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PRIME MINISTER

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SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP

**SIGNING OF COMMONWEALTH - LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACCORD,
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA, 14 NOVEMBER 1995**

I am very pleased to be here to sign the first partnership agreement entered into by Commonwealth and local governments.

The textbooks commonly refer to local government as the "third" tier of government. I suppose it might seem a little remote when you're sitting on Capitol Hill - but that description seems much less accurate when you're driving along a suburban road, or sitting in a local park or using the local library.

Of all the tiers of government, local government actually operates *closest* to the people. Good local governments keep their communities together and keep them strong. Local representatives are drawn in a very immediate way from their communities - and because most elective positions are part-time, the incumbents remain fully engaged in those communities.

Local government is situated directly in the community's line of sight - and your work is of interest to all the members of the community.

Australia's councils have always served as the forum for local decision-making on local matters. But they are also increasingly significant to our *national* life.

In all but a few areas of Australia's public life, the decisions of local government - and the quality of those decisions - help determine our progress.

This is the case with the regeneration of our cities and the redevelopment of our regions. It is most certainly the case with the protection of our natural environment. The health of our people and the houses they live in, the culture in which they participate, their jobs and their standard of living - all this is touched by the processes of local government. Many of the problems we face as a nation lie at the local level - and so do the solutions.

All Australian governments owe a duty to the Australian people - and all are charged with serving the Australian nation. No less than their Commonwealth, State and Territory counterparts, local governments have a role in addressing national issues and pursuing national goals.

As local governments become more aware of their national responsibilities, the federal government is moving to anchor itself more securely in local communities.

The lesson we can draw from such widely different initiatives as Working Nation Landcare and Australia Remembers is that national programs work best at the local level - when they are delivered by local people, fuelled by local energy and informed by local needs.

We realise that in pursuing national priorities, we must make use of the people and resources on the ground - and very often that means local governments.

So a partnership between the Commonwealth and local government is very worthwhile - and long overdue. But like all matches, it required some making.

In February David Plumridge first mentioned to me the idea of an Accord - spurred on, I believe, by the success achieved at your First National Assembly last November.

I thought it was a very good idea - and an excellent means of broadening and deepening the relationship between our two levels of government.

In the intervening months, the two parties, led by David Plumridge and Brian Howe, have worked hard to put some flesh onto the bones of this Accord - and they have succeeded. We will sign a very valuable document today, one which contains some significant undertakings and which will shape our future working relationship.

At the heart of this Accord is a set of principles - shared beliefs sincerely held and shared goals to be sincerely pursued. These include commitments to social justice and community cohesion, the pursuit of reconciliation with our indigenous people, recognition of the benefits of cultural diversity and the need for all governments to pursue micro-economic reform and to protect the environment.

This is an important statement - a statement of the principles which guide Australian government. These principles have not always been the subject of consensus within the Australian polity, so it is worthwhile setting them down - in ink if not in concrete.

But this Accord is composed of more than fine words. Both the Commonwealth and local governments are making significant undertakings.

The Commonwealth believes local government should be involved in COAG processes and Ministerial Council activities where local government has a legitimate interest, such as a significant statutory responsibility or financial commitment.

The Commonwealth will consult with local government when its initiatives are likely to impact upon local government, having regard to normal budgetary processes and existing arrangements with State and Territory Governments.

And the Commonwealth undertakes to provide funding, within existing resources, for a range of local government initiatives from the Local Government Development Program - and to review the financial position of local government, taking account of such issues as future changes in local government functions and responsibilities.

So the Accord is good for local government. But it's also good for Australia. It folds local affairs into the national mix - and draws local government more fully into the mainstream of national life.

Under the Accord, local government commits to pull its weight in the arena of micro-economic reform, particularly through the implementation of national competition policy, enterprise bargaining, productive diversity and regulatory reform.

Following on the Report of the Urban Design Task Force, the Commonwealth welcomes local government's willingness to pursue reforms that will improve the quality of our cities and thus the quality of life of our people.

I welcome your commitment to the protection of the environment. The Accord provides for an integrated approach to planning and development and to appropriate involvement in areas like waste management, sewerage and stormwater treatment - issues that are crucial if we are to look after our rivers and our coasts.

In this Accord, local government signs up to the cause of invigorating Australian democracy through the creation of an effective citizenship education program.

I know you had Philip Adams speaking to you yesterday and I gather you warmly welcomed everything he said about the program called Australia Consults.

The government endorsed the program back in June, shortly after I announced the Government's preferred model of an Australian Republic. There has been a good deal of debate about the model. I believe it is the best means of reaching the objective of having an Australian as Australia's Head of State.

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We decided it was the best model after extensive consultations and a great deal of hard thinking. We still firmly believe it is the best model. But it is not a model we want to force upon Australians - indeed no model can be forced upon Australians. A republic can't be forced upon Australians.

On the contrary, we want the whole nation to consider the issues. In fact, we think that the consideration of them will be immensely beneficial to the nation and to the life of our democracy.

If Australia Consults serves the purpose of encouraging interest and debate and knowledge of our democratic system and an enlivened sense of national possibilities and national purpose, it will be an invaluable program.

We have a chance with the approach of the Centenary of Federation and the debate about our Head of State and other constitutional arrangements to become much more familiar with our democracy and ourselves. And I hope we learn a great deal more than what our shortcomings are. I hope we will be reminded that there is no more robust democracy in the world: indeed, there are few older democracies and few, if any, more truly democratic.

It will do no harm if through the national debate ahead of us we are reminded that Australia is a very good, and very democratic place to live.

Finally, by participating in a national system of performance indicators, local government joins the other two tiers of government in the measurement of performance and progress in the delivery of services.

The Commonwealth / Local Government Accord is a balanced document, which will make for a more secure and productive relationship between our two levels of government. More than that, though, it will make for a better Federation and a stronger nation.

The Accord demonstrates how well Australian federalism can work when the activities of all governments coalesce around national priorities - and when the decisions of all governments are measured against the national interest.

When this Labor Government signed our first Accord with the trade unions in 1983, no one could have predicted the benefits that would flow to Australia. There is no reason why today's agreement should not similarly advance the nation over the next decade.

Let me say in closing that it has been one of the real pleasures of my time in this office of Prime Minister to watch the relationship between the Commonwealth and Local Government grow into something truly substantial and creative.

We will all have to draw our own conclusions about the other side of the Australian political equation who, at this premier event on the local

government calendar, decided that the interests of local government are best advanced by a deafening policy silence.

If we all rack our brains, perhaps we can think of some reason why we should be kept in the dark. I must say I can't think of one. If it is a decent policy I cannot think of any advantage the Government could take from it. If it is not a decent policy I cannot think why it would be more credible just before an election than it would be now.

Let me offer my thanks to those responsible for negotiating this Accord - especially Brian Howe. Brian retires from public life at the next election and he leaves behind an impressive record of service and achievement.

And to all the local government representatives here today: good luck for the future - because the work of local councils represents much of the hard work of government. I trust you will return to your communities excited by our achievement today - and confident in the ability of Australians to work together for a common cause.

Thank you.



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