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# Welcome and Introduction to the Future

Address to the Communities in Control Conference  
Melbourne, 6th June 2005

## Senator The Hon. Kay Patterson

**Federal Minister for Family and Community  
Services, Minister Assisting the Prime  
Minister for Women's Issues**

\*If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to  
the  
**2005 Communities in Control conference  
convened by Our Community and Centacare Catholic Family  
Services.**

Thank you Rhonda for your introduction.

I am delighted to be with you here today to open this “2005 Communities in Control” Conference.

I can see from the number of you here today that this is one of the premier events for people interested in the wellbeing of our communities.

I am particularly pleased to be asked to be part of this dialogue on what it means for communities to be “in control”

There is no doubt that communities, or the groups within them have the ability to affect people’s lives. In my own life I have experienced this.

Some of you may have heard me tell this story before but I had left school at Intermediate (or year 9 as it is now known) and undertook a business college course and was at work just before I turned 16.

Guiding had played a significant part in my life from the time I was 10 and when I was 18 I was one of two girls chosen to attend a six week event in Mexico with 23 other girls, and two outstanding leaders, as a guest of the Girl Scouts of the USA.

The other 23 were all at university and they and the two leaders encouraged me to return to school.

After working for two more years and with enormous assistance from this group and Guides in NSW I returned to do matriculation in a one year program at East Sydney Tech. From there I undertook an honours degree at the University of Sydney and went on to complete a Dip.Ed and Ph.D. at Monash.

I am absolutely convinced that had it not been for my guiding mentors that I would have been very unlikely to have been on the same trajectory.

I was an only child, growing up in inner Sydney and guiding was my life - I am so grateful that my guide leader took in the very keen tenderfoot at 10 1/2 who had hung around the guide hall for six

months waiting to turn 11 which was then the age at which you could join.

My experience and, I am sure, many of your own, highlights the affect that community, and groups within them, can have on the welfare of others.

What the guides gave me was opportunity.

The guides assisted me by providing both opportunity and mentoring which gave me the power to realise that opportunity.

*One item on the agenda for this conference that caught my interest was the creation of a “Community First” political party. It caught my interest because I think the Government has already fulfilled that roll.*

*I would like to cover some of the work that this Government is already doing with local communities and local community groups.*

The Prime Minister has said and I quote:

*“We are pursuing policies that spread power, freedom and opportunity to the suburbs, workplaces, towns and farms right across the nation”*

The Prime Minister believes that this dispersal of power and opportunity to communities is central to the philosophy of our Government – putting community ideas, goals and solutions first.

But Government’s can’t just tell communities to be “in control” and leave it at that.

The Howard Government is about sharing responsibility - individuals, families, Government and communities share the responsibility to address a problem and then to make a change for the better.

A social coalition is where Government, communities, families and individuals work together is the means by which communities can control their future and can make a difference.

At the most basic level, a community in control is a community in charge of its own destiny – one that has a capacity to influence the

decisions that affect people's lives, and one that has the power to chart its own course into the future

Government can assist but is not in the best position to address local issues. As most of you know well – the best solutions come from within local communities. We need programs that support individuals, organisations, councils and other groups to strengthen our communities.

The support that we offer needs to be Canberra funded not Canberra run.

The Howard Government supports a range of programs which assists individuals and groups who are working to help their local communities.

In nearly every community in Australia, small groups of committed people are working hard to help their communities in some way. These groups are born out of individual's generosity, creativity and determination to bring about a positive change in areas they know that they can make a difference

The work they do ranges from selling raffle tickets for the hospital auxiliary to building a kid's playground with volunteer labour, to taking pensioners on an outing, to revegetating beaches and natural reserves.

The Volunteer Small Equipment grants program recognises the amazing efforts of these groups and currently provides grants of up to \$3000 to purchase small equipment. These items make the job of these volunteers easier, safer and more enjoyable.

The Howard Government has now allocated over \$29 million to more than 14,000 community groups as part of this program.

The latest round of the program assisted over two thousand organisations to purchase items they otherwise may not have been able to afford. Equipment that will be purchased includes urns, microwaves, portable sunshades, computers, tools and safety equipment.

In Tasmania for example a local Fire Brigade received around \$900 to purchase torches and holders. They sound like small items

but they mean that the workers can help others more safety in emergency and rescue situations because their hands will be free.

Another new program of this government is the \$140 million Communities for Children initiative.

Communities for Children supports up to 45 disadvantaged communities with funding of up to \$4 million per community for local early childhood development initiatives.

A community organisation is supported to drive and facilitate a community development approach to improving outcomes for young children. This approach recognises that local organisations are best placed to understand the local needs and facilitate partnerships and collaboration.

The main goal of Communities for Children is to assist places like Broadmeadows here in Melbourne and Dubbo in NSW that will be launched tomorrow, to take a community-wide and joint approach to supporting our youngest citizens and their families.

I know the Dubbo project is of interest to one of your convenors today, Father Caddy, as Centacare has been selected as the facilitating partner for the Dubbo site.

In essence, it is a community-building exercise - one that aims to create closer links and ongoing cooperation between all the people who have a close interest in the health and wellbeing of young children. That includes, families and schools, community service providers, charities, volunteers, neighbourhoods, indeed whole communities.

It will also ensure that the services available for children and families have the flexibility to respond to local needs and are accessible to those who need of support.

