

The community sector: more vital than ever

Keynote address

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To Good Beginnings Australia

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Greater unity within the community sector will have to be cultivated or recultivated. Against the background of years of often uneasy and ill-defined relationships between the sector and Government, this will not be easy to do in the short timeframes of a new Government in a hurry to make a difference.

Thank you for inviting me today. I want to start by acknowledging the outstanding work being done by Good Beginnings Australia in the providing targeted community-based programs which directly assist children and families. Good Beginnings has been a pioneer in the delivery of early childhood interventions; I wish sincerely to thank you for the important work you do.

The work you do with children, families and communities is inevitably going to be affected by directions being taken by the Rudd Government.

It promises to be an exciting era. There will, however, be challenges to many existing ways of working. I would like to share some thoughts about where I see Government taking families and the community sector, why practitioners will play an even more vitally important role in the future, and ways that we might make the most of the changing social policy and practice landscape.

Let me start, however, by saying a few words about Families Australia. We have been going since 2001 as the independent, non-Government peak body which promotes the interests of families at the national level.

In a nutshell, we are a policy think-tank and advocacy organisation. We take our independence seriously and do not pick “winners” amongst political parties. Our main job is to inform and influence Government and officials about family issues with a view to helping them make good public policy.

We have around 400 member organisations across Australia in the family and community NGO sector. Our members include many of the largest NGOs, such as Good Beginnings, as well as hundreds of local community bodies, such as child care centres and youth and counselling services.

Not only do we listen to our members about the needs of families, but we also go out to the public directly through focus groups. In the past year or two, we have heard from hundreds of Australians in this way. These views form an essential part of our policy thinking.

To give you an idea of what we do, in the past year, we have been playing a leading role in the NGO push for a National Child Protection Framework – I am pleased to say that that work is starting to bear fruit under the new Government.

We have been adding an advocacy voice on a range of other fronts – from trying to get better financial support for grandparents, to urging Governments to take more comprehensive approaches to tackle substance abuse, and helping to overhaul assessment criteria for Government payments to carers of children with severe disability.

We have been urging the Federal Government to engage more with employer groups to find practical ways to improve work-life-family balance. We have been an active public supporter of universal paid parental leave, a topic now finally receiving attention through the Productivity Commission.

We have been assisting a so-far relatively little known group of people, the Forgotten Australians, who were in institutional care, such as orphanages, in the period from the 1930s to the 1970s, to gain recognition and support for the maltreatment that many suffered.

The other major string to our bow is about celebrating the importance of families by running National Families Week in May each year. Two weeks ago, over 120,000 people participated in National Families Week events to celebrate the importance of families however people would like to define what family means to them. I want to thank Good Beginnings Australia for running a multitude of National Families Week events over the years.

Where is the Rudd Government taking families?

There are two main parts to the Rudd Government's approach on families. The first is about helping working families. The second is about helping least advantaged families and individuals to escape social exclusion.

I particularly want to talk about the second policy agenda because it will (or should) impact fundamentally on your work.

According to its pre-Election platform, the Rudd Government sees social exclusion as:

the outcome of people or communities suffering from a range of problems such as unemployment, low incomes, poor housing, crime, poor health and disability and family breakdown. In combination, these problems can result in cycles of poverty, spanning generations and geographical regions...To be socially included, all Australians must be given the opportunity to: secure a job; access services; connect with others in life through family, friends, work, personal interests and local community; deal with personal crisis such as ill health, bereavement or the loss of a job; and have their voice heard.¹

The thinking that underpins this approach is nicely captured by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who remarked that prosperity "masks a tail of under-achievers, the socially excluded. The rising tide does not lift their ships. This issue of social exclusion is common throughout Western countries."²

¹ Australian Labor Party, *An Australian Social Inclusion agenda*, 2007 Federal Election platform, accessed at www.kevin07.com.au

² Ibid., quoting Blair, T., 'What I've Learned', *The Economist*, 31 May 2007

We have seen this policy thrust being manifested, for example, in the Rudd Government's early attention to the problem of homelessness and in the recent Federal Budget which saw greater support for carers and a boost in funding to Indigenous programs.

