

QLD AFA STATE CONFERENCE 2003

Opening address

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Good morning and welcome to the Australian Family Association State Conference 2003!

What an edifying start from Janelle, setting the tone for what I'm sure will be an uplifting day, a day which promises to be an important gathering for quite simply the most important thing in our lives – family.

Janelle's extraordinary voice, resonated for me a foremost reminder that as today unfolds, with ideas, frustrations, maybe despair and hopefully flints of optimism attached to the plight of the family in Australian society in 2003 – let's not lose sight that family in the end is *celebration*. It is unconditional celebration because it is God's projection, his imprint so to speak, of his nature – a fundamentally *familial* nature – as we know, Father, Son and Holy Spirit - onto creation that is His.

That said, it's my brief task to take you from heavenly ambiance to family taxation reform, followed by the rest of the morning's programme which will be delivered by earthly politicians!

Can I start by thanking all of you for coming along. We're all busy in our different walks of life, and weekends are getting more and more precious – so it's great that you've been able to give up a Saturday, in whole or part, to be here.

To current AFA members as indeed those in the National Civic Council here today, mine is yet another token of gratitude in a long list over the many, many years, in most of your cases, for your ongoing support of this great institute. You continue to be the stalwarts of the AFA: you have stood up over all these years to fight the good fight, rather than sit and watch the world go by. By writing to newspapers let alone reading them, taking it up with politicians and other public actors, informing your communities, paying up your membership fees ... sometimes! – you continue to be the guardians of family in society.

On this note, I relay the best wishes for today from our patron, the ever venerable Major General Digger James and his wife Barbera, and their regret in not being able to be with us.

To those not part of AFA – can we get a show of hands? – I'm delighted to see such an amazing turn up: well over half are not from the AFA or NCC. Victor, get the membership forms out! Welcome and let's hope it's worth your while.

To those who've travelled to Brisbane to be here, please take the rain back with you when you go! No - a special welcome to you. We are blessed to have speakers who've journeyed a fair way to be with us today. Peter McDonald, Professor of Demography and Head of Demography and Sociology program at the Australian National University, has flown in from Canberra this morning. Wayne Swan and Senator Ron Boswell have a big week ahead in Canberra with the visits from Presidents Bush and Hu, among things, yet were unequivocal in accepting our invitations to speak here today. Martin Klippe, at just 24 years of age, has brought the social inspiration of youth down from Mackay. And there's the highly enabled, I have to say, Janelle Colquhoun to share her fighting spirit with us today. More about the speakers shortly.

The AFA for many years now has been Australia's premier thought and action leader for family values and family related policy. Its concerns stretch from life as it first enters family existence – that is to say from the moment of conception and embryonic stages – through to the later years when duties are done and unconditional care beckons those who've been cared for unconditionally.

Families, whose moral sensibilities have not been interrupted by ideological persuasion or the blank human condition, gives lived expression to the sanctity and dignity of life - for families are the unconditional *amalgam of being*. That TV ad. from the 70s which went something like - "wash your hands Geoffrey, take a hike Julia" – intones, if only simply, the joy of family *sound* – of regular, ordinary bustle - which beats to that deep, libertarian *rhythm* - when you belong to family, you belong warts and all.

At the centre of family is marriage. Marriage is borne out of and sustained by a love so intimate and committed – a *sacrificial* love as we'd say - that it bears as its fruit, new being. Children are the end to which marriage is a stable and cohesive means – and the natural family has been the stablest of the unconditional amalgam of being as testified through quite literally millennia of human experience.

Of course, it is becoming fashionable for some to revise, and the rest of us to swallow, that marriage is a recent or western invention, that is not as absolute in the history of humanity as we'd imagine. This is stark nonsense. Marriage, as traditionally understood, is evident through most cultures, and radically different cultures at that. AFA's national vice-president, Bill Muehlenberg, has written an excellent marriage apologetic, "*The Historicity and Universality of Marriage*," which we've included in your conference kits. I urge you not only to read it, but to pass it on to your communities.

