

OUR COMMITMENT TO WOMEN

STATEMENT BY
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MINISTER FOR SOCIAL SECURITY
AND MINISTER ASSISTING THE PRIME MINISTER
FOR THE STATUS OF WOMEN
13 MAY 1997

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CONTENTS

OVERVIEW	5
OUR COMMITMENT TO WOMEN	5
BLENDING WORK AND FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES	6
INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS REFORM	6
Office of the Employment Advocate	6
Working Women's Centres	6
CHILD CARE	6
Growth in child care places	7
Non-work related care	7
School age care	8
Other child care measures	8
MARRIAGE AND RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION	8
CARERS	8
YOUNG WOMEN	10
TOWARDS EMPLOYMENT-STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOLS AND TRAINING	10
GREEN CORPS	10
WORK FOR THE DOLE	10
NEW APPRENTICESHIPS	11
OLDER WOMEN	11
RETIREMENT INCOME	11
Deferred Pension Bonus Plan	11
Reform of means testing for retirement income streams	14
Legislative Guarantee for Age Pension	14
AGED RESIDENTIAL CARE	14
SUPERANNUATION IMPROVEMENTS AND SAVINGS	15
Savings Rebate	15
Preservation	15
Choice and Flexibility	15
INCOME SECURITY	16
COMMON PARENTING PAYMENT	16
EXTENSION OF JOBS EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROGRAMME	16
ACTIVITY TEST CHANGES FOR EXPECTANT MOTHERS	17
FAMILY PAYMENT IF A CHILD GOES OVERSEAS	17
THE COMMONWEALTH SERVICE DELIVERY AGENCY	17
LAW AND JUSTICE	17
NATIONAL CAMPAIGN AGAINST VIOLENCE AND CRIME	18
NATIONAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SUMMIT	18
VIOLENCE IN THE ELECTRONIC MEDIA	18

X-RATED MATERIAL	20
MODEL CRIMINAL CODE	20
WOMEN'S LEGAL CENTRES	20
BETTER HEALTH	20
PILOT STUDY OF ALTERNATIVE FUNDING FOR RURAL OBSTETRIC SERVICES	21
IMMUNISATION	21
ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER HEALTH	21
Breastfeeding Strategy	21
Sexual Health	22
RURAL WOMEN	22
NATIONAL FORUM ON WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT	23
DEVELOPMENT OF A NATIONAL ACTION PLAN	23
INTEGRATED RURAL POLICY PACKAGE	23
RURAL WOMEN'S UNIT	24
WOMEN AND SMALL BUSINESS	24
WOMEN IN DECISION MAKING	25
EXECUTIVE SEARCH PILOT PROGRAMME IN GOVERNMENT	25
<i>APPOINT</i> DATABASE	25
POLITICAL REPRESENTATION	26
WOMEN AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY	26
OSW'S HOME PAGE ON THE INTERNET	26
IMPROVING ACCESS	26
A NEW GRANTS PROGRAMME	26
AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S ROUND TABLE	26
NATIONAL WOMEN'S COMMUNICATION NETWORK	27
PARLIAMENTARY ADVISORY GROUP	27
INFORMATION ON WOMEN IN FEDERAL PARLIAMENT	27
ANNUAL REPORT OF THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF NATIONAL WOMEN'S	28
NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS	28
CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION	28

OVERVIEW

our commitment to women

The Coalition Government's commitment to women has been reflected in its first year through policies which allow women to make real choices at different stages of their lives. The Government is offering women greater choice through action in the following key areas:

Work and Family Life

Blending work and family life is a challenge for many women today. The *Workplace Relations Act 1996* has laid down the framework for a more family friendly workplace with permanent part-time work and greater scope for flexibility in working arrangements. The Family Tax Initiative is an innovative measure to provide more assistance to families. Our child care system provides excellent choice for women in employment and ensures continued growth in child care places.

Employment Opportunities

Preparing young women for employment as the economy grows is a priority. Encouraging schools to provide links with training and with employers, and apprenticeships which recognise the needs and interests of young women, all play a part. The Green Corps Programme will encourage young Australians to consider further education and training in environment related areas.

Income Support

Income support is vital as part of a reliable safety net and support system for those in need. Benefit payments will be simpler and more flexible for customers. The new Parenting Payment recognises that family circumstances can change.

Greater Choice for Older Women

The pension bonus scheme gives greater choice to older women who want to stay in the workforce beyond age pension age. For the frail elderly, better choice of high quality care will be available.

Women as Carers

The National Carer Action Plan will provide a better choice of services for carers who often bear a heavy load. Extensions of Carer Payment and an increase in the rate of Domiciliary Nursing Care Benefit in this Budget, coupled with scope for more flexible use of respite care without losing pension entitlement, are major improvements.

Women in Decision Making

The Government wants to encourage far greater participation of women in decision making in all areas of government and business and is implementing a strategy to increase the number of women appointed to Commonwealth boards and bodies.

Safety

A safe environment in which community and economic life can flourish is a basic right of all Australians. Women's safety is a priority and domestic violence is especially abhorrent. In accordance with an election commitment the Prime Minister will convene a National Domestic

Violence Summit later this year. The Summit will work towards the development of a comprehensive strategy to reduce domestic violence in Australia.

BLENDING WORK AND FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES

Women constitute 43 per cent of the total Australian labour force (ABS, 1996). While the majority (57.5 per cent) of these women work full-time, the demand for part-time work continues to increase, particularly among women with family responsibilities. The percentage of women working part-time has grown from 37.6 per cent in 1986 to 42.5 per cent in 1996. Regardless of the extent of women's labour force involvement, the ability to combine family and work responsibilities effectively, remains a significant challenge.

Industrial Relations Reform

The Government's *Workplace Relations Act 1996* provides conditions for employers and employees to develop a more flexible, responsive working environment as well as a range of benefits and protections for women in the workplace. Changes to the federal industrial relations system which will be of particular benefit to women include removal of restrictions on regular part-time work and the capacity to formalise workplace agreements that suit individual circumstances.

Office of the Employment Advocate

Women employees will be able to access independent advice and assistance on rights and responsibilities under the *Workplace Relations Act 1996* from the Office of the Employment Advocate (OEA). The Employment Advocate is required to pay particular regard to the needs of workers who may be in a disadvantaged bargaining position.

The Office of the Employment Advocate is headed by Mr Alan Rowe, an independent Statutory Officer, who is responsible for filing and approving Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) and dealing with alleged breaches of AWAs and freedom of association matters. The OEA will promote better work and management practices through AWAs including arrangements that assist workers to blend work and family responsibilities.

The Head Office of the Employment Advocate is in Sydney with offices also located in each State or Territory Capital. The Australia-wide contact number is: 1300 366 632.

Working Women's Centres

Continued funding has been provided to existing Working Women's Centres which will play an important role in assisting women workers to understand and use the new industrial relations system.

Child Care

The Government is committed to ensuring that all parents have fair and equitable access to flexible, affordable and high quality care options. In recognising that access to child care is essential to women's involvement in paid work, the Budget provides for continued growth of additional child care places with an estimated 44,000 new private sector places and a further 39,000 new community long day care, Family Day Care and outside school hours care places to be established over the period 1997-98 to 2000-2001.

Growth in child care places

In June 1991, the number of below school age children in Commonwealth funded long day care services was 179,940. By June 1996 this had risen to 413,400. In particular, the private sector has grown by about 20,000 new places every year since 1991, when the Government extended Childcare Assistance subsidies to this sector. This has greatly exceeded the original forecast of a total of 28,000 places over the first four years.

The 1997-98 Child Care Reform Package includes a number of measures to address problems caused by rapid and unregulated growth. A National Planning System will be introduced to influence new long day care centres to locate in areas of unmet need. Private sector places eligible for Childcare Assistance will be contained to 7,000 new places for each of the calendar years 1998 and 1999 with a return to unrestricted growth beyond 1999. The limit will maintain growth of the industry at a level that is consistent with the growth in labour force participation of parents with young children. Funding totalling \$9.5 million over four years has also been set aside to support new community long day care centres established under the National Child Care Strategy which are located in disadvantaged rural and remote areas where no alternative care is available.

The Government will increase the supply of Family Day Care by 2,500 places at a cost of \$11 million over the next four years. This acknowledges that families are seeking greater access to Family Day Care because it offers more flexible hours, care for family groupings and quality care in a home setting. These additional places will alleviate pressures for families particularly in the rural and remote areas where the private sector is not establishing child care centres. An estimated 3,200 additional families (4,300 children) will benefit from this measure.

Non-work related care

From 1 January 1998, a 20 hour per week limit on access to Childcare Assistance will be introduced for each child in care for non-work related purposes. The limit will apply to all long day care and school age services. This measure improves the targeting of Childcare Assistance to parents who work, study, train or are seeking work, consistent with the primary objective of the Children's Services Programme. It will provide fair and equitable access for families in similar circumstances. It is also expected to improve access for an additional 17,000 children due to changes in usage patterns.

Working families and users of Occasional Care services and Aboriginal or Rural Multifunctional Children's services will not be affected by this change. Exemptions to the 20 hour limit will be available to ensure families in particular circumstances do not lose access to care. These exemptions will assist families in crisis, children at risk of abuse or neglect, and a limited number of services where they are the sole provider of care in their area.

Funding of \$1 million in each of the three years from 1998-99 has been set aside to improve developmental opportunities available through playgroups for children with a parent at home, representing a 60 per cent increase in current government assistance to playgroups.

School age care

Reform of funding for school age care has been a high priority for the Government. Present arrangements are inequitable for many families. The Government will introduce broad ranging reform which will significantly improve affordability for 70,000 low and middle income families using Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) services. The reforms will also improve the quality and viability of OSHC services.

Other child care measures

Childcare Assistance is currently paid in advance to services to reduce fees in accordance with family entitlements. On 1 January 1998, the new Commonwealth Service Delivery Agency will make payments fortnightly in advance to services based on family entitlements. From 1 January 1999 Childcare Assistance will be moved to arrears in conjunction with the introduction of a Childcare Card. Moving payments to arrears will provide consistency with other family payments made by the Commonwealth Service Delivery Agency.

The movement to payment in arrears may cause some difficulties for low income families who have to pay the full fees in advance for the first fortnight of care. The Department of Health and Family Services will develop options with the Commonwealth Service Delivery Agency to support families which have difficulty in meeting this cost.

To ensure families participating in the Work for the Dole initiative can gain access to appropriate child care, the Government will arrange and cover the full cost of child care for participants, estimated to cost around \$0.6 million over two years.

Marriage and Relationship Education

In recognition of pressures placed on family life today, the Government allocated an extra \$6.1 million over three years in 1996-97 to foster positive, stable relationships. In April 1997, 34 new and extended marriage and relationship education services were launched throughout Australia. The additional funding targeted to this sub programme will bring total Commonwealth government expenditure up to \$11.85 million over three years. The marriage and relationship education programme is a preventative programme which focuses on providing information and skills to foster positive, stable relationships.

CARERS

The majority of carers are women. The Government acknowledges the crucial role of carers and is very aware of the difficulties they face. Our commitment to the provision of better services for carers is reflected in the National Carer Action Plan which was announced in the 1996-97 Budget.

The first initiatives include greater access to respite care and changes to Carer Payment to give carers more opportunities to take a break and more choices for those who want to combine caring with part-time work or study.

The Government will provide further assistance to carers through:

- increasing the rate of Domiciliary Nursing Care Benefit (DNCB) from 1 July 1998 to align with the Child Disability Allowance (CDA). This provides an increase of \$16.60 per fortnight from the current rate of \$58.30 to \$74.90 (an increase of 28.5 per cent) to those receiving DNCB;
- extending Carer Payment from 1 July 1998 to carers of children under 16 with profound disabilities. From 1 March 1999 the Carer Payment will also be available to those required to care for an adult as well as care for or supervise care of that adult's dependent child; and
- increasing to 63 the number of days that a carer may take as a break from caring and still remain eligible for Carer Payment, CDA and DNCB, thus easing the pressure of their caring responsibilities.

The Government has also decided to extend the Newstart Allowance activity test exemption for temporary carers beyond the current 13 week limit in special circumstances. This increases the scope for the unemployed to provide care without losing their payment.

The Government has also been made aware of the concerns, over a long period of time, of the parents of very disabled children about the effectiveness of the CDA. In the five years from June 1991 to June 1996, the number of children receiving CDA rose by an average of 17.3 per cent per annum well above the annual growth in the number of children in the population. This has led to concerns about the administration of the allowance and the extent to which it continues to meet its objectives.

To address these concerns, from July 1998:

- the Government will introduce new assessment methods using child disability tables applicable only to new applicants from July 1998. People already receiving CDA as at 1 July 1998 will not have their payment affected by medical review for five years from that date. This will give current customers a substantial adjustment period before the new tables are applied to them;
- children who do not meet the criteria for the CDA under the new tables but who have a chronic medical condition will qualify for a Health Care Card which will assist with the cost of pharmaceuticals; and
- under new provisions, families with two or more disabled children who do not individually qualify for the allowance may be eligible for a single rate of CDA in recognition of the combined care responsibility that carers face in these circumstances.

In accordance with an election commitment, the Government will also provide:

- continued funding of in excess of \$8 million over four years for information and support services for carers. These services will mainly be provided through Carer Resource centres which were established under the 1996-97 Budget; and

- additional support of in excess of \$10 million over four years to persons with dementia and their carers particularly those in rural areas, by providing financial support to Aged Care Assessment Teams and leading agencies.

YOUNG WOMEN

Secure employment opportunities in growing sectors of the economy have yet to emerge for young women without tertiary qualifications. Statistics on young women's full-time unemployment (aged 15-19 years) indicate that full-time work opportunities for female school leavers are limited. Young women's full-time unemployment rate is consistently higher than for young men. In the 12 months to February 1997, the average rate for young women was 31 per cent, compared to 26 per cent for young men. The Government has identified youth unemployment as an area of particular concern and has already put in place a number of measures designed to improve young people's preparedness for the labour market and their competitiveness. These measures include the literacy and numeracy initiative, the expansion of vocational education options in schools, the development of New Apprenticeships, and the retention of junior rates of pay.

towards employment-strategies for schools and training

The Government will support and encourage schools to develop strategies that prepare students in their transition to employment, further education and training. Schools will be encouraged to tender to operate as employment agencies and to take an active role in providing job brokerage for school leavers. Strategies may include the extension of support and information services to students, including advice on employment and training options; and assistance to students in accessing external support services.

Green Corps

The Green Corps programme offers full-time accredited training opportunities of six months for young people (aged 17-20 years) interested in cultural heritage protection and environmental issues. At the end of their placement in the Corps, trainees will be eligible for a grant from the Government of \$500 to assist them to meet the costs of ongoing further education. They will also be able to use their Green Corps training as credit in further education and training.

The Government has provided over \$41 million to Green Corps over three years through the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs. This will enable up to 3,500 young people to participate in the programme.

Already in the first round of Green Corps projects which commenced in March 1997, 43 per cent of the participants were female.

Examples of Green Corps projects which have attracted a high number of women are the Millstream Chichester National Park, near Karratha in WA, where eight out of ten participants are female, and the revegetation programme operating through the Western Plains Zoo in Dubbo, NSW.

work for the dole

A series of pilot Work for the Dole projects will be located in rural Australia and regions where job opportunities for young people are most limited. These projects will enable young people to make a

valuable contribution to their community through work experience. It will help break the cycle of despair and despondency felt by so many young unemployed people.

This initiative is targeted at young people aged 18 to 24 years who have been unemployed for at least six months. This programme has the potential to benefit young women who are long term unemployed.

Young jobseekers who participate in this initiative will have the chance to add to their work experience and demonstrate their abilities through participation in projects which are supported by the community, and are of value to the communities in which they live.

Participants will work for two six hour days if aged 18 to 20 years and two and a half six hour days if 21 years and over, and will be required to participate for a maximum of six months each. Participants will be paid an extra \$20 per fortnight to cover any additional costs of working. For young women participants with children, the Government will arrange and cover the full cost of childcare. It is anticipated that the first pilot projects will commence in September 1997.

new apprenticeships

Training and employment opportunities for women will be expanded and improved through the development and implementation of New Apprenticeships.

Key features of the new training system include the development of part-time apprenticeships and traineeships; the expansion of apprenticeships and traineeships into new and growing industries and sectors where women are employed in significant numbers; and research to develop ways to overcome barriers that discourage women from participation in non-traditional and emerging fields of training and employment.

OLDER WOMEN

The Government recognises the significant contributions made by Australia's older women, many of whom have devoted their energies to a range of family, caring, community and volunteer responsibilities.

Older women of today have had shorter workforce experience and are less likely to have superannuation or other savings to provide for retirement. Measures in this Budget will provide added security for age pensioners, the majority of whom are women. Through the Government's initiative on Retirement Savings Accounts, in future women will be able to accumulate additional financial resources for later life.

While recognising that many older women remain healthy and active, the Government is also committed to improvements in residential aged care.

There are several initiatives in the Budget which will assist older women.

Retirement Income

Deferred Pension Bonus Plan

The Government is delivering its election commitment to introduce a pension bonus scheme. The deferred pension bonus plan recognises that for some, active participation in paid work continues beyond retirement age.

This plan offers people of Age or Service Pension age a positive incentive to defer retirement. Under the plan a person who defers Age or Service Pension take-up while continuing to work for at least 25 hours per week will accrue a bonus of 9.4 per cent of his or her basic pension entitlement.

The bonus will accrue for each year of employment beyond Age or Service Pension age, up to a maximum of 5 years, when the bonus reaches 47 per cent of entitlement for each year of deferral. The starting date for bonus accrual will be 1 July 1998.

The bonus will be paid as a lump sum on pension take-up, and will be tax exempt. At current pension rates, the maximum bonus would be \$21,251 for a single pension, and \$35,450 for a couple, in receipt of the maximum rate of pension. This will be of particular importance to women who generally live longer than men, have broken patterns of employment and less chance of accruing retirement savings. Two examples of how the scheme would operate are set out below.

Example 1

Jean and Arthur are currently working. Arthur is eligible for the Age Pension from 3 July 1998. Arthur chooses to continue working (for a minimum of 25 hours per week) for the next five years. He applies for the Age Pension on 3 July 2003 and his assessed basic pension entitlement is \$290.10 per fortnight (based on current rates). Arthur will receive a bonus payment of \$17,725.10 with his first Age Pension payment.

Jean is not eligible for the Age Pension until 18 August 2000. She chooses to wait until Arthur retires before she applies for the Age Pension. Jean applies for her pension on 18 August 2003 and her assessed basic pension entitlement is \$290.10 per fortnight (based on current rates). Jean will receive a bonus payment of \$6,381.03 with her first Age Pension payment.

Arthur

$$\begin{aligned} \$290.10 \times 26 \text{ fortnights} &= \$7,542.60 \\ \$7,542.60 \times 9.4 \text{ per cent} \times 5 \text{ (47 per cent)} &= \$3,545.02 \\ \$3,545.02 \times 5 &= \$17,725.10 \end{aligned}$$

Jean

$$\begin{aligned} \$290.10 \times 26 \text{ fortnights} &= \$7,542.60 \\ \$7,542.60 \times 9.4 \text{ per cent} \times 3 \text{ (28.2 per cent)} &= \$2,127.01 \\ \$2,127.01 \times 3 &= \$6,381.03 \end{aligned}$$

Between them Arthur and Jean will have a tax free bonus payment of \$24,106.13 when they choose to retire.

Example 2

Sharon qualifies for the Age Pension in the year the scheme commences. She is working in a shop where she has worked for some years, does not want to retire and is concerned to improve her retirement income. She defers claiming the pension until she has accrued a 5 year bonus. When she claims the pension a little over five years later, she is assessed as being entitled to the maximum basic rate, currently \$347.80 per fortnight. The tax free bonus will be included with her first pension payment. The amount is calculated below.

Sharon

$$\begin{aligned} \$347.80 \times 26 \text{ fortnights} &= \$9,042.80 \\ \$9,042.80 \times 9.4 \text{ per cent} \times 5 \text{ (47 per cent)} &= \$4,250.12 \\ \$4,250.12 \times 5 &= \$21,250.58 \end{aligned}$$

Sharon will receive a bonus payment of \$21,250.58 with her first Age Pension payment.

The bonus payments have been calculated using the current maximum rate for Age Pension and do not take into account any Consumer Price Index increases that may occur.

The deferred pension bonus plan will assist older people with the cost of larger purchases which are often important when a person commences retirement. The deferred pension bonus plan will be available to all persons who are eligible for a full or part pension who remain in the workforce beyond age pension age.

Reform of means testing for retirement income streams

Currently some people find the rules on means testing of income streams, which many retirees purchase to provide a regular income in their retirement, difficult to understand. This sometimes results in them making decisions which focus on gaining access to social security benefits rather than maximising their total retirement income.

The Government is introducing a standard set of rules for assessing income streams which will address this problem. The present arrangements for assessing income streams are complex and also contain loopholes through which some people are able to circumvent the means test. The new rules will make their income and asset treatment more simple, consistent and equitable. They also provide significant incentives for longer term income streams meeting specified criteria. The new, simpler arrangements will provide a clear choice between income streams which ensure an orderly draw down of capital and income over the entire retirement period, and income streams which offer shorter terms and greater access to capital. Special arrangements will exempt products which have already been purchased from the new approach where they involve contracts that cannot be broken or where people would face significant penalties by changing products.

Legislative Guarantee for Age Pension

The Government has demonstrated its commitment to an adequate Age Pension for those who need it by introducing legislation to maintain the single rate of pension at no less than 25 per cent of Male Total Average Weekly Earnings (MTAWE). The date of commencement of the legislation will be 20 September 1997. This will ensure that age pensioners share in increases in community living standards.

While the MTAWE benchmark has been a long standing bipartisan commitment, this is the first time that a Government has entrenched the MTAWE benchmark in legislation. It provides further evidence of the priority this Government places on ensuring the adequacy of pension payments. The measure provides added security for age pensioners, the majority of whom - 65 per cent - are women.

AGED RESIDENTIAL CARE

Almost three in every four older Australians living in nursing homes or aged care hostels are women. The Government is concerned to provide older Australians with choices and opportunities for a better quality of life in their later, most vulnerable, years.

In the 1996-97 Budget the Government announced wide ranging reforms to residential aged care. The new reforms will:

- integrate nursing homes and hostels minimising the need for relocation;
- establish an accreditation system to assure quality of care and accommodation;

- introduce an accommodation bond for some residents which will provide funds to improve and upgrade facilities for all residents; and
- introduce new funding rates to better align existing resources with care needs which will particularly benefit people suffering from dementia.

The new arrangements are expected to come into effect on 1 July 1997. Implementation details of the reform package have been worked out with industry and consumer groups. Stringent safeguards will protect those older Australians seeking to move to residential aged care facilities who cannot afford to pay an accommodation bond.

Over time the reforms will ensure a better quality of accommodation and more appropriate levels of care for older Australians are available.

Superannuation improvements and savings

Savings Rebate

The Government is strongly committed to encouraging household saving, and recognises that people, particularly women, want to save for life cycle needs such as education, health care, housing and consumer durables.

A major initiative of this Budget is the introduction of a broadly based savings rebate which will be available to resident individual taxpayers. The savings rebate will assist current savers and will be an encouragement to potential savers.

All taxpaying individuals who have some savings or investments or make undeducted superannuation contributions will benefit from the savings rebate. This rebate replaces the former Government's inequitable proposal to provide superannuation contributions to match 'compulsory' superannuation contributions by employees. The previous proposal would have provided no assistance to those who are already retired or are otherwise ineligible to contribute to superannuation, often women.

Preservation

This Government is also committed to helping people to achieve a higher standard of living in retirement than would be possible from the Age Pension alone. This Budget announces improvements to the superannuation preservation arrangements to ensure that benefits are used to provide income in retirement, and generally are not withdrawn from the superannuation system for other reasons.

Individuals will continue to be able to obtain early access to preserved benefits where the benefits are taken in the form of a non-commutable life pension or lifetime annuity on termination of gainful employment (subject to the terms of superannuation fund trust deeds).

Choice and Flexibility

The Government also believes that women should have more choice as to where their superannuation benefits are invested. Hence, from 1 July 1998, employees will be given a greater choice as to which fund will receive compulsory employer superannuation contributions made on their behalf. The arrangements will not override negotiated provisions contained in workplace

agreements, and will not apply to employees working under State industrial awards, for constitutional reasons.

To improve the flexibility of superannuation arrangements for low income employees, from 1 July 1998, people earning from \$450 to \$900 per month from an employer will be allowed, with the employer's agreement, to choose to receive as wages or salary the employer Superannuation Guarantee (SG) contributions. Employees will only be able to opt out to the extent that SG contributions exceed relevant award obligations.

These measures will benefit women by ensuring that superannuation is made more flexible, reflecting people's actual social and work experiences.

These reforms complement several measures announced in the 1996-97 Budget, which come into effect from 1 July 1997, and include:

- allowing a contributing spouse to receive an 18 per cent income tax rebate for contributions of up to \$3,000 per annum to the superannuation fund or Retirement Savings Account (RSA) of a low income spouse. This policy will assist many women who have in the past not had access to their own superannuation arrangements; and
- allowing individuals continuing in gainful employment to contribute to superannuation up to the age of 70, rather than 65 (the previous limit). This policy allows people who wish to continue in employment to continue to build up superannuation benefits.

INCOME SECURITY

Common Parenting pAYMENT

The Government is strongly committed to supporting families with children and recognises the disruption and inconvenience which can affect families when their living arrangements change and they are required to move between Sole Parent Pension and Parenting Allowance. These payments will be replaced from 20 March 1998 by a single Parenting Payment which recognises a person's responsibilities for caring for children and will streamline claim and payment processes.

This change will reduce the stigma often associated with receipt of the Sole Parent Pension and treat people with children in a more consistent way. Only certain aspects of both payments have been aligned and sole parents have retained the core features of the pension payment rate, income testing and concession card.

Extension of JOBS EDUCATION AND TRAINING programme

The Jobs, Education and Training (JET) programme successfully aids entry or re-entry into the workforce through an integrated programme of advice and counselling, access to child care, and education and employment assistance. The JET programme is currently available to Sole Parent Pensioners, people in receipt of carers pensions and widows receiving social security payments.

In order to ensure that people caring for dependent children are treated in a more consistent way, the Government is extending access to the JET programme to recipients of the new Parenting Payment. Services will be targeted to parents at two critical points: when the youngest child has recently

commenced school, or high school. These times are when a parent is most likely to reassess the possibility of paid work.

Included in this initiative is additional funding of \$3 million per year to boost the capacity for JET participants to have pre-vocational training and be more able to take up employment.

Activity Test Changes for Expectant Mothers

Changes will be introduced to make Department of Social Security payment arrangements more responsive and less intrusive for unemployed women who are expectant mothers.

Under current guidelines, expectant mothers in the latter stages of pregnancy need to meet Newstart Allowance (NSA) activity test requirements or they have to transfer to Special Benefit which has a harsher income test than NSA. This measure will enable expectant mothers to remain on NSA, by providing a temporary exemption from activity test obligations from up to six weeks prior to the expected date of confinement to six weeks after the birth of their child.

Family Payment if a child goes overseas

Under current arrangements more than minimum Family Payment (FP) is not payable if a child is absent from Australia on a FP payday. This has resulted in financial hardship for some families who continue to meet ongoing financial responsibilities for the child but who cease to be entitled to more than minimum FP while the child is overseas. In the past low income families have had their FP reduced by an average of \$80 per week when their child was out of Australia. Under this initiative families will continue to be eligible to receive maximum FP when a child and/or parent goes overseas for up to eight weeks.

The Commonwealth service delivery Agency

Women make up 60 per cent of the almost four million Australians who receive income support payments (this figure excludes family payments and allowances). The new Commonwealth Service Delivery Agency (CSDA) will commence operation on 1 July 1997. It will be a user friendly 'one stop shop'. Customers will have more convenient and better access to information about government services, benefits and allowances.

The first priority for the CSDA will be to deliver all the payments and services currently delivered by the Department of Social Security together with some of the employment