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## Inside this Issue

Your Peak Body In Action	2
ACCS Advocacy	2
Reports from ACCS Representatives	3
Consolidation and Child Care in Canada	3
ACCS Branch Reports	4
How to Contact ACCS State and Territory Branches	4

## All Systems Go!

*Prue Warrilow, National Convenor*

The federal election is over and with the return of the ALP – albeit as a minority government - it's all systems go for the COAG early childhood agenda.

It signals exciting times for children's services with not one, but two ministers with a focus on education and care for young children. One of these ministers - Peter Garrett – is in Cabinet and therefore has a direct voice to the Prime Minister and will be an active participant in setting ALP policy. This demonstrates the Government's strong commitment to the early childhood agenda and the importance in which it is viewed.

ACCS has had a good initial meeting with Minister Garrett on 13 October 2010. We talked to the Minister on multiple issues including; the importance of getting the quality agenda through without compromising standards, how to actively engage the sector to feel ownership of the process and the content of the quality reforms through real consultation on the regulation and assessment tools, what we mean by real consultation, workforce issues including the shortage of trained and qualified early childhood educators and our ideas to help relieve this situation, affordability, assisting vulnerable children and their families have better access to formal children's services and resourcing services to facilitate this, and the importance of having a Children's Commissioner sitting in the Human Rights Commission. It's amazing what you can cover in 45 minutes!

While it is still early days for Minister Garret and his staff to get their heads around the COAG early childhood agenda, the

Minister asked very pertinent questions and commented that he would be asking for more information from his department on the issues we raised.

We also emphasised the particular needs of rural and remote services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's services, and stressed that it was critical to the success of the COAG early childhood agenda to ensure these services are included in the process. The Minister acknowledged this and emphasised that this government remains highly committed to closing the gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

He also acknowledged the challenges we had presented to him and said that he was keen to meet again with ACCS before the end of the year. In regard to any remaining concerns in the sector about unintended negative consequences of the division of responsibilities between the two ministers, Minister Garrett asked us to pause, observe their actions and to "take careful note of what we do".

So it's going to be a busy, exciting time in the next few months as we get to see and comment on the details of the COAG early childhood agenda .... Bring on improved ratios, bring on the regulations, the assessment tool and the workforce strategies. I look forward to real consultation, not being briefed and talked to, but listened to and actively participating.

And Minister, we will be watching to see the good work roll out with the community children's services sector as active partners in the process.

### ACCS website!

You can find information about your national peak body by visiting [www.ausccs.org.au](http://www.ausccs.org.au)

# Your Peak Body In Action

**Barbara Romeril, National Secretary**

ACCS conducted our usual vigorous advocacy during the federal election campaign in support of children, families and communities. Our lobby kit was widely used by our members and web based communications with politicians supplemented more traditional means.

ACCS is pleased to report that the incoming Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth Peter Garrett has actively sought a meeting from his first day in the new portfolio. It is gratifying to see that ACCS is perceived as a useful source of advice to government.

We have heard concerns from members about the implications of the new ministerial arrangements and fears that it may constitute a return to the bad old days of early childhood education being administered in isolation from child care; we all know that care and education are inseparable and ACCS would not support any separation. We are encouraged by public statements that the new arrangements are not intended to create this division but rather to strengthen representation of early childhood education and care in Cabinet; we will continue to advocate for integration.

We have met with GoodStart, the non-profit consortium that has bought the remaining ABC Learning centres and now operates around the country; it is interesting to turn our minds to the best way to engage with a national community provider, something ACCS has not had to address before. We continue ongoing dialogue to find a solution that will strengthen the whole of the community children's services sector.

Our partnership with the child care union LHMU continues at national and state/territory levels. We have significant common ground with the union especially in supporting quality improvement, workforce development and action for professional wages and conditions.

The regular August meeting of the National Children's Services Forum was cancelled due to the federal election; we will meet in November to resume the dialogue between national children's services peak bodies, and with the Federal Government.

## ACCS Advocacy

### Federal Election 2010 – A reflection on ACCS' successes and future challenges

Now there is a minority ALP government installed in Australia, it is timely to reflect on ACCS' role in the federal election campaign. The key goal was to raise awareness of ACCS' policy demands, influence major party policy and engage the community in the debate.

