

PUTTING CHILDREN FIRST: STORIES FROM AUSTRALIA AND ELSEWHERE

Queen's Birthday address by Dr Brian Babington AM
to the Order of Australia Association (ACT), 14 June 2022, Canberra



Distinguished guests, friends, I begin by paying my respects to the Ngunnawal/Ngambri peoples, the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we gather, and to their Elders, past, present and emerging. It is great honour to talk to you on this important occasion, which also celebrates Her Majesty The Queen's Platinum Jubilee.

While it may not yet be over, my career has had two rather distinct, and some might say, unconnected halves. Career One was as a diplomat, a Foreign Affairs Officer, representing Australia in Burma then at the United Nations in New York; Career Two has been in the world of non-government community development, especially working with others to tackle child abuse. People are often puzzled why I left a diplomatic career to join the non-government sector. 'Puzzled' might actually be an overly polite way of putting things: apart from my ever-supportive family, many thought I had taken leave of my senses.

The truth is that Career One in Foreign Affairs built on my training as a social historian and kept sending me to places where I saw a lot of human need and inspirational people who were trying to solve complex social problems. Ultimately, I wanted to be part of that world. I don't want to dwell on my story but only to situate me in what I really want to talk about later.



In the early 1980s at the start of my diplomatic career my wife, Rhonda, and I were posted to Burma, where one of my duties was to manage Australia's aid program. One of our biggest projects involved the drilling of tube-wells in villages dotted through the dusty central dry zone around Mandalay and the ancient capital of Pagan.

Imagine this: village women and their children walking up to six hours a day to and from their villages to draw water for cooking and drinking from often polluted creeks. Under our aid program, hundreds of tube wells were drilled right in the middle of villages like the one pictured on the bottom left of this slide.

In doing so, we helped to spark a revolution for local women and children and to transform life in poor villages almost overnight. By making clean water accessible *within* villages, we helped local women to spend more time doing things they wanted to benefit their children, families and community like start up small businesses to generate income. They became engines of community development, and I am so proud that we helped to enable them via this relatively simple technology; they did the rest.

My next 'ah-ha' moment was working on community development and aid issues at the UN in New York with outstanding people like my Ambassador and friend, the late Dr Peter Wilenski AC, and observing how good Australia can be at bridging so-called developed and developing countries and forging innovative partnerships between disparate international players in tackling seemingly insurmountable problems like environmental degradation.

So, after these experiences, which showed me the importance of enabling people and communities and forging diverse partnerships at local and global scales, the writing was on the wall for Career One. Then, I found Families Australia, a national peak social policy advising non-government organisation, where I had the privilege of working for 16 years with extraordinary people, like my colleagues Jennifer Horsfield, Dr Sue Packer AO, Bev Orr OAM, who shared these loves: I felt like I had come home. And that leads me to talk about how some of the people with whom I worked fought to change policies and practices relating to children.



Children

- 360 million in extreme poverty
- 166 million with diagnosed mental disorder
- 18% Australian children below poverty line
- 46,000 children in foster or kinship care
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children x10 more likely in out-of-home care than non-Indigenous children

Most children grow up safe and well, but that isn't universally true. In Australia and elsewhere, too many are falling through the cracks. At the global level, around 360 million children — or just under 20 per cent of all the world's children — live in extreme poverty. Around 13 per cent of adolescents, 166 million, live with a diagnosed mental disorderⁱ. Disasters and emergencies affect children to a disproportionate degree. We are seeing this right now as the crisis in Ukraine unfolds, leaving over three million children displaced and in need of urgent humanitarian assistanceⁱⁱ.

In Australia, almost 18 per cent of children live below the poverty line and one in seven children experience mental health issues. We have the fifth highest OECD suicide rate for young people aged 15-19 yearsⁱⁱⁱ. Around 46,000 children and young people live in out-of-home care, that is, either foster or kinship care. And, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are ten times more likely to be in out-of-home care than non-Indigenous children^{iv}. On your tables there are copies of an extract from the most recent Commonwealth Government report on Australia's children which provides you with a summary of where we are making progress and where we could do better.

These statistics can feel overwhelming, leaving many of us, including me, to wonder what we can do and whether the odds can ever be turned around. It is here that I want to talk about how some people and organisations, often not with a lot of power or money, are making a real difference for children and young people — or at least seeding the potential for change — and showing us that change is possible against the odds, especially through innovative partnerships and clever ways of working.



Indonesia

- Around 500,000 in 5,000 orphanages (2007)
- Innovative problem-solving and leadership
- Leads to major policy shift
- Around 100,000 live in orphanages (2019)

First, to Indonesia, where it may surprise you to learn that only a decade ago up to half a million of Indonesia's 85 million children lived in an estimated 5,000 orphanages^v. The story I want to tell you concerns Save the Children's work to reduce the numbers of children living in Indonesia's orphanages. I came to know this story as part of my doctoral research^{vi}.

