



PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
COMMONWEALTH/STATE MINISTERS' CONFERENCE
ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN
CANBERRA - 14 FEBRUARY 1991**

This inaugural meeting of the Commonwealth/State Ministers' Conference on the Status of Women marks the beginning of an important new phase in improving the status of women in Australia.

By opening the channels for formal Ministerial consultation on status of women issues, this forum will help us towards our shared goal of raising the status of Australian women quickly and efficiently.

I announced the establishment of this Forum in March last year, to allow better sharing of information among governments and better co-ordination of policies.

Australian women have come a long way since 1902, when they won the right to vote in Federal elections.

But the past 20 years have seen particularly dramatic steps forward.

Women's participation in the workforce has increased from 40 per cent in 1972 to 52 per cent in 1990.

The retention rate of girls to Year 12 has risen from 36 per cent in 1972 to 70 per cent in 1990.

In comparison to other OECD countries, Australia has the lowest wage differential - that is, the difference between female and male earnings.

And inextricably linked to these improvements has been the rapid growth in the provision of child care - affordable child care to enable women to work, train or study and improve their financial independence.

Since 1983 the supply of Commonwealth funded child care places has more than doubled by 77,500 places to 123,500.

Last March I announced plans to increase the provision of child care by extending fee relief to commercial and employer centres to stimulate an increase of about 28,000 new places in these sectors. I also announced the planned establishment of 50,000 new community places over the next five years. These developments mean that by 1996, there should be over 250,000 child care places in Australia.

I am confident that there will be continuing close collaboration between our governments to implement this expansion because all governments have recognised the trend of growing workforce participation by women and have cooperated to increase the supply of child care where it is needed most.

The National Agenda for Women is a prime mechanism for ensuring that the great surge forward in social and economic reform for women maintains its momentum.

Australia leads the world with the National Agenda. We were the first Government to have developed a comprehensive policy document based on the United Nation's Forward Looking Strategies for Women.

More than two years of negotiation and consultation with some 25,000 women underpin the National Agenda.

Our reputation in this field is internationally unchallenged. Our voice is influential.

The 1990s bring an unprecedented opportunity for developing a closer partnership between our Governments.

The goals are to improve our national efficiency and international competitiveness, and to improve the delivery and quality of the services governments provide.

On status of women issues, we can be proud of the level of consultation and coordination by Commonwealth and State governments.

With Queensland's recent establishment of government machinery, there is for the first time a specific Minister in each State and Territory responsible for status of women issues.

I am sure today's Conference and your work in the future will consolidate that structure and enhance the opportunities for progress to be made in the future.

Today, your discussions will link in with the process and outcomes of the Special Premiers' Conference on Intergovernmental Relations.

Your consideration of the paper, 'Women's Interests in the Commonwealth/State Relations Review' will give this Conference an important role in that process.

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Also of significance today will be your consideration of the Ottawa Communique from the Third Meeting of Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs.

This meeting, last October, reached unanimous agreement on strategies for improving the status of women, specifically in regard to economic equality, structural adjustment and eliminating violence against women.

Finally, I would welcome your consideration of the draft Declaration on Women and Structural Adjustment. I will be seeking support for this Declaration at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting later in the year, and I believe that support will be forthcoming.

So you have a full agenda before you.

I commend the spirit of co-operation which is evident already and I wish you a successful inaugural meeting.

I will now hand you over to the Minister Assisting me on the Status of Women, Wendy Fatin, who will be chairing your discussion.

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