This collaboration will not only produce better outcomes for your children and families, but will also create a stronger and more inclusive community. It goes to the heart of what the Government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is all about.

And, importantly, it is change that will be driven from within your community, not 'imposed' on you from the outside.

The Communities for Children initiative reflects the belief that everyone has a part to play in dealing with community-based issues and that the best solutions lie in the combined wisdom and expertise of a broad cross-section of people and organisations.

Apart from the projects that focus specifically on children often local groups will get together with local business and the council and take joint action to achieve a bigger goal.

This might relate to a wider community project, like training young leaders to undertake local projects, helping parents to build parenting skills and better family relationships, offering friendship and support for newly-arrived migrants or improving links between existing community services.

The Government offers grants to projects like these through the Local Answers program.

The grants help to make community ideas a reality – in communities that combine their wisdom and resources to help themselves.

And this week I will be announcing a further \$20 million of grants under the Local Answers program to support communities throughout Australia.

We have also seen how this partnership between Government and local councils and organisations can work in the changed way that Government is now dealing with Indigenous communities.

I recently announced, together with Amanda Vanstone and Philip Ruddock a number of Shared Responsibility Agreements.

These SRAs demonstrate a new way of doing business in Indigenous Affairs. Working with Indigenous communities. Talking with them. But more importantly listening to what they have to say about what they want to achieve in the future. Where do they want their community to be in the future, be it in 2 years, five years or 20 years?

From these discussions we are seeing interesting developments yielding real results for communities.

FaCS is a lead agency for a COAG trial site, Wadeye in the Northern Territory. Wadeye has one of the largest Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory.

COAG trials involve state and federal government representatives working with the community to deliver the best possible outcomes

In Wadeye the community have currently chosen to focus on “Giving every child a chance”. This includes a range of initiatives to encourage school attendance and retention

Some of you may have heard of the “no school, no pool” agreement. The local community wanted to take this approach and it is yielding results, not only in increased school enrolments but also in reduced incidence of skin disease.

In a remote indigenous community it may be easier for a community to identify issues of concern such as few children finishing school

But how does a community or Government identify a need at the community level. How do we target our resources at areas of need? It is not simply about geography, or average income levels.

Wadeye chose to focus on improving outcomes for children’s health and wellbeing.

From every perspective it makes sense to invest in early childhood. And the best idea is to develop policies and programs that prevent problems happening, right from the start.

In keeping with the Government’s commitment to the National Agenda for Early Childhood, the Australian Early Development Index project is designed to tell us just how well Australian children are faring in the early years.

The impetus behind the project is the Government’s strong commitment to ensuring that Australian children get the best possible start in life.

And as the Australian Government Minister responsible for many children’s issues, I can assure you I’ll continue to work hard to

keep children's health and wellbeing at the forefront of the national stage.

With funding of over \$900, 000 over three years the project is going to involve 60 communities and include more than 420 schools and 12 500 children across the country.

I am sure your keynote international speaker, Judy Rogers, will be aware that this project uses an Australian adaptation of a Canadian index, which includes a teacher completed checklist of over 100 questions about various areas of a child's development.

Teachers complete the checklist on children in the first year of school.

The data gathered will allow communities to better understand where children are doing well and the areas where more community and other support are needed.

Communities which participated in the original trial in Western Australia in 2003 found that the results helped them to take action.

For example one community set up a Parenting Information café, which has become a central point for families to find out information about local services.

Other communities now have programs that involve parents in their children's early learning and help them builds the skills needed to support their young children.

The communities involved in the project to date have been very positive about the useful role the AEDI plays in planning.

A further 33 communities across Australia have put up their hands to participate in the project this year. Almost every state and territory is represented and there is a good mix of metropolitan and regional communities.

I am sure all of you recognise the value of understanding what is happening in children's early years of life. We all know that the years before school profoundly influence children's experience of school and their outcomes later in life.

Ensuring that children are given the best possible start in life and chance of a good outcome is about a community taking control of its future.

The importance of positive and stimulating environments for young children is well appreciated by the Australian Government. This is why we fund playgroups.

Playgroups give children the opportunity to develop early learning and social skills which encourage their future learning.

Playgroups also give parents the opportunity to share experiences and knowledge, and gain valuable social and support networks which often leads to their continuing participation in local community activities.

Today I would like to announce nearly \$1.1 million to provide further assistance to playgroups. This includes funding to playgroups associations for capacity building and a number of specific grants to playgroups to purchase toys and equipment to ensure children can play in a safe environment.

Where some families are significantly disadvantaged then additional assistance may be required. The Australian Government funds *Intensive Support Playgroups* which are delivered by a team of early childhood and family support workers who provide ongoing assistance to families across a range of areas including housing, domestic violence, and financial crisis.

I am pleased to announce that the funding I have announced today includes nearly half a million dollars for extension of funding for four intensive supported playgroups. These are mobile playgroup services, in areas such as caravan parks, which support families most at need and have shown very good outcomes.

Participation in playgroups promotes stable and positive families, communities and childhood experiences in many ways, and the Government is committed to giving families this opportunity.

With about \$100 million to invest over the next few years, the Howard Government commitment to communities is unquestionable.

I congratulate all involved on this Conference and I wish you all the best in your deliberations over the next few days.

I look forward to the outcomes of this meeting and can tell you that this Government will be working with local communities and groups such as yourselves to deliver on the major topics of this conference – in particular “Where Communities are in Control”.

Thank you.