



**PRIME MINISTER**

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER  
OPENING OF ACA PREMISES - 30 MARCH 1984 - SYDNEY**

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Ladies and Gentlemen

It was with real pleasure that I accepted your invitation to participate in this official opening of the Australian Consumer Association's (ACA's) new building.

I have for a long time been impressed with ACA's contribution to the Australian consumer movement.

1984 has been something of a landmark year for the ACA. The ACA is celebrating its 25th anniversary and this year its magazine "Choice" passed the 200,000 subscription mark for the first time. This suggests the Association is regularly reaching at least a million readers and that its role in assisting people make informed purchasing decisions is widely appreciated.

No doubt these impressive new premises and laboratory facilities for testing products will enable ACA to further enhance the quality of its service to consumers.

But as you all know the ACA's role is wider than this.

The establishment in 1979 by ACA of a public affairs unit was an important extension of its activities beyond the traditional product testing role. The ACA has for some time also been very active in seeking to secure attention to consumer interests by Government decision-makers on a broad range of matters from health care to communications. This pressure from ACA was needed and has been effectively applied.

Partly as a result of such pressures Governments today are more sensitive to legitimate consumer concerns. The Australian Labor movement has for a long time shared those concerns and my Government rates them highly.

Indeed, in accord with the extensive commitments in the 1982 ALP policy platform, the Australian Labor Government is playing an active and innovative role in consumer affairs.

At a most fundamental level, and of particular interest to consumers, has been the fact that the Government has turned the economy on to a path of strong recovery. In doing so we have laid the basis for continued non-inflationary growth and increased employment opportunities in the medium and longer term. Particular priority has been given to restoring equality in Australia's social and economic fabric.

Central to our strategy has been the Prices and Incomes Accord which, as well as ushering in a new era of industrial harmony in Australia, has provided a firm underpinning to consumer confidence.

Our policies have helped to produce strong growth in private consumption expenditure. Coupled with strong public spending, rebuilding of stocks and our ability to export, private consumption has been a major element in turning the economy around and setting it on the path to sustained recovery.

The Government has also embarked on a course aimed at facilitating structural change as a means of enhancing the prospects of medium and longer term growth. Such change will bring with it increased employment and improved living standards. It should also benefit consumers directly. They will enjoy lower prices made possible by increased efficiency in Australian industry and by the reduced burden of supporting high cost industries.

The Government recognises that a closely focussed set of policy measures is also needed if more particular concerns associated with consumer welfare are adequately to be addressed. Accordingly the Australian Labor Government has moved rapidly to put the necessary policies into place.

The new Prices Surveillance Authority, which began operations on 19 March, will directly benefit consumers. The Authority has been developed as an important instrument of price restraint. The operations of the authority will involve monitoring and examining applications for price increases, and conducting inquiries into prices in particular areas.

It is not anticipated that the authority will need to monitor prices over a wide section of industry. The Government acknowledges and accepts that competitive markets provide the most effective defence against unwarranted price increases. The selection of goods and services subjected to surveillance will focus on areas where effective competitive disciplines are not present and where price or wage decisions have pervasive effects throughout the economy.

Another significant milestone for all Australian consumers is the Medicare Scheme introduced on 1 February.

Those who will gain most from the launch of Medicare are the two million Australians who up until now have not been eligible for Government health benefits, who have not been able to afford private health insurance, and who have had no protection against crippling medical and hospital bills.

With the introduction of Medicare, for the first time in many years, Australians are now able to face illness in the family in the sure knowledge that medical services and public hospital accommodation and treatment are theirs by right.

All Australians regardless of income are now entitled to Medicare benefits.

Nor shall we be deflected from this commitment by the current obstructionism of the doctors.

The Government is dedicated to the operation of an efficient, high standard health care system. We intend to provide this through Medicare at a cost that is affordable to the Australian people.

In this regard the Government simply cannot ignore questions such as the rapidly increasing cost of diagnostic services. Diagnostic service costs have increased 40% faster over the past four years than have costs of all other medical benefits. It is vital to the future of Medicare, and clearly in the patients' interests, that such cost increases be curbed. The Government is determined that they will be.

The Government also has a general responsibility to regulate the use of public health facilities for private profit, to ensure that exploitation of the providers of those facilities - the taxpayers - does not occur. It takes this responsibility most seriously.

