



PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
OPENING OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES COMMITTEE
CANBERRA - 15 FEBRUARY 1990**

First, let me welcome you and thank you for accepting my invitation to join Brian Howe, Neal Blewett and me here today.

There are few more important social issues than that which brings us together for this meeting. We are here to talk about our children and the future they face as we enter the 1990s.

I know all Australian Governments share the Commonwealth's fundamental goal that our children should grow up in a socially, financially and emotionally secure environment.

This is not simply a matter of natural concern for the next generation of Australians, though, of course, that would be motive and inspiration enough. Social justice for our children is also the best contribution we could possibly make towards a strong, compassionate, and productive Australia in the years to come.

The goal, then, is not in dispute. And, together, we have the capacity to make the goal a reality.

But vision and capacity are not enough. They must be focussed into well co-ordinated action.

So far, this Government has put its major efforts into ensuring that low income families with children have an adequate, guaranteed, basic income. We have achieved this by raising all children's payments to a benchmark of adequacy and then indexing them. The introduction of the Family Allowance Supplement has enabled us to meet those benchmarks. ~~Rent-assistance has also been substantially increased, and it too will be indexed from March next year.~~

These initiatives have, as you know, have been warmly welcomed by distinguished workers in the field, such as Bishop Peter Hollingworth and the Institute of Family Studies.

These fundamental reforms have been complemented by the introduction of the Child Support Scheme - itself an example of the States and the Commonwealth working together to improve the lot of Australian children. Thanks to our joint efforts we have gone from a situation where 70 per cent of non-custodial parents paid no maintenance to one in which 70 per cent of Child Support Agency orders are complied with.

Last April we introduced a \$550 million family package that increased Family Allowance Supplement and Family Allowance payments enabling us to meet in full and indeed exceed, the benchmarks of adequacy we set ourselves in 1987. Moreover we have indexed these payments to ensure the benchmark payments are maintained over time.

Our last Federal budget contained a \$100m package to provide co-ordinated help to disadvantaged young people. This included: longer term accommodation; expanded labour market assistance; help in staying on at school; health services in high risk locations and improved access to information and services.

The measure of our total commitment as a Commonwealth is that we now spend \$3.5 billion on family payments compared to the \$1.7 billion being paid in 1982-83. By any standards that is an unprecedented achievement.

It's relevant, too, to consider improvement in the broader economy. Providing jobs attacks the greatest single source of poverty, so our creation of 1.6 million new jobs, and the opening up of these jobs to disadvantaged groups through schemes such as JET and NEWSTART, has greatly reduced the extent and impact of poverty and hardship in this country.

Backing these measures is a whole range of services for children for which the Commonwealth has either sole responsibility or shared responsibility with the States. These services, which include income support, education, training and employment, health and housing, are documented in the yellow booklet which has been provided to you all.

And it is clear that the States also put many resources into programs for children, both together with the Commonwealth and independently. I fully acknowledge your contribution - a vital contribution under our Federal system. I'd like to thank you also for responding so thoroughly and promptly to our request for documentation on your programs. Your response is yet another indication of our common sense of purpose and is, I hope, a portent of our fruitful co-operation on this issue in the future.

This is not an issue that need divide the Commonwealth and the States and Territories. It is one which can and must transcend differences in the party political complexion of respective Governments.

The challenge for the future is to make sure that the services we are all providing for Australia's children are delivered to them in the most efficient and effective way possible. I have said on a number of occasions that our achievements to date are no justification for complacency, in what is a critical area - one in which hardship still persists.

What this means, in part, is making sure that children in need do not slip through the safety net that we jointly provide. Our services must reach the right people, at the right time, in the right place, and with the right back-up.

I have commented before that anyone who visits the outer fringes of our larger cities or our provincial towns must confront and recognise the special problems caused by social isolation.

It may be difficult to get to and from work, or to find adequate child care so parents can return to work, or to have a basic choice of schooling, or to ensure kids are cared for after school, or to get special services for drug dependency or alcoholism or marriage counselling or managing the family budget.

These difficulties can put special pressure on families - pressures with which some families simply can't cope.

It's not a question of providing some specific new program to deal with a problem at crisis point.

It's a matter of ensuring that families and children get the help they need before the crisis point - before problems are too deeply entrenched.

It's a matter of finding an approach that, as I have said, recognises the potential vulnerability of families throughout the life cycle - marriage and the potential for breaking up; birth and child care; work and the possibility of injury or the threat of redundancy.

It is the analysis and achievement of this large goal that is the task of this committee.

Because a comprehensive approach must include the participation of all levels of government. Whether the help gets through to the children at risk in the most efficient and effective manner often depends on people and organisations at the State level.

And let's remember this fact. Understandably, families and children in need of counselling, health services, legal aid, emergency accommodation, child care, emergency financial assistance, or any other kind of help - these families and children are unlikely to care which tier of government has the responsibility to provide such services. They expect us to work that out ourselves, and to work together. And they are right.

The real task is to do everything in our power to co-ordinate the delivery of those services; the division of responsibility behind the scenes should still present just one face to the family in need; and it should be a caring and efficient face.

There is a growing feeling that together we've got the basic building blocks in position. It would be nothing short of a tragedy if we still failed some children because we did not take the time, effort and imagination to sit down together and co-ordinate the delivery of our considerable joint resources.

It's not for me to foreshadow the detail of the work this committee has in front of it and I am not here today to announce new Commonwealth initiatives, although I do assure you that we are never going to be content just to sit pat; we will always have under review what we are doing and whether we can do it better or do more.

This meeting today is not an end in itself, but the beginning of a process of hard but immensely practical and rewarding work. We've already made a good start in documenting what we do for children right now. I hope that your discussions today will identify areas of concern where our combined efforts can have an impact in the future.

This committee is an important step towards a vital goal for all of us. Over the coming months I look forward to seeing the results of today's meeting and of future consultations. I am confident they will be worth the effort and pledge that my Government will attach high priority to considering your recommendations and to responding as positively as we can to them. I pledge my own continuing personal interest and involvement in the effort.
