

AN OPEN LETTER TO COAG PARTICIPANTS

Dear Prime Minister, Premiers, Chief Ministers, Federal Treasurer, State/Territory Treasurers and Australian Local Government Association representatives,

As you gather to meet for the first Meeting of the Council of Australian Governments since the recent Federal election, we acknowledge and welcome the unique opportunity presented by this historic assembly of Labor leaders from all Federal and all State/Territory jurisdictions.

As stated in the Prime Minister's media release of 10 December 2007, "The time for buck-passing must come to an end. The time for real work to deal with real problems facing the nation must begin".

These words instil in many a great hope that much can be achieved through the COAG alliance and you are all commended for gathering within such a short timeframe to tackle a very ambitious agenda.

When attempting to resolve difficulties and complications with so many cross-jurisdictional issues traversing the Federal and State/Territory divide it is refreshing to see a commitment from our newly elected Prime Minister to set in place a new framework for co-operative Commonwealth-State relations with the hope of resolving many current problems and challenges.

We welcome the Cabinet's decision of 17 December to place Indigenous Issues on the COAG agenda.

If there was one additional item we would seek to put forward on the Agenda that would be the issue of child protection. Now is the time to look towards developing a National Child Protection Framework such as that being proposed by the Coalition of Organisations Committed to the Safety and Wellbeing of Australia's Children – of which we are a member.

Regarding those agenda items which have been made public for the COAG meeting of 20 December 2007, Catholic Social Services Australia would like to put forward our position on some of the agenda items for your consideration.

Health and Hospitals in Australia

Investing in public dental programs

We welcome the new Commonwealth Government's pre-election commitment to establish a Commonwealth Dental Health Program.

It is our view that assistance should be targeted to low-income earners and should go beyond funding for check-ups. As a member of the National Oral Health Alliance, we support its call for provision of a free basic course of dental care every two years for all holders of concession cards.

Education, Skills and Training – The Productivity Agenda

Investing in Early Childhood

A number of specific features within Federal ALP's Early Childhood agenda invite our comment.

In targeting children in particularly disadvantaged communities, Catholic Social Services Australia is pleased to see the commitment provided by the Federal Government to roll out the Brotherhood of St Laurence's "Home Interaction Program".

As a partner with Jesuit Social Services in the research project ***Dropping off the Edge***,¹ we believe that this project provides the mapping tool necessary to identify the most disadvantaged communities.

In choosing sites for such interventions it is vital to heed a fundamental insight of contemporary medico-social research: disadvantage involves the accumulation of multiple aspects of deprivation, from limitations on health to deficient education and vocational skills, to financial stress and exposure to criminality.

In mapping the distribution of disadvantage throughout Australia, Catholic Social Services Australia and Jesuit Social Services systematically compiled data on a wide range of indicators, including those just noted, in cooperation with governments in all state jurisdictions and the ACT. The research dealt only in tangible manifestations of disadvantage and did so in a scientific way that produced an administrative tool directly applicable to the Government's intended interventions in – among other areas – early childhood.

This mapping tool identifies explicitly a hierarchy of localities in each jurisdiction ranging from the most to the least disadvantaged places. That hierarchy is a real and enduring structure which on the evidence of repeated studies contains 3-5% of highly disadvantaged localities manifesting a markedly disproportionate share of each jurisdiction's social problems while failing to benefit from mainstream economic and social measures intended to promote general wellbeing. Our publication ***Dropping off the Edge*** identifies the areas in question and could provide a coherent and effective basis for determining priorities for the intended interventions. It also comments on geographical areas which may soon be headed for highly disadvantaged status.

Catholic Social Services Australia welcomes the Federal Labor Government's proposal to work with the states and territories to develop a network of Early Learning Centres. The Federal Government's commitment to universal access to pre-school is an important and welcome development.

No single factor is more important in instigating and sustaining disadvantage than an inadequate education. The Government is to be commended for recognising the importance of children acquiring the precursor skills that will help to ensure a good beginning to their formal education. Guaranteeing the opportunity for all children to benefit from pre-schooling at age four and to be helped in timely fashion with any medical problems that could later impede their educational progress will be major contributions to the desired 'educational revolution.' However, the scale of deprivation experienced by many children from highly disadvantaged backgrounds is of a magnitude that requires both the opportunity to attend pre-school at age three and the extension of sustained encouragement and support to their families to ensure that this happens (such as the Home Interaction Program).