ACCS endeavoured to do this in multiple ways – through

developing election demands to distribute to the major parties and our membership, by developing a lobby kit and e-cards as resources for ACCS members, developing a policy scorecard to offer an easy to read analysis for interested individuals, and monitoring media to ensure ACCS was responding to negative child care campaigns organised by the commercial children's services lobby. ACCS had a letter published in The Courier Mail on August 11 which has been reproduced below.

Despite the very short lead time between the election being called and the election date ACCS developed and distributed resources efficiently. Also, ACCS used some new technology in the form of e-cards – this is a fast, environmentally sustainable lobbying tool. The responses to these cards from the major parties were obviously generic but quite detailed in outlining their child care policy which is a positive sign that the major parties have children's education and care clearly on their policy radar.

As for how far the election demands of ACCS were adopted by the new Gillard Government – we know the quality reforms will go ahead, but the other ACCS demands have not been explicitly written into ALP policy – which means ACCS still has plenty of lobbying and advocacy work to do!

### LETTER TO THE Courier Mail 11.8.10

#### Children Must Not Be Milked for Profit

The child care union has got it right (*Union suggests childcare cost fears are 'alarmist'* Courier Mail 10.8.10) - commercial child care providers are irresponsible in running a scare campaign against lifting quality in children's services.

Proposed new quality standards for children's services are in many instances no higher than existing standards in state/territory regulations. In fact most long day care centres are already or will soon be required to operate at the proposed national staffing levels for babies and for preschoolers; in most states they are operating at the new national standards for toddlers. Many not for profit children's services are already operating above the state/territory standards so the transition to higher quality is entirely achievable with little or no fee increase.

The commercial services which have stuck to the bare minimum standards may well struggle to maintain profits – so be it. Our children are more important than their fat pockets.

Now the ALP needs to step up and release a child care policy which unequivocally supports the National Quality Reforms and the Henry Tax Review recommendation for Child Care Tax Rebate to be rolled into Child Care Benefit so the public purse can be used more equitably to support affordability for all families.

The good news is that the community sector will continue to provide high quality early years services for Australia's children and families. Commercial providers must catch up.

**Barbara Romeril, National Secretary**  
**Australian Community Children's Services**

# Reports from ACCS Representatives

## Families Australia Board

Prue Warrilow was returned to the board of Families Australia at the recent AGM; this is a very positive outcome for ACCS as it enables us to continue to work to bridge the gap between welfare services and universal early childhood education and care services.

## Families Australia Coalition of Organisations Committed to the Safety and Wellbeing of Australia's Children

ACCS attended the recent meeting of the consortium of agencies which are working closely with the federal government to implement its commitment to a National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children.

The meeting expressed frustration and concern at delays in implementation of key aspects of the framework and held in depth discussions with FAHCSIA as well as with the Minister Jenny Macklin.

The minister expressed strong support for an ongoing partnership with the community sector via this consortium; ACCS will continue to participate.

# Consolidation and Child Care in Canada

## Edleun eager to expand childcare reach outside Alberta

**Steve Ladurantaye, *Globe and Mail (Canada), 29 September 2010***

Leslie Wulf sees a sector that needs to grow up in a hurry when he looks at Canada's daycare industry.

Unlike countries such as the United States and Britain, where the market is dominated by a few players, Canada's daycare centres are largely small and privately owned, and often non-profit.

The five largest companies operate a mere 1 per cent of the market, leaving the door open for a well-financed player to consolidate the industry and build identical centres from coast-to-coast to house finger-painting children and tantrum-throwing toddlers while their parents spend their days at work.

If recent history is any guide, the rewards would be great. Bright Family Horizons Family Solutions, which provides daycare services to large corporations in the United States, sold for \$1.3-billion (U.S.) last year. The year before, U.S.-based Learning Care Group, which has more than 100,000 daycare spaces, sold a 65-per-cent stake for \$700-million.

"Canada is full of mom-and-pop shops and companies set up by a couple of real estate buddies," said Mr. Wulf, chief executive officer of Calgary-based Edleun Group Inc. "It's not going to be like that any more. It's hugely capital intensive and you need economies of scale to operate effectively."

Edleun raised \$40-million (Canadian) earlier this year after obtaining a listing on the TSX Venture Exchange, and it has

already spent \$20-million to expand its number of daycare centres to 20 from 11 since the spring, all of them based in Alberta. The business model is deceptively simple: build or buy daycares and fill them with children, each of whom provides a steady stream of income.

