



## **PRIME MINISTER**

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP**

**ADDRESS TO THE NATIONAL FAMILY SUMMIT, PARLIAMENT  
HOUSE, CANBERRA ACT, 11 NOVEMBER 1992**

Ita, Summit delegates, friends

I appreciate being given the opportunity to deliver the official opening address to this important event.

I know, Ita, that you were motivated to organise this national gathering by your concern for the social problems you identified as being suffered by many Australian families today.

I commend your initiative in gathering together an impressive array of Australians for this meeting, and trust that these two days will produce fruitful and productive discussions.

I note that you intend to present to me a summary of the Summit proceedings and I look forward to hearing your thoughts on how we should all be responding to the changing face of families in Australia today.

For my part, I would like to spend the time available to me this morning contributing some of my own thoughts on this challenging subject.

In doing so, I speak as a family member - as a husband and a father, as well as a son and a brother. But I also speak as a member of a Government which has directed considerable policy effort over the past decade towards addressing the financial and other needs of families.

I am proud of my own contribution towards many of these policies – particularly those, such as the establishment of the Child Support Agency and the introduction of the Family Allowance Supplement – which have put money into the hands of women and children who previously went without.

The record of the Child Support Agency speaks for itself.

Before it was set up in 1988, only 24 per cent of custodial parents received child support and the average level of maintenance was \$26 per child per week.

Today the Agency collects 70 per cent of the amount on its books, and the average level of support is now \$48 per child per week.

Similarly, the Family Allowance Supplement has put money into the pockets of those who really need it. The \$3 per child per week increase to FAS recipients provided for in the 'One Nation' package benefited 750,000 low income families who, between them, have 1.5 million children.

Some of the government's biggest programs such as Medicare, Family Allowances and our housing programs are greatly beneficial to families, especially families with low incomes.

In fact, it is difficult to think of any of our policies in the income support area, the health area, the housing area, the community services area that do not benefit families.

This is especially true when we consider the great variety of family forms that exist in Australia today.

When we talk about Australian families today, we have to include families of all sorts and sizes.

Families with children where both parents are present.

Families with children headed by sole parents – women or men.

Families that include several generations living under the same roof.

Families where one member cares for another who is frail aged, chronically ill, disabled or suffering from HIV/AIDS.

And let's not forget all the other combinations, the single people, the childless, the once-or never-married who live alone, the "empty-nesters" and all the others who are equally entitled to be included when we speak of the great family of our nation.

In other words, when it comes to caring for people in need - be that need physical, financial, emotional or spiritual - let's not overlook anyone just because they happen not to live in the kind of traditional arrangements that perhaps once characterised the majority of households.

At the same time, I think we have to acknowledge that families where children are present are often those where governments have a special role to play in providing financial and other forms of assistance.

Families with children often have greater financial needs, and it is up to us as a society to ensure that the next generation is clothed and fed and sheltered and educated.

That is the very least we can do.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

You are no doubt aware that 1994 has been designated by the United Nations as the International Year of the Family.

We see this as a most important year because it will enable us, as a government and as a community, to draw together our ideas and our thinking about families and help us frame approaches for the future.

We intend that, as far as Australia is concerned, 1994 - IYF - will be a year in which we truly try to come to grips with some of the challenges today's families face.

To emphasise how seriously we intend to treat IYF let me inform you today of some of the initial decisions we have already taken in order to be well prepared.

First, I propose to appoint a Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on the International Year of the Family - and I have already approached the Minister for Aged, Family and Health Services, my colleague Peter Staples, about accepting this position.

I am delighted that he has agreed to do so.

Secondly, I have decided to establish an IYF Secretariat in my department so that I can be closely involved in the Year's activities. Part of the role of the Secretariat will be to support an IYF Council composed of members with a variety of backgrounds and expertise who will advise the Government and be a focus for IYF.

I am very pleased to be able to announce today that Jennifer Rowe has accepted the Government's invitation to be Chair of this Council.

For the past five years Jennifer Rowe has been editor of The Australian Women's Weekly, a position she will leave next month in order to devote herself to her writing.

Ms. Rowe is well known as the author of adult mystery books, but she also deserves recognition for the six best-selling children's books she has written under the pen name Emily Rodda. Indeed, four of these books have won the Australian Children's Book of the Year Award.

Ms Rowe is vitally interested in all aspects of Australian family life and especially in the challenges faced by the traditional form of the family in today's increasingly complex and difficult world.

Her stewardship of the Women's Weekly has put her in touch with thousands of families and she is very alive to the many issues families face in a world that no longer provides tradition or other forms of certainty.

Ms. Rowe is uniquely qualified to lead the IYF Council and I am very pleased she has agreed to accept this important post.

The Government will give careful consideration to the issues nominated by the IYF Council to address during the Year, but I should like to say today that I will be a strong advocate for the inclusion of two vital issues.

Domestic violence is one.

How we go about reconciling work and family is the other.

Less than a fortnight ago I spoke on the subject of violence against women.

I said then, and let me repeat now, that we as a society have an obligation to do something about the terrible toll of violence against women. I singled out domestic

violence, saying that we do not know its true extent, but it is probably greater than any of us would like to admit.

