

**ADDRESS GIVEN AT THE WELCOME RECEPTION OF THE
14th AUSTRALASIAN CONFERENCE ON CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT**

By The Rt Hon Dame Sian Elias, Administrator of the Government

**Held at the Rendezvous Grand Hotel, Auckland
Sunday 29 March 2015 at 4.30 pm**

*Sian Elias¹

E nga mana, e nga reo, e nga iwi o te motu e huihui nei, tēnei aku mihi māhana ki a koutou. Te manuhiri tuārangi, te manuhiri waewaetapu nau mai haere mai ki Aotearoa. No reira, kia ora tātou katoa.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen warm greetings to you all. I extend a special welcome to international delegates, especially those of you in New Zealand for the first time. This is the 14th Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect. It is nearly ten years since New Zealand had the privilege of hosting it. So this is precious opportunity and we are grateful to all who have travelled from afar to be here.

The reception to open the conference is being hosted, in the spirit of cross-agency co-operation which is a theme of the conference, by the Australian Institute of Criminology and the Ministry of Social Development. I express thanks on behalf of us all to them.

I want specifically to acknowledge the conference chairs, Dr Adam Tomison and Paul Nixon who have put huge effort into what promises to be a very stimulating conference indeed, with great speaker and important topics. I greet also the keynote speakers and distinguished guests. They will contribute greatly to the success of the conference. So too will all of you delegates because a conference such as this is an exchange and all of you are critical to the exchanges that matter. So I greet you all. Tena koutou katoa.

His Excellency the Governor General sends his apologies – he is in Singapore representing New Zealand at the funeral of Lee Kuan Yew. He is particularly sorry not to be with you because the field in which you work is one in which he takes especial interest.

His Excellency's loss however is my gain. I am delighted to be able to stand in for him because the topic of this conference is one of considerable professional as well as personal interest to me.

It is impossible to work, as I do, within the justice system of any country and not be keenly aware of the impact of child abuse and neglect and the vicious cycle of intergenerational harm and alienation it sets up.

¹ The Rt Hon Dame Sian Elias, GNZM as Administrator of the Government of New Zealand.

The well-being and safety of children in our communities is a barometer of social justice and decency in any society. The way a society treats its children reveals its soul, as Nelson Mandela put it. To our very great shame, this window on our soul as a society is deeply disturbing and when something is deeply disturbing, it is tempting to turn away if you can.

You, who work to address child abuse and neglect are the people who do not flinch from what is revealed. You know that none of us can afford to turn away from the issues of child abuse and neglect. It is a very great pleasure to have the opportunity to express appreciation for the important work you do and to say how much I admire your professionalism and commitment to continuous adaptation in response to developing knowledge and insights into what works and what does not.

That preparedness to learn and adapt is the reason for a conference such as this. It brings together different professional disciplines and different agencies working in the field. It builds upon the insight that the only sure ways to promote the safety and well-being of children is through promoting their better integration into the layered and diverse communities to which they belong. It is also critical to do as we would be done by: to recognise that these children have their own inherent dignity and perspectives rather than seeing them and their families as objects for agency management.

Good intentions are not enough in seeking to address child abuse and neglect. Aspirations need to be backed up by both good design for agency and other responses and by practical strategies for engagement. Neither is sufficient in itself. Engagement without sound design and co-ordination is a mess and potentially harmful and good theoretical system design without strategies for practical implementation may be useless. For example, the Principal Judge of the Youth Court has pointed out that the Family Group Conference in his court typically involves a young Maori boy and his mother.² That's not the engagement hoped for in the system as designed. So even where systems design may be good, practical effort is required to make it work.

The causes of child abuse and neglect are complex. Effective strategies both for prevention and to address their effects must operate on a wide front. Co-operation between agencies with specific functions touching on child abuse and neglect and its consequences is essential. So too is co-ordinated effort by those professionals whose skills deal with different aspects of the problem and the response. Nor is integrated and co-ordinated professional response sufficient in itself. Responses which fit the communities to which children belong and in which they are entitled to participate require strategies which are culturally appropriate. That means letting in the community.

