

Prime Minister's keynote address to the ACL National Conference

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Abstract: On Saturday November 21, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd gave the keynote address at the ACL National Conference in Canberra.

Prime Minister's speech to the Australian Christian Lobby's national conference

Hyatt Hotel
Canberra
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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

I acknowledge the First Australians on whose land we meet, and whose cultures we celebrate as among the oldest continuing cultures in human history.

I thank Jim Wallace for his invitation today and I am pleased today to be the first serving Prime Minister to address the Australian Christian Lobby's national conference.

In speaking to you today, I also acknowledge the enormous contribution of Australia's churches and church communities throughout our nation's history.

The history books often recount the great moments of conflict and change in our nation's story - war, depression and political strife.

But they can miss out on the quiet years that also shape a nation's character and destiny.

The years when people are going about their normal lives - working hard, raising a family, building communities and building the institutions that sustain a nation through the good times and the bad.

If we studied those quiet years more closely, I believe we'd all better appreciate the profoundly important role of our churches and religious institutions in our national life.

The work of sustaining community life in times of celebration and times of grief and loss.

The work of caring for those at life's extremities, those in need of care in our hospitals, our aged care homes and our refuges.

The work of improving opportunity for all through our schools.

The work of helping shape the values that are essential for a healthy society - values of compassion, of tolerance, of sacrifice for others, of hard work, of responsibility, of self-respect, - and of the equal dignity of every human being.

And the work of helping people to wrestle with deeper questions of meaning.

This isn't noisy work - it's quiet work.

Yet it's the work that builds a nation.

Work that builds families.

Work that builds communities.

Work that strengthens the social fabric - or the social capital - of the nation.

And we must all be attentive to how stressed our social fabric - and with that our families - have become with the challenges of 21st century life.

Of course like governments and other organisations, churches and church institutions have sometimes failed to live up to those values.

The apology to the Forgotten Australians and Child Migrants in the past week was a sharp reminder of that.

Among the stories of those men and women raised in orphanages and institutions run by the state, by churches and by charities, there are many heart-wrenching stories of neglect and outright abuse - physical, psychological and sexual.

The truth is, the church and the state failed badly to provide the love and protection that a child needs as he or she grows up.

And for these grave offences we must both be sorry.

Churches now have an important role to play now in making those Forgotten Australians into the Remembered Australians.

For this is the only way to go about healing broken lives.

This coming Tuesday will mark the second anniversary of the Government's 2007 election win.

We have faced enormous challenges over the past two years.

Challenges that were barely on the radar in November 2007.

By September 2008, the worst global economic downturn in three-quarters of a century was threatening to slam into Australia.

As the crisis unfolded fully, we had just one clear goal.

To do everything we could to cushion our economy, our communities and our families from the full impact of a global economic cyclone by supporting jobs right around Australia.

To keep as many Australians as possible in work.

So as many families as possible continue to have at least one breadwinner, and children do not have to face the insecurity and instability common in jobless families.

We know the toll that unemployment can take on even the strongest families.

We have seen in the post-war period the destructive cycle of successive generations of unemployment, welfare dependency and the destruction of the human spirit.

So we were determined to do all we could to keep as many families as possible out of that cycle.

To learn from history.

Not to repeat it.

That's why we took strong, early and decisive action to build a stronger Australia.

And our actions have been effective.

Australia is the only advanced economy to so far stay out of recession.

Australia has the second lowest unemployment rate of all the major advanced economies - so that today, hundreds of thousands of children have been saved from the trauma of seeing mums and dads losing their jobs.

And we have done so with the lowest debt and deficit of any of the Major Advanced Economies.

Nevertheless, many, many Australian families have been doing it tough through this crisis.

Economic downturns invariably hit the most vulnerable people in our community the hardest.

That reality has underscored the strength of the Government's commitment to building a fairer Australia - a nation where it is possible for everyone to enjoy a decent family life.

We have honoured our commitment to abolish Work Choices, replacing it with a fair and modern industrial relations system that gets the balance right.

We have built a decent safety net of conditions that removes the incentive for employers to make employees work unsociable hours, by ending Australian Workplace Agreements that stripped away penalty rates and overtime pay.

We are introducing into all awards and enterprise agreements a provision for individual flexibility that makes it easier for employees to negotiate family-friendly work arrangements.

