



**PRIME MINISTER**

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER  
ACCEPTANCE OF BROTHERHOOD OF ST LAURENCE  
CHILD POVERTY POSTCARDS  
PARLIAMENT HOUSE - 22 JUNE 1990**

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Archbishop Hollingworth  
Dr Hewson and other Parliamentary colleagues  
Ladies and gentlemen  
and, in particular, children of Canberra  
representing the children of Australia

Thank you for these postcards and thank you more importantly for the concern and the commitment that they represent: your concern about the plight of Australian families and Australian children who are living in hardship, and your commitment to do something positive to remedy that plight.

Your action demonstrates that Australians do care about those in our community who have less, and are prepared to speak out for those whose own voice is muffled by disadvantage. For that, you deserve the respect and gratitude of us all.

As Archbishop Hollingworth has noted, my Government has placed great emphasis on improving the financial situation of families with children

- . we have raised all children's payments to a benchmark of adequacy and we have indexed them
- . we have substantially increased rent assistance and from March 1991 it will be indexed
- . we have introduced the Child Support Scheme
- . we have introduced a \$100 million package of help for disadvantaged young people, particularly the homeless.

And we have recognised too, that the causes of poverty are complex and that breaking the poverty cycle involves more than income support.

The most effective means of overcoming poverty is of course through employment. Our record of job creation is second to none. Some 1.6 million Australians have found jobs since 1983. Some of these are disadvantaged people who have found work through programs like JET and NEWSTART.

We have dramatically expanded the quality and quantity of opportunities for education and training.

For families to take advantage of employment and training opportunities, access to affordable quality child care is crucial. We are working to create more than a quarter of a million places by 1996 - and to ensure, through better fee relief levels, improved access to these places.

Having achieved greatly improved income support, job opportunities, training and education chances for disadvantaged groups in our society, we are now investigating how to carry the fight for social justice into new arenas.

For example, we have announced the National Housing Strategy so that, together with the States, we can look further into the housing needs of Australians and determining how these can best be met.

We have also announced a major review of health policy within the Medicare framework designed to put in place a national health strategy for the twenty-first century.

Also in pursuit of these new approaches to social justice I invited the Premiers and Chief Ministers last December to participate in a Commonwealth/State Ministerial Committee on Services for Disadvantaged Children and Families. The intended objective of that Committee is for the States and the Commonwealth to improve the co-ordination of services that we provide to disadvantaged children and families so that these people get a better deal.

As the Brotherhood and the Councils of Social Service have also realised, many families suffer disadvantage simply because they live in places where fewer services are available - such as on the outer fringes of our major cities and provincial towns, or in remote parts of Australia.

Part of the solution to this problem lies in the better coordination and allocation of services.

As I said at the opening of the Committee's first meeting: from the point of view of the family in need, working out which tier of Government has the responsibility of providing the services is less important than ensuring that the appropriate services are delivered, to those who need them.

The Committee's work so far has borne out that fundamental truth.

The first step the Commonwealth has taken is to try to establish with the States a genuine exchange of information and views on what services are currently provided and how best they can be integrated and improved.

I can assure you my Government is committed to action. We very much want to see results.

But I think it's appropriate in this gathering, where the focus is on the Federal sphere, to remember that the States also have a vital role to play. They too need to demonstrate their full commitment to the work of the Committee.

In particular, their strong commitment is needed to collecting and exchanging better information than available to date on the location of their services and the scope for better integration before real progress can be made.

On the special needs of Aboriginal children, funds and co-ordination are of course necessary. However, as the Brotherhood has pointed out, Aboriginal people themselves must have an opportunity to develop and implement solutions to their own problems. The context of their poverty - the dispossession and oppression suffered by generations of Aboriginal people - must be addressed. Through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and the promotion of a process of reconciliation, the Government is attempting to give Aboriginal people the self-management and self-respect necessary to overcome the fundamental causes of Aboriginal child poverty.

Let me conclude with a more general point about the motivation of politicians and the rationale of social justice programs such as we are discussing today.

It's very easy to adopt a fashionable cynicism about politicians and assume that they will only do something if they're pushed into it. That's an attitude that I see underlies these postcards, where you make the claim that "all politicians will only do something about [child poverty] if they feel they have to. At election time, for instance ...".

Let me say, quite deliberately, I think that is a cheap shot. It may make you feel good - quite simply it is a false statement.

I can tell you: That's not my attitude to social justice; it's not my attitude to what politics is about.

I think any closer analysis of the new services we have delivered to disadvantaged Australians would show they haven't been based on a judgment that there may be votes in them. Instead, they have been part of an overall strategy of change based on a fundamental analysis of who really is in need in this community.

The reason we can afford to spend more money on the less well off is, by and large, because we decided to spend less money on those who are better off. That has meant taking benefits away from people and levying new taxes on those who hadn't been paying their fair share. In other words, we've made some tough decisions - some unpopular decisions - decisions that cost us votes at election time. I ask you to recall the virulent campaigns waged against us on the assets test, the fringe benefits tax and the capital gains tax. But we made those decisions because they were the right decisions to make. I think at the end of the day you would agree that is a far better rationale for decision making than any knee-jerk responsiveness to a lobbying campaign, whether expressed through postcards or by any other means.

So my Government has worked, and will continue to work, to improve the circumstances of the disadvantaged in our community. We cannot do it single-handed. The contribution made by the many community organisations, notable among them the Brotherhood of St Laurence, and the Councils of Social Service is crucial. I commend your work and wish you continued success.

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