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DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER**

Minister for Education
Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations
Minister for Social Inclusion

SPEECH

*****CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*****

ADDRESS TO THE SOCIAL INCLUSION CONFERENCE

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Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet – the Kulin Nations – and, in a spirit of reconciliation, pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Thank you for your warm welcome – and let me in return thank you for attending this important conference.

It is a conference with a full program and with much to discuss.

I am delighted to welcome our international expert guests as well as the many other speakers, practitioners and participants to Melbourne.

Let me acknowledge my parliamentary colleague Senator Ursula Stephens as well as Jenny Macklin, who spoke this morning.

Let me also thank Patricia Faulkner, David Cappo and all the members of the Australian Social Inclusion Board for their presence here and their ongoing hard work on this agenda.

Today marks an important moment in that national agenda. The publication of the Australian Government's statement: A Stronger, Fairer Australia.

As the Prime Minister said this Australia day, our national spirit is built on the idea of a fair go for all and the power of each individual to make their own story.

There are many people here today who have dedicated their lives to that proposition.

We are here today to reaffirm it and to examine the ways that it can be given practical expression.

SOCIAL INCLUSION

When I was sworn in as Deputy Prime Minister, being the first Minister for Social Inclusion was an important part of my portfolio responsibilities.

For some, the language was new.

But the core value behind the words is as old as our community. It is that in a strong and fair nation, nobody is left behind.

A recognition that everybody shares the responsibility to maintain that fairness. To give others a fair go.

To seize opportunities when they arise.

And to share the cost and the work of supporting those who are most at risk and most disadvantaged in our society.

Our commitment to social inclusion may be expressed in new ways.

But it is driven by a passion that runs like a thread through the history of progressive reform in Australia.

By an indignation at the exclusion and loss of hope experienced by too many Australians, including indigenous Australians.

And by a determination to build communities in which every individual can develop themselves and play their full part.

That determination – to build a stronger, fairer nation - is the foundation of our Government.

Indeed, it is the reason I joined the Labor Party.

It is the reason I stand before you today and I dare say it is the reason why we are all in this room.

And so allow me to speak about how this fundamental belief informs our policies now and into the future.

GENERATIONAL CHALLENGE

My argument is that in every era, for each generation, this challenge arises anew.

It is a challenge framed by the impact of economic change.

But it also defines some of the central social and moral questions of our time.

Questions that require fresh answers and discomfort all of us by testing some deeply-held assumptions.

When we were elected, our commitment to social inclusion was driven by the reality that, through a decade of economic growth, too many Australians were being left behind.

We all lived through a period in which, though the economy grew, not all Australians benefitted.

Our predecessors failed to invest in the services that help people to recover from adversity, in the infrastructure that maintains opportunity and decent living standards, in the skills and abilities that prevent the growth of long term disadvantage.

The extraordinary resources flowing through our economy from the resources boom were not invested wisely in renewing the foundations of strong, fair communities.

Too many Australians felt that, as a community, we were losing touch with fairness.

That growing feeling contributed to the change of federal government in 2007.

We came to government two years ago committed to delivering today for all Australians and to investing in our future as a nation.

Of course, during that time, Australia has faced the greatest economic challenge since the Great Depression.

The Global Economic Recession threatened to undo the prosperity and security of millions of Australians. Those most directly affected were those already facing greatest hardship.

You can see its terrible effects in the experiences of other nations around the world. In the US, where the unemployment rate stands above 10 per cent. In the UK, where GDP shrank by 4.8 per cent during 2009.

Meeting this threat on behalf of the entire Australian community meant that we, as a Government, had to act boldly.

And our actions reflect the commitment that we have had since day one.

The largest ever single investment in social housing

A Jobs and Training Compact to give immediate help to the communities, workers and young people hit hardest by rising unemployment.

Temporary Financial Assistance and a doubling of Emergency Relief.

FACING THE NEXT CHALLENGE

Now at the beginning of a new year and a new decade, we continue to deliver today while addressing the long term challenges of building our nation in the 21st century.

Challenges framed by change in our population, in our economy, in our communities.

The challenge of an ageing population, with rising health costs and growing dependency ratios.

The challenge of a knowledge-driven, intensely competitive international economy, where opportunity is tied to knowledge, skills and connection through global networks.

The challenge of adaptation to climate change and a carbon-constrained economy.