We have decided to introduce Australia's first system of paid parental leave, and we have extended rights to parental leave to make it easier for parents to choose to stay at home during the earliest years of a child's life.

We have initiated the greatest ever Commonwealth investment in social housing and in tackling the scourge of homelessness - because we know that without a place to live, it is difficult for people to find work, for kids to study and for people to make a fresh start to get their lives back together.

Our first White Paper was entitled A Place to Call Home - with the aim of halving homeless for the more than 105,000 Australians who currently are without a place to call home.

And as part of the Nation Building Economic Stimulus plan, we are building almost 20,000 units of social housing for the neediest Australians.

We have implemented the largest reform of our age pension since it was introduced one hundred years ago - raising the single age pension by \$32 per week to help the most vulnerable Australians to make ends meet.

We are investing in the quality of education in our most disadvantaged schools.

We have made the apology to the Stolen Generations, and we are taking action to close the gap on Indigenous disadvantage.

As I have said before, I do not believe that in Australia you can successfully advance an economic reform agenda without a complementary agenda to help strengthen our social fabric by providing maximum support for families under pressure.

We should not have to choose between faster growth and a fairer society.

It is not easy tackling the complex challenges of closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage, halving homelessness, or supporting families and building more resilient communities where there's been decades of multiple disadvantage.

In working to build a fairer Australia, we recognise that we cannot be effective if governments merely act alone.

Governments must work in partnership with local people and with community-based organisations to deliver lasting results.

As we work to build a stronger and fairer Australia, the Australian Government is strongly committed to continuing to strengthen our partnerships with organisations in the 'third sector' - many of which are church or faith-based organisations.

That is why we have been working with many community organisations this year towards establishing a Compact with the Third Sector.

As we continue to build a stronger Australia and fairer Australia, the Government is also determined to prepare our nation for the challenges of the future.

We are taking action on climate change.

We are tackling the challenge of long-term health and hospital reform.

We are seeking to build the best educated, best skilled, best trained workforce of any in the world.

A country where we halve homelessness.

Where we close the gap with our Indigenous brothers and sisters.

Where we don't allow the fair go to slide out the back door.

This is the kind of Australia we can build together.

The focus of the ACL's conference this weekend is how we as a society care for the best interests of our children.

Governments have fundamental obligations relating to the safety and protection of children, as well as ensuring that every child has the opportunity to achieve their potential through the opportunity of a world class education.

That is why the Government that I lead is committed to an education revolution in Australia.

I spoke about the need for an education revolution in my maiden speech in 1998, shortly after being elected to Parliament.

After I was elected as Leader of the Opposition, the first policy paper that I released was entitled The Australian

Economy Needs an Education Revolution.

And since coming to office, the Australian Government has got that education revolution underway.

We have set out goals to achieve:

universal access to preschool for four year olds by 2013;
a 90 per cent year twelve retention rate by 2015;
halving the number of 20 to 64 year olds without a minimum certificate III level qualification by 2020, and
providing a university place to an additional 50,000 students by 2013.
To achieve these goals the Government has increased investment in education by around 50 per cent in real terms over the current five year period compared with the previous 5 years.

This includes investments in computers for schools, in the largest school modernisation program in Australia's history, building trades training centres in schools across the nation, establishing a national school curriculum and steps to increase teacher quality.

In short, the Government is delivering on our commitment to an education revolution.

Beyond these measures, the Government recognises that we have a wider responsibility for the care and nurture children in our schools.

If a child is struggling, or there are problems at home, it's the school environment where this is most likely to be seen.

And it is within the school environment where we can make a real difference in supporting children and supporting parents when they need help.

That is why I have always been a strong supporter of the role of chaplains in our schools - because they make a difference.

Just three months ago on the Sunshine Coast, where I grew up, we saw a remarkable demonstration of the positive impact that school chaplains can have on their community.

A couple in their 50s, Allan and Kari Taylor, were killed in the most tragic circumstances in a road accident on the Sunshine Motorway.

In the days that followed, we saw a snapshot of just how important school chaplains can be in the life of a community, as hundreds of kids, parents and members of the community told moving stories of how Allan and Kari had made a difference in their lives.

For those who don't know the story, let me give you a bit of their history.

Kari and I went to school together at Nambour High.

In fact, we once debated against each other on the question of: "Does God exist?"

I'm a little reluctant to admit it to this audience - but I was on the negative side.

Kari argued the affirmative - and won.

