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SPEECH FOR THE HON LARRY ANTHONY, MP MINISTER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFAIRS ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL POLICY OUTLOOK CONFERENCE – PURSUING OPPORTUNITY AND PROSPERITY ECONOMICS AND COMMERCE BUILDING, CNR GRATTAN STREET AND ROYAL PARADE, UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE 1.30PM, FRIDAY 14 NOVEMBER 2003

Ladies and gentlemen

Introduction

Thank you Elaine (*Henry*) for your introduction.

I'm delighted to be here today – in the distinguished company of Professors Fiona Stanley and Neal Halfon - to talk about early childhood.

Fiona very forcefully put the case about the early years to us when she spoke at the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council in 2001.

Not long afterwards, the Prime Minister appointed me as the first federal Minister with responsibility for children's issues.

And in February this year, Fiona and I launched the consultation paper for the Government's National Agenda for Early Childhood.

I want to speak today about the need for that Agenda and the importance of getting it right, of finding solutions to the issues confronting us as a society that values children.

I was delighted to see a session specifically relating to children on the Agenda of this major Conference on Opportunity and Prosperity.

"Creating Child Friendly Communities" is an ambitious and complex undertaking.

But at this critical point in our history, it must be a key focus for us all.

There's no doubt that Australia is doing very well economically.

We have low inflation, low unemployment, and low interest rates.

Fewer children in the years to come

But since the mid-70s, Australia has had below replacement level fertility.

The fertility rate is continuing to decline, and so the total number of children is decreasing.

Governments can make choices that support families, and this Government is committed to a very extensive range of family payments and services.

But in the end, having children must be an individual choice.

And we as the Government have a responsibility to plan for a future that includes a higher proportion of older people and fewer children.

In the years to come, we'll have fewer working-age people to support more older people.

So structural ageing is a hot topic at present, and a number of initiatives are in place or on the drawing board to address the issues.

Investing in children

The implications for discussions about early childhood are obvious.

Of course we invest in children for their own sake, because we love and value them.

They all have the right to the best start in life in a safe environment.

We want them to develop lasting values and life skills, and have every opportunity to reach their potential.

But it has now become absolutely imperative for us, as a nation, to invest in Australia's children to improve the long-term economic and social outlook for Australia.

We simply can't afford to lose any of them - to unemployment, to illness, to alcohol or drug abuse, to crime or to suicide.

Australia's children have always been precious, but given the ageing population, they have become even more valuable.

This adds an extra urgency to ensuring their well being and success.

Challenges

Let's look briefly at some of the challenges we and our children face in modern Australia.

I expect Fiona will go into more detail about some of the more disturbing indicators.

Many of them are a consequence of our changing lifestyles.

Australians are wealthier than they have ever been.

But there are still groups of disadvantaged people who need additional assistance.

For example, compared to the non-Indigenous population, Indigenous people have:

- much poorer education and employment outcomes
 - more health problems, and
 - shorter life expectancy.
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- Mental health is a major problem worldwide and continues to grow. About 15 percent of Australian children 4-12 years of age have an identifiable mental health problem.
 - Technology has made life much less demanding physically. Children spend long hours on the computer and in front of the TV. As a consequence, childhood obesity and poor physical fitness are at record highs.
 - In a wealthy, modern society, we still have 30,000 cases of child abuse each year.
 - And around 19,000 Australian children are in out-of-home care because of abuse or neglect.
 - We still have more than 800,000 children growing up in jobless families, despite significant improvements in employment levels.

So we have our work cut out for us – to put children first in all of our policy work and ensure that we have child-friendly communities.

But what is a child-friendly community?

I believe it can be defined on a number of different levels.

Locally, governments and communities can invest their time and support families through high quality child care, community health centres, pre-schools, parks and safe playgrounds.

I understand Professor Halfon is an expert on this vital cooperative process.

State governments can provide essential services and facilities to improve health, education, public safety and so on.

All of this is crucial.

All of it, at all levels, contributes to the level I want to focus on – the national, overarching building of a child-friendly society.

It requires cooperation and investment at all levels – from the different levels of government, business, communities and, of course, parents – to improve children's lives and put them at the centre of our vision for this country.

The Government believes we have a leadership role in defining and building a child-friendly society.

A society where children are safe and valued, and where their lives are full of opportunities.

We are doing this by developing the National Agenda for Early Childhood.