I need to preface the story with a few words about the global context. You may recall that the plight of children in institutions made headlines in the 1980s with revelations about appalling conditions for babies and children in Romania's orphanages. But, we had certainly known for even longer of the many profoundly negative consequences of institutions for children's physical, mental and socio-emotional development^{vii}. International concern about orphanages and other children's issues crystallised in the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which proclaimed that we should always act in the 'best interests' of the child, that children should be raised by their parents wherever possible, and that there must be better support given to families so that orphanages become the last resort when no other alternatives are possible^{viii}.

Despite the UN Convention, I am sorry to say that children are still being relinquished to orphanages in large numbers in many countries. Today, between two and eight million children live in orphanages, with the principal motivating reason being extreme family poverty^{ix}. But, the more insidious side is that, in some countries, orphanages are politically well-connected profit-making enterprises which makes the task of phasing them out nothing short of Herculean.

Back to Indonesia. Orphanages were introduced by the Dutch colonists over 300 years ago. By the early 2000s they had grown significantly in number, often supported by government subsidies, despite the fact that an estimated 90 per cent of children in these places were not orphans, having one or more living family member.

With that context, enter Save the Children! As you may know, Save the Children is a global non-government advocate for child rights. One of its aims is to reduce substantially the numbers of children in orphanages. In the early 2000s, they decided to tackle this issue in Indonesia. The odds were very definitely stacked against them: they were taking on big business, entrenched political support, and a fair degree of community acceptance. Being an NGO, they also had very little power to effect change.

The starting question they asked was: How best to encourage the Indonesian Government to fulfil its obligations to the UN Convention to phase out orphanages? Their response was, I think, an inspiring story of innovative problem-solving and leadership amidst ambiguity. Initially, they positioned a couple of staff members inside government in an act of partnership building that helped government to undertake the first-ever national census of orphanages. This work highlighted the scale of the problem, especially the plight of children displaced by the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. Then, they assisted government to establish a national registration database to keep track of children's institutions and draft national standards of care for children. Finally, they supported trial family support programs in places like Bandung to demonstrate how strengthening families could prevent relinquishment of children to institutions.

The net effect of this work was that, in 2010, the Indonesian Government announced a new national policy to move from reliance on orphanages to a child welfare system centred on family-based care.

Very significantly, just before the COVID pandemic, the Indonesian Government claimed that the number of children in orphanages had dropped from 500,000 to 100,000 in just a decade. It seems clear that a major policy paradigm shift is occurring which, if followed through, will improve the lives of tens of thousands of children and their families. This result was due overwhelmingly to Save the Children, which intervened at just the right political moment and forged respectful partnerships with pivotal government players who sought change, also for pressing economic reasons. When seen against the background of the massive vested pro-orphanage interests, this represents a major advance for child rights.

I'd like to stay on the topic of influencing national children's policy but change location: to Australia.



In many senses our country's story has been progressive in relation to children. From the 1930s, around 500,000 children in total lived in orphanages, but like many other Western countries, these places were closed by the 1980s, and the vast majority of children grow up in family settings. Tragically, however, child abuse statistics tell an alarming story. In the early 1990s, the number of children known to have been either physically, emotionally or sexually abused or neglected hovered at around 20,000 annually.

Fifteen years on, that annual number had risen by almost 200 per cent to 56,000 children. There was also a close correlation in the rise in the number of children in foster and other forms of out-of-home care^x. Grandparents, in particular, were found to be bearing increased loads as primary carers, and still do to this day as I've found when talking to many grandparent carers over the years^{xi}. By the early 2000s the situation was described by eminent practitioners and researchers as nothing short of a crisis. They argued that tackling abuse required a recognition that child safety was everyone's business and that we needed better coordinated government, non-government and community action to address the deep-seated causes of child abuse, especially alcohol and substance abuse and domestic and family violence.

So, the question was this: If past responses were plainly failing children and families, what would it take to break the log jam? In statutory terms, day-to-day responsibility for child protection falls to State and Territory Governments. Traditionally, the Commonwealth Government has stayed away from day-to-day child protection matters, instead focusing attention on funding larger social welfare programs. Faced with that conundrum, several non-government organisations and community leaders decided that it was vital for the Commonwealth Government to become engaged on child protection matters for the first time under a new long-term national strategy that prioritised preventing child abuse at a deeper causal level and providing earlier assistance to families and children experiencing vulnerability before problems reached acute levels.

To help spearhead this campaign, Families Australia helped to establish an NGO, academic and community consortium of over 200 organisations — the National Coalition on Child Safety and Wellbeing — to advocate the case across all political and jurisdictional lines. Happily, this thinking coincided with a window of opportunity in Federal politics.


The upshot was that, in 2009, all Australian governments adopted the nation's first-ever plan to tackle child abuse: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children. This was a landmark in that Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments had never before joined forces with the non-government, community and academic sectors in a collaborative venture to tackle this problem. In its first decade, the National Framework

was the policy driver for the appointment of Australia's first-ever National Children's Commissioner, the development of national standards to oversee out-of-home care, as well as national principles for child-safe organisations. Importantly, too, the National Framework has gained support across all major political parties and jurisdictions: it is now widely recognised as the national policy 'spine' to tackle the problem.

