

**SPEECH NOTES FOR  
SENATOR THE HON JOCELYN NEWMAN  
MINISTER FOR FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SERVICES**

**NATIONAL HOUSING CONFERENCE  
STADIUM AUSTRALIA, SYDNEY  
7.00PM, MONDAY 29 NOVEMBER 1999**

## **Introduction**

Thank you *Adam (Farrar)*. I'm delighted to be here tonight to speak at your conference dinner. This is the second time I have been to this spectacular Stadium. And I think everyone who comes to the Olympics - spectators and athletes alike - will really enjoy all the magnificent facilities provided here.

I understand you have already had a very busy day looking at those housing issues that centre on the conference themes of reform and renewal in social housing and its response to social exclusion. And I know you have another full day tomorrow. But I look forward to hearing about the outcomes of your discussions because I think we, in government, will find these very useful when it comes to shaping our future housing policies.

I must say how impressed I am to see such a large gathering of housing sector experts, with different backgrounds and political persuasions, from right across Australia and from overseas. And I want to particularly welcome our international guests - Mavis McDonald, Professor Chris Paris, Professor John Quigley, Bill Payne and Jim Carr -who have all travelled quite some distance to share with you their knowledge and experience of the British and American social housing systems.

As well, I want to thank the conference sponsors for their generosity, including the Macquarie Bank, Firstsoftware, the New South Wales Department of Housing and, of course, the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, or AHURI (*pronounced a-hoor-ie*). I am also pleased my own Department of Family and Community Services could make a substantial contribution towards this event.

In essence, this combination of sponsors represents a very good example of the partnerships, or social coalitions, that the Prime Minister often talks about. We believe partnerships between different levels of government and the private sector, for instance, can make a positive difference to the health

and well-being of our communities, and in this case, to the area of social housing.

### **The importance of housing**

The Howard Government places a great deal of importance on its housing responsibilities. Most of you would know that, under the federal system, the States and Territories share responsibility for housing with the Commonwealth. And as the federal Minister for Family and Community Services, I see housing as one of the most stimulating and challenging areas of my ministerial portfolio.

After all, housing is an issue that affects the lives of all Australians. And it is fundamental to a decent standard of living that all governments should provide healthy and safe housing for our citizens.

### **A strong economy**

Of course, we cannot deliver on this unless we maintain a strong economy. The health of the housing sector goes hand in hand with how well our economy is performing. The bottom line of housing sustainability and equity in Australia is absolutely dependent on economic realities.

Since coming to office, we have followed a course of responsible economic management. The reality today is the economy is well placed for continued investment and economic growth. We have record low inflation. Unemployment levels are well down. And this is all the more remarkable when you consider the effects of the Asian crisis.

Importantly for the housing sector, official and business lending rates have declined dramatically. Families are now paying around \$300 a month less on a typical \$100,000 mortgage. This is all good news for home-owners, home buyers and investors alike.

### **Tax reform**

Against this background of strong economic growth, the new tax changes will provide \$12 billion a year in personal income tax cuts, particularly for low and middle families. And, as part of the simplification of family support, about \$2.5 billion is also being provided to fund generous increases in assistance.

Many families will also benefit from the 4 per cent increase to social security payments and the 7 per cent increase to the maximum rate of Rent Assistance from 1 July 2000. In all, the Commonwealth pays around \$1.5 billion each year on Rent Assistance to help low income households renting privately or living in community housing.

It's these economic realities and the extra support we give to people in need that make housing affordable for most Australians. For many, we have restored home ownership as a real choice. But we all understand not everyone can afford to buy their own homes. And, unfortunately, some do not have the resources to pay private rents. I'm sure most of you here tonight would agree, as a society, we have an obligation to provide decent housing for these disadvantaged people – and especially for people at risk.

## **Responding to social exclusion – early intervention and prevention**

There's no question that many Australians are experiencing the kinds of multiple disadvantages that lead to social exclusion. For many, this means isolation and marginalisation in their own communities. In turn, their health suffers, they have fewer housing options, their connection with the workforce is lost and families breakdown.

No doubt over the course of this conference there will be debate about what we mean by this term 'social exclusion', what it means in Australian terms and what the research and experience in this area tells us is the best way forward. And certainly, there'll be a whole range of views about the role of social housing in responding to social exclusion.

In the broader context, the Government's response to social exclusion is mirrored right across our social policy-making. While we will always provide social safety net payments for people in immediate and urgent need, I think governments also have an obligation to help prevent family and community crises happening in the first place – to help equip people with the resilience and skills to help them through difficult times.

We have committed many millions of dollars – unprecedented amounts – on early intervention and prevention programs designed to help prevent family break-ups, domestic violence, drug abuse, suicide, child abuse, crime and homelessness – particularly youth homelessness. This overall focus on assistance at an early stage, is supported across the political spectrum and accepted by most experts as a sound investment in the future of any country.

## **Strengthening communities**

In Australia, we are seeing pockets of disadvantage and social exclusion in the midst of plenty. Increasingly, it seems that the circumstances and opportunities for individuals and communities can be very strongly affected by geography. We know about this in relation to rural and regional

communities, and we can also see this in areas in the centre of capital cities where high levels of social disadvantage seem to be concentrated.

To address these problems, we want to develop strong communities, with all the players, such as businesses, charities, community organisations and all levels of government, working in partnerships, together with strong networks between families and communities. These strong communities have a much better chance than weaker communities of dealing with the worst effects of social and economic dislocation. And solutions, including housing solutions, which come from the ground up and from communities themselves, are among the most successful in making permanent change.

