



PRIME MINISTER

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ELECTORATE TALK

I want to briefly talk with you about the Federal Government's commitment to enhancing the position of Australians as individuals. The Government has made a number of significant - and often little noticed - reforms to improve the position of individual men and women. Although the attention of the public and the media has generally focused on economic matters, our reforms in these areas are of equal importance to this Government.

We have a basic commitment to creating the kind of situation where Australians can realise their own capacities and potential to the full. Our approach differs greatly from our political opponents. We seek to increase the capacity of people to make their own decisions - to choose. We do not seek to increase the power of Government. We seek to give meaningful and effective assistance to the disadvantaged in the community - and not just to throw money at a problem and hope for some instant solution. Society simply does not work that way. In the final analysis, it is individual people who require help and care.

Our record in these matters stands up well under scrutiny. Let us first look at the question of civil liberty. We have acted on a number of fronts. A Human Rights Commission will be established by 1 July this year. Its broad purpose is to promote individual rights and to make sure that our laws are in line with the United Nations international covenant on civil and political rights.

We will introduce a Freedom of Information Bill that will give - as a basic and fundamental right - access to certain categories of Government information. It is designed to loosen up the flow of information from Government to the people.

The Federal Government has also decided to implement the report of the Law Reform Commission on criminal investigation. This is a particularly important advance in civil liberties for people detained for questioning or arrested and charged with a federal criminal offence.

The Government is currently negotiating with the States so that legal aid is provided in the most effective manner possible. We believe this to be a fundamental right. In these times of budgetary restraint, the funds we made available to this serviced increased by nearly \$4 million.

Aboriginal Land Rights legislation to the Northern Territory has been passed - a most significant advance for the aboriginal people. Our predecessors spoke about Aboriginal Land Rights, but we acted.

There have also been references to the Law Reform Commission on the protection of privacy; the law of defamation; and investigation into the possibility of applying aboriginal customary law in criminal matters to aborigines living in the traditional manner.

All in all, this is an impressive list that demonstrates our commitment to maintaining the freedom and dignity of the individual. It also demonstrates, of course, our capacity to act effectively in carrying out our policies.

Let me now talk about our approach and our actions in assisting the disadvantaged. As I mentioned earlier, we are determined to provide assistance to those most in need in a way that does not make people more dependent on government. Our wish is to make people more independent to enhance their self-respect and dignity, and not to destroy it. We realise that quite often Government bureaucracies are unable to provide the kind of personal aid necessary. We therefore place great emphasis on the work of voluntary organisations. There is no doubt that they can bring a personal and highly effective approach to the formidable task of dispensing social welfare programmes. They frequently become aware of the need for assistance long before a Government Department itself. That is one important reason why we want close association with voluntary organisations - so we can quickly know of emerging needs and changes in direction that may be required. Our actions in this area reflect our commitment.

The indexation of pensions, for instance, automatically retains their real value. The family allowance scheme is of incalculable benefit to 300,000 Australian families who got virtually no benefit from the old system of tax deductions merely because their incomes were too low. There has been a re-orientation of child care programmes to give children of working mothers and single parent children adequate care. In this often controversial area, what we are seeking to do is simply provide the circumstances in which children are properly cared for. Also, Senator Guilfoyle, as Minister for Social Security, has been reviewing the administration of her Department to improve its capacity to assist individuals. We have set up a committee of experts from various Government Departments that provide over-the-counter service to see if improvements can be made in the effectiveness of this service. This is not a criticism of public servants, but a genuine desire to make sure that welfare services are dispensed with the greatest possible degree of concern and sensitivity.

The Government has also initiated two significant experimental programmes within migrant communities. Migrant resource centres have been set up in Sydney and Melbourne to see if we can get a more effective contact with migrants and can get a better delivery of Government services to migrants. I emphasise the programmes are experimental, but I believe they are well worth while and I am sure we will learn much from them.

Our Housing Voucher experiment scheme - that enables people eligible for assistance to choose their own housing - is another example of our concern for individual freedom and choice. Throughout this year, the Government will continue to apply this approach to individual liberty and to those in need. We will continue to seek to enhance the potential of Australians as people.
