

Children Australia sought interviews or input from Commonwealth leaders in February. Action was postponed when the Federal election was called. Senator Haines had arranged for Senator Powell of the Australian Democrats to be interviewed and this interview took place soon after the election but before the party leadership changes were announced. Representations to the other leaders followed culminating in written questions being forwarded to them in June to which each responded with the following information.

AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS



Senator Janet Powell was interviewed on April 12th by Margarita Frederico and Lloyd Owen. The original brief for the journal's enquiry was "policies, obstacles and opportunities facing Australia's children in 1990". Senator Powell pointed to the Australian Democrats party platforms on child care and social security as a source of detailed and practical sug-

gestions bearing on the needs of children. The child care platform proposes accessible, flexible, affordable, quality child care and has a target of 200,000 places by the year 2000 with strategic planning for additional places based on a proportion of children whose parents are in part time or full time employment. Child care should be available in the community and the work place. It will include centre based and family day care places and out of school hours and occasional care. More flexibility is sought through extended hours, overnight, family day care and work based care to enable participation and career advancement opportunities for women in the work force. Affordability should be improved through annual indexation of fee and income levels related to subsidy, removal of the gap between cost of the place and subsidy and alignment of family day care subsidy levels with those for centres. Also featured are the establishment and maintenance of standards, triennial funding agreements, direct subsidies for community based care, opposition to a voucher system and tax deductibility for child care connected to workplace participation.

The social security platform addresses a number of issues pertinent to the well-being of children and young people some of which Senator Powell highlighted in interview with these comments. "Both major parties are restricting access to unemployment and sole parent benefits - linking them to the labour market, but the programs are not there." In discussing current eligibility arrangements for benefits for sole parents she said "Don't support welfare fraud but tightening now is Draconian". In response to questions about the weight given to children on the political agenda - "Not high" - Children are seen as family business, there is a tendency in the political process to not know who and where they are. "There is an expectation of dependency till age 21 but if you are 15 and earning \$1,000 you are no longer a dependant." "There is an attitude that anyone with a child might be ripping off the system there is no minimum maintenance guarantee. The sole parent benefit is below the poverty line. The Austudy income test is Draconian." "The family allowance and family allowance supplement is good, but not enough". "There is no targeting of carers." The key government priority is the budget deficit. Health, education and welfare are seen as big spending areas and therefore areas for big savings".

In the Senator's view many problems arise from the distribution of responsibility between the three spheres of government. Official Democrat policy is to abolish the state level. "We are seeing problems not anticipated in the 60's, youth homelessness, child poverty, family poverty, family breakdown, domestic violence." She is a strong supporter of the convention on children's rights "It is important to establish a national view". Children are affected by

the failure to pass on federal dollars, the states have to be, or choose to be, tight in their dealings with others including local government. Australia should ratify the convention quickly it is a concern that conservative politicians and the government might respond too readily to the very vocal minority and their ill-founded opposition to it. "There is a need to assert the community base and services at the community level but there is a gap, a them and us, between the government and the people. The support and developmental needs of children need public provision beyond limited forms of intervention and charitable responses. The government is the people but we seem to have lost this view. Privatisation debates lose sight of the fact that government services now do belong to the people. In the case of Telecom it is 100%. Public community services can be done well and sensitively from a community base upwards. Community involvement can mean hearing about the problem and supporting the government to take action. Promise the children might be better supported by a wealth tax than a charitable trust though a charitable base may be needed for speed of action. At present, awareness of need penetrates the community more than the political mind, because families do it."

Among the obstacles identified by the Senator facing children in the 90's are the implications of family breakdown, economic problems and unemployment. ("It is now being suggested that 6% unemployment is acceptable when it is not long since 1% barely was.")

There has been the growing independence for both women and men. "It is good to be moving away from oppression, from the stress of doing two jobs but there are major implications for children." Adequate funding and support is necessary for family counsellors, marriage counsellors and mediation approaches (like Noble Park). There is room for reconsideration and some possible benefits around the roles of different generations in the household in child care and out of school activities. "There is a challenge for the unions over the next decade in creating more flexibility in the work place for women and men to move in and out for child care, parent care reasons." There is a need to deal with the conflict between parenting, job finding and training. This entails recognising the demands of parenting.

The Senator was asked to comment specifically on the areas of child abuse, institutional abuse and intercountry adoption. She chose also to comment on housing and children and the environment. Her comments were extensive but the following is a brief summary of her observations.

