



**The Hon Maxine McKew MP**

**Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education and Child Care**

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## **Speech**

# **Tasmanian Early Years Foundation**

Tasmanian Early Years Foundation Hobart Function Centre - 20 May 2008

Good afternoon, everyone. I've been sitting here thinking, 'Does it get much better than this—an autumn day in Hobart.' You are very lucky. I hope you all realise this.

Well, it's very lovely to be here, and I must say I was very keen to accept this invitation when Rebecca Smith and Dr Sue Jenkins got in touch with me and asked me to deliver this inaugural speech on behalf of the Tasmanian Early Years Foundation.

I know that you are a very 'young' organisation just like the Rudd government, but young and fresh I would say, with a great mission. I must say I've had a marvellous morning, actually.

I've been talking with David Bartlett and also with John Smith, your Secretary of Education. And apart from a lot of the innovative models ..... around integrated care and education – I've been sitting here thinking what simple message that I should take back to Canberra to tell the Prime Minister and to tell the Deputy Prime Minister about ... And it's to hear from them that they actually feel that what's going on now is a different kind of conversation.

.... That in fact more work has been done between states and the Commonwealth in a few short months than they can remember in a long time.

It's dangerous to talk things up, but I'm really hoping that we can look back on this period and we'll be able to say, 'This was the time that we turned a corner and we really reinvented Federalism. You know, Federalism for the 21st century'.

And I know people in this room who worked both in education and health, if we get this right, you will know that so many people will be the beneficiaries from service delivery in terms of health and education. I mean, we have to get it right but I can't tell you how encouraging it is to hear, certainly from my Tasmanian colleagues, how they feel it's working so far.

So here we are, one week, everyone, after the Rudd Government's first budget – a budget that I think has delivered for children by giving national emphasis to the importance of early learning and these are exciting times by any measure.

I've always had a passion for education and I've long acknowledged the difference a good teacher can make in a person's life.

So I'm thrilled to be responsible for early childhood education and care at this time of enormous opportunity.

The kind of sector that the government would like to see is one which elevates the importance of effective early intervention, one that integrates care and education, and a sector where leadership is provided by well-credentialed educators and carers.

My ambition in this portfolio is both simple and large. Early childhood education has to be taken as seriously as every other level of education: primary, secondary and tertiary.

And you should know that this approach has the Prime Ministerial imprimatur.

It's the Prime Minister who has identified early childhood education as the starting point for the Education Revolution. This is where it begins, with significant fresh investment and a new approach.

You might recall that in his address to the Sydney Institute just a week before the 2020 Summit, Kevin Rudd put forward his 2020 vision. He talked about a 'one stop shop' for parents with young children, combining parenting support, health checks, and early childhood learning and child care services.

Now I can assure you this was the subject of much spirited discussion at the Summit, and it certainly provides food for thought as we look at the bigger picture of early childhood development, and ask how we can best deliver the services.

I have received more emails and encouraging comments about the PM's proposal than just about anything else this year.

And the fact is – we actually have good models around the country that are heading in this direction.

Here in Tasmania, for instance, Deputy Premier and Minister for Education and Skills David Bartlett – he is already pursuing an integrated centre model, as you know, through the state's Launching into Learning program.

So are other states – and to a certain extent – local governments.

So what is an integrated family centre?

I think it's what develops when providers listen to what it is the community says it needs.

It's a service model that brings together in one place, under one roof, a range of services that support the ongoing needs of the family and one that helps sustain the wider community.

I'll talk a bit about South Australia because I know there are many professionals here who've a look at the Café

Enfield model. It's run by the wonderful woman, Joan Gilbert.

On one of my first interstate visits, I visited Café Enfield and I'll just tell you a bit about it.

Café Enfield sits within one of the poorest postcodes in Australia. It fits precisely within what Professor Tony Vinson has described as a community that has above average inter-generational unemployment, teenage pregnancies, limited computer access, early school leaving rates, physical and mental disabilities and long-term unemployment.

