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PRIME MINISTER

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

**LAUNCH OF THE INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE FAMILY
BANKSTOWN, 6 DECEMBER 1993**

I am delighted to be here today to launch the International Year of the Family in Australia.

For me, families matter.

Indeed, I am sure that we are all here because we think the same way on this.

Because of the importance of families to all of us as individuals.

Because of the importance of families to our communities.

Because we think families are a national resource vital to the future of this country.

And because we want everyone to be aware of it.

We want everyone to know the value of families.

And when we speak of the value of families, we speak of the value of all families.

We recognise that families have their own unique needs, and that the Government has a special role to assist them.

We have implemented and will continue to put into place measures to help families.

But one thing is certain.

Families are endlessly diverse in shape and structure.

It is appropriate then, that Government programs continue to recognise this diversity of family forms in Australia, and meet their different, but equally legitimate, needs.

As I have said before, when we talk about families today, we are talking about 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, or disabled.

And any number of other combinations which complete the Australian national family.

Just now the biggest problem facing many families is unemployment.

It is the dominant economic and social issue of our times.

We know only too well what the consequences of unemployment are - particularly long term unemployment - on individuals, on children, on families, on communities, on the social fabric.

That is why we have commissioned a Discussion Paper on Unemployment, which we will receive next week - a major report on the dimensions of the problem and how to deal with it.

Following our consideration of it, the Government will release a White Paper on employment next year - the first since the end of World War II.

Among other considerations, our response to the report will recognise that, although all families are vulnerable to unemployment, some are more vulnerable than others.

There is no getting away from the fact that unemployment affects families in different ways, and that for solutions to be effective they must take the differences into account.

Our policies must address the diverse nature of Australian families, and the diverse nature of their employment and assistance needs.

A major issue to address in this context is how families balance the responsibilities of work and family life.

Governments should, I believe, promote policies which recognise and support choices families are making in combining paid work and family care.

We have to make these aspects of peoples' lives fit more harmoniously together.

We have to keep pressing for more "family-friendly" workplaces.

And child care.

This Government is very proud of it's record in the creation of childcare places.

It is proud of the system of fee relief it has introduced and its needs based planning.

The child care rebate, to be provided next year, is another important plank in our child care policy.

It is a long overdue recognition of the cost of child care for families in earning an income.

We recognise that childcare needs are neither uniform or identical.

We recognise that women, throughout their lives, have a range of equally legitimate choices about being in the workforce or being at home.

We appreciate the value of caring and nurturing provided by women who do choose to stay at home while their children are growing up, and the value of the unpaid work they carry out both in the household and in the community.

That is why we have introduced the Home Care Child Allowance for supporting parents caring for their children full time at home.

By paying the allowance directly to the caring parent, usually the mother, we have provided many women at home with a source of independent income which otherwise they would not have.

Perhaps I could summarise the Government's support for families by saying simply that we are about recognising diversity and facilitating choice.

And this, I believe, sits well with the objectives of the International Year of the Family.

Some people, I know, get a bit cynical about International Years, and about their usefulness.

I am not one of them.

I support the concept of International Years on the basis of their results.

Because of the benefits that come from them.

These benefits don't necessarily come overnight.

Some of them don't come nearly quickly enough for everyone.

But they do come, and they come, in part, because of the change in attitudes which the International Years bring about.

Few would deny that there has been substantial progress in what women have achieved since the International Year for Women in 1975.

And equally few would deny the impetus which the Year had on legislators, not least here in Australia.

Similarly, the International Year of the Disabled marked a turning point in the way in which society viewed people with disabilities.

There is now a much greater sensitivity towards their needs, and it's reflected in everything from building codes to co-ordinated hospital and community services.

This Year is the Year for the World's Indigenous People, a year we have marked indelibly in Australia's history with landmark legislation which will put an end to an historic lie and go some way to laying the basis of real justice for indigenous Australians.

Legislation which will go a long way towards extending the Australian family by granting basic rights to people who have long been denied them.

In addition to individual achievements, the cumulative aspect of International Years has, I believe, also been very important.

We might well have been able to have an International Year of the Family without any previous International Years.

But I strongly doubt whether the Year would have the focus intended for it, would explore the crucial range of issues that it plans to address, without the previous International Years to which I have just referred.

They have brought about a fundamental shift in the way we think about families.

And now the National Council for the International Year of the family will be building on these past achievements.

The Council, which the Government has established, is chaired by Professor Bettina Cass and comprises a number of Australians who are eminent in their fields.

Before the International Year of the Family came along, the members of the Council were already busy people in their own area of work.

I realise that the members are giving up scarce time to serve on this Council, and I am pleased to place on record my appreciation for their important act of public service.

This year won't simply be about celebrating families, although there is much worthy of celebration.

Rather, the International Year of the Family is an opportunity to take stock of the types of support and services that Government and non-Government organisations provide for families.

To see how we can do things better.

The Government, together with the Council, will be looking to strengthen the partnerships between families, governments, education and community services, business, unions, religious organisations and community groups.

Ultimately out of our work we hope will come the basis for family policy for the future - an Australian Agenda for Families.

Ladies and Gentlemen

The International Year of the family affects us all.

While the style of families has changed, one thing should not change and that is the binding and the support that members of families should provide to one another.

Children particularly benefit from having the support of loving and interested parents.

Support and esteem which stays with them throughout their life.

We have, perhaps, become too blasé as a society about the obligations of parents to their children - about the need to consider them in our life choices.

We will succeed better as a society when parents have a strong and continuing involvement with their children's lives and their emotional development.

Families are all important in determining how children develop into adults and form their own families. They are crucial to our development as productive and fulfilled members of a wider society.

Ultimately it is the family which provides any individual with his or her most essential need - the need to belong. This is at the heart of our responsibility to support families, and at the heart of a family's responsibility to support its members.

Cherishing and supporting the family, all our families, is the most important commitment we can make to future generations in a just, decent and humane society.

As the Christmas holiday season approaches, our thoughts of family come particularly to the fore.

Let me conclude then with an illustration of the importance of family from Evonne Goolgong Cawley's recent autobiography.

She relates how the family car broke down on Christmas Eve on a back road far from anywhere.

In her words, "Mum and Dad helped us tear paper into strips and we decorated a little scrubby tree.

Then we sat around it on our tarpaulin and sang Christmas carols.

Silent Night was Mum's favourite, so we sang that twice.

I can't have been very old but I have a clear memory of drifting into sleep that night, my head in my father's lap and catching a glimpse of both my parents in the moonlight.

They were a good looking couple and they loved us.

We might have been stuck on a back road in Western New South Wales on Christmas Eve, but we were the luckiest kids in the world."

In these few words, Evonne has captured the enduring feelings of love, acceptance and commitment - values we all seek and cherish in our family lives.

It gives me great pleasure to launch the International Year of the Family.