In the child protection area services should build on the maternal and child health system to ensure the development of an adequate support network. Schools have a role in responding to signs of family distress.

The question of institutional abuse has implications in the education system. Drawing on her experience as a secondary teacher she observed that young people are maturing earlier with access to information and life experience, a smaller world. Traditional systems and older approaches to discipline don't work. They can be damaging and many fall by the wayside.

There is a major problem entailed in failing to treat child care and adolescent care as roles to be taught.

There is a need to ensure that the institutions for children and adults, the systems we make, do operate, are humane and productive. Much of the current restructuring is "not doing much for kids". "It is restructuring bureaucrats and teachers, the last thing to receive attention is the face to face with children."

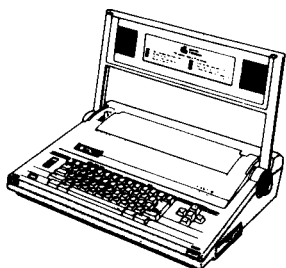
Intercountry adoption raises the whole question of relating to other societies. The Democrats would increase foreign aid and not tie it to foreign policy. Parenting through other than natural means must be preceded by stringent counselling. The right sort of motivation is important and there are issues of retention of culture and knowledge of background. If these things are established it equals good homes for children who need one. There are unwanted children around the world and we have to do something for them.

Housing is a issue bearing on the well-being of children. There is a need for public housing as distinct from welfare housing (expressed by Hugh Stretton S.A.). One might consider recycling high rise for those whose lifestyle is suited to them. The move to privatisation and deregulation is likely to keep people on welfare and gentrify areas. Extending the gap between rich and poor moves toward social violence.

"The future is everything to children and they are often informed

about the environment and nuclear issues. They are effected by issues of the urban environment and conservation (pollution, traffic, failure of public transport, lack of facilities)." "Children should be consulted and play a part in decision making in the family and elsewhere. In the new age children and parents are and should be seen as individuals. Human beings develop and change, if we are lucky couples manage it together. Where breakdown does occur one has a better time of it if each has their own individuality. Outcomes are better where relationships were good beforehand."

The Senator indicated at the outset that she was a strong supporter of the work of the Australian Institute of Family Studies. She would want to encourage the use of its information "well researched", "thoroughly done" in developing policy. As well, information from organisations with grass roots perspectives and people dealing directly with children should be used.



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Up-to-date information is vital for practitioners, managers, researchers and students involved with children, youth and families in the health, welfare and education fields.

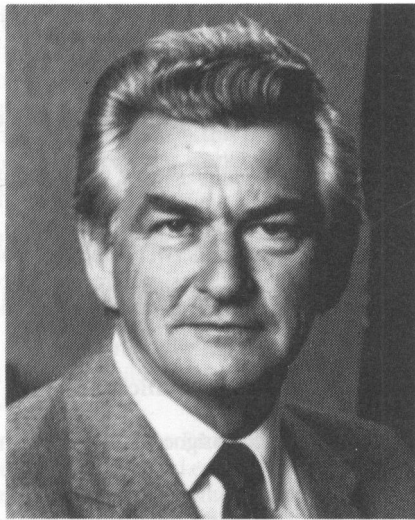
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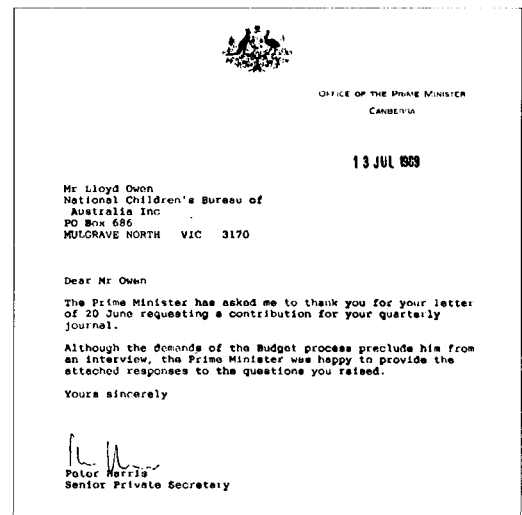


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The Hon. R.J.L. Hawke A.C. M.P.



