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# Opening Address

## by His Excellency The Right Honourable Sir Ninian Stephen Governor-General of The Commonwealth of Australia

*On the Occasion of the Opening of the National Conference of the  
Children's Bureau of Australia  
in Brisbane on Tuesday, 26 July 1988*

To speak of children and their welfare is to invade the very heartland of platitudes — phrases about citizens of the future, resources of the nation and the hands that will mould the shape of things to come — these spring all too readily to the lips. They do so, of course, because they are all to a high degree true, which is the way with platitudes! But what unfortunately is far from possessing the status of a platitude, far from being generally obvious and accepted in the community, is precisely what should be **done** about, and for, early childhood and the care and welfare of little children, what legislative and administrative steps should be taken by governments, what changes if any should be made by NGOs operating in the field, to meet present needs.

And that this is so is, no doubt, because we live in times of tremendous social change, with society in flux and children and families under pressures which were unknown in the past.

In the 19th century it seemed clear enough that what children primarily needed was the benefit of legislation which protected them against the horrors of child labour in factories and mines and freed them for education — and this was achieved, piecemeal over the years. The pictures Charles Dickens could truthfully paint of miserable child chimney sweeps and ragged bands of infant pickpockets disappeared; as did the statistician's grim figure of New South Wales education in the mid-1840's, with a little over half of the children between 4 and 14 receiving no education whatever.

Again, in the great depression, what was needed seemed clear enough, however difficult it was to obtain — it was support of the desperately poor, to save them from the most dire consequences of abject poverty.

But the present-day community, possessed for the first time in human history with an effective way to control human reproduction and with a new ethic regarding marriage and divorce, is now faced with rather different problems, problems vitally affecting children and families but which are novel because the conditions which produce them are novel. They seem to me to centre round three important developments — the virtual disappearance of the true extended family of, say, two generations ago. All sorts of factors, including dramatically reduced birth-rates and high mobility of population, are some of the causes of this. The second is the pressures, both economic and otherwise, upon mothers, to remain in or re-enter the workforce; the third is the great increase in the number of single parent families.

All three of these are, of course, inter-related and all of them create needs which especially affect children. That in itself makes especially important the work being done by the Children's Bureau in its triple role of research, advocacy and dissemination of relevant information.

As one instance of the needs of the present day, no-one knows better than the Bureau of the need for more and better day care centres and pre-school facilities and for ready access to them, both in terms of cost and of physical access in terms of transport. And the latter need does not, of course, cease at the pre-school level. In a nation striving for increased population growth we should be doing all we can to encourage something better than the present below zero population growth in our indigenous population.

One of the features of our Australian polity, our federal system, seems to me to give rise to a special need for the work of the Bureau, manifest in the Bureau's bulletins and reflected, too, in its quarterly journal 'Australian Child and Family Welfare'. That feature is the existence of eight separate and quite disparate state and territory departments concerned with child welfare and care, together with a superimposed federal social security and family court system.

The Bureau, starting with a base in Victoria and largely supported by Victorian funding, none of it from government, is now expanding into other states. It surely has an important mission, in each of its three key activities — research, advocacy and information: The mission of ensuring that all these disparate systems of child and family welfare achieve and maintain satisfactory common standards.

One of the great advantages of federal systems is said to be the opportunity for regional experimentation, followed by nation wide adoption of reforms which have proved successful in a particular state or territory. This, of course, calls for processes of assessment and then for dissemination of those assessments Australia-wide. Already this is working on a governmental level in several areas, where ministerial councils, on which all governments are represented, meet, discuss and seek common outcomes, profiting from the different experiences of each entity.

The Bureau is, I know, uniquely well informed and acutely aware of the need, in its areas of concern, for better standards of care nation-wide. It is ideally situated to fulfil the role, on the non-governmental level, of research into positive measures and of dissemination of information about those measures, always given the necessary funding and membership.

It is enormously encouraging to read in its publications what the Bureau has been able to do with very limited resources. I very sincerely hope that this Congress will mark the beginning of a new and fruitful chapter in its still brief but already highly successful career as an Australian advocate for the welfare of the children and families of Australia.