I still contend the room was stacked.

Kari was one of the first students from Nambour to be accepted into the Queensland Conservatorium of Music, where she graduated with a Diploma of Performing Arts.

She could easily have used her talents to pursue a career in opera.

But instead, she chose to use her voice and her gifts in her community, serving alongside Allan.

She met Allan when he became the SunCoast Christian College's first high school teacher.

Allan went on to become principal.

But nine years ago, he gave up that role.

Because he felt he could make a greater difference as a school chaplain.

That was a remarkable step - after all, being a chaplain doesn't carry much social status, while being a principal does.

But Allan was interested not in status, but in service.

He wanted to make a difference in the lives of the kids and the families in his community - and he saw the best way of doing that was by being a chaplain.

Allan led the way as the first primary school chaplain on the Sunshine Coast.

He was always there to help and support kids in the community as a chaplain and a mentor.

After that tragic accident, more than 3,000 people attended their funeral.

Many of them carried personal stories of the ways that Allan or Kari had helped, supported and inspired them, often through difficult times in their lives - stories that may never be told.

But what we saw in the lives and the tragic deaths of Allan and Kari was a strong testimony to the work of school chaplains - the quiet work that is making a difference in the lives of thousands of families every day.

I have been a supporter of school chaplaincies since my time in the Queensland Government almost twenty years ago, as chief of staff to Premier Wayne Goss and then as the Director General of the Cabinet Office.

It was during this period that we formalised arrangements through the state education department for school chaplains to operate in our schools.

The Queensland Department of Education formally approved the Scripture Union of Queensland as the employing authority for state school chaplains.

And the first chaplain was employed at Kelvin Grove State High School, followed by chaplains at the Mitchelton and Craigslea State High Schools.

The development of these formal arrangements for school chaplaincy acted as a catalyst for the education department to develop chaplaincy guidelines, which were first published in 1993.

When these guidelines came into effect, Scripture Union Queensland was the only employer to seek employer accreditation Queensland-wide, and as a result became the predominant chaplaincy employer in the state.

And it is still the most significant group coordinating chaplaincy services, with the strong support of local communities across the state.

We supported the role of chaplains and other student welfare staff such as counsellors and pastoral care workers because we recognised that schools are key institutions in the lives of kids and their families.

School chaplains and counsellors are in a unique position to help young people navigate the often choppy waters of adolescence.

And for many kids, the emotional challenges of those years can affect their capacity to study, to learn and sometimes even to survive - which is why it is appropriate for governments to support chaplaincy programs.

Chaplains do great work.

They provide a listening ear for individual students - who are often more comfortable talking to a chaplain or a counsellor than a teacher, because they see them as being independent of the school authorities.

They provide an additional adult role model in the school.

They help connect the school community, including parents and teachers as well as children themselves.

They organise informal school activities where students can make new friendships and develop new interests.

They can arrange expert help with specific challenges, such as dealing with family breakdown, bullying, self-esteem, drugs, grief and behavioural management problems.

And when critical incidents affect a school - such as the bushfires earlier this year in Victoria - they can play a very important active role in helping the community cope with those hard times.

Like the story of Jeff Lampard, one of two part-time chaplains at Kinglake West Primary School.

After the Black Saturday bushfires, a Year Six student at the school burrowed himself into bags of clothes and toys in the corner of his classroom.

He wouldn't talk, and he wouldn't come out.

It took Jeff two and a half hours to coax the boy out of his burrow.

And it turned out that this boy had survived the bushfires by wrapping himself in a wet sheet and running for his life as his house burnt, as cars and gas cylinders exploded around him.

He lost friends, and all of his possessions.

But in those hours that Jeff spent gently and patiently talking to him, they established a connection that became so important to that boy in the weeks and months following the fires.

Not all students express their distress and pain as openly as the little boy from Kinglake West.

Some mask their feelings.

Last month, a young lady named Alex told her story to at Rockhampton's School Chaplaincy fundraising dinner.

Alex is 22 now.

But when she was 15 and in Year 10, she wanted to end her life.

And she told that dinner that she probably would have, had her school chaplain not intervened and helped her talk to a counsellor.

As Alex said, and I quote:

"School chaplains are friends amongst the students. Students are more comfortable talking to a chaplain as a friend..."

The National School Chaplaincy Program was commenced in 2007 as a three-year program providing funding for up to \$20,000 per annum for schools for a maximum of three years, to fund chaplains.