Q. What priority is accorded to the needs of children in the work of the Australian Parliament?

A. Members of Parliament are no different from other Australians in the high priority we attach to the fundamental goal that our children should be able to grow up in a socially, financially and emotionally secure environment. I think all Parliamentarians would agree that giving careful and considerate attention to addressing the needs of our children is one of the best contributions we can make towards ensuring a productive, united and compassionate Australia in the years to come.

Q. How does your political party ascertain the needs of children?

A. Clearly the needs of children today are many and varied and our ways of ascertaining those needs, (as well as our answers to them) must be similarly complex and varied. We must be, and I believe we are, accessible to the views of the children themselves, of their parents and of the many community organisations which work to improve the lives of children in a wide range of areas. To help us better to ascertain children's needs, the Government last year established a Commonwealth-State/Territory Ministerial Committee, whose task is to draw together information from all available sources and to use it to advocate practical ways of improving services for children.

Q. Who is the primary spokesperson for your party on matters concerning children?

A. Naturally no one Minister is solely in charge of children's issues, because the range of policies affecting children, both inside and outside their family environment, is covered across a number of portfolios. Ultimately, however, as Prime Minister, I take upon myself the responsibility of spokesperson on the broad thrust of Government policies on children.

Q. Which portfolios and departments are most concerned with the interests of children?

A. The Department of Social Security has primary responsibility for the income support of disadvantaged children and their families. The Department of Community Services and Health deals with health and housing matters as well as child care and the delivery of many community services influencing the welfare of children. The other main portfolio concerned with the interests of children is the Department of Employment, Education and Training which has primary responsibility for the payment of various allowances (such as AUSTUDY) aimed at encouraging children to complete their education and general policies relating to education, training and employment. Specific needs of Aboriginal children are addressed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission (ATSIC).

Q. What current policies are directed to the interests of children and young people for the nineties and beyond?

A. Short, medium and long-term strategies are all being pursued by the Government, but in answering this question I will mention briefly some of our new long-term policies for the 1990's.

On 8 March 1990, I announced my Government's commitment to a series of measures to address deficiencies in the provision of services for disadvantaged families and children. For example, nearly 280,000 families will benefit from new child care arrangements; in all, by mid 1996 the Government will spend \$400 million in the biggest expansion of child care in Australia's history. Other measures include the establishment of family resource centres and increased funding for marriage counselling/family mediation, outside school hours care for 'at risk' adolescents, and a package of education programs.

Our Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) provides funding to organisations for accommodation support for homeless children and for children 'at risk' of domestic violence. As well the Government has made available special funds to develop a co-ordinated approach to assistance for homeless children. A \$100 million package of initiatives is providing accommodation, income support, labour market assistance, education, health care and improved access to services.

In addition to these specific measures, more than half a million families, including some 1.2 million children, are being helped with Family Allowance Supplement payments or their equivalent in extra pensions and benefits. These payments have enabled us to achieve the benchmarks of adequacy to which we committed ourselves in 1987, and through indexation of payments we will maintain that position over time.

I readily acknowledge that the causes of disadvantage are complex, requiring wide-ranging and on-going responses. Our Commonwealth-State/Territory Ministerial Committee on Services for Disadvantaged Families and Children is therefore looking at ways of improving the effectiveness of the services provided for disadvantaged children.

Q. What do you perceive as the greatest dangers for children now and through the nineties?

A. There are various dangers that children and young people face now, and are likely to face through the nineties. The Commonwealth's examination of its youth strategy in 1988 revealed that major difficulties being faced by some young people are:

- the risk of homelessness;
- lack of access to support services and opportunities for further education, training and employment related assistance; and
- declining health and fitness as a result of poor diet, drugs, lifestyle and inadequate advice and access to primary health care.

These are the main problems which the Government has been addressing, as you will have seen in my answer to your previous question.

Q. What should be done to protect children from abuse and neglect within families, by strangers and from institutions?

A. The protection of children from abuse and neglect within families, by strangers and from institutions is of particular concern. In the institutional context, access and equity measures together with client protection and appeals process are now being built into funded services. There is also a requirement for service quality and performance to be measured every three years. These measures will give young people 'at risk' increased protection and service quality, greater dignity, privacy and opportunities to address their difficulties.

Q. Do you personally have a position in respect to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child?

A. I personally support this important Convention, which aims to protect and promote the human rights of children throughout the world. The Government fully endorses this worthy aim and we welcome the unanimous adoption of the Convention by the United Nations General Assembly.