In fact, many of you would recognise the low SES areas in Tasmania that are very, very similar to Enfield.

But it's the Enfield model that aims to address this extreme social disadvantage which is most interesting.

They bring together health and education experts, they run parenting classes, they help very young mothers finish high school and most important of all, they bring together care and quality early learning opportunities for young children in a safe, stable, nurturing environment – often one that is very different from the one they experience at home.

I'll just give you one example. Joan Gilbert deals with a lot of young children who suffer severe language delay. Now there can be many reasons for this, but Joan told me the story of one little boy is only ever yelled at, at home. He never hears an encouraging word. There's no confidence building. Needless to say, he doesn't hear too many rhymes or stories. He's not put to bed with a book each night.

Now consider what is not happening in this little boy's life.

With no exposure to rich language at home, his vocabulary use is limited, and we know that word language by the age of three is a predictive measure of language skill in the later primary years of schooling.

Without the kind of intervention provided by the Joan Gilbert's of this world, and she spends as much time with the damaged parents as she does with children, then we'll lose these people and the sad stories, as you all know, will be re-told in one report after another about dysfunction in families and communities.

Now let's consider another postcode, a far more affluent one, and another model of outstanding leadership.

In my own electorate, the Somerville Park integrated family centre and that's been designed by Hornsby Council.

This is a very smart outfit, with the providers starting out by saying, 'What is it that stressed hard working families in this area need?'

What they've come up with is a long [inaudible]. A long day care model with a quality preschool program provided within those hours. There are one-on-one programs for children with special needs. When I was there recently teachers were working with children with autism and children with Down's syndrome. And interestingly, those children were also playing and learning along with the others. There's a speech therapist on site that provides her services a couple of days a week

I also think the genius of Somerville Park is they understand that on top of this, it's all the other stuff that stresses parents out – organising nutritious meals and keeping children appropriately groomed.

So Somerville Park, I love this, organises kids' haircuts on site. Imagine that. Now apparently the kids keep still because the parents aren't there. They also run a great commercial kitchen. So that for a reasonable price, when Dad picks up young Delia at 5.30 in the afternoon, he can also pick up a decent osso bucco to take home for the family dinner.

Now this is a smart council that is turning service delivery on its head. Instead of saying this is the standard child care model and parents should fit into it, they are doing the reverse. They're creating and constantly looking for ways to adapt child care to suit the needs of that particular community.

The one thing that Somerville Park has not been able to crack is the provision on site of an infant health nurse.

Cross agency problems are inhibiting this, but that has to change. We need education and health working together for the development of children and the health and wellbeing of parents.

Now we all know the evidence on the returns from investing in all of this. It makes good developmental and economic sense to expand the system and raise standards, and I say to rethink the model.

It's why we have an ambitious reform agenda for expanding and improving the quality of early childhood services.

So last week the government delivered on its investment commitments by investing a total of \$2.4 billion. I'll just say that again, \$2.4 billion. That's over five years for integrated early childhood set of initiatives that will provide high quality services and deliver educational opportunities.

These initiatives are all about improving accessibility, affordability, and importantly, quality of care.

They are about increasing community confidence in the service providers.

A major budget item is the investment of \$533 million over five years to provide all Australian children, including Indigenous children in remote communities, with access to affordable preschool programs delivered by a qualified teacher. By 2013, children will have access to 15 hours of early learning programs each week for 40 weeks a year in the year before formal schooling.

This is a big ambition, as the current estimates are that around 13 to 20 per cent of Australian children have no exposure to any pre-primary education.

Now you're fortunate here in Tasmania because you have a very well-established kindergarten system, and that is provided free within the school system. And my discussion this morning with David Bartlett were around increasing the hours from 10 to 15 hours. Certainly, he's thinking is very far advanced on that.

Now to stress, our aim is not to make preschool compulsory, but certainly to ensure that every child has the opportunity to participate in early learning. This means delivering preschool programs or kindergarten in a variety of settings that meet the needs of families.

Central to this again is a collegial, collaborative relationship with the states and territories aimed at raising the quality of programs.