The Prime Minister has been addressing these challenges over the last week.

And among them he identified the importance of building a society in which every Australian, whoever they are and wherever they are, has the opportunity to participate, to make something of themselves and to contribute to the life of their community.

A STRONGER, FAIRER AUSTRALIA

That is why we have developed this framework for building a stronger, fairer Australia.

It is about recognising the impact that disadvantage has on the lives and the life chances of so many Australians.

But it is also about facing the fact that disadvantage is caused, and perpetuated, by more than a lack of income, important though that is.

It is about the growth of chronic health conditions which are fuelled by dysfunctional behaviour.

It is about families in which abuse and neglect blight the lives of children and perpetuate a cycle of intergenerational suffering.

And it is about the importance of inner discipline – about the shaping of character and the taking of personal responsibility and their role in building worthwhile, fulfilling lives.

So, although the language may be unfamiliar for some, that is why our Social Inclusion statement defines a new approach to confronting these problems.

An approach which asserts that nobody should be left behind.

An approach which acknowledges the difficulty and the complexity of entrenched disadvantage.

An approach which names capability and responsibility alongside the need for new opportunities and resources.

The priorities for action that we outline in this statement are about targeting the problem as it is experienced by Australians, not just working within the silos of government.

They are about reducing disadvantage now and about working to break the cycle of disadvantage so that over time our resources are committed to preventing problems and expanding opportunities.

Jenny Macklin has already spoken about some of this action and the work to be done this year – the challenge of closing the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. Of reducing homelessness. Of supporting those who live with disability and mental illness to make their full contribution.

I want to touch on three specific areas that illustrate the progress we can aspire to.

JOBLESS FAMILIES

The first is those families with children where no adult is in work.

15 per cent of families with children under 15 are in this situation. This number fell during past years, but it has risen as the effects of the Global Economic Recession have washed through Australia.

In October 2009 there were more than 235,000 Australian families with children where the parents had not had a job for at least a year. For more than 126,000, the parents had no earnings for at least the last three years.

This is not a situation that we, as a community, should find either acceptable or inevitable. We can continue to respect the choice that many parents make while their children are young not to seek paid work, and at the same time recognise that prolonged periods outside the labour market, for parents of children who also rely on income support, increase the risks of long term exclusion for both parents and children.

Parents in these jobless families are less likely than others to have completed year 12, to report good health, to have access to transport options and to participate in local community activities.

Children who, at the age of 14, had both parents out of work were 1.8 times more likely to be out of work as adults compared to those who had a working parent.

So as our economy recovers, we should confront the barriers that prevent parents in jobless families from taking meaningful opportunities to work *and* from supporting their children's development more positively and more effectively.

Our measures so far include the reshaping of Employment Services to provide more intensive support and more flexible options for jobseekers, especially those who are battling against several forms of disadvantage.

It includes massive investment in childcare, to lift the quality and the accessibility of places and to make childcare more affordable for all.

And it includes the introduction of Australia's first paid parental leave scheme, to guarantee working parents support during those crucial first weeks after childcare and to encourage their participation in the workforce.

And for those families where the barriers remain too high, we are investing in innovation. Through the Family Centred Employment Project, we are testing new approaches, working with jobless families in three disadvantaged local communities (Broadmeadows in Victoria, Mansfield Park in South Australia and Goodna in Queensland) to find how best to combine support for individual families in genuinely personalised ways.

In some families, stabilising the family routine and dealing with situations like family conflict, lack of basic literacy and numeracy, insecure housing or health problems may be the key to successfully participating in training or work.

We are also working with the South Australian Government, through their Building Family Opportunities program in Port Augusta, Playford and Port Adelaide, to find out how service providers and local community organisations can work better together.

We won't find a solution for all, but we can make progress to providing genuinely personalised support and learn the lessons for future reform.

IMPROVING THE LIFE CHANCES OF CHILDREN AT RISK OF DISADVANTAGE

Our focus on jobless families is strongly connected to our commitment to improve the life chances of children most at risk of disadvantage.

Those children who, because of hardship or adversity, abuse or neglect, through being born in the wrong postcode or missing out on a great education, are at most risk of exclusion from the opportunities to work, learn and make their own voices heard in later life.

Perhaps this is the starkest illustration of how income poverty is just one powerful risk factor in creating future disadvantage.

