

Launch of Linked Up Lives – Centre for Work + Life

University of South Australia

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Speech by Deputy Prime Minister, Julia Gillard.

Introduction

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and, in a spirit of reconciliation, paying my respects to elders past and present.

It is a pleasure to be back in my home town of Adelaide and in the state that put social inclusion on the map for Australian government and policy makers.

I would like to congratulate the Centre for Work + Life at the University of South Australia for this important piece of research about life in ten suburbs around the country.

I acknowledge the contribution of those who have partnered with the Centre to deliver this research – Lend Lease, the ARC and The Innovation and Economic Opportunities Group in South Australia.

The research I am launching today goes beyond just the intersection of work and life. It enters the homes of retirees, teenagers, couples, families and businesspeople to examine how work and life affect community – and how community can affect work/life.

It does this through the prism of time – the life stages that we all go through irrespective of the type of household we live in – and through the prism of space – the type of suburb or community we live in, the distances we travel and the location of key services and community infrastructure.

This research is important because it will support a policy discussion that needs to involve all levels of government, planners, developers, business and service providers. This is a conversation about how we can all contribute to strengthening communities and how the design of neighbourhoods, services and infrastructure can support better outcomes for families and for employers.

How Australians are linking their lives

When my family migrated to Australia and landed in Adelaide they were encouraged, as were many new migrants at that time, to settle into the newly established suburbs of Elizabeth, a master planned satellite town configured around large employers such as Holden and defence industries and local shopping centres.

Instead, my parents chose to settle in Kingswood a more traditional suburb, on the archetypal suburban block. Like many of the families in this study we relied

on our family car for travel but we were able to attend high quality state schools and access well established local facilities and services.

The choice my parents made left an indelible mark on mine and my sister's futures. This report shows what many people already know: that planners' attempts to assimilate middle and working class families in Elizabeth were largely unsuccessful. Middle class families left the area, while working class families built their own networks and communities. One result, decades later, is the persistence of disadvantage in some places to the north of Adelaide with this social exclusion posing an ongoing challenge for government and for the whole community.

The influences that shape a community and a place are hard to predict and even harder to control through policy. They emerge from the interaction between people's everyday choices and preferences and the deep, long term forces driving change through our economy and our social structures.

Australians are still predominantly city – suburb dwellers, in family households, still heavily reliant on their cars for travelling and their families for caring.

This report shows that Australians' needs and choices continue to grow more diverse, with people living in a wide range of household types. But it also reinforces the fact that, in today's Australia, people have many common needs.

People need access to good jobs and good local services. They want to live in safe communities and be able to get around relatively easily. People want to be able to combine their different commitments, so that work, family, caring, learning and community involvement do not come into overt conflict. Working parents, especially mothers, want to be able to use good local services and to maintain flexible working arrangements that allow them to plan and manage household routines.

The report also shows that, with a changing demographic structure, we may need to think harder about how to meet the needs of specific groups. In our new social landscape retirees and teenagers may need particular attention.

Reducing the tensions between work, family and community life should be good for all of us. It is not the job of government alone, but good policy and intelligent implementation of policy play a big part.

For example, labour markets may be more diverse and flexible, but many employees work long hours and those work routines can cast a long shadow over the family home and time.

Parents, especially women, may be negotiating flexible working arrangements more frequently than in the past but these arrangements can make it harder to quarantine work from home.

These work arrangements cast their shadow on the unpaid work at home, such as child rearing, caring and domestic tasks, with women still undertaking the lion's share of these tasks, whether they are in paid employment or not.

Work arrangements and changing household routines impact on community. Long commutes, poor quality local schools and services, and physical barriers such as highways and poorly planned public transport routes can render the family home a dormitory and the suburb a ghost town during working hours.

Of particular concern are those communities, whether they are in traditional urban areas or outer suburban, where disadvantage and isolation can become concentrated and compounded by lack of access to work, to good quality services and to the forms of community support that help families maintain their resilience.

Building inclusive communities

The Government is striving to focus attention on these communities.

Our framework for building a stronger, fairer Australia is built on five pillars that are fundamental for improving life outcomes and life chances.

- Maintaining a strong economy to secure jobs and create opportunities;
- Reducing the gap in income and participation between households through investment in skills and income support, including significant pension reforms;
- Delivering services that meet the needs of every Australian in health, education, housing and social support;
- Supporting resilient families and building strong, cohesive communities; and
Building effective partnerships across sectors, so that governments, businesses and the nonprofit sector can work together to solve common problems.

Battling the Global economic Recession

Over the last year the Government's priority has been to confront the effects of a Global Economic Recession threatening the livelihoods of all Australians.

We did that, of course, by acting to stimulate the economy and prevent the worst effects of the international downturn from being visited on Australian jobs and families.

Our policies have supported households, have prioritised learning and skills for those who find themselves out of work and have invested in the kind of infrastructure that supports the growth of sustainable communities, including social housing, energy efficiency, transport and broadband connections and of course Building the Education Revolution, the largest school building program that Australia has ever seen.

And the evidence suggests that, so far, Australia's performance has been world leading in maintaining economic growth and avoiding the destruction of jobs, skills and capital that accompanies deep recession.