Funding more places will also help address issues of accessibility, which is why last week the Government committed \$114.5 million to build the first 38 of 260 new Early Learning and Care Centres.

We've already begun negotiations with the states on this, and all 38 will be operational by June 2010.

The remaining centres will be rolled out progressively, with all centres operational by June 2014.

It's worth pointing out, and some of you with long memories in the sector will know, this is the first time since 1996 that the Commonwealth Government has made a significant capital commitment to the construction of new child care centres.

The Commonwealth will no longer be a passive player in this area.

Tasmania will see an immediate benefit with two new centres – one at Beaconsfield, where planning is already well underway, and another autism-specific centre for the north-west. And I know my colleague, Bill Shorten, has been here in the last day or so talking about that.

Importantly, the Budget also delivered \$22 million over four years to develop a rigorous set of national quality standards for child care, and to introduce an A to E rating system that will provide parents with more useful information about the service they're considering.

The Federal Government is working closely with the states and territories through COAG on this reform agenda.

We've also got quite a stunning panel of experts, an advisory group, working on this. Some of the names will be familiar to you – people like Professor Alison Elliott from Charles Darwin, Professor Marilyn Fler from Monash, Collette Taylor from Melbourne, and Associate Professor Karen Martin from Southern Cross.

...On that panel, we have community and private providers, and COAG officials as well.....That group will be reporting back to me very soon and will fit into our discussions with the states.

... Improving the quality of early learning is not just about setting appropriate standards and benchmarks; it is also about looking at the way the sector is regulated.

As you all know, what we have in Australia is an odd system – it is fragmented, it is over-regulated, and it is very confusing for parents.

This is something we're going to address, working with our colleagues in the states.

For example, if you have a look at this – the licensing arrangements across Australia. It makes no sense to have one set of career-child ratios in Tasmania, another in Queensland and yet another in Western Australia. Ditto for staffing qualifications.

Our aim is to remove duplication from the system, reduce the administrative burden on service providers and increase the efficiency of the system.

We need streamlined licensing across the nation and closer alignment with the accreditation process. And that is what we're working on.

We know that it is critical to get this right, and we know that the key to doing so is extensive consultation with all of you and all of the other key stakeholders.

And you know it's not a new concept. Indeed, our soon-to-be Governor General Quentin Bryce was responsible for a comprehensive dialogue around the quality agenda in the early 1990s.

I also recall that she didn't always have an easy time of it, as various loud voices argued the toss about standards for the care of children.

It is still a contentious issue. But in 2008 it is almost impossible to argue against what Fiona Stanley and Frank Oberklaid and many others have been saying for years – that unless we get this right, then the social gradients will continue to increase. That is, the gulf between those doing exceptionally well and those who are struggling. Those social gradients will increase if we get don't this right.

If we dodge the challenge, or if we stumble, we all have to confront this question: Do we really want to accept the reality of 'two Australia's?' That's a compelling question in Tasmania. The charmed life that many of us live, where we have multiple choices, or the pinched life for many others.

That is not a reality I find acceptable.

I'm going to turn now to the most important issue of all and that is about teachers and carers.

Quite simply, we will not achieve our ambitions in this area unless we dramatically increase the professional standing and qualifications of those who work with young children.

To address the challenges we face, last week the Government announced a package of measures worth \$126 million over four years to help build the highly skilled and capable workforce necessary to implement our reform agenda.

The package provides incentives to improve the qualifications of child care workers and supports more early childhood teachers, particularly in remote and disadvantaged areas.

This package will support around 8,000 child care workers to gain a qualification by removing TAFE fees for child care diplomas and advanced diplomas, that's from 2009. It creates additional university places for early childhood teachers, starting with 500 places next year and rising to 1,500 places by 2011. It also reduces up to half of the HECS-HELP debts of early childhood teachers who work in regional and remote areas.

I'll talk more about all those issues and workforce in a moment, but I also want to stress ... I suppose, the most immediate change that parents will see as a result of last week's Budget.