Responding to consultation feedback

An important step in the Agenda was the consultations with major stakeholders and parents.

Last month, I released a public report, which covers what people told us.

While the Agenda it won't all happen overnightwe are talking about fundamental change herel believe our shared priorities must be:

- to increase public awareness about the importance of the early years;
- to offer more effective education and support for parents and caregivers; and
- to link up services more and improve collaboration between them, on the ground.

Building a sound evidence base

However to make a difference to children's lives, we must build our decisions on a sound evidence base.

We now have a valuable research partnership with the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, better known as ARACY.

The Australian Government has contributed nearly one million dollars to the Alliance.

For the first time in Australia, we are documenting what is happening to our children.

We are doing this on a national and comprehensive scale with two longitudinal studiesa \$20 million study of Australian Children called *Growing Up in Australia* and another study of Indigenous children.

This investment in research reflects the importance to this nation on investing in young children, from an early age.

Action on urgent issues

This research will take time – but in the meantime we have not been sitting on our hands.

Based on some early feedback, the Prime Minister announced an Agenda downpayment of \$10 million to give extra support to families with young children.

Without going into the detail, these cover issues such as:

- piloting approaches to better linking of family services at the local level;
- raising awareness and providing support to families where there is a significant risk of child abuse or neglect;
- providing extra capital assistance to some Indigenous child care services; and
- looking at what **information** we already have for parentsthen identifying what information they actually want, when they want it, and how best to get it out to them.

Early Intervention

Last month, the Prime Minister announced 73 new project grants, totalling \$7 million, as part of the Government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy.

Many of these projects have a focus on childhood and parenting support.

In making the announcement, John Howard said:

One of the things that we have found ... is the enormous value of early childhood intervention, of identifying children and families that are at risk from the very beginning. And it is quite extraordinary what progress can be made if those families can be identified and helped at a very early stage.

People at this conference who work with children and families would know just how true these words are.

I know many argue convincingly for investment in older children. We all acknowledge that too many of them are falling through the cracks.

We all want to see better outcomes in education, training and employment for our young people. It's never too late to intervene.

With the right help and support, young people can, and do, change direction.

But how much more effective is it, if we can set them on the right path from the beginning, rather than turn them around later on.

The Perry Preschool Study in Michigan is one of the best-known examples of return for investment in young children.

Starting in the sixties, the study followed groups of disadvantaged children through to adulthood.

It found that the group involved in active learning pre-school programs had better outcomes later on, better graduation levels, fewer arrests, and higher levels of income and home ownership.

Analysis showed an extraordinary benefit-cost ratio of 716 per cent of the program investment returned to the public.

That's over seven dollars returned for every dollar investedan extremely good result, better than the stock market over the same number of years.

Given some of the worrying health issues and trends in Australia, it makes logical sense to address them as early as possible, to avoid massive outlays down the track.

Certainly that was the feedback we received from the consultations on the Agenda.

There are clearly some areas that require some urgent early intervention and prevention responses.

I intend to work with other Ministers across the Government to take action on these.

Healthy mothers and children

One is better maternal health and nutrition during pregnancywith quality health services, especially in disadvantaged communities.

Everyone would have been alarmed at the story in The Australian on Wednesday, "Born with a Hangover...for life". It was about Foetal Alcohol Syndrome – it can and must be prevented. What hope do these babies have!

Obesity

Another is to tackle the growing problem of obesity.

Apart from the social impacts, obesity has serious economic effects.

It puts huge demands on our health budget.

The latest estimates suggest that the true costs of obesity could be anywhere from \$700 million to just over \$1.2 billion a year.

The Australian Government is determined to do what we can to reverse the trends by working with parents and carers.

We need to ensure they know about the potential consequences of obesity, like asthma and diabetes.

Early learning

Early learning is just as important.

Our education investment in Australia has tended to focus heavily on school-age children.

Yet the evidence says the crucial time for learning is in the first three years.

While education remains mainly the responsibility of the states and territories, I believe I can work with them to help improve early learning and care.

The idea is to set solid foundations for better literacy and numeracy skills, higher education retention rates, and maximum future workforce productivity all important in our response to an ageing population.

Child care

Child care services offer an ideal channel for providing support and education to families and children.

Although child care will never replace the care and attention provided at home, it does give parents choices and encourages workforce participation.