I say today that I believe we should make the elimination of domestic violence one of the major aims of the International Year of the Family.

I don't want to be unrealistic by setting unreachable goals, but I do believe we can say that as a society we regard violence within the home as intolerable and that we will use the International Year of the Family as our opportunity to take every step we can to end it.

Women and children have the right to safety, the right not to feel frightened in the very place where they are entitled to find shelter.

It is surely not too much to ask that we as a society will strive to make this right a reality.

The second issue I wish to argue for is the reconciling of our work and family lives – for policies and arrangements on how to make the various aspects of our lives fit more harmoniously together.

So our lives can become less stressful.

In particular so women's lives can become less stressful.

It is women who, these days, are more often the ones who shoulder the "double burden" of managing the time-tables of family members and who run family finances in addition to their paid job outside the home.

It is no wonder that many women are just dead tired all the time.

We should be looking for ways to make it easier for them, be they at home all day with kids or in the paid work-force.

This is an issue on which the government has spoken many times in the past.

I have myself previously advocated that our workplaces become more "family-friendly".

By this we mean more flexible working arrangements so parents can attend to children who are sick or need special attention. We mean better access to child-

care, and child-care where the hours are compatible with parents' working days.  
We mean leave that enables women and men to spend time with newborn infants.

As a government we are proud of our record in child care.

We have increased the number of places five-fold. We have established a fee relief system which keeps fees down in community and private sector centres for low and middle income families. And we have introduced needs-based planning to try to ensure that services are located where they are most needed.

Since we came to office we have increased the number of subsidised places from 46,000 to 193,000. By mid 1996 we expect to have over 250,000 child care places available.

This is a record to stand on – but we intend to do more.

Already we are planning innovations in our approach. For instance, we have begun piloting special care for sick kids because we know this is one of the greatest causes of anxiety in parents – what do you do if your child is sick and needs to be looked after?

There are many other subjects we could include under this issue of how we reconcile these two important areas of our lives.

You could almost say it is the crux of modern family life.

It will be one of the more challenging aspects of the International Year of the Family, I believe, to come up with practical suggestions for how to make it easier for all of us – but especially those of us with young children – to achieve greater harmony between these two areas of our lives.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

I do not believe it is necessary to wait until 1993, however, to address another issue which I know is of great concern to parents.

I refer to the subject of violence in the media.

Last week in the Parliament I raised the matter of the amount of violence on television. Following my remarks, I have been in touch with the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations (FACTS) and I will be meeting with Bob Campbell, its Chairman, next week.

I look forward to a productive discussion with Mr Campbell, and I am confident we can address the legitimate concerns many parents have within the self-regulatory framework to which the government is committed.

But my concern about violence on our screens is not confined to what is aired on television.

I am also worried about what we see on the big screen - when we go to the movies - and what we see in our homes when we rent videos.

I believe that all us should be able to have confidence in the classifications system so that we are not taken by surprise by the contents of a film or a video.

This is important to us as adults who want to decide what kind of entertainment we are paying for, but it is quite critical when it comes to choosing movies or videos for our children will watch.

For the past three years the Office of Film and Literature Classification has enhanced the classifications by providing consumer advice for all films and videos. This advice is set out on the bottom of video covers and in display advertisements for films.

This consumer advice is important in assisting parents to try and decide what is suitable for their children to see, but it does not make up for a fundamental weakness in our classification system.

I am referring to the far too broad scope of the "M" classification for films and videos.

The category is absurdly broad.

I find it difficult to accept the utility of a system which brackets "Crocodile Dundee" and "Cape Fear" in the same "M" category.

I am sure many other parents would share my lack of confidence in such a system.

But what can we realistically do about it?

In the past there have been suggestions that a special category be created just for films which depict violence.

While this would help to identify violent films, it would ignore the concerns of many parents in the community about coarse language, or depictions of sex or drug-use which also feature prominently in the "M" category.

I believe that there should be two levels in the present "M" category.

The first would cover the lower end of the category, would include all films and videos which contained "milder" material and would - like the present "M" category - be advisory only.

The second, which might be called MA, would be restricted rather than advisory (meaning there would be penalties for allowing children under 15 access to these films unless accompanied by an adult) and would apply to the other, more raunchy and more violent end of the spectrum.

At the same time as we were making more sense of these classifications, we might want to take a look at the recommendation of the former Australian Broadcasting Tribunal for a single classification system for television and for films and video.

The present dual system is confusing to all concerned.

I recognise these are difficult issues.

We are not trying to restrict what adults can watch.

But I do think I speak for many parents when I say we need more reliable means of knowing the contents of films and videos so we can make informed choices about what our children are subjected to.

In this spirit, I propose to ask my colleagues, the State Premiers and Chief Ministers, to agree to list film and video classification as an agenda item at the Council of Australian Governments meeting to be held in Perth on December 7.

I trust they will agree that finding a fair and equitable solution to this subject is in the interests of us all -- and is especially in the interests of Australia's children.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

I have great pleasure in declaring this National Family Summit officially open and I trust the next two days will see you engage in much constructive discussion.

Thank you.