One of the biggest issues as you know for families is affordability, which is why the Government has committed \$1.6 billion to increasing the Child Care Tax Rebate from 30 to 50 per cent.

This will see the maximum amount claimable go from \$4,200 to \$7,500 per child per year.

We also want to ensure more timely assistance to families in meeting their child care costs, so to this end the rebate will be paid quarterly, rather than annually, with the first payments due in October this year.

Now I just want to stress this point because there's been some confusion around it. The recent budget

changes do not, the recent budget changes do not, introduce a means test for the Child Care Tax Rebate.

Every working family with a child in approved care, who currently accesses the child care benefit and the child care tax rebate, will be better off.

I'll just give one example: a couple with a combined income of \$110,000. They both work four days a week and use 25 hours of long day care for each of their two children. This family will receive an extra \$3,148 in assistance with child care costs in the 08-09 year that's over and above what they received in the previous years. ....That's a couple ... a nurse and policeman working four days.

What about couples on somewhat higher incomes around \$130,000? They can be better off to the tune of around \$2,300.

I'll make this important point. Whether women with children who choose to stay at home or go to work, I know that's a very personal choice, and this Government supports all women who make those choices. But we do recognise that balancing work and family is challenging, and we want to make it easier for working families by providing additional support.

Last week the Treasurer announced \$46 billion worth of personal tax cuts. Combined with the increase in the tax rebate, these changes could make a significant difference to working mothers, and therefore their families.

I think it's going to be the interaction between these incentives that could make working an additional day that much more attractive to those women who want, or need, to increase their hours.

And we understand for some working women, the combination of tax incentives and the increased rebate will provide more flexibility and real choice.

What I've discovered travelling around the country, visiting centres and talking to parents, is that the key to women feeling comfortable about increasing their working hours is feeling confident about the care their children are receiving.

And this means, of course, we need a well-qualified and well-regarded child care and early learning sector. We need centres of excellence. Places where you'll find a four-year trained university teacher in every room, but we need a lot more of them.

I said at the beginning that I want this sector to be taken as seriously as every other part of the education system.

Let me illustrate what I mean.

When parents enrol their child in school they know and expect, without a second thought, that their child will be taught by university trained and registered teachers. They will have a reasonable expectation that the school will be led by a principal who understands the needs of students, and who offers leadership by encouraging ongoing professional development and training.

Somewhat bewilderingly, I find that many parents who put their child's name on a waiting list for long day care don't have those same expectations or certainties around the quality of care their child will receive.

We know that service quality is inextricably linked to staff qualifications.

But just consider one statistic.

Only 7 per cent of workers in long day care centres hold a bachelor degree or a higher qualification in early childhood teaching.

The figure is highest in NSW where 12 per cent of long day care staff has a tertiary qualification, and it's no surprise why. NSW is the only state where there's a requirement for centres with more than 29 children to employ a university trained teacher.

Now if you take the view that 'anyone can do child minding' then there is nothing wrong with that figure.

If you accept though, as most now do, that children learn more in the first five years of their life than any other comparable period, then you will know that these figures have to change.

Demand for early childhood teachers is strong, and will only get stronger as we move towards universal access to early childhood education programs. This occupation is expected to grow by 6.7 per cent per year in the medium term.

But child care workers, as you know, have been in short supply across the nation for many years. While there has been a growth in enrolments in Certificate III child care courses, enrolments in Diploma child care courses have fallen since 2002.

And job turnover is high – one in five child care workers leave the occupation every year.

As I said earlier, I've been to a lot of centres this year. And whether they're run by the community sector or a private provider, one thing is obvious: the centres with the longest waiting lists are those that put a premium on attracting and keeping qualified and dedicated staff.

These centres are to be found in the community and in the private sector.

Again, in my own electorate there's a family run centre – a private provider; someone who's a third generation provider of care - with exactly the kind of approach that I'm describing

Nesha O'Neil runs the Midson Rd Centre in north-west Sydney. They provide for about 60 places. They just picked up the top award for child care provider of the year.

