Those of you who have chosen to be part of this session may wonder about what it is that the federal government contributes in the broad areas on which this conference focuses - or is this session a necessary recompense for sponsorship of the conference.

I hope that by the end of this session I will be able to convince you that the Commonwealth’s interests are much more than token and that there is an enormous contribution to policy and practice in the child, youth and family arena which comes from an arena which is much wider than Tasmania.

I am loath to say that the impetus for all, or most, of this change comes from the Commonwealth as the interactions and relationships which lead to the formation of ideas are complex and it is unduly simplistic to suggest that ideas and initiatives come from one area.

However, the Commonwealth has attempted to, and is attempting to, take a leadership role in a number of areas. These areas include the design of a social policy framework which is relevant to meeting the challenges of contemporary society and in so doing lead by engaging the community in policy and program design.

The other area where we have attempted to take a leadership role is in ensuring that there is better integration with other related policy areas such as the taxation system, the economic system, the education system and the industrial relations system. In short our behaviours reflect the changing relationship and the changing role of government. Our role is not defined by our ability to give grants but by our capacity to involve a range in both policy and program design and to integrate a wide range of initiatives.

Whilst I have noted that the Commonwealth is taking a leadership role this does not mean that there is not also a range of other leaders- be they academics, State governments, community organisations or whatever. Moreover, I think there is a greater recognition of areas of common interest between levels of government and community organisations and roles (including the right to own an area) which were clear ten or fifteen years ago have changed and are no longer as clear. And this increased level of partnership in both policy and practice and recognition of our common interests is a good thing.

What I will try to do is put into perspective some of the Commonwealth initiatives and show how they are making a significant impact on our environment.

Thinking about what I might say today was useful for me - and so at least one of us will get something out of today - in that it forced me to reflect on the issues to which I have just alluded:

• the role of government;
• the relationship between the various levels of government and the community sector; and
• what it is that the Commonwealth government is doing and how it fits into a broader strategy.

In trying to get to grips with these issues I re-read a large number of the Department of Family and Community Services policy documents and ministerial speeches.

I don’t intend to spend any more time specifically on the first two questions – about the role of government and the relationship between the different levels of government and will include them in passing as I talk about a broad strategy and particular interactions.

Today is about early intervention and strengthening families and so I have attempted to limit my thinking to this area. It is, however, not always possible to draw a neat distinction between this and community capacity building. The two areas are interwoven and for this reason I may lapse into something which fits more neatly into tomorrow’s agenda.

When I started to think about how the Commonwealth influences families I made myself a list of some of the areas in which we are involved. I was, myself, surprised at how long a list I drew up and I am quite sure that I missed things out.

I started my list with childcare, because it is an area with which I work regularly and am relatively familiar. It is large and many faceted and so to just say childcare doesn’t do the complexity of the family interventions in that arena justice.

I then added a series of youth interventions such as:
• Youth Activity Centres and Family Liaison Workers
• Youth Allowance
• Youth suicide prevention programs and
• Reconnect Services.

And when I got to this point I wondered whether reconnect services are about youth, or about parenting or about homelessness.

This question led me into areas of parenting and relationship support and I added to my list areas like:
• relationship support;
• pre marriage education;
• men’s relationship programs; and
• early intervention parenting programs and the whole gamut of NAPCAN funding.

I also identified the family support arrangements which are part of the family support tax system and the establishment of Family Assistance Offices.

And further on to a range of other areas in which the Commonwealth is engaged such as; domestic violence programs, housing and homelessness, the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, work and families research, emergency relief,
the national drug strategy, and the provision of child support arrangements through
the Child Support Agency.

What I think might be useful is if I talked about one or two of these rather than all of
them. To talk about all of them would become a bit of a list. Moreover, it would be so
complicated that it would not give me the opportunity to focus on the themes which
underpin the full range of Commonwealth policies.

The ones on which I have opted to focus are ones which I think can help me
illustrate the themes (and which I am reasonably comfortable) talking about.

Before I briefly describe a couple of the programs, I think it would be useful to note
what the themes are which I hope will be illustrated. I have already noted the very
high level issue about the role of government. I have also already made note about
something to do with community engagement. This has been defined differently
depending on the environment and context but includes such terms as:
• establishing the social coalition;
• building community capacity;
• developing local solutions to local problems;
• localisation of policy and practice.

This has also been extended to incorporate notions of focus on individuals. This is a
difficult concept for us bureaucrats who have been brought up in an entitlement
system in which provision of the same amount of support to each person is a
standard. The notion that individuals on income support payments may get different
interventions is one, which the welfare reform debate has raised, and one which is
not easily addressed in an environment that is based on equity of service provision.

Each of the notions I grouped together a moment ago, social coalitions about
community capacity and about localisation of policy and practice are worthy of a
more detailed consideration - but not today. They are also closely linked to the
second dominant theme that of early intervention.

