

The Families Commission after One Year:

An Address to the Littlies Lobby Parliamentary Breakfast

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The Families Commission will be a year old at the end of this month. It is therefore a fair question to ask how it has managed to carve out a role and work programme that ensures the Commission makes a unique contribution to the interests of New Zealand families in a landscape where a number of other institutions and agencies also address similar interests. In trying to answer this question for you this morning I hope to also comment on the particular perspective that makes sense to me and which has been my reference point over the past almost 20 years of professional life.

I am sure this audience, that is very well informed about these matters could immediately tell us the areas we should address and some may even wonder why we have been slow to take well thought out and public positions on a number of contemporary challenges for New Zealand families. I hope you will accept that it has been important for the Commission to set itself up properly and to gather intelligence on key questions carefully before offering advice and commentary on family issues. We have resolved to “walk before running”, to take positions and offer advice on the basis of research, consultation and due consideration rather than whatever takes our fancy. I trust this perspective will meet with your approval.

In August 2000 Professor Urie Bronfenbrenner, probably the world’s leading developmental scientist, was invited to give the commencement address at Pennsylvania State University. In this address he stated that the graduating class was not the only group that merited special recognition that day. One of the principal discoveries he said he had made from his research on human development over thirty years was that:

“The human family is the most powerful, the most humane, and by far the most economical system known for making and keeping human beings human”¹

He went on however to conclude that as a consequence of the research findings that had been accumulating since the 1970’s he believed the family was less and less able to effectively perform the functions associated with “making and keeping human beings human”.

¹ Bronfenbrenner, U; “Commencement address at Pennsylvania State University, 5 August 2000”: [Http://people.cornell.edu/pages/ub11/](http://people.cornell.edu/pages/ub11/)

In a related article Professor Bronfenbrenner² refers to the growing chaos in the lives of children, youth and families in America. His research had shown that this was reflected in part in the increasing cynicism and disillusionment by young adolescents in the institutions in society, their reduced trust in other people, increasing self – centeredness and disregard for the needs of others, increased levels of crime, increased rates of imprisonment, rising rates of teenage pregnancy and birth and reduction in school achievement.

Bronfenbrenner noted that these changes were taking place at the same time that the social institutions, including families, and informal structures that had significant impact on the character of the next generation were also experiencing marked changes. These included:

- The rise in the number of parents bringing up children who did not have a second parent figure present on a regular basis to engage with the child and provide emotional and material support.
- More parents struggling with the demands of full time work and the family.
- Teenage youths and adult models watched by children and youth emphasised commercialism, sexuality, substance abuse and violence. Thus young people were bereft, in his view, of watching adults who were positive role models and whose behaviours could be internalised.
- Families' neighbourhood ties were reducing while the number of children and families living in poverty was increasing and where the gap between the rich and the poor was widening.

Bronfenbrenner's research, and he has an extensive reputation for interrogating research from many sources and countries in reaching his conclusions, was showing that similar trends were occurring in other countries. He also predicted that societies showing the highest levels of developmental disarray would be those based on individualism, essentially the English speaking countries.³

² Bronfenbrenner, U; "Growing Chaos in the Lives of Children Youth and Families: How Can We Turn it Around? Cornell University, 1999.

³ Bronfenbrenner, U; "Growing Chaos in the Lives of Children Youth and Families: How Can We Turn it Around? Cornell University, 1999

In 2000 Professor Bronfenbrenner predicted that the “chaos”, which had not then reached a violent form, was contagious and would spread to other countries. He seemed critical of the research focus on “analysing the developmental disarray of children and families than on identifying the scientific bases and strategies for turning it around and thereby actualising the untapped constructive potential of people.

Are there some elements of chaos in the lives of children, youth and family in New Zealand?

Before discussing some of the solutions Bronfenbrenner suggests lets examine what elements of the “chaos” might be present in New Zealand.

Before I proceed let me be clear that it would be unfair and inaccurate to describe the characteristics to which I refer as representing “chaos” in the New Zealand context. While some of the negative indicators could be referred to as having the potential, if unchecked over the next few years, to cause chaos, it is not my intention to be alarmist or unnecessarily negative. I make this point to refer to the opportunity we have to address these concerns now to avert any long term risks to our society and families. The Families Commission clearly has the potential to play a significant role in this regard over the next few years provided it can comprehensively conceptualise the influences on families, and in partnership with the key players, creatively design solutions, test them, improve them and generalise them.

In the American context Bronfenbrenner also lamented that it was yet to address the reality of the growing “chaos” in the lives of children, youth and families as well as in settings like health, neighbourhoods, workplaces and the like.