As with the Indonesian case, turning around complex problems is taking time and, as much as we desperately want to see early improvements, on-ground change has been slow. We still see deeply distressing child abuse stories and statistics. For example, the number of children in out-of-home care rose by seven per cent in the last three years alone, from 43,000 to 46,000^{xii}.

A bright spot is that Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments recently decided to continue the National Framework for a further decade^{xiii}. Under the new plan, there will be a national approach to early intervention and targeted support for children and families experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage and a special focus will be on the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Clearly, far more work is needed. The National Framework may be the policy spine, but it still lacks sufficient muscle and sinew in terms of funding to make significant progress, and the fact remains that children's issues usually do not get much political priority.



Drawing it together

- People from disparate backgrounds coming together in trust and goodwill
- Courage to reach out
- To be hopeful in bad times...
- What can we do?

Let me try to draw these two stories together. The cases I've talked about represent bold thinking to take on issues by forging new alliances to tackle wickedly complex issues based on shared values rather than confrontation and chronic problematisation. At the heart of both cases is a story about people coming together in a spirit of trust and goodwill to solve deeply human problems even if their starting points — their motivations, power and resources — are different.

As I reflect on the key messages of the Queen's Birthday celebrations, I think so much about the courage and tenacity I've observed in those reaching out to other players beyond their traditional networks — going way out of their comfort zone — to suggest ways forward with common purpose, believing in a better society in which all children and young people grow up safe and well.

These imaginative people invoke the spirit remarked upon by American social historian Howard Zinn who wrote: "To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness...If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act...and if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future...to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvellous victory."

I have no easy answers to the question of what we as individuals can do in our daily lives to help grow child wellbeing and safety, except to suggest that we start where we are, whether that's working in a local community setting, urging our various levels of government to adopt child friendly policies and practices, speaking up when we see injustices, supporting children's organisations through donations, or doing what we can within our families or networks to encourage others and offer hope. I wonder, too, what we can do to support and inspire

young people to start and sustain their own journey of community contribution and service, and in the process, of course, help to build their own resilience, values, networks and character. I leave you with these questions and would love to hear your ideas.

And, it is in that vein that I close by recalling Professor Dorothy Scott AM, who was for many years the Director of the Australian Centre for Child Protection at the University of South Australia, as well as one of the founders of the National Coalition on Child Safety and Wellbeing. I always remember her response when asked about critical ingredients of childhood resilience and wellbeing. She said that right at the top of her list was for a child to know that they are the ‘twinkle in the eye’ of at least one unconditionally kind and loving adult. After all is said and done, I think that immensely powerful recipe is...a pretty good starting point. Thank you.

ⁱ UNICEF 2021, [On my mind. State of the world's children 2021](#), p.10.

ⁱⁱ World Vision 2022, [Ukraine crisis. Facts, FAQs and how to help](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ Valuing Children Initiative 2022, [Every child is valuable](#).

^{iv} Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020, [Child protection Australia 2019-2020](#).

^v Save the Children UK, UNICEF and Indonesian Ministry of Social Affairs 2007, [‘Someone that matters’. The quality of childcare institutions in Indonesia](#).

^{vi} Babington, BK 2015, [For the benefit of children alone? A discourse analysis of policymaking relating to children's institutions in Indonesia, 1999-2009](#) (Ph.D dissertation, Australian National University, Canberra).

^{vii} See Groark, CJ & McCall, RB 2011, [‘Implementing changes in institutions to improve young children's development’](#), *Infant Mental Health Journal* 32(5), pp. 509–525; Dozier M, Zeanah, CH, Wallin, AR & Shaffer, C 2012, [‘Institutional care of young children: review of literature and policy implications’](#), *Social Issues Policy Review* 6(1), pp. 1-25.

^{viii} United Nations 1989, [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

^{ix} Save the Children 2009, [Keeping children out of harmful institutions. Why we should be investing in family-based care](#), estimate that four in five children in orphanages have at least one living parent and are therefore not orphans.

^x According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, there were 14,078 children in out-of-home care in Australia 1997 and 25,454 children in out-of-home care in 2006. See Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [Child protection Australia](#) (various years).

^{xi} Families Australia 2008, [Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth Inquiry into Better Support for Carers](#).

^{xii} Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020, [Child protection Australia 2019-2020](#). In 2019-2020, emotional abuse (54%) was the most common type of abuse or neglect substantiated through investigations. This was followed by neglect (22%), physical abuse (14%), and sexual abuse (9%). Also, children from very remote areas had the highest rates of abuse substantiation (24 per 1,000 children) and were more than three times as likely as children from major cities (seven per 1,000 children) to be the subject of a substantiation.

^{xiii} Australian Government 2021, [The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031](#).