For decades now, the AFA has taken up the good fight by enlightening its membership through high quality journals and newsletters as you'll see in your kits, mobilising its activities through branches, shaping policy and lobbying policy makers. AFA, as its constitution holds, is neither politically partisan nor denominationally specific in its Christian posit. But being Christian as such, means to engage in the secular world – in a liberal democratic sense and persuasively on secular grounds. This is not despite, but *because* of, Christianity. Central, not surprisingly, to AFA's mission is the defense of marriage.

It is ironic that as we approach the International Year of the Family in 2004 (decreed by the United Nations), marriage is heading to the rocks, with the tragic effect that children being immersed into the harsh rapids of life, at tender ages, right in their living rooms. Today in Australia, *30% of children are separated from one of Mum and Dad*. And we all know, and study after study confirms what is surely common sense, that the fracture of marriage, emotionally fractures kids in profound and abiding ways.

At the National AFA Conference in Adelaide earlier this month, Dr Bob Birrell, Head of the Centre for Population and Urban Research at Monash University, delivered a paper reflecting on the dependence of marriage on fertility rates. The dependence continues almost as a constant – as is our propensity for having children compared to 15 years ago. The difference is that the changing patterns of partnerships, away from early, more stable marriages, is now having dramatic effects on our fertility levels.

The suspension of marriage to later age or defacto unions, has dropped fertility levels. Our current fertility rate of 1.7 is now below the population replacement rate of 2.1. We still want kids, but we're having them later in life when conception capacity lowers. (Note, in parts of Europe this gap is as bad or worse – Italy at 1.2 being one of the worst).

The other factor in declining fertility is the now quadrupled divorce rate that has occurred since 1975 when the then Senator Lionel Murphy introducing unilateral (no-fault) divorce through his Family Law Bill with the prophesy: “Mr President, this measure is a most important social reform. It will affect the lives of many.” The one thing you'd have to concede to Murphy. He knew what he was talking about!

In its declining state, and again the irony of International Year of the Family beckons, marriage hangs on the precipice of deformation with same sex unions seeking its redefinition to advance their right to have kids. I hope I'm not being unecumenical when I cite the poignant observation by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith that to deny a child a mother and father is a cruel deprivation.

The latest issue of that finest of religious journals, *First Things*, the editors note incisively that the desire by gay activists for marriage is a *recent* phenomenon, having for a long time insisted that marriage is an outdated institution of the bourgeois. The swing in fact correlates with the push for so-called “open” or loosely coupled marriages otherwise termed “*polyamory*.” This is anathema to the idea of sacrificial love and commitment, typically expressed through *monogamy*, and marriage as *public* institution with required provisions for the welfare of children.

Quite candidly, the most loving man, and therefore the most loving *gay* man, cannot teach a little girl how to be a woman, and to deal with the developmental complexities of that journey. Can any man intimately help a girl deal with her first menstruation cycle, say, having been-there-done-that? Correspondingly, the most loving woman and therefore the most loving lesbian cannot truly help a little boy to become a man. And there is a whole raft of developmental issues, including sound nurturing which rests of the sexual complementarity of parent sets. Surely this should be the locus of the debate. However, by focussing of the civil rights of a minority, due attention to the

needs of children is diminished – and the very reason why marriage is *public* institution is lost.

Which brings us back to the AFA and the challenges it faces as a voice of family, the defense of marriage, the wellbeing of kids. In the past, the AFA relied on a large, loyal membership and strong lobbying platform. The platform exists and our connection with politicians continues, as indicated by the speakers today. However, the membership has been in decline to its lowest point now.

Yet *now* I believe is an opportune moment for rejuvenation. We can no longer concentrate solely on the regular activities of keeping the membership happy, so to speak, doing the lobbying and making media appearances. Rather we need to embark on a fresh impetus to get new membership – and to awaken the *sleeping giant* of family folk in our community to engage in social undercurrent which threatens to undercut their fabric.