Family structures and family forms have changed significantly in New Zealand over the past 25 years. We have a large decline in two parent families and a doubling of the number of one parent families. New Zealand has high rates of single-parenthood compared to other OECD nations. By 2021 one-parent families are likely to make up 35% of families with children in New Zealand⁴. One suspects that for a sizeable proportion of sole parents it would be difficult to provide as extensive a range of

⁴ Statistics New Zealand. (2003) *National Family and Household Projections 2001 (base) – 2021*, <http://www.stats.govt.nz>

opportunities and experiences for their children without enormous effort and sacrifice or without enhanced state provision and community support.

New Zealanders partner and re-partner more often resulting than before in a range of reconstituted blended and step families. These family forms require refinement of particular policies and resources which have yet to be developed and instituted.

There is widespread concern about the levels of family violence and child abuse in New Zealand. While a number of policies and programmes have been implemented to change these trends we are critical of the lack of overall success. Recently the level of concern has been significant enough to call for a rejuvenation of efforts to achieve better success at turning the trends around. We also continue to observe the increase in child abuse as greater effort is put into addressing the issues on a regular basis.

The proportion of older people in the population is increasing and there are reports from groups organised around older people of loneliness and isolation as well as abuse, neglect and poverty.

Our population is diversifying in ethnic terms and we are yet to gain a fuller appreciation of the changes these families are experiencing making it difficult to develop appropriate policies that are relevant to them and that would assist their adjustment and settlement in New Zealand.

The labour market is changing and the most common labour arrangement amongst parenting couples is both parents in paid work. These raise significant issues for programmes and provision in child care, work life balance, and the creation of family friendly work environments.

A view that is often expressed is that financial support for families with children does not appear to be as generous as they were previously and some sections of the community remain significantly disadvantaged such as single-parent families, families dependent on income-tested benefits, families with at least one non-European adult, and those in rental housing. In our just completed focus groups on "What makes families Successful" a number of participants noted that the families Package is making a difference so we note that some of these matters are being progressively addressed.

Whether or not these changing indicators about the family (and there are many more besides the ones identified above) in New Zealand represents “chaos” in Bronfenbrenner’s terms is not quite the point. The point is that as a society we need to understand the changes and their implications for policies and practices that would support the family, “the best system for keeping human beings human” to continue to be the foundation of our society in the future.

Bronfenbrenner’s developmental science provides a detailed formulation of the various types of influence on human development. His work encourages us to seek explanations for human experiences in the environment, conceived broadly, and which is not stable but in a constant state of flux and somewhat unpredictable. Bronfenbrenner explains that if you have a family with children in an environment that is constantly changing, at first this is annoying. However, if it persists over time, especially if you are a single parent, or two-parent family with both parents working full time and with little control over their working hours that prevents them from spending time with their family, then that external environment becomes internalised and reflected in their behaviour at home. These conditions are more likely to occur for low income families although not exclusively. In such a situation it is the environment that has to be examined in detail and appropriate policies designed to minimise its disabling effects.

In addition to providing a detailed formulation for conceptualising the various elements that impact on families, Bronfenbrenner encourages us to adopt a research methodology that goes beyond understanding a problem or issue. He encourages us to adopt a methodology and mind set that seeks to reverse the disruptive changes we uncover. This demands an examination of both the environment and the person’s interaction with it, and the design of what he calls “transformative experiments” to change the situations that are not producing the outcomes we desire for families.

Transformative experiments are significant processes designed to change the environment in such a way that significantly alters the experiences of families from the dysfunctional to the functional. Natural experiments take place very regularly in society. We harness the power of these experiments to be transformative when we design an alternative set of experiences that enable a better alignment in the factors that impact on people’s experiences.

In my view the work of the Families Commission needs to be such that when we examine particular issues of concern to families we also design interventions that will result in change and that will be transformative. If we simply research and report then we might not be much different from other agencies engaged in research and reporting. This is the powerful message from the work of the pre-eminent developmental scientist of the past fifty years and one that ought to be heeded.

The Families Commission

Regardless of the method by which the Families Commission was established, its establishment signals in a powerful way the importance of families, or to use Bronfenbrenner's term acceptance that the family "is the most powerful, the most human and by far the most economical system known for making and keeping human beings human".

The challenge for the Commission has been to conceptualise our mandate in a manner that enables us to make an effective and long term contribution to New Zealand families.

Our task is to select those issues that are representative of the "chaos" the family is experiencing, understand it and design transformative experiments to change its effect on families. In doing this we place the family at the centre of our consideration and we are asked, by our empowering legislation, to ensure that they are totally integrated in the responses developed.

There are four pillars to the work of the Commission and each lends itself to the perspective I am outlining.

We are required to maintain a significant research programme. Thus you can expect that as we examine issues of interest to families, research will be a key part of the examination. We are committed to learn from the already completed research and to participate collaboratively with those who are currently researching an area. Where gaps exist we will undertake research ourselves or commission research on the topic.