The Convention represents a major advance in setting international standards for the welfare of a particularly vulnerable group in society. It endorses the child's rights to protection from abuse and neglect, from harmful or hazardous work, from drug abuse and from sexual exploitation. The Convention also affirms the right of children to the highest attainable standards of health care and access to education.

I am very conscious of the important role of the family in Australia's society and in all societies throughout the world. In supporting the Convention, my Government took into account the fact that the Convention recognises the central and crucial place of the family as the fundamental unit of society. It expressly recognises the role of parents and guardians in providing guidance in the exercise of the child's rights as the child's capacity to make his or her own decisions develops. The Convention also firmly underlines the responsibility of governments for the welfare of children where parents or others responsible fail, or are unable, to do so. I can assure you that no caring parent or guardian need fear that the Convention will diminish in any way their traditional role.

The Convention has been endorsed by a wide range of non-government and community organisations working on behalf of

children, both in Australia and overseas. For example, among church groups, the Catholic Bishops of Australia and the Social Responsibility Committee of the Uniting Church have expressed their support for the Convention.

Q. In your opinion should Australia sign the Convention? If so, why? If not, why?

A. Australia will sign the Convention shortly, following the completion of the consultative processes in which we are currently engaged with the States and Territories. By signing the Convention, Australia will demonstrate internationally our concern for the rights of all children. My Government also believes that signature will encourage other countries to be guided by the agreed international standards for the welfare of children.

Q. Should Australia proceed to ratification of the Convention and if so, in what time frame?

A. When the Convention has been signed, Australia will move as rapidly as possible to ratify it.

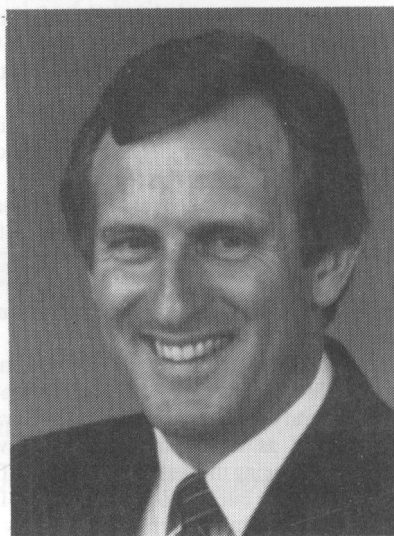
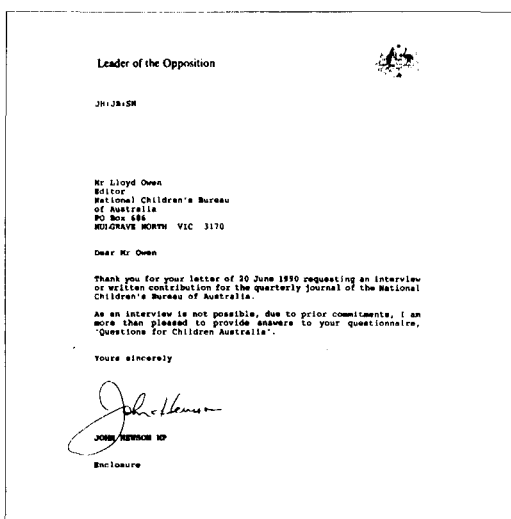
Q. What role do you see being performed by the Australian Institute of Family Studies through the nineties?

A. The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) is an independent statutory authority established under the Family Law Act 1975. The Institute has built up considerable expertise in the area of services to families and children, and it has been contributing substantially to policy analysis and public debate in this area. For example, the Institute's work on family incomes and tax, youth and family issues, housing, and the geographic distribution of families and services has been very useful to the Government in the development of our policies.

Q. Where does the work of the Institute fit in connection with the development of policy by your party?

A. In the nineties, it will continue its work of conducting research into factors affecting the social and economic well-being of Australian families; developing options for improved methods of family support, the prevention of family disruption and the promotion of marital and family stability; and the dissemination of research. Such work, I believe, will complement work being done by the Government and thus help to provide us with a basis for improving and extending our ability to help children and families.

THE LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION



Dr. John Hewson M.P.

Q. What priority is accorded to the needs of children in the work of the Australian Parliament?

A. The need to educate children about the workings of the Australian

Parliament and the Westminster system in general is recognised by the Coalition.