Government speeches over the last five years have focussed on the merits from
both a human and an economic perspective of providing appropriate support at the
most effective time. In reading through government statements the analogy about
building fences at the top of cliffs rather than paying for ambulances at the bottom is
well used. It is an analogy which is illustrative of a dominant theme.

Within the early intervention context there is a part of the Report of the Reference
Group on Welfare Reform which I think is worth noting. One of the things, which had
an impact on me from that report, was the OECD statistic about the incidence of
children living in workless families. The report notes that in Australia that 860,000
children are living in jobless families and that we lead the OECD in this particular
area.

The report tells us something about our failures and about an issue which we must
address. We know that welfare dependence has negative human consequences
and that it is currently self-perpetuating. We also know that we must put in place
strategies to address this statistic and its human consequences.
There is also a theme which comes through federal (and international social policy) which is about the inadequacy of support programs which are not supported by a behavioural component. Again this is related to the role of government and the effective role of the State. The Prime Minister in one of his social policy speeches noted that;

“What we have tried to do over the last three years is to recognise that the Government has a limited but strategic role in developing family policy. And we have tried to develop a strategy that pays regard to the fact that in the end it is human behaviour that dictates the stability of families.”

The debate over behavioural interventions is perhaps most easily identifiable in the discussion over mutual obligation. For example there is much debate in the community about the extension of mutual obligation requirements in the parenting payment area to include people whose children are of high school or school age. The notion that this is a good idea is premised on the belief that, as well as financial incentives, there needs to be a set of behavioural responses aimed at addressing issues of workforce participation of workless families.

Finally I believe that it is most important to note a theme which is not often a feature of contemporary debate. That is the importance of maintaining a safety net. Whilst there is a lot of debate about fences rather than ambulances there remains a strong commitment to maintaining the income support safety net as a part of our system for people who need it.

The two areas, which I will outline in a little more detail as illustrations of the themes, have been chosen because of their apparent differences. They reflect the apparently vastly different components of the welfare system – areas of financial support through parenting payments and the apparently softer community development focus of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. What I hope I can illustrate is that many of the themes which I have already noted are apparent in each.

Let me start with parenting payments - an area in which I am no expert. Parenting payment is an income support arrangement which exists to assist both lone parents and partnered parents, who have the main child care role, to look after their children.

Within recent times the developments within this payment have included a range of options aimed at improving labour market participation and reducing long-term welfare dependence. These have included the expansion of the Jobs Education and Training Program; a move which reflects the desire to not only break cyclical welfare dependence but also to do so by having different responses for different people. It is a small reflection of individualisation of response.

Linked to this has been the Parenting Payment Intervention Pilot. Within the program a thousand people who are in receipt of parenting payment were interviewed (including a significant number in Tasmania) and specific assistance was provided to assist them back into some form of economic or social participation. This particular pilot, whilst perhaps not the biggest thing which has happened in
social welfare in the last five years, is again a reflection of a form of government assistance which has an individualised response.

Linked to both of these initiatives is the ideal that people will change their behaviour. There is within both of these programs a commitment to some form of mutual obligation and as I noted earlier, there is a substantial national debate over the application of mutual obligation to parenting payments.

As well as these changes there have been a number of substantial alterations, which impinge on the parenting payment area particularly through the taxation system, and the relaxation of income tests to provide greater incentives for people who choose to work.

Whist parenting payment is a fairly traditional payment it provides a reflection that the themes in Federal government administration are not ever present.

The other area, which I said that I would make reference to, is that of community support and particularly the Stronger Families and Communities strategy. Without the inertia of a past it is possible to see in this area not change but a program which reflects all of the themes of government programs with considerable strength.

Features of the community support area include the building of social coalitions and the working in partnership with a range of other areas. These are clearly demonstrated in initiatives like the Prime Minister’s Community and Business Partnership, which is about promoting a culture of community and business collaboration in Australia and which is about redefining the role of government.

Allied to this have been the range of programs which are being established under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy and its precursor program. These have again been about providing assistance to communities and families on a time-limited basis to help them develop capacity, to show other communities what they are capable of achieving and allowing them to demonstrate the same sort of things. It is also about building strong networks within and between communities, which facilitate them, becoming stronger. At this conference you will hear from some of the organisations with which we have been working at Clarendon Vale, at Bridgewater Gagebrook and a few other places.

These developments are about a whole range of the themes which I have mentioned before. They are about:

• changing the nature of government;
• establishing social coalitions and bringing people together;
• localisation of response; and
• changing the nature of government responses from a purely financial one to a response which leads to behavioural change and as such reflect the themes which I have previously identified.

What I have attempted to do this afternoon is highlight a range of themes which underpin commonwealth policies and are part of the national agenda in human service programs. These themes are important because they provide an
environmental context within which we manage in Tasmania and are reflective of national good practice. They are about increasing individualisation of response, about a move away from an rigid provision of identical services to all, about valuing the importance of early intervention and about the importance of integration of response between levels of government and service providers.

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