The company has no debt and with \$22-million in cash reported at the end of its last quarter it is eager to expand out Alberta – it has targeted more than 280 other centres it would like to buy. It will likely accelerate those plans by taking out mortgages on the existing 20 centres, Mr. Wulf said.

If it meets its goal, Edleun will command 10 per cent of the Canadian market.

Before it can attempt to consolidate an industry traditionally managed by the state, the company must dispel the perception it is looking to profit at the expense of children. Unlike most Western countries, about 80 per cent of Canada's child-care centres are not-for-profit. And in Ontario, funding regulations in several large municipalities restrict how much money can go to privately owned centres.

Numbers on profits aren't available in Canada because most centres are small and the municipalities that host them don't keep data. Doug Hyatt, a business professor at the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, said there may be rules about how many children to adults and maximum capacity, but that doesn't tell the whole story.

"What really matters is seeing how workers interact with kids," he said. "You need to see if workers get down on their hands and needs to interact with kids, and other intangible things you just can't measure. In Canada, it's just difficult to assess the industry."

Advocates such as Martha Friendly, co-ordinator of the Toronto-based Childcare Resource and Research Unit, a policy and research oriented facility focusing on early childhood education and child care, have voiced concerns that a company beholden to its shareholders can't offer proper care and make a profit at the same time. They see parallels to Australia's system if companies such as Edleun are allowed to expand.

"You can't make money offering quality child care," Ms. Friendly said, citing studies that suggest non-profits provide better levels of care. "A public company exists to make money, so there is perhaps an incentive to cut corners on things such as quality staff."

Prof. Hyatt said his research tends to indicate private daycares will proliferate in Canada as they have in other countries.

"Consolidation is a common business model that you see in every industry – you see it everything from dentistry to auto dealerships," he said. "Mom and Pa get old and they need to move on. People use informal child-care arrangements to get by, but it's problematic and there's a need here to be filled."

In most provinces, the government helps parents defray the cost of daycare through subsidies and tax breaks. Parents will choose the best daycare, Mr. Wulf said, regardless of ownership structure.

His centres – which can house up to 230 children aged six weeks to 12 years old – are highly standardized and offer the same programs and menus (created by a nutritionist) regardless of where they are located.

They are also expensive to open. To build from scratch could cost up to \$4.5-million, he said, putting it out of reach for the smaller entrepreneurs who once dominated the industry.

"These people want to retire, they want to sell their buildings," Mr. Wulf said. "We can build new, or we can renovate them up to our standards. But it's not an inexpensive process, we've spent more remodelling some of our buildings than their owners did to put them up."

## ACCS Branch Reports

### Queensland Branch Report

*Tanya Roessler, Queensland Branch Treasurer*

At the last Queensland branch meeting we elected the Queensland State representatives for 2010 - Frances Snedden who organizes the collation and distribution of National information to members and Tanya Roessler who writes the quarterly articles for ACCS in Action.

Now that the election result is finalised we can move forward to the reforms that are being introduced. In Queensland we still have concerns over occasional care services being in limbo again due to not being included in the National Quality Framework. In particular as to how the 'ready reckoner' will affect many of our small rural, remote, Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander Children's Services who operate solely on mixed age groups.

At the last meeting we discussed the continuing issues with RTO's rewarding qualifications in unacceptable timeframes. We have heard of people being given qualifications in 2 days and we have a concern with the poor quality outcome and we are currently looking into what can be done regarding this issue.

Our membership in Queensland has grown this year with many of our regional and remote children's Services joining. Thank you to all the Queensland branch members for their dedication, and passion in their work and for their willingness to share their beliefs and ideas.

### VICTORIAN BRANCH

*Barbara Romeril, CCC Executive Director*

Community Child Care is well into another election lobbying campaign to influence the next Victorian Government. Our strapline is 'Invest In The Rights Of Victoria's Children - Quality Services For All'. We have all major parties addressing members at our AGM in November a few days before the election.

Our demands are similar to the ACCS demands in the recent federal election:

We call on the next Victorian State Government to deliver on the right of all Victorian children and families to access quality children's services by:

- fully implementing the national quality framework to improve ratios of staff to children, qualifications and number of qualified staff who work with our children

- funding children's services for social inclusion so vulnerable and at risk families can benefit from high quality children's services
- funding incentives to improve qualifications and skill levels to provide a skilled workforce to deliver high quality for our children

## How to Contact ACCS State and Territory Branches

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