



PRIME MINISTER

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ELECTORATE TALK

For most Australians, and probably for most men and women in the modern world, the size and complexity of Governments can be overwhelming. People often see Government departments as having little concern for individual problems; and little concern for individual justice. They feel overpowered, confused and lost by what they see as red tape and rigid guidelines having no relevance to their own personal needs. They feel that Governments, at all levels, have vast powers over individuals, almost unchallengeable power.

There is no doubt that Australians do need protection for their basic human rights in this highly complex area of Government administration. There is no doubt that this protection has been delayed for too long.

This week, that situation was considerably rectified with the appointment of a Commonwealth Ombudsman. The Ombudsman, supported by two Deputy Ombudsmen, will be a powerful servant acting in the best interests of individuals. His duties are specific. Basically, he will be required to investigate complaints about administrative actions of Government officials. He will be mainly concerned by the way in which officials have handled the matter in question. He will be looking at alleged bias, neglect, delay, incompetence, or any other complaints that can be generally classified as bad administration. His powers will span any Commonwealth department, statutory authority or any other Commonwealth agency.

Under law, the Commonwealth Ombudsman will have the power to gain immediate access to documents or premises. He will be able to interview officials or anyone else who may be able to assist his enquiries. If the Ombudsman finds that some remedy is required to correct a wrong decision, he will make recommendations to the relevant department and to its Minister. If he then finds that corrective action has not been taken to his complete satisfaction, the Ombudsman has the power to report the matter directly to me as Prime Minister and to the Parliament. This means, of course, that in some cases the Prime Minister can, and will, intervene directly on behalf of the citizen.

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The strength of the Ombudsman's work lies in the independence and impartiality of his investigation. He is outside the influence and control of any Government department. His judgements are based solely on his own experience and capacity. Of course, the Ombudsman will be answerable directly to the people through the Federal Parliament. He will make an annual report to the Parliament and additional periodical reports as necessary.

The concept of an Ombudsman is not unique to Australia. It first emerged in the Scandinavian countries early in the 19th century. New Zealand appointed an Ombudsman in 1962 and the United Kingdom followed five years later. Six of the Canadian provinces have Ombudsmen. Today, five of the six Australian states have established the office in the last five years.

The appointment of a Commonwealth Ombudsman in Australia is an important step forward in enhancing human rights. It is in line with a number of other measures, such as the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, that have been taken by this Government to put people first and to protect basic individual rights.

We believe that people expect Governments to serve their interests, and not the contrary.

The appointment of a Commonwealth Ombudsman gives practical meaning to this philosophy. It again demonstrates our ability, and our record, of turning promise into achievement.

