



2

PRIME MINISTER

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ADDRESS TO ST. MARK'S LUTHERAN CHILD CARE CENTRE, MT GRAVATT, BRISBANE

Thank you for inviting me here today to take part in what I consider to be a very important occasion. The Commonwealth Government has given great emphasis to the need for adequate child care services. As you have given me this opportunity, let me tell you the reasons for the Government adopting this policy, and just what this policy means.

We have known for some time about the need in the area of child care. It was a Liberal-National Country Party Government that first introduced, in 1972, an Act that provided for the development of child care centres. The Child Care Act. In 1969 a survey was conducted which showed that although some 271,000 preschool aged children were the off-spring of working mothers, there were only 555 child care centres in Australia able to provide full day care for about 14,000 children. Only 40 of these centres catering for only 2,000 children received any form of government assistance from state or local authorities. Less than 10 percent of the pre-school children of working mothers were in recognised child care centres.

Five years later, in 1974, the situation was not much improved. Of the 375,000 children under five years of age, whose responsible parents were in the workforce, only 38,700 were cared for in recognised centres - that is, just over 10 percent. It was estimated that one out of eight school aged children whose responsible parents were in the work force had no supervision for several hours during the day, before school opened, and after it was finished.

I emphasise that in spite of the fact that increasing amounts of government funds were directed to children's services by the previous government, very little of this money went to help the people who need it most - the people whom those figures I have just mentioned represent - the migrant families, the single parents, families on low incomes. Their children were being deprived of basic, adequate care, because the services just did not exist to help them. Even where facilities did exist, they were often far too expensive for the people who needed them most.

It is now apparent and it should have been apparent then that the limited resources available should have been channelled through assisting these families. And above all, to assisting these children many of whom have been seriously deprived through no fault of their own or of their parents' in the early formative years of their life. It is for this reason that the Commonwealth Government decided to give greater emphasis to the provisions of child care services for families in need. Some people, however, still believe that the provision of facilities such as St. Mark's Lutheran Child Care Centre will encourage parents - mothers in particular - to shirk their own responsibilities.

I believe the situation is a good deal more complicated than that. The fact is that today there are more two income families in Australia than single income families. Further, in Queensland a recent survey shows that women comprise one third of the Queensland labour force and that six out of ten of these women are married. This is a demographic trend that Governments even if they wanted to, could do little to reverse.

We have the situation that more women are marrying and have occupations outside the home. Girls as well as boys are spending more time in full time education. And many adult women are re-entering tertiary institutions, or entering them for the first time.

There are also today, a growing number of single parent families. Families headed by a single woman or man constitute almost one tenth of the number of families in Australia. I am especially pleased to perform this ceremony today because the Liberal-National Country Party Government's social welfare programmes places great emphasis on cooperative effort by community groups.

It is the Government's belief that only by positive action between groups like yourselves, with the assistance of government, but without the hindrance of undue government interference, can an effective approach to the whole question of social welfare be achieved.

Only if groups such as yourselves define and communicate their needs can the Commonwealth Government be fully responsive to those needs. My Government is committed to encouraging the kind of self-help evidenced and indeed exemplified by this Centre.

I understand that there are plans to provide within this complex an aged person's home and a youth hostel. This is a progressive step and it is obvious that all groups will benefit greatly from one another's presence and their contact with one another.

It gives me very great pleasure to declare the St. Mark's Lutheran Child Care Centre officially open.