Where families are apart or divided, for whatever reason, community support becomes even more critical. Linking families and communities is integral to strengthening both. Building community spirit and community capacity is important. Many country towns, regional centres and suburban neighbourhoods have a powerful sense of community spirit, but facilities, services and community resources are sometimes inadequate.

The Government's new Stronger Communities Strategy, which I outlined at the Regional Australia summit in Canberra last month, will look at ways to strengthen and nurture disadvantaged communities, particularly in regional and rural areas. The cornerstone of our approach is a belief in the ability of people – local citizens, local leaders, and local ideas – who, with the right support, can help make Australian communities stronger.

Turning now to some of the Commonwealth programs that specifically relate to housing renewal and reform.

### **Indigenous housing**

In our community, it is Indigenous people who perhaps suffer the most disadvantage. The sad fact is, many Indigenous people do not enjoy the same essential services and housing standards that the rest of us take for

granted. From the city to the bush, many Indigenous people live in appalling conditions, conditions which contribute directly to social exclusion. This situation is absolutely unacceptable in modern Australian society.

While the Commonwealth does not have principal responsibility for housing, we're determined to do what we can to turn this situation around. Each year, we allocate grants of around \$91 million to the States and Territories through the Aboriginal Rental Housing Program. There are also community housing and infrastructure funds of around \$230 million from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. And the States put in around \$55 million a year. All of this funding is specifically targeted to improving Indigenous housing. But, I think you would all agree that money is not the whole answer.

One new element that I am promoting is the development of a National Framework for the Design, Construction, and Maintenance of Indigenous Housing. This includes a set of guiding principles, the States' and Territories' own standards specific to Indigenous housing in remote communities, and a practical manual - *The National Indigenous Housing Guide* - for improving basic necessities, such as water and waste removal and electricity supply.

In practical terms, we want to ensure, for instance, that Aboriginal mothers have hot water to wash their children, their clothes and their cooking utensils. I also want to see that their drains and toilets work properly. So, I'm very keen to get the National Framework officially endorsed by Housing Ministers.

### **Commonwealth/State Housing Agreement**

As many of you would know, the Commonwealth also recently negotiated a new Housing Agreement with the States and Territories, which will run to the year 2003. Under this agreement the Commonwealth's contribution is

\$4 billion over the next four years. This brings funding certainty for public and community housing, as well as other housing-related services.

But this agreement differs from previous Commonwealth/State Housing Agreements in a number of ways. When we talk about housing, we're not just concerned with bricks and mortar. We have to remember that people in Australia continue to have a myriad of different housing needs.

In recognition of these and the geographic differences I mentioned earlier, we are planning to sign individual, bilateral agreements with each State and Territory. These will take account of their distinct housing needs. For example, the housing needs of people living in the Northern Territory are not the same as people living in New South Wales.

We are moving away from the 'one size fits all' umbrella agreements of the past. Although we will still have a multilateral Commonwealth/State Housing Agreement, each bilateral agreement with the States will outline an approach to reforming and renewing the social housing consistent with particular client needs, housing stocks and local conditions. They will also include performance, outcome and evaluation measures, and include a requirement to show how housing assistance has contributed to building communities. We expect these documents to be forward-looking and flexible and to give each State and Territory better capacities to adapt their housing programs to local needs and circumstances.

In the area of public housing, some State housing authorities are already making changes that will improve their capacities to better target public housing to the most disadvantaged. This includes tightening income and asset eligibility rules and developing new waiting list procedures. Housing tenure will, also, increasingly be provided for the duration of people's need rather than for their lifetime. These changes are designed to give the homeless, and those in greatest housing need, faster access to public housing.

## **Community Housing**

The other important area of Commonwealth interest involves the development of community housing and I am an enthusiastic advocate of the benefits it brings.

One of the great values of community housing is its web of networks across the community. It links and intertwines housing needs with other community services and support.

You might be familiar with some of the community housing initiatives supported by my department. These include more training and the development of competency standards for community housing workers, encouraging private sector investment in community housing and commissioning housing research and surveys.

We also fund innovative community housing ventures and, as the Minister, I'm asked to launch many of these. Good examples include the two 'Habitat for Humanity' sweat equity projects in Victoria and a joint project between the ACT Government and Community Housing Canberra to redevelop a site with a mix of public, community, privately-owned and private rental housing.

I believe that, in future, the continuing growth of community housing has the potential to offer a real alternative to public housing and private rental. It has a unique emphasis on tenant participation, usually people on low incomes. Community housing gives people the chance to take greater personal responsibility for their own housing.

In my view, this responsibility is akin to the responsibility of home ownership. It reflects the philosophy of self-help, one of the cornerstones of community housing. As well, community housing involves self-governance,

where people can make their own decisions about the environment in which they live.

## **Conclusion**

Thank you once again for inviting me to speak at your dinner tonight.

There are lots of good news stories about housing that I am sure you will share over these two days – about local efforts to improve housing estates and to set up better links between housing and other welfare services. Best of all, though, is how all this makes clear differences to the quality of peoples' lives and their communities.

Clearly, people's health and well-being are inextricably linked to the quality of the housing in which they live. Housing is not just a roof over our heads - where we live must also be safe and healthy. Together, we must find new ways to bring healthy housing, and dignified living, to those most disadvantaged amongst us.

These are just some of the issues you'll be examining at this conference. I wish you well in your deliberations.

Thank you.

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