Since its inception, around 2,700 schools have received funding under the program.

It is not always understood that when the previous Government established this program, they only funded it for a three year period. This means that no future allocation of funding was made for the program beyond three years.

In other words, the funding then dropped dead.

It had not been included in the Budget as a permanent program for the future.

These are the facts - whatever some people might be claiming about that today.

The clear feedback I have received from schools, parents and communities around the nation is that this has been a successful program.

It has enhanced the well-being of students and school communities.

As Michael Lamb, of the Baxter Primary School Council on the Mornington Peninsula, wrote to me last month:

"Our School Chaplain provides advice, counselling, wisdom, and a warm welcome for any member of the school community who may have an issue or need support. She is not perceived by families to be part of the official 'system' within the school, and is seen to be accessible by some parents and children who may hesitate to approach the Principal or other staff member with an issue."

And I know that many teachers value the extra resource that a chaplain provides in their busy day.

As Sharon Williamson, a trained teacher who works as a chaplain at a school here in the ACT, wrote to me:

"I often look around at classrooms and watch the children who need that extra support, that extra bit of care and that extra bit of communication and trust for others. As a teacher, we are so consumed with an overwhelming curriculum that - as much as we would like to - it is hard to offer that extra portion to our students who can use support. Bring in the school Chaplain and the need is filled."

Or as this principal told researchers studying the effectiveness of the program:

"As a young male in an all female staff, the chaplain has provided a good male role model for our boys in particular."

Wherever they operate, there is strong support for chaplaincies for school principals, teachers, parents and kids themselves.

School chaplains make a difference.

That is why today I can confirm today that the Government will be continuing the school chaplaincy program.

We will guarantee funding for the next two years until December 2011 for schools currently funded under the National School Chaplaincy Program.

This will involve a total additional investment of \$42 million over the 2010 and 2011 school years.

This does two things.

It provides certainty for our schools and chaplains.

And it provides the Government with further time to consult with the community and evaluate the best long-term shape of the program.

During the course of 2010, the Government will be consulting widely over the future shape of chaplaincy and pastoral care programs beyond 2011.

We are doing this because we want to hear your views about ways the long-term program can be improved.

While there is no denying the success of the National School Chaplaincy Program, it could be improved to better accommodate schools in rural and regional areas, small schools and schools in disadvantaged communities.

As one principal told researchers:

"Our school has a chaplain because of deep need. We employed the chaplain prior to the Government funding. We thus did not fit the criteria for Chaplaincy funding."

That's why we will be seeking to engage with you, with representatives of churches, parents, school communities, state education departments, and other interested parties around the nation as we examine the best way to support pastoral care initiatives in the future.

School chaplaincies are only one important way in which the Government is taking action to protect and support children and young Australians.

The Government is developing a National Strategy for Young Australians to tackle many of the greatest challenges facing the three and a half million young Australians aged 12 to 24 - including binge drinking, youth violence, drug usage, mental health problems and body image.

We are implementing a \$126 million Cyber Safety Plan to improve cyber-safety for children and young Australians - funding almost 100 extra police officers in child protection work, and undertaking a pilot trial of filtering technologies to identify the best way forward to make the internet safer.

We are implementing a National Binge Drinking Strategy, including community level initiatives, early intervention strategies and a national advertising campaign that confronts young people with the potential consequences of binge drinking.

I have also asked the Minister for Home Affairs, Brendan O'Connor to work with State and Territory Police Commissioners on how we face up to the problem of alcohol-fuelled violence on our streets - including establishing clear cut legal consequences for breaking the law.

And I intend to take this matter to discussions with State and Territory leaders at the COAG meeting next month.

In each of these areas, there is great potential for the Government to work in partnership with church and community organisations - to support children and young Australians, and to support the families and communities who nurture and support them.

Such partnerships are important.

In the complex world of the 21st century, governments must work together with the whole community to tackle the difficult social problems that we confront.

Churches and faith-based organisations are among our most important partners in that challenge.

You have been doing this quiet work since the first days of European settlement in this nation.

And your work will continue to be of great importance as we confront the challenges that lie ahead.

The Australian Government greatly values the contribution of the nation's churches and faith-based organisations, and we look forward to continuing to build stronger partnerships in the years to come.

Source: Prime Minister of Australia website at <http://www.pm.gov.au/node/6342>

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