¹ Vinson, T, *Dropping off the Edge: The distribution of disadvantage in Australia*, Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia, 2007.

An assured opportunity for four year olds to benefit from pre-schooling should rightly be a universal policy. The same opportunity for three year olds needs to be sensitively targeted to children from highly disadvantaged areas and integrated with other family and childhood services. Otherwise the education gap between youngsters from more privileged backgrounds and those from disadvantaged circumstances will continue to resist the best efforts of even our most dedicated teachers.

Implementing the Government's National Secondary School Computer Fund

The 'digital divide' mirrors the broader social divide. ***Dropping off the Edge*** found that limited use of computers and lack of access to the internet correlated strongly with other measures of disadvantage.

Combined with more effective teaching of basic skills, ensuring the quality of educational resources in schools in disadvantaged areas, and new techniques in education, increasing access to computers and the internet promises to improve the prospects of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, support for computer use in the home environment will be required to complement the work undertaken at school.

Climate Change

Establishing a National Emissions Trading system

In developing a national and integrated emissions trading regime, COAG must safeguard the interests of the most disadvantaged Australians. As a matter of justice, all measures addressing climate change should be designed to avoid undue burdens on low-income households.

This should entail protection against increases in energy and transport costs (both directly and indirectly, in the form of flow-on increases in prices of other goods and services). It should also entail assistance to modify dwellings to minimise energy costs, producing both environmental and equity benefits.

Detailed recommendations on relevant issues were made in our joint submission – made with the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the National Welfare Rights Network – to the Prime Ministerial Task Group on Emissions Trading in early 2007.²

We welcome the new Commonwealth Government's commitment to provide incentives for landlords to reduce dwellings' energy requirements. We also look forward to engaging with governments about wider measures.

Housing

Addressing rental affordability

COAG must prioritise the needs of those who find home ownership beyond their reach. This means that COAG's first priority should be low-income households now in the private rental market.

We welcome efforts to arrive at supply-side solutions. But monitoring the distributional effects will be critical. For example, any taxpayer-funded investment aimed at increasing private rental affordability should primarily benefit tenants rather than landlords.

² Brotherhood of St Laurence, National Welfare Rights Network and Catholic Social Services Australia, Joint Submission to Prime Ministerial Task Group on Emissions Trading, April 2007 (available at <http://www.catholicsocialservices.org.au/publications/submissions>).

We need a thorough review of the allocation and adequacy of taxpayer-funded housing assistance (e.g. the absence of means testing of the First Home Owner Grant; and the adequacy of Commonwealth Rent Assistance).

Above all, we need a concerted national effort to increase the supply of adequate public and social housing. An integral component of the annual "State of Supply Report" by the proposed National Housing Supply Research Council should be the thorough examination of, and recommendations about, current conditions and future options for the provision of public and social housing.

Homelessness

The presence of this issue on COAG's agenda for its 20 December 2007 meeting indicates a welcome prioritising of the problem of homelessness.

We look forward to early action on the commitment to deploy increased funding of homelessness programs so that many fewer homeless individuals and families are turned away from shelters. And the Commonwealth Government's plan to move towards supported housing assured for the first 12 months (rather than refuge accommodation) is also welcome.

Beyond measures to deal with homelessness after it has materialised, governments should give high priority to policies aimed at addressing the causes of homelessness and preventing its occurrence – especially structural poverty and domestic violence.

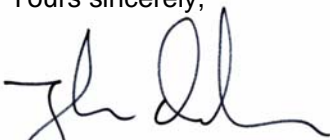
In Summary

We welcome the Prime Minister's indication that he looks forward to extensive discussions across the community during 2008 on the critical issues to be discussed at 20 December 2007 COAG meeting.³ Such consultation will be essential to maximise COAG's effectiveness and the prospects for real progress.

We therefore hope that the work program agreed at this week's COAG meeting will factor in time and resources for such consultation – and that the agreed objectives and work program agreed this week by COAG will be flexible enough to make that consultation meaningful.

We look forward to 2008 with much anticipation, and to joining with other areas of civil society to contributing to progress under a new spirit of cooperative federalism.

Yours sincerely,



Frank Quinlan
Executive Director

19 December 2007