The second pillar of the work of the Commission is community engagement so we will consult families as well as individuals and institutions that are affected in order to gain a detailed appreciation of the lived experiences of people and providers.

The third pillar of our work is the analysis of current policy and practices that impact on the particular issue. We will understand the range of policies that impact on a particular issue, understand what they are meant to achieve, i.e. both the intended and unintended consequences and the changes that might be indicated.

The fourth pillar of our work is public education. Thus we are able to place information, refocus practices etc with families, communities and institutions in order to address the issue selected.

If, by these processes, we are able to adopt the mind set of designing transformative action to address the disruptive changes in the lives of families, we would have injected a new level of consideration of family interests. As advocates for all New Zealand families, this would be, we anticipate, a welcome addition to the consideration of their interests.

The Integration

There would be no need for a Families Commission if all was well with the family in New Zealand. Clearly we are required to point out that all those who provide a service, design a policy or undertake a practice that affects families will place the interests of families above all else. Mandating the Commission to be advocates for families provides a sense of urgency and immediacy in the work of the Commission.

As I have said our commitment is to understand issues through science and to engage with families at a human and immediate level. Hence our focus on consultation that is carefully conceptualised sensitively carried out and competently analysed.

We will understand current provision by analysing the policies and practices that inform the area.

We will engage in transformative action either through the design and development of alternative policies and practices or through community education, or both.

This method of operating will mean that we will maintain an appropriate public profile, place information before the public regularly, lead or encourage public debate as required.

The Current Work Programme

In addition to establishing the Commission in its first year we made significant progress on a number of areas of work. These included:

An examination of what makes families successful. Based on a literature review on the topic we undertook 42 focus groups around the country on people's views on what they considered were important. A preliminary reading of the early analysis suggests that families do think about their immediate environment as well the community and policies that affect them in some detail. We also get an early impression that the majority of families who participated were happy with their family circumstances. However, this is only an early impression. These reports are currently being prepared and will be available from the end of this month.

We have reviewed government funded parenting programmes, examined the literature on the effects of government policies on families and analysed the type of data that is available for us to interrogate from the current longitudinal studies underway in New Zealand. These reports will be available from the end of this month.

One of the somewhat novel projects we have undertaken is provided opportunities for 10 Blue Skies work on families to be completed and published.

We will develop a register of all the family issues raised with us through any method and think our way through how our various roles can address them. This register will become an important tool for enabling the Commission to develop its understanding of the issues facing New Zealand families, and will directly feed into the organisation's research, public education and advocacy work.

Another tool that will be used by the Commission over the next two years is a people's panel that will be established and first piloted during 2005/06. The people's panel (a public consultation technique, that has been used successfully in the United

Kingdom for some years) will support the Commission's Community Engagement Framework and research activity by providing a mechanism for obtaining the views of a sample of the New Zealand population. Members of the panel will be consulted from time to time to obtain their views on issues relevant to New Zealand families. The issues for consultation will be determined by the Commission in conjunction with the organisation's wider research and community engagement agenda. Panel members will be recruited to ensure they reflect the diversity of New Zealand families and coverage of the groups as specified in the Families Commission Act 2003.

Significant research activities due during the 2005/06 include:

- A final report, summarising the results from the literature review, focus groups, and public consultation exercise (November 2005) arising from the Families with Dependent Children: Successful Outcomes project.
- We will be carrying out a large quantitative survey of families, including follow-up on themes emerging from the Families with Dependent Children project
- A commissioned Overview/Trends report on family violence will be completed and published by August 2005
- A new project will focus on issues relating to older people and families, including the contributions older people make within families and the implications of an aging population. First reports from this work are due in March 2006
- An initial commissioned report aimed at identifying potential tools and methodologies for assessing the impacts government policies have on families will be completed in July 2005. This will be followed by a review of the empirical literature on the impacts of Government policies on family form.
- A report on Family Living Standards and the Costs of Raising Children. This research will seek to improve understanding of the costs of raising children and the implications for policy in the medium-term. A review of methodologies will be completed first, followed by preliminary cost estimates by March 2006.

Community Initiatives

- **Commissioner Forums** Our, more formal, research will be further informed by our ongoing engagement with communities, such as our planned annual programme of regional forums with Commissioners.
- **Issues Register** The Families Commission intends to document these issues (through regional forums, or through environmental scanning of the media), into an issues register,
- **People's Panel** Another tool that the Commission will use is a people's panel that will be established and first piloted during 2005/06.
- **Publications Programme** From July this year the Commission will publish a series of reports based on research carried out over the past year

Summary

I have tried to place the work of the Families Commission in a slightly broader context as well as provide you with some information on our current work. We are still getting up to full speed and in this next year we will maintain a much greater public presence. We want to balance our focus on the four elements of our work and it is my personal intention to do work that could be seen as being "transformative" in the sense advanced by Bronfenbrenner's formulations.