Here's some of the important initiatives that the committee is embarking on:

- In addition to the monthly journals, we have deployed a web site collecting the *best* of public commentaries and prestigious think-tanks on family/social from around the world. We update this once a month, giving anyone on the web access to the ace-up-your-sleeve arguments and David-versus-Goliath turnarounds relating to family. Consider for example, the groundswell support to protect traditional marriage in the US through the proposal for the 28th amendment to the US Constitution – the *Marriage Amendment*. Or a politician pulling the pin, solo, on an Irish state sex education programme. Or the latest of a growing list of breakthrough cures using stem cells from adults while those from embryos remain at zero. Or an effective way for dealing with Internet spam which brings current regulation provisions in service to self-regulation. You can read all of this through our latest web update.
- The web site also features *Public Voice*, a petitioning system where, as a particular issue arises, we create a signable email, which through a click is automatically sent to the public actor responsible, typically a politician.
- The production of high-quality information sheets providing one-stop reference to particular issues. We intend deploying these free of charge to the community.
- Community forums in different parts of Brisbane, the Gold Coast and other centres in Queensland. These half-day forums will bring local communities in direct touch with experts of a wide range of issues. The first of these is scheduled for early next year.
- A comprehensive campaign to contact all schools, churches, community centres and political outlets in Brisbane. This will partly be a mail out, and partly be direct contact. Through this we hope to engage the community with the looming debates and issues, and to partake in talks and community events – getting out of our ivory towers so to speak. Naturally, we anticipate new members through all of this, particularly from the Christian churches.

As I say it's all about awakening the sleeping giant – families - in our midst.

Today's conference is also part of that impetus. The theme is "*Re-establishing family in Australian social policy.*" In order to understand the challenges families are facing at the start of the new millennium, we need to understand the various issues concretely. If we take a preachy, sanctimonious posture, I'm afraid we will be our own worst enemies. We need to understand issues in concrete, which will affect outcomes that we desire. Foremost in our thinking should be family-supportive public policies by which force policy-makers are ensure that family doesn't merely become the rhetoric of speeches and platforms but rather action. Here I'm delighted to say that policy-shapers and policy-makers have come to the table in this democratic chamber.

The most mechanistic and complex issue facing the plight of the family is taxation. Professor Peter McDonald will discuss family support conceptually and then allay that with fairer family taxation using a model which is not the same as the AFA's traditionally supported home-makers allowance and the income-splitting model being advanced by the Liberal Party in NSW. Wayne Swan, Shadow Minister for Family and Community Services, will discuss how the ALP has been rethinking family support in its policies – policies which will be pivotal for one of the battlegrounds of the next election – family. Senator Ron Boswell from the National Party will be discussing moves to change the definition of marriage to accommodate same-sex unions.

That's on the policy front. Another bracket of talks deals with *Generation X*, new generation challenges. Martin Klibbe, immediate past president of the Young Nationals will be talking about how young people are discovering conservative values. This will be of keen interest to older delegates, one of who was earlier reflecting something that we often feel – "they all gone mad." Not quite is Martin's message, they are showing a propensity to turn around. I, as a computer scientist by trade, will be talking about the *Internet spam* problem, and its particular specialisation which brings grief for parents, *Internet pornographic* spam.

A special guest of ours today is Janelle Colquhoun, who's just sung our opening. Janelle will tell us about her remarkable journey from being an opera singer, once accompanying the great Dame Joan Sutherland, to becoming blind and then developing a career in business. Although she'll give us an insight into how families cope with disability, I have to say the talk may as well be titled, "*look who's disabled.*"

Since the defense of marriage is so close to our hearts, Alan Baker, the President of the Family Council of Queensland, will remind us *why marriage matters* – this time from a social science perspective.

So without further adieu, I'll like to complete my opening with one last but by no means least gesture. I'd like to thank Ronan Lee, State Member for Indooroopilly for organising this great venue for us today. Ronan, as young as he is, is the hero of unborn human life in Brisbane [applause]. God willing, he may become Australia's pro-life hero one day. I'll now get Ronan to complete the opening with a few words to us.