This is encouraging, to say the least. And it leads us towards an agenda for sustaining our economic growth over the long term and seeking to strengthen family and community life in ways that enable all Australians to benefit.

Report findings and the implications for policy

In developing that agenda, this report has some important and challenging findings.

One of them is the recommendation that the best services should be placed in the worst off suburbs. Our commitment to breaking down entrenched inequality and providing life changing opportunities requires a commitment to providing excellent infrastructure and services in these communities.

Our response to the global economic recession has sought to target local community infrastructure grants at communities likely to benefit most and we have appointed Local Employment Coordinators where unemployment is highest.

We are piloting new ways to support jobless families with children and encouraging social enterprise and economic regeneration through the Jobs Fund.

But this report also shows that the quality of universal services makes an enormous difference.

Improving education in every community

One thing that strikes me in particular is the central importance of education for work, family and community life.

The research suggests that local communities with excellent schools are in a better position to thrive and that the availability of pre- and post-school learning opportunities also makes a difference to the vitality, economic diversity and inclusiveness of a local area.

That confirms how much it matters that we deliver excellent education in every community, as well as supporting great early learning and workforce participation through high quality early years provision.

Our education reform agenda is squarely focused on these aims. We have, through the COAG process, been working with the States to deliver our National early years Quality Agenda, and agreement on this is expected next week. We are already implementing our commitment to offer a year of high quality pre-school to every child and our policy to increase the Child Care Tax Rebate to 50%.

Equally, we are serious about lifting the quality of schooling in every neighbourhood, increasing recurrent funding for primary schools, delivering the largest school building program Australia has ever seen and building national partnerships to lift teacher quality and student achievement in disadvantaged school communities.

Providing real choices and pathways for teenagers is an obvious imperative and through COAG we have agreed a national target of lifting achievement of Year 12 or equivalent to 90 per cent of all young people.

This goal is supported by our 10 year program to build Trade Training Centres, which will enable all secondary schools across Australia to introduce or upgrade trades facilities and link teenagers to local opportunities.

Through our stimulus and infrastructure programs we have consistently prioritised the importance of taking on apprentices and trainees and many employees like Lend Lease have responded very positively. Our Apprentice Kickstart initiative doubles the incentive for employers to take on a new apprentice over the next few months, as this year's cohort of school leavers look at their options and we renew the push to make sure that young people are on a pathway to real skills and good work opportunities.

South Australia has had encouraging results in recent years from its ICAN networks, offering local community and educational support to young people at risk of not completing their secondary education. National Partnership funding is supporting the expansion of this approach. It is another example of how better outcomes will flow from improved services in conjunction with better local collaboration and greater community involvement.

Supporting work and family

Of course, in some of the communities profiled in the report, incomes are higher but flexible time for parenting and community involvement may be in short supply.

Again, government has an important role to play both in creating the conditions for fair and flexible work and in helping parents to get the support and services they need for their children.

Our workplace relations reforms provide both protection and flexibility to help workers seeking to combine work with other commitments and responsibilities while also simplifying awards and administration for employers. Ten National Employment Standards will become operational on 1 January 2010 will guarantee minimum conditions of work including access to annual leave and carers leave arrangements and the right to request flexible working hours for permanent employees with children under five.

The beginning of 2011 will see a comprehensive system of Paid Parental Leave scheme for Australia introduced, reflecting the same commitment to support both parenting and workforce participation and to give working families as much flexibility as possible in choosing how to combine those commitments.

Infrastructure that works for communities

The final issue that I want to raise is the critical importance of good local infrastructure to preventing social exclusion.

The report's analysis shows that the availability of good learning opportunities, alongside other essential services, is vital for reducing the impacts of disadvantage.

So communities that have good libraries, colleges, pre-schools and other facilities like primary health care, leisure and recreation, are likely to support greater social interaction and encourage more active participation by the whole community. This is hardly surprising, but it does raise the question of what kinds of local infrastructure help to achieve the openness and interaction we are talking about.

Our infrastructure programs do seek to encourage these qualities. Many of the projects I see being built through the Primary Schools for the 21st century program involve multi-purpose school halls, libraries and learning centres that include spaces for parents and for community use. The conditions of funding under the program make access by the wider community to the new facilities a requirement for any participating school.

This investment in schools is joined with our investment in tertiary education where we are supporting the development of new campus facilities in suburban growth corridors and regional centres and investing in community learning facilities in TAFE colleges.

Conclusion

These investments clearly create great opportunities. But I also understand that dynamic social and economic change will continue to create need and demand in every Australian community.

As I said earlier, one of the most important findings in this research is that the actions of government do not and cannot solely determine the quality of family and community life, just as they do not determine the outcomes of the market economy.

A stronger community requires the physical attributes that the public and private sector can provide – appropriate infrastructure, services, businesses – but it also requires the time and resources of community makers. A discussion about what motivates people to give time and what encourages them to take part in positive community activities – and how that gives rise to 'social capital' and greater community resilience – is therefore an essential part of this wider debate.

It is a debate that affects all of us and we all share the responsibility to learn how together we can build a stronger, fairer Australia for every community.

Thank you.