There's no mystery about it. Nesha employs 4/4 year trained teachers – that's the top of the hierarchy. Below them are a group of diploma trained or associate diploma staff, and in turn they are supported by Cert 111 people. Nesha encourages constant ongoing learning with all staff required to upgrade their skills – the Cert III's to the diploma; the diploma people to the university trained.

Interestingly, with this kind of staffing arrangement, you might expect higher fees. That's not the case, with fees at Midson Rd at the industry average.

And this is very interesting. I find this over and over again. Where you find centres with above average staff qualifications, you also find centres that are attuned to what families can afford. That's the most interesting point.

Again, there's nothing mysterious about what Nesha is doing.

Highly sought-after centres are run by individuals who are great leaders. And importantly, they understand what all the experts have been telling us for years.

That 'the critical phase for developing cognitive skills of thinking and knowing in children up to the ages of six happens in this early period'.

Leaders in early childhood education understand this and they are doing something about it.

It's clearly what's driving all of you, and particularly the Government in pursuing its Launching into Learning program. In particular, it's driving the Department of Education in Tasmania in working with The Smith Family in communities across the state to help children from disadvantaged families.

The way to help all children – and central to realising our ambitions in this area – is professionalising the sector and elevating the status of its workforce.

I met recently with the Deans of Education from a number of universities, and I came away not entirely happy with what I'd heard. Particularly unhappy, in fact. And it's this – that many high quality graduates in early learning do not want to work in this sector, despite being trained in this area.

Pay and conditions are not as attractive as they are in primary schools, the environment is often not that collegiate, and they feel their work isn't valued.

Their first choice is to work in primary schools or stand-alone preschools or kindergartens.

Now this is where we need the revolution.

We have to have early learning centres that are creative, and engaging, and fun, and rewarding places to work.

As I've already mentioned, in the first budget the Rudd Government committed \$126 million to training and retaining a high quality workforce in this area.

We can provide the incentives, Government can provide the incentives. But I also think we need something more.

All of us have to say to our future educators – 'That teaching is a fine thing to do.'

'That teaching is a fine thing to do.'

It is time, I think, to honour teachers and to return to the vocation of teaching the prestige it clearly deserves.

The nurturing of young minds is a worthwhile task.

So I say to those considering their tertiary future – whether you're 20, or 40, or 50 (and we need our Golden Gurus) – think of teaching and think particularly of teaching infants.

Because if you do, you will be able to look back upon a time in your professional life and know that you helped set up a three-year-old for life.

We need to work together to attract – and keep – the best, brightest and the most committed graduates.

We can't make these changes on our own, and we need a sector. We certainly need a sector that is pulling in the same direction.

Now I acknowledge there are again big challenges here. But none is greater; it seems to me, than perhaps problem the sector has with itself.

Every industry – especially politics – has rivalries and a bit of point-scoring. But really, the child care sector has to, I think, get over its sectional rivalries.

This has to change.

If the public debate continues to be a tedious and ill-informed war about the merits of the community sector on the one hand, and the corporate or private providers on the other, we will not be able to deliver what we want for children.

I can assure you the way to get my attention is to talk about a workforce strategy, or about what an early learning framework looks like, or about how we get effective ratios into centres.

Quality and mediocrity can be found across the sector. I have the files Canberra office to prove it.

If we want to lift standards for all, then we need to behave in a collegial way.

Smart organisations know that partnerships, alliances, are the most effective way to pursue an agenda.

And, believe me, delivering for children is at the very top of my agenda as it is for the foundation, which is why I [inaudible] speak to again, applauding the work of Sue and Rebecca and indeed entire board. They have assembled a great group that will guide and definitely inspire. On top of everything .... if the Federal Government is to achieve this very big set of ambitions, we need a new kind of advocacy. So Sue and Rebecca – I will leave you with that thought.

And thank you so much, ladies and gentlemen, for your attention and indeed for the spirit with which you receive me today.

Thank you so very much.

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