



PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

MONDAY, 13 SEPTEMBER 1982

ADDRESS AT OPENING OF CAPTION CENTRE, SYDNEY

The opening of the Australian Caption Centre is an event of great importance to Australia. Over 800,000 people in Australia suffer from impaired hearing, many of those people will be helped enormously by the establishment of the Australian Caption Centre.

For the first time they will be able to watch and understand television by way of captions which will be picked up by special decoding devices attached to their television sets. The captions won't be visible to other viewers.

In order to help promote this service the Commonwealth Government last year provided significant funds to assist with the setting up of the Caption Centre. This year we are providing further funds to the Australian Caption Centre for the provision of further facilities for caption television programs.

As well as supporting the Australian Caption Centre the Commonwealth provides the ABC with additional support to enable it to broadcast for seven hours a week caption programs in Sydney and Melbourne. This service is expected to begin in April of next year. The commercial television stations have so far not made any decisions about the use of captions but I hope that before too long and once there is total agreement on the kind of technology which ought to be used, but interpolating and not captioned, I agree with the remarks that have been said about delay. There is always going to be new technology coming forward, there will always be better ways of doing it if you wait a while. This has been delayed a long while already and I don't believe that there is any excuse for further delay by the ABC or by commercial stations on the grounds of technology.

Those with hearing difficulties will be able to benefit as much from television as the rest of us do. That is the objective that we want to pursue and want to achieve. I hope therefore that caption television will eventually be available on all television stations.

My colleague the Minister for Communications, has discussed this issue with the commercial television stations to obtain a clearer idea of the problems they see on implementing closed captioning on their programs. The Minister is examining urgently the issue of Australia adopting an industry wide standard for captioning technology and the question of whether the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal should hold an inquiry into the wider introduction of closed captioning for the hearing impaired.

Neil Brown who is here will be making an announcement on both of these matters very soon.

Television has become by far the most popular and in many respects the most influential source of information and entertainment in Australia and any section of the community which is unable to benefit from television is certainly at a disadvantage. Again, interpolating and not captioned, as a politician I think television has a great many advantages because if you go on 'live' people see what you say and the way you say it, or hear what you say and the way you say it and it is not interpreted as so often what politicians say is interpreted. So in the interests of overall accuracy and getting a fair judgement of whether it is State or Federal politicians or whoever else, that accuracy ought to be available to the 800,000 to 1 million people who have impaired hearing and who at the moment have to rely on the print media.

The Caption Centre will help deaf people overcome that particular disadvantage that they have. It will enable them not only to keep in touch more easily with current events, but it will also help to make them more aware of various entitlements from Government. That is particularly important at a time like this just after the introduction of a Commonwealth Budget. People do need to be aware of the services and of the programs that are available if there are adjustments that affect them because one of the things that we found in recent times is the programs can be introduced by state or by Commonwealth and even though it might be advertising in relation to it, there is still an enormous gap in the awareness of average Australians as to their entitlements under the programs. Without captioning, up to a million people are going to be in a more difficult position in finding out what their entitlements than the rest of us.

The benefits of new programs are obviously going to be better understood once television stations generally undertake captioning. This is one of the responsibilities of Government but I think it is also the responsibility of television stations and the media generally to help get the message across. That is another important and serious reason why not just the ABC but commercial television stations ought to adopt captioning as soon as possible. I am sorry for that interpolation again, with future technology there will be a way of immediate captioning and picking up what one says and translating that into a caption so that you don't need typists or shorthand writers or whatever.

In helping with the establishment of the Caption Centre the Government has been able to make an important contribution to making sure that all sections of the community are aware of the facts and are aware of their entitlements. The commitment by the Government to the Caption Centre is also indicative of our overall commitment to a caring society in which people who are in any way disadvantaged should be able to live as normal a life as possible with every support from the community. In the case of the disabled they should be able to enjoy a meaningful home life and participate in all social, creative and recreational activities. That is a right to which all Australians are entitled and one which the Government will do everything in its power to meet.

There is an enormous amount, and again interpolating, of public education involved in this, the education of other people of what the difficulties are and how those difficulties can be overcome. I can remember John Hickman, as a quadriplegic and then as a lecturer at the Australian National University in his book 'One Step at a Time' describing some of his own experiences. He saw an advertisement in a newspaper of one of the major retail stores who had advertised special parking space for disabled people and it was going to be reserved for them close to the shopping centre so they wouldn't have to move too far to go and make their purchases. He thought this was great, and he pulled up his car and got into his chair and then found that there was no way at all that he could get from that parking centre into the shopping centre because there were steps which you couldn't put a wheel chair up or down. It wasn't a question of anyone having done that deliberately it was a question of lack of knowledge, lack of understanding of the efforts all of us can make which can contribute to disabled people - whatever the disablement might be - leading a more active and more participatory life in the normal life of the community. This Caption Centre and its work and the adoption of captions in television stations will do much not only to help disabled people in this case, those of the hearing impaired enjoy the programs, it will do a great deal I believe to help educate other Australians in ways which will assist disabled people to lead fuller lives within the Australian community.

In opening this morning the Australian Caption Centre I would like to pay tribute to the efforts of all those people who over the past few years worked so hard to lay the groundwork for the establishment of this service. They have shown a dedication and a determination to give hearing impaired people real access to television and I am delighted to see that their efforts have been so successful. I pay tribute to them and I am glad they have been so persistent and it has been an honour for the Government to be able to provide some support to make the opening of this centre a practical possibility. It is now going to be open for the ABC and to commercial interests to take advantage of the opportunities that have been provided to demonstrate that they also are very much part of a caring society.

It is with very great pleasure that I declare open the Australian Caption Centre.

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