In coming to office, the Rudd Government also signaled that it would be seeking to redefine the relationship between Government and the community sector.

At its core, this is part of the Rudd Government's efforts to construct a new social consensus, a new pluralism in Australian democracy.

The ALP has recognised not only that the community sector is a vitally important partner in helping Government to deliver on its social inclusion agenda, but also that the sector has itself been severely eroded in terms of its influence, capacities and support from Government.

Let me speak for a moment about that latter point from a broad national perspective. Listening to our member organisations, I often hear about the failure of State/Territory and Commonwealth Governments to act collaboratively and plan programs in a coordinated fashion.

There have been loud complaints about the short-sightedness of Governments in not renewing promising programs or renewing them far too late with the effect that good staff are difficult to retain. And, there have been complaints that Government is imposing untenable administrative and compliance burdens on already over-stretched organisations.

Well, has the rubber hit the road, so to speak, in terms of improving these things? The signs are encouraging, but it is still early days. Organisations such as Families Australia which receive some Government funding have been informed that they can again engage in public 'advocacy'. We are doing exactly that.

The Social Inclusion Board had its first meeting last week, and is charged with generating practical and effective solutions to tackle disadvantage.

Government is also working on a National Compact which will lay down the principles of the new relationship it wants to build with the sector. In a speech last week, Senator Stephens, the Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion and the Voluntary Sector, stated that the aim of the Compact will be to strengthen the relationship between Government and the sector, to “foster consistent treatment of organisations across government agencies and promote a better understanding between sectors of the constraints, practices and operations of the other.”³

She stated that basic elements of the Compact could include a statement of mutual roles and responsibilities, codes of conduct and a timetable for a revised regulatory framework, including charity legislation and a standard charter of accounts. She added that the Compact “must not represent less accountability – but rather the right kind of accountability that captures the way that services and programs are working to better meet social inclusion priorities.”⁴ I think we all need to be actively engaged in the development of such a compact.

Perhaps one of the most encouraging signs of change is in the way that Government has decided to engage with the community and research sectors in relation to the development of the National Child Protection Framework.

Good Beginnings Australia is an important member of a recently formed and highly diverse 51 member Coalition of Organisations Committed to the Safety and Wellbeing of Australia’s Children, which is working closely with Minister Jenny Macklin and her Department to devise the Framework.

It is encouraging to see how Ministers and officials have embraced the idea of partnership with the sector on this issue, recognising that the sector is the repository of a great deal of knowledge and that Government alone cannot solve the problem. It is a long overdue

³ Senator the Hon. Ursula Stephens, Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion and the Voluntary Sector and Parliamentary Secretary Assisting the Prime Minister for Social Inclusion, Address to 11th CPA Australia Not-for-Profit Conference, Brisbane, 22 May 2008

⁴ Ibid.

acknowledgement of the value of the sector in framing good public policy.

I hope we will see that model of coalitions of community organisations coming together on specific issues to influence, and work with, Government becoming a memorable feature of the Rudd era.

It is certainly clear from recent Government comments that it expects the sector to be responsive to its social inclusion agenda. In March this year, Senator Stephens stated that ending the “gagging” of NGOs:

puts the onus back on the sector to promote social inclusion by helping change attitudes and perceptions that underpin exclusion; opening up public space around social inclusion – fostering discussion and policy development; promoting innovation – to identify and try new approaches; and acting as a bridge between organisations and communities and helping to forge new alliances that will deliver outcomes.⁵

Implications for the community sector

There are major implications in all this for the way we work. And there are some two-edged swords here as well.

I want to talk briefly about some main implications that I see and to suggest that you keep a watchful eye out for others.