For disadvantaged children, in particular, high quality child care offers real benefits.

It helps with positive emotional and physical health in adulthood.

And it can substantially reduce spending later on in policing, health and welfare.

We've had great results with our Family Crisis Pilot services ranging from formal child care services, like the Sydney Day Nursery centre in Waterloo, Sydney, to the playgroups operating for long term caravan park residents in a few states.

We also have crèches being operated in remote Indigenous communities, linking with health programmes and providing culturally sensitive training opportunities for Indigenous carers.

I want the Early Childhood Agenda to include more quality child care places.

And I want it to lead to child care and family services that offer linked up networks of family support in local communities.

Indigenous children

During the Agenda consultations, people who work with Indigenous children stressed the particular disadvantages they face.

At the moment, the Council of Australian Governments is supporting projects that are targeting families in a number of Indigenous communities.

These projects involve partnerships between the Australian Government, state and territory governments, and the communities themselves.

These are major projects, but we are already seeing some good results for the families and communities involved.

I am pleased that the Productivity Commission has drawn up a seven point priority list to tackle indigenous disadvantage and their number one priority was that resources should be focused at early childhood development.

Like other Australian children, Indigenous children must be safe; they must be healthy and properly fed; and they and their families must have access to culturally appropriate early learning information and services.

Parenting support

There have been some strong reactions in the media to my belief that parents need educating about parenting.

I know a lot of people think that parenting is instinctive.

I'm a parent; and I hope I'm a good parent.

But I know I'm still learning, and I'll be learning all my life.

Indeed, I agree absolutely with a saying I found on the Internet the other day, which says, "Every adult needs a child to teach, it's the way adults learn"!

Raising children demands a lot of skill.

We don't let people drive a car or heal the sick without passing a test.

We recognise the risks there.

But we also need to recognise the risks in bringing up babies.

George Negus in a recent interview said about parenting that it was "Far more daunting than war zones, refugee camps or interviewing Maggie Thatcher". He's been there and yet this is his analogy with parenting!

Access to information and support is the right of all parents.

Yet I've been asked why the Government wants to intrude into people's lives.

John Laws said to me quite strongly, "get out of our lives" when I suggested parents needed help with parenting.

But the opposite message is coming from groups such as the Australian Association of Primary School Principals.

There is another and very important reason why I want to help parents.

We know that relationships come under increased pressure when children come into their lives. And as a result of relationship breakdown one in five children live with one parent and one in ten live in step families.

30 per cent of Australian children are involved in single, step or blended families. Behavioural problems are more common in children living in such circumstances. Boys in particular seem to be affected by the departure of their father.

I find this pretty sobering and I make no apology for wanting to help parents.

If I can help them by ensuring they have information and assistance to help them cope with the stresses of raising children, then maybe we can help prevent some relationship breakdowns.

The Government's job is to make sure that parents can find out what they need to know, can get the information and resources they need, so they can give their children the best start in life.

Conclusion

Look at the research.

It's telling us that the experiences of very young children and babies have a lasting impact on their lives.

Their brains are busy responding, making connections and learning from the first day.

If they suffer trauma; if they're undernourished or not protected against illness; if they're left alone, without communication; they will be left behind.

So many of these problems are preventable!

The most valuable investment we can make is in the early years of our children's lives.

It is imperative that the business community understands – this policy is not just some "feel good" social policy.

It is at the very core of how Australia will grow and prosper in the future.

Think of this as a social **and** economic imperative. I am. The Prime Minister is.

We think that an effective National Agenda for Early Childhood is at least as important as the other major,

nation-building projects aheadlike tackling salinity, fixing up our water supply, or linking up the rail transport infrastructure.

It's groundbreaking investment in the future of our country.

This Government can't do it alone.

We need contributions from all governments, state and local, from the business community, researchers, community workers and ultimately all Australians.

I strongly believe the planets are aligning when it comes to children.

- We now have a dedicated Minister for Children and Youth at the national level,
- we have the Australian of the Year talking about the importance of children,
- we have a Prime Minister talking about his concern at the lack of male role models in many young boys lives,
- we have a Parliamentary Inquiry looking at Family Law and Child Support – both of which impact on children,
- we have the Productivity Commission talking about more resources into Early Childhood Development.

Things are moving.

We can make a difference for our kids. And we will all benefit.

Thank you.

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