A special Parliamentary Education Unit is located within Parliament

House. Its role is many-fold. Among the services it provides are:

- the establishment of a mock-parliament for senior secondary school students and a mini-parliament for primary students. These activities involve school children of all ages 'acting out' various roles as portrayed in both Houses of Parliament
- 'Consequences of Legislation' - this involves illustrating to children how the legislative process works and how different types of legislation impact in peoples' everyday lives.
- A range of posters and brochures relating to the workings of both Houses of Parliament and the general structure of the Parliamentary system.
- 'Excursion Portfolios' are sent out to schools planning to send a group of children to Parliament House with a variety of suggested activities to perform before, during and after the Parliamentary visit.
- 'Parliament Packs' a 12 kilo, 2 box set of information sent out to every school in Australia.

All the duties performed by the Education Unit are designed with one specific objective in mind i.e. To give all children a basic and/or better understanding of the Australian Parliament and the democratic process.

Q. How does your political party ascertain the needs of children?

A. As part of our policy process, the Liberal Party will continue to consult with various community organisations, welfare groups and social policy research centres which deal exclusively with the needs of children. On a more general level, the Liberal Party has had a long standing policy commitment to the Australian family and by extension, to all children of Australia. We believe that every encouragement should be given to the family to ensure that it remains the basic building block of our society. We believe that all children should be given every opportunity to participate and succeed in society and that can only be achieved if we create an economic environment in which education and employment opportunities are available to everyone.

Q. Who is the primary spokesperson for your party on matters concerning children?

A. Senator Richard Alston - Shadow Minister for Social Security, Child Care and Retirement Income. Senator Michael Baume - Shadow Minister for Arts, Heritage, Sport and Youth Affairs.

Q. Which portfolios and departments are most concerned with the interests of children?

A. Education, Health, Employment, Education and Training, Youth Affairs, Sport, Social Security, Child Care, Arts and Heritage.

Q. What current policies are directed to the interests of children and young people for the nineties and beyond?

A. In the review of policies that is now underway, one of our chief priorities, as it has always been, will be to ensure a 'better deal' for all Australians and particularly for children. Some specific policies, presented at the last election, which would have impacted positively on children were our child tax and child care rebate policies and an unemployment benefit policy which would have provided more intensive training and retraining for our unemployed youth.

Q. What do you perceive as the greatest dangers for children now and through the nineties?

A. Under the present economic policies of the Labor Government, many thousands of families have been placed under severe economic, social and emotional pressure. The children of those families have undoubtedly suffered as a result. Until policies are put in place that lessen the burden on the average Australian family, many children will continue to face considerable strain and be denied the opportunity to reach their full potential. The problems of child poverty and youth homelessness remain as stark in 1990 as they have ever been. Again, if the proper policies are not put in place, which can offer all children the chance to obtain employment, education and training while living in

a 'normal' and secure environment, child poverty and homelessness will continue to be major economic and social problems.

Q. What should be done to protect children from abuse and neglect within families, by strangers and from institutions?

A. The greatest thing any government can do for children is to encourage the strengthening of the family unit. The Coalition's objectives in this area are:

- to preserve and protect the family as the most fundamental, enduring and rewarding unit of society.
- to promote a climate of responsibility towards the obligations of marriage and the family; and
- in cases of irremediable breakdown to provide for the simple, dignified and just dissolution of marriages, assuming that above all, the children are protected. When the family unit breaks down, as it unfortunately does in many instances, the legal system should protect the interests of the child as best it can.

As a general rule and in recognition of the principle that both parents have a direct responsibility for a child's well-being, joint legal custody orders should be made, unless the court, in the interests of the child, otherwise orders;

- Physical custody should continue to be awarded in accordance with a child's best interests;
- So far as practicable each parent should share in decisions concerning a child's well-being and future; and
- So far as practicable questions of access should be dealt with through the use of informal procedures, in a manner designed to minimise court involvement, emotional strain, time and costs.

Q. Do you personally have a position in respect to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child?

A. The Coalition recognises the work of the international community over the last decade in drafting a Convention to set minimum standards of protection for all children. While the Coalition supports key sections of the Convention, particularly those that declare the rights of the child to be protected from physical and mental abuse, exploitation in child labour, drug abuse, social exploitation and abduction, we remain concerned that the Convention does not emphasise strongly enough the rights and responsibilities of the parents.

Q. In your opinion should Australia sign the Convention? If yes, why? If no, why?

Should Australia proceed to ratification of the Convention and if so, in what time frame?