It is a far cry from the 1970s when I used to appear in the Magistrate's Court in child neglect cases. No one doubts the sincerity of the views of the social workers of the

² Alison Cleland and Khylee Quince *Youth Justice in Aotearoa New Zealand: Law, Policy and Critique* (LexisNexis, Wellington 2014) at 163, as cited in Andrew Becroft "It's All Relative: the Absolute Importance of the Family in Youth Justice (a New Zealand Perspective)" (Paper delivered at the World Congress on Juvenile Justice, Geneva, January 2015) at 23.

time or that they were acting in what they conceived to be the best interests of the children. But the process was top-down and paternalistic. It was often culturally inappropriate and often hugely disruptive of family relationships. The human rights lens now applied to child care, the changes to put the child at the centre and not simply as an object for agency benevolence, and the willingness to accept community diversity have all effected a real revolution in approach.

That we have come a long way does not mean we should be complacent. Continuous reassessment in this area, as in all areas that matter and are concerned with human interaction, is the obligation of all who work in this field.

Because children are our future we need to invest in their health, well-being, development and safety. If strategies are to be responsive to the dignity of the child we need to pay close attention to the identity of the child. That means the cultural identification and heritage of the child is as important as its health, education, and safety. So too are the child's family - and we need to pay close attention to the perspective of the child itself.

The first principle of the child's best interests as paramount has been reaffirmed in New Zealand's Vulnerable Children Act 2014. If we are to respect the human dignity of the child, the child must not however be treated as an object. It is critical that those who respond to vulnerable children hear the child's voice and respect the child's wishes to the greatest extent. It is also important to see childhood as important in its own right. It is not simply a preparation for adulthood. Children must have safety to learn and grow and have fun.

Families are where children are best nurtured and taught about the values that will equip them for life. But they can be dangerous for vulnerable children if the family is not coping and not equipped with the life skills and resources to protect and nurture the child. Engaging the families of vulnerable children is essential to best outcomes for them. Those who would grow children safely must ensure their families also grow in well-being and life skills. For those families unable to care safely for their children, we need to ensure that there are properly supported foster caregivers and whanau caregivers to pick things up. These are very special people indeed. The role they play in providing safe havens in which children can grow in self-esteem is often under the radar. It is very hard work. What is provided every day to improve the lives of children in our communities is humbling indeed.

The organisers have taken the opportunity to ensure that within the theme there is an opportunity to look especially at New Zealand experience with working with tangata whenua. The unique place of tangata whenua, their language, history, culture and traditions, shapes the identity of New Zealand. An indigenous response to promotion of the well-being of children emphasises whakapapa for connections, shared responsibility for child-rearing and cultural identity. Adherence to the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples gives added impetus to the need to respond appropriately when children are of indigenous communities. Under the spirit of the Treaty of Waitangi interventions must foster protection, including of customs and language, the mutual good faith and co-operation that is a feature of partnership and full participation.

These principles are best strategy more generally. Excellent communication and respect for different perspectives and authority are essential to mobilising the joint effort and responsibilities that are the only safe harbour for vulnerable children. The effort can be successful only if it builds on relationships. Such relationships set up partnerships: across generations, across cultures, across disciplines and across all agencies dedicated to nurturing and protecting children.

“Cultural responsiveness in a multi-agency world”, the theme of the conference, matters. The complexities of child abuse and neglect mean that support and administration is delivered in the modern administrative state by a wide range of agencies and providers, as the content of the sessions properly acknowledges. Such agencies operate under the umbrella of human rights, including importantly in this context the Convention on the Rights of the Child. They also operate under open and fair processes our communities now rightly expect because such openness and fairness are aspects of human rights in themselves.

The conference offers the opportunity over the next four days to promote exchange of ideas and knowledge. The programme seeks to stimulate new thinking on matters such as how more effective partnerships are built with indigenous people and those of different cultures to work out how best children may be kept safe and their well-being promoted. It also seeks to stimulate ideas about how different agencies, government, non-government, business and not for profit, can work better together in partnership to improve the lives of the most vulnerable in our communities. There is opportunity in the conference to show what is happening with child protection services in a range of jurisdictions, such as New Zealand’s experience with the Vulnerable Children’s Board in promoting multi-agency approaches so that outcomes for vulnerable children and young people are improved.

At this conference, there is opportunity to share the body of evidence-based knowledge and understanding about what keeps children safe and an opportunity to examine it from a range of different perspectives. A conference like this promotes connections and friendships that can be tapped for longer-distance continued self-examination of best practice.

Many of you have a lifetime of service in this important work. I know you will be energised by the conference to continue and will I am sure find real help here. I want to thank all of you for coming to Auckland to share your knowledge, ideas and expertise. More importantly, I am very glad indeed to have the opportunity to thank you for the essential work you all do.

I wish you well for your deliberations and for a most successful conference.

No reira tena koutou, tena koutou, tena ra tatou katoua.
