

## BUILDING STRONGER AUSTRALIAN FAMILIES

Dr Brian Babington, Chief Executive Officer, Families Australia  
Address to the Building Stronger Australian Families Policy Forum  
at the Department of Social Services  
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I'd like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet here and those around Australia. I'd like to pay my respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders both past and present, and to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with us today.

I thought it would be useful to say a few words about Families Australia for those unfamiliar with us and what brings us here today.

Families Australia tries to be a national NGO that brings people together from diverse backgrounds in an atmosphere of respect and common purpose to think about and, ideally, find practical ways to solve social policy issues.

This way of working is especially important to me. Having had a career in DFAT, then helping to lead a Commonwealth statutory agency, then running a social enterprise venture to encourage corporate philanthropy, and now leading Families Australia, one of my biggest frustrations is when effective problem identification and resolution is stymied because participants share too many affinities in terms of worldview, narratives and basic working assumptions. So often it's hard to get the right diversity of people in the room to crunch problems.

And I've often been complicit in that. It's a comfortable place to be, so long as you don't expect much progress to be made while people tend to cling to problematisation. Having represented Australia at four UN General Assemblies, I also know what it's like when no-one shares assumptions and no-one agrees.

I should say at this point that I am not opposed to rigorous diagnosis, but sometimes I've found it can be hard for people to know when to transition to the very hard work of solving seemingly intractable problems.

Conversely, one of my greatest joys is being in being in rooms where people find ways to constructively disagree, probe issues, and come up with new, shared solutions.

Let me give you an example of that. For much of the past decade Families Australia has been working very closely with the Commonwealth Government and this Department to help devise and enact the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children. As you may know, the National Framework is Australia's first-ever COAG-endorsed national plan to tackle child abuse and to improve child wellbeing.

Families Australia decided that this problem needed to be tackled in a new way, with the NGO and research sectors being not only generators of policy ideas but should also be active, equal participants in policy design and take loads of responsibility for policy implementation.

So, we set about building a coalition of NGOs and researchers that now numbers around 200 leading organisations and individuals around Australia with the aim of bringing their expertise to the table.

That thinking was the birth of what we call the 'tripartite' approach to the National Framework under which three parties – the Commonwealth, the State and Territory Governments and the NGO/research sectors – come together regularly to drive National Framework implementation through the National Forum on Protecting Australia's Children.

I can tell you that this Forum and its various committees are places for open, critical thinking and not everyone is in aggressive agreement.

Yet, there is a lot of mutual respect and trust and, over time, it has become indispensable to the progress of the Framework. We've developed a strong cross-sectoral vision about what needs to be done as well as, I think, realistic and frank understandings about our respective capabilities and limitations.

Today we would like to continue in that same spirit. While a lot of Families Australia's journey has been around child protection and helping those who have suffered abuse in institutions – as our name implies – we have a broader mandate.

That mandate is to look at the widest possible range of issues that face Australian families, especially those impeding families and individuals who now experience, and those likely to experience, the greatest vulnerability.

So, recently we started a series of forums under the banner of 'Building Stronger Australian Families'. Specifically we have two aims: to share expert knowledge about trends for Australian families and, together, to consider what we need to do differently in a policy sense to better support families and communities. We expect to hold 3 or 4 such forums each year for the next few years.

From each forum we'll collect ideas which could represent new ways of thinking about, and responding to, current and anticipated challenges for families. We held our first forum last November in Canberra.

This morning, we are reprising and updating that forum to share with the Department and other guests.

We hope to leave here today with ideas that we can develop further in collaboration with DSS, possibly as focal points for more detailed discussion. We have two speakers, both of whom are distinguished academics who have worked closely with government as well as within it.

Professor Alan Hayes AM is the Distinguished Professor in Family Studies and the Director of the Family Action Centre within the Faculty of Health and Medicine at the University of Newcastle. Until last year, Alan was Director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies. He is now also a Families Australia Board member.

Dr Lyndall Strazdins is an Associate Professor and ARC Future Fellow at the National Centre of Epidemiology and Population Health within the Australian National University. We've partnered with Lyndall for many years on work and family issues, and I know she has worked closely with the Department on many projects, such as the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC).

I wanted to foreshadow something of our method in advance. I hope you'll observe two distinctly different but interrelated talks. Alan is going to talk about some of the broader trends for Australian families, particularly for those who are not engaged with, or who have fragile connection, with the workforce. Lyndall will do a deeper dive into work and family issues, with a particular focus on some of the dynamics and looming issues for those already engaging in work.

I leave it to you to consider the main points of articulation between the presentations. Perhaps it is around the need to re-analyse our understandings of who is now needing, and who is likely in the future to need, help. In the context of strong limitations on governments to keep investing in welfare at historical levels, perhaps it is about putting more energy into innovative community empowerment models.

I would like to leave you with some questions that might help discussion after the presentations:

1. What should we do differently to address the needs of families?
2. What existing models look promising? (Perhaps place-based or investment approaches?)
3. What new models should we be developing to anticipate social, economic, environmental and other changes?
4. What aspects of our understandings about current and projected family disadvantage need to be re-analysed?

In closing, I recently attended a leadership forum at Harvard where the key mantra was that leaders needed to get off the dance-floor of everyday activity and get onto the balcony to see the dance from a different perspective.

It was also about building up our capacities for courageous conversations. I hope we'll do a little of these things today.