A. As stated above, we remain concerned that the Convention does not emphasise strongly enough the rights and responsibilities of the parents. The Coalition would support ratification of the Convention on the undertaking that the concerns outlined above be addressed.

Accordingly, our preferred position is that the ratification be accompanied by express reservations relating to specific articles in the Convention that underplay the rights and responsibilities with respect to children's education and upbringing.

Furthermore ratification of the Convention should only take place after proper and thorough consultation with the States.

Q. What role do you see being performed by the Australian Institute of Family Studies through the nineties?

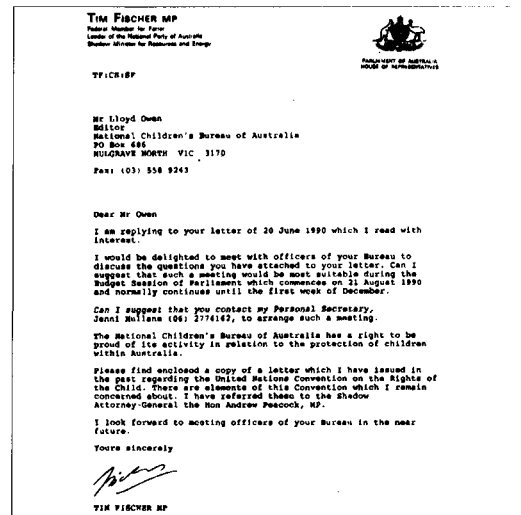
A. The Australian Institute of Family Studies will continue its primary role as one of the foremost social policy and research centres in Australia, with a particular emphasis placed on the changing role of the family.

Q. Where does the work of the Institute fit in connection with the development of policy by your party?

A. As with other leading social policy and research centres, the Coalition, where possible and where necessary, will liaise and consult with the Australian Institute of Family Studies during the formulation of policies, particularly in the areas of welfare and family policy.



Tim Fischer M.P.



Thank you for your recent letter concerning the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The Liberal and National Parties recognise the work of the international community over the last 10 years in drafting a Convention to set minimum standards of protection which should be afforded to children. In particular, there has been abuse of children in wars, in employment, and in prostitution. These matters, together with others, have been dealt with in the Convention.

We believe that steps taken to end these abuses should be applauded.

There are many other provisions of the Convention which are clearly worthy of support, for example those that declare the rights of children to protection from:

- physical or mental violence, exploitation and abuse;
- exploitation in child labour;
- drug abuse;
- sexual exploitation and abuse; and
- abduction and exploitation.

These and many other provisions of the Convention would be supported by all responsible people.

Concern has been expressed, however, that some of the Articles of the Convention, as they are presently drafted, do not recognise the rights and responsibilities of parents towards their children and may diminish the parent/child relationship.

First, the Convention declares that children have the right to "freedom of expression", a right described as including:

"... freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print..."

The Coalition Parties are of the view that the expression of this right does not acknowledge the right and the duty of parents to provide guidance to children on information they should receive in their formative years. That right and duty should be expressly stated in the Convention.

Secondly, the Convention declares the right of "freedom of association and freedom of peaceful assembly".

Again, this right is expressed in the Convention in such a way that it does not acknowledge the right and duty of parents to supervise the associations that their children keep.

That responsibility should be expressly stated in the Convention.

Thirdly, the Convention does not give adequate recognition to the rights and duties of parents with respect to the education as well as the physical, social and moral development of their children.

Earlier United Nations documents contained very clear statements of parents' rights and responsibilities with respect to their children's education and upbringing.

Those rights and responsibilities were expressly stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, the Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and they should also be contained in the present Convention.

The Convention provides that parties may make reservations to the Convention at the time of ratification. We believe that, on ratification, reservations should be made expressing the concerns outlined above.

In the application of the Convention to Australia, the attitude of State Governments will be vital, as most of the laws relevant to children are State laws.

You can be assured that in considering the Convention, the Coalition will pay the highest regard to the importance of the family unit in Australian society, and to the rights and responsibilities of parents.

I trust this makes the Coalition's position on this issue clear. Thank you for writing to me about this important matter.

Finally, I would add that the United Kingdom has moved for ratification and I would also add that as Leader of the National Party, I have reservations about some aspects of the work of the United Nations, notably UNESCO and FAO. You may be assured that I will closely monitor UN activities to the maximum extent possible.

Tim Fischer