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PRIME MINISTER

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ADDRESS AT THE CENTRAL METHODIST MISSION, SYDNEY

It is a great pleasure for me to be here and participate in your annual mission rally. I am particularly pleased to have this opportunity to applaud the work which your mission has been carrying out for the past 93 years, and for the innovations and ingenuity that the mission has demonstrated in caring for those in need in this city.

The life-line centre, established here in 1963, and subsequently emulated in many centres around the world, has given new hope to thousands.

The 23 homes, hospitals and service agencies which the mission manages throughout Sydney provide residential care for over a thousand people, and a wide variety of assistance to many others, every day and night of the year.

It is developments such as these - and I would add, the whole concept of operating a mission through a theatre - which effectively refute the suggestion that the Australian christian churches are moribund.

The Federal Government, this mission and the many other voluntary social welfare agencies in Australia, are partners in the task of providing effective and prompt help to the disadvantaged and underprivileged in our community.

Our roles are complementary. There are many areas in which government services can never match the service which voluntary agencies can provide. The large government bureaucracies that are associated with social welfare often cannot by their very nature have the flexibility to meet the needs of the poor and disadvantaged in a complex industrial society.

Their needs are not confined to material aid. Many people are most in need of warm and understanding advice how best to cope with the complexity of our society, to assist them in overcoming feelings of powerlessness in the face of large institutions.

The rules which regulate government organisations limit their ability to provide the personalised assistance necessary in coping with these problems. Government organisations can, because of their size and apparent impersonality actually heighten people's sense of their inability to cope.

The most personal assistance provided by voluntary organisations is essential in overcoming problems of this kind. The voluntary work which organisations such as your own undertake, has the enormous strength that it is undertaken out of a genuine and personal commitment to a cause, and no amount of money could buy the dedication and commitment which organisations such as this mission can mobilise.

We have sought to give maximum possible encouragement and assistance to voluntary agencies with their sense of commitment and sensitivity to each individual's problems. This mission, for example, has received capital grants of \$220,000 for two centres which assist handicapped persons - the Pinaroo Hostel and the David Morgan sheltered workshop - together with substantial annual subsidies towards staff salaries.

The Government has also paid over \$40,000 towards the running of the Francis Street hostel for homeless men, and has undertaken to grant over \$1 million for your exciting new venture - a centre for the homeless at Darlinghurst. This very week Departmental officers have been discussing with the mission details of the tenders received to build and equip the centre.

What we must strive to achieve is the most effective cooperation and interaction between us. We must also all be prepared to look at what our real objectives are and see that our programmes actually do serve their objectives, that they do assist those in need.

For a government department, or for a voluntary agency such a seemingly sensible and deceptively simple exercise is in a practice extremely difficult. There is a tendency for programmes to continue unchanged because they are there, we are used to them, continuation does not disturb vested interests nor disrupt established work-patterns.

Sometimes a programme plods on when, if subjected to impartial analysis, it should be changed, to ensure that those most in need get priority in assistance, and as the need of those the programme was designed to help, change. We have acted to redirect the thrust of a number of our programmes towards those most in need, and to ensure that such assistance actually reaches them.

In the area of children's services, the programmes of the previous government were primarily directed to funding pre-schools. Yet it was clear that the most urgent need of low income families was the provision of full day care for working mothers. The failure to provide such care is to allow many children to have unsuitable care while their mothers are at work - or no care at all.

Accordingly, we changed the direction of our programmes to give greater emphasis to the provision of full day care facilities.

In the provision of legal aid, we found that inadequate aid was being received by the poorest in our community. We acted to tighten the means test and redirect funds to those most in need of assistance. To ensure that this programme was fully effective, we increased total spending on legal aid by 23% this year.

We have also made many changes in the administration of the Department of Social Security to enable it to provide a more efficient and sensitive service to its clients. These changes particularly assisted those whose circumstances were such that they needed immediate payment of benefits, and those who had difficulty in obtaining benefits due to them, through problems of language.

It will sometimes be necessary for government to grasp the nettle and replace an entire programme by another more effective one. A classic example was the former system of providing tax deductions for dependent children. Such deductions could only be used by taxpayers who had sufficient income against which to set off the full deduction permitted. Significant numbers of the poorest in our community could not avail themselves of this subsidy. We acted to replace that system by a new programme of family allowances, under which cash payments are made directly to every mother in Australia. This has been of greater assistance to 300,000 poorer families with 800,000 children, including in particular many single parents, migrants and aboriginal families.

A further advantage of the family allowance scheme is that it gives the mother who receives the monthly cheque complete discretion how to use the funds provided. This increases her independence and her ability to make effective choices about the welfare of her family.

While making major changes we have also heeded the warning the Henderson Report offered Australian governments against: "Falling into the inflationary trap of attempting to carry out so many social reforms or other public expenditures at once that they accelerate an inflationary spiral that does more to damage poor people than the assistance provided by the reform."

We have also sought to continually review the manner in which social welfare programmes are carried out. In less enlightened days, many programmes for the poor, the sick and the homeless were well-intentioned but demeaning for the recipients. Doling out soup through an iron grille to homeless men may well have great merit in staving off starvation for those fed; a regular weekly hand out may provide the basic necessities; but neither in itself is sufficient to meet the needs of people for independence. What is required now are programmes which help to increase dignity and self-respect, which provide warm and relevant advice on how to become independent, not breed a debilitating dependence on those who provide the service.

Wherever necessary those benefitting from our programmes should have a choice in the way such benefits are used. Responsibility for the important decisions in an individual's life should be placed where it belongs - with that individual and not with any social welfare agency or government department.

It is often difficult to devise programmes which meet this objective. Governments must be prepared to experiment and exercise some ingenuity in finding a scheme that really works. I shall mention two such experimental programmes which we are presently in the course of trying out. We are at the moment preparing to launch "H.A.V.E." - the housing assistance voucher experiment. This programme will assist low income earners by paying to them, in cash, subsidies towards the cost of their family's accommodation. It is up to them how they use such subsidies - they may rent housing commission flats, or they may prefer private accommodation. The choice and the responsibility is left to the recipient.

Another experimental programme is our migrant resources centre in Melbourne. Instead of the government bureaucracy running the centre, we have contracted out this responsibility to a voluntary organisation, the Greek Welfare Society. Early indications are that the centre is working well and that some other ethnic groups see the centre as a possible model for their own operations.

Ladies and gentlemen, I believe that the cooperation of voluntary associations and government provides the best basis for providing a system of social welfare that meets the needs of contemporary society. The Government has shown its readiness to try new methods of tackling the constantly changing problems in our community. None of us can afford to oppose innovation and new ideas when existing programmes are not fulfilling their desired objectives. It has been a strength of this mission that you have shown a willingness continually to rethink the work you are performing. The steady stream of new proposals which the mission has devised in recent years, such as the new Darlinghurst Centre, provides ample evidence of this. Your willingness to adapt will again be put to the test next month when, as part of the new Uniting Church, the mission changes its name and coordinates its work even more closely with the activities of the many other agencies operated by the Uniting Church. For the past 20 years, your superintendent - Alan Walker - has led your mission through a difficult period to even greater strength and effectiveness. I congratulate him on his new appointment as Director of World Evangelism for the World Methodist Church, and I wish his successor every success - it will be a hard act to follow.