Another major initiative of benefit to all Australians is the protection afforded by the recently passed Sex Discrimination Act. Protection is now guaranteed throughout Australia against discrimination on the grounds of sex, marital status or pregnancy in the provision of goods or services, in working facilities available, in accommodation and in the disposal of land. It is now, for example, unlawful to deny a loan to a woman because she is a woman or to refuse applications for emergency housing on the basis of the applicant's marital status. The Government has now ensured that those disadvantaged or alone at law have the full protection of the law.

The enactment of the Trade Practices Act in 1974 by the then Labor Government marked the major entry of the Commonwealth into consumer affairs.

This Government is committed to ensuring the Act continues to provide effective protection for consumers. To this end a draft amending bill was released for public comment on 21 February 1984.

The Government wants to obtain the views of consumer groups and other interested parties on the proposed amendments. Their views will be taken into account before amending legislation is introduced in the Parliament later this year.

The Government will continue to encourage and support the active enforcement of the Trade Practices Act by the Trade Practices Commission.

Under the previous Government the Commission was severely hampered in its enforcement activities by a ministerial direction which required the Commission to limit its consumer protection work to matters that raised issues of importance at the national level and which were brought to attention from outside the Commission. The Attorney-General has recently revoked this restrictive direction.

There has, as well, been a substantial increase in the number of prosecution proceedings instituted by the Commission under the consumer protection provisions of the Trade Practices Act during the past year. It has also been proposed that penalties for breaches of the Act be increased five-fold - an increase that would bring penalties to a level more likely to serve as a deterrent than was the case previously.

The Government is as well making useful progress in consultation with the States and Territories on the development of uniform consumer protection laws throughout Australia.

The Standing Committee of Commonwealth and State Consumer Affairs Ministers is actively pursuing this issue, and has established a special working party of officers to examine it. State ministers have asked the Commonwealth to consider a number of additional changes to the present Trade Practices Act which they consider would facilitate the achievement of uniformity by making the act a suitable basis for mirror legislation elsewhere in the Commonwealth. A list of these changes has been released for public comment.

Consumers also have a major interest in information relating to Government activities, programs and service. The Freedom of Information Act makes a substantial contribution to the evolution of open Government in Australia.

The legislation has been strengthened by amendments which came into force on 1 January 1984. Those amendments widen the scope of the Act as well as clarifying and improving its practical operation. They have also provided for researchers being given access to material ante-dating the original legislation. In this way we have given the Act a greater practical significance.

I understand that ACA has been active in stimulating public awareness of the rights of citizens under the new Act. In particular, ACA is to be congratulated on its work with the Public Interest Advocacy Centre in the development of a handbook to assist community groups in using the FOI legislation.

The Government has also moved quickly to legislate to protect consumers in other areas such as insurance.

Last year we introduced two Bills into Parliament - one to regulate the activities of Life and General Insurance Agents to strengthen the financial stability of the industry; the other to improve the information flow and general relationship between the insurer and the insured.

Public comment on the Bills is being analysed with a view to proceeding with the Bills in the Autumn Session of Parliament.

The Government is also committed to ensuring that the consumer voice will be heard and taken into account in Government decision-making.

The Australian Federation of Consumer Organisations (AFCO), of which ACA is a member, was established in 1974 with the sponsorship of the then Labor Government. AFCO receives considerable financial support from the Government to assist it in representing the consumer viewpoint to Government and in industry policy formulation and decision-making bodies.

The Government is appointing consumer representatives to appropriate advisory bodies. We have, for example, already appointed Dr John Braithwaite of AFCO to EPAC, our chief economic advisory council.

The new and expanded membership of the National Consumer Affairs Advisory Council was announced on 15 March. The Government expects the Council to play an increasing role in developing policy advice on consumer affairs matters.

By revitalising the National Consumer Affairs Advisory Council, which includes members from consumer organisations, business, trade unions and Government, we have provided a national focus for consumer interests. Through it we also hope to foster more effective and productive co-operation and liaison between business organisations and consumer groups on matters of consumer interest.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Work is underway in many other areas, including consumer education and information programs, product safety and recall procedures for hazardous products, uniformity of packaging and labelling and a national compensation scheme for loss or damage resulting from the collapse of a travel agency plus licensing legislation for travel agents.

Notwithstanding this, there is still much to be done to ensure that consumer concerns are addressed in a comprehensive and adequate manner.

The Government looks forward to meeting this challenge in co-operation with a strong consumer movement.

In this regard ACA has a particularly important role to play.

It is therefore with pleasure that I formally open this new building.

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