First, for community organisations, gaining and retaining the ear of Government will be linked to credible performance. Government will want to ensure that organisations are properly representing the views of their constituencies and, if they are program deliverers, that they are embracing outcomes-based accountability practices.

Second, Government is increasingly interested in holistic and joined-up perspectives in both policy and practice. They state that they have a strong appetite for whole-of-Government and whole-of-nation

⁵ Senator the Hon. Ursula Stephens, Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion and the Voluntary Sector and Parliamentary Secretary Assisting the Prime Minister for Social Inclusion, Address to the Australian Council for International Development Forum, 12 March 2008, Parliament House, Canberra.

approaches which overcome arbitrary State/Territory and Commonwealth barriers and rivalries.

Buried in this point are a few important matters. One is that organisations which always push their own barrow when integrated approaches are called for may find themselves sidelined by Government. This may, however, become an area of tension because, while many organisations will grasp the importance of forming coalitions, they will also want to position themselves as individual entities with the new Government and to respond to Government's call for fresh ideas.

Government will also be looking for more detailed program ideas, especially those which will help them to assist difficult to reach and marginalised children and families. These things will carry a large challenge for already stretched community organisations to rethink their approaches, and they may tend to favour the swifter, better resourced and more strategically savvy organisations.

Greater unity within the community sector will have to be cultivated or recultivated. Against the background of years of often uneasy and ill-defined relationships between the sector and Government, this will not be easy to do in the short timeframes of a new Government in a hurry to make a difference.

Third, Government has clearly signaled that it values research and evidence and that it is interested to understand causal factors, for example, of homelessness. This is of course a good sign, yet the development of new, or codification of existing, evidence and practice is not something that every community organisation has been richly funded for.

Fourth, there may be a question mark over preserving the robust independent voice of our organisations and the sector. I suspect that many community organisations will feel a greater alignment of values with a Government that speaks the language of social inclusion. However, could there be a danger that the new pluralism will, over time, blur the respective roles of Government and the sector, leading to the inadvertent erosion of the sector's capacity to have – or rather reaffirm – a distinctive voice?

That points to the need for us to keep vigilant against excessive cosiness and to keep stating our positions. We should, I suggest, think hard about these issues and watch for signs. It would be tragic if our independence were over time eroded by a force that seeks to encourage it.

You will play an even more vitally important role in the future

That broader context leads me to say that you, as practitioners, will play an even more vital role than ever because:

1. Without your practically grounded advice, Government will define the needs of children, adults and families without sufficient input, running the risk of devising simplistic and near-sighted policy solutions.
2. Without your energies, Government will clearly not be able to deliver programs to children and families at a time when the sector is the main service deliverer.
3. Without you, there will not be a healthy diversity of options for people when they look for solutions to their problems.
4. Without you, the focus on children will not be as highly resolved as it needs to be at a time of additional Government interest in the early childhood agenda.
5. Without your voices advocating about the needs of your clients and your agency, we cannot keep evolving a robust pluralistic sector and society at a time of growing social complexity which requires nuanced not broad-brush solutions.
6. Without you, we cannot keep the community sector strong at a time when it is being challenged to perform even more strongly and to participate in partnerships with Government.
7. And, without your example, others can't be inspired to undertake community sector roles at a time when social needs are growing.

The changes I have sketched out bring uncertainties, but there are things we can do to make the most of them. Let me leave you with four suggestions:

1. Continue to look for new and innovative ways of working, especially those which are more holistic, integrated and less-siloed.
2. Keep critically appraising whether clients might be better served by community partnership models which involve the integration of

efforts with other agencies or practitioners in coalitions or consortia.

3. Keep putting forward ideas about best practice which could be replicated or undertaken on a larger scale in different locations and jurisdictions.
4. Not least, keep being excellent at what you do because, without your knowledge, dedication and persistence, we won't see an early end to the tragedy of entrenched disadvantage.

Thank you.