We know that social influences, family relationships and cultural factors all play their part.

We know that children from families with three or more disadvantages are likely to be in the bottom fifteen per cent of learning outcomes at age 5.

We know that child protection notifications continue to rise at an alarming rate and that an estimated quarter of a million Australian children are living with family violence.

And we know, from the more recent scientific evidence, just how influential the early years of child development are for setting the future life course.

Not that each individual's fate is determined before they start school, but that the opportunities for positive influence, for developing resilience and for making investments with long term return are there to be taken in the early years.

And we have already begun to act to turn this tide.

For me, the central element of this long term strategy must be education. Gaining access to a first class education, from the early years through to the transition to adulthood, is the platform that will support all of our children to thrive.

That is why we are driving transformational change in our education system.

Guaranteeing universal access to a year of high quality pre-school.

Building children and family centres in the communities where they can make greatest difference.

Implementing the Australian Early Years Development Index to highlight just how well or badly children are faring as they enter school, in every Australian community.

And reforming to make sure that background and income do not act as barriers to educational opportunity, that every school and every school system is accountable for offering each student the support they need in order to thrive and to excel.

Our National Partnership for Disadvantaged School Communities is delivering \$1.5 billion over 7 years to lift achievement in 1500 schools around the nation.

We are working with every jurisdiction to deliver an Indigenous Education Action Plan that will focus on the attainment and the progress of indigenous students in every community.

And, with Jenny Macklin's leadership, we are reshaping family and children's services to build more effective partnerships linking governments, community organisations, health, social and education services in local communities.

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF LOCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

Finally, we know that the clustering of risk and disadvantage does not just occur around particular groups of people, but in particular places.

One of our great challenges, particularly in a country as vast and varied as Australia, is to build the infrastructure and the capabilities that enable every community to thrive, that avoids some becoming the casualties of global economic change.

The unemployment rates show it

The Australian Early Development Index shows it.

The health and disability statistics show it.

The crime and imprisonment rates show it.

The child protection notifications show it.

Some neighbourhoods, some communities, are disadvantaged by virtue of distance, making it that much harder and more expensive to deliver the infrastructure and services that support participation.

But this is not just about the geographical distribution of funding and physical facilities.

As a community we are also responsible for the concentration of social risks and the damage that, left unchecked, they will do to future generations and to our long term prosperity.

So once again, we have started to deliver.

We have created Priority Employment Regions, with dedicated coordinators, around Australia to help battle the effects of the international downturn on those areas where unemployment and its associated risks are already high.

We have initiated Remote Service Delivery pilots, to focus on integrating and aligning the investment made across Commonwealth agencies and other governments so that separate strategies can become more than the sum of their parts.

And we have begun working with the States and Territories on a national action plan to examine how, together, we can build the governance and investment that will help to break the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage and building stronger, fairer communities that can support individual opportunity while sharing collective responsibility for the future.

CONCLUSION: THE LONG ROAD AHEAD

All of this is hard work. I would not pretend otherwise.

In some of these areas, we have moved further and faster than anyone could have predicted two years ago.

In others, we have barely begun to make an impression.

We should not expect that the solutions will be straightforward or that progress will be any less hard fought in the future.

But I believe we have good reason to be hopeful.

Australia today combines an active commitment to fairness with an economic position full of opportunity.

We stand together at the start of a new decade.

I believe the test of this work is the progress we have made together by its close.

It will not be an easy road. But in following it, we stand on the shoulders of pioneers and innovators, of activists and reformers, of researchers and visionaries who have helped to pave the way.

This agenda is about embedding that commitment to fairness in everything that government does. Inevitably, that task requires slow, repetitive and painstaking work.

And it involves accountability, which is why the role of the Australian Social Inclusion Board in reporting on our progress, and the commitment made by the Australian Government to reporting objectively on key indicators of risk and change, is also part of the framework that we launch today.

But even more than changing the way government works, social inclusion is about learning to mobilise our whole community.

To harness the potential of new technology for social benefit.

To learn from the innovations of local communities and single organisations and spread them across hundreds of postcodes at a time.

To empower those Australians who have so far gained least from our common wealth to bring their hopes, their experiences and their drive to the project of building a stronger, fairer Australia.

You are all part of that work. I thank you and wish you well for the rest of the conference.