

BOUQUETS AND BRICKBATS: ON THE WORK OF PEAK FAMILY-RELATED ORGANISATIONS. FAMILIES ACT 10TH ANNIVERSARY

Dr Brian Babington, Chief Executive Officer, Families Australia
Address to the Families ACT 10th anniversary celebration
Canberra, 10 May 2016

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, to thank you Auntie Agnes, and to also pay respects to Aboriginal elders past and present.

It is a great thrill to be with you today. There is no way I can top the wonderful choir we've just heard!

I want to congratulate Families ACT, especially Fiona and her Board and Will, on your great achievements in your first decade of operations for families in the ACT.

It's wonderful to take time out from our busy lives to mark such occasions. It's also good to reflect on the type of work that FACT does as a peak body.

I've been the CEO of Families Australia for the past 11 years, having also worked in Federal Government, served at the United Nations in New York, and run a business to encourage corporate-community partnerships.

Families Australia is very much like FACT in being a peak body based in Canberra, but our mandate is a national one.

What we try to do is represent the views of our over 800 member organisations around Australia to the Australian Parliament and Government.

Most of our members are organisations that deliver services to families, children and communities around Australia.

In a nutshell, we help to make national policies ones that maximise family wellbeing.

One of the big issues we've worked on, alongside the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments, is Australia's first-ever plan of action to reduce rates of child abuse and neglect – the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020.

So, after 11 years, I know a bit about the highs and lows, the criticisms and the flowers that you get in leading a peak body.

One of the most frequent criticisms is that, sitting in Canberra, you are somehow disconnected from people's everyday lives on the ground.

Another is that peak bodies can get in the way and distort the truly democratic relationship that ought to exist between politicians and the public.

Then there's the charge that peak bodies simply promote vested commercial and political interests.

I think we need to think seriously about these arguments and never ignore them.

The other side of the coin is that, when they work well, peak bodies are a very effective and efficient way of collecting, communicating and representing a wide range of views to government on behalf of organisations busily engaged in the work of helping people.

When it's done well, governments do value how wide-ranging stakeholder views can be synthesised in order to facilitate policymaking and service delivery.

Peaks can also act as a trusted confidante to government and their member organisations.

They often work behind the scenes to help policymaking to occur effectively and to resolve, or at least help to ease, cross-sectoral tensions and miscommunications.

I know from experience that this 'honest broker' role, when it's done well, is highly valued by politicians, officials and the organisations being represented by a peak body.

In essence, it seems to me that peak bodies in our sector (I can only speak a little about the social sector) work well when they do at least three things.

First, they need to continually go back to the people they represent, asking: Am I representing you and the people you help truly, honestly and effectively?

They need to have the courage to ask rather than assume the answers.

While a peak's value is around it being one-step removed from the day-to-day work of its members, it is perilous not to stay alive to members concerns and interests.

Second, they work best when they have high levels of ability to effectively engage with politicians, officials, the media and peer organisations in seeking better public policy and program outcomes.

To me, a willingness and capacity to search for collaborative solutions without losing the passion of the cause is like gold. I believe that the best public policy outcomes are based in trusted relationships that can withstand the blowtorch of differing points of view.

Finally, I think it's about being a 'good citizen' in taking the broadest and most ethical, inclusive view about community needs and solutions.

It can be challenging for those leading peaks to keep looking upwards to that broader community interest, to risk disappointing your supporters when greater interests may not precisely align with what some of your members want.

But, I think one of the great roles played by a peak is to analyse the range of interests and, at times, to have courageous conversations that help consensus building...and stay alive through the journey!

I've seen FACT evolve strongly over its first decade. It embodies these three things, plus a lot more. I congratulate them and wish them well for the decades to come.