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## PRIME MINISTER

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**PRIME MINISTER'S OPENING STATEMENT  
SPECIAL PREMIERS' CONFERENCE  
BRISBANE - 30 OCTOBER 1990**

At the outset, let me thank each of you for the very positive way in which you have responded to the call I made in July for a new approach and a new process to achieve a closer partnership within our Federal Constitution.

Your positive response - as individuals and as leaders of your Governments - is the key element, the vital spark, in giving life and direction to the historic process we are inaugurating together today.

The contacts I have had with each of you in recent weeks, parallel with the preparatory work of our officials, and your response, encourage me immensely.

Our agreed goal can be simply stated - in this last decade of the first century of the Australian Federation, to make the Federation work better.

I believe we are agreed that the purpose of setting such a goal is to improve our national efficiency and international competitiveness and to improve the delivery and quality of the services we provide as governments for the people of Australia.

And we are agreed, I believe, that our first task is to move by sensible, practical, achievable steps to get better co-operation within the existing framework of the Federal Constitution.

Those means and ends are easily enough stated.

Yet we know from the experience of ninety years how hard it is to achieve even modest change and reform - and I speak here not of the Constitution itself, but of change and reform in the way we do things, the way we govern ourselves under our Federal system.

But your response so far convinces me that never has the time been so propitious - as indeed, it has never been so urgent and compelling - for a new effort, a new approach and a new spirit of co-operation.

An important objective for this first special Conference is to reach broad agreement on a set of principles, as a clear guide for future action in the key areas under review.

Those areas which we are looking at today cover the full range of inter-governmental relationships: the general financial arrangements; tied grants; micro-economic reform; duplication of services; the environment; and industrial relations.

To set principles and clear courses for action over such a breadth of areas in itself is a major challenge for this Conference.

It would mean a very serious resolve and very substantial commitment by us all - on behalf of our respective governments, and on our own behalf as the elected leaders of this nation.

In the Commonwealth's case, the adoption of the principles before us would in some areas involve an historic change of course in the way the Federal system has developed over the last ninety years.

One such instance is the matter of tied grants. The commitment I am prepared to make on the Commonwealth's behalf to work with the States towards a substantial reduction in tied grants represents a fundamental shift in direction. But we are prepared to make this commitment as an earnest of our determination to work genuinely and sincerely with the States to create a closer federal partnership.

I cannot emphasise too strongly the need for us all to move our thinking beyond old fixed ideas of centralism or State rights - of the Commonwealth versus the States. I believe the people we represent expect us to rise above that. The guiding test for everything we do here should be: what is best for all our citizens, our fellow Australians.

Our officials have worked hard to prepare the ground for this meeting.

But officials can advance the work only so far.

This Conference is the critical stage in the process - the catalyst for change.

We alone, as the elected leaders, as the responsible heads of government, can make the commitment - the commitment of personal and political will - to create, guide and invigorate the process towards a better, more effective, Federal system and through it, a better Australia. If we now make that commitment - and I do so unequivocally - then I am convinced we will be able to meet the just expectations of the people we have the privilege to represent, not just for the two days of this Conference, but for this crucial decade in the history of Australia.

I look forward to a co-operative approach from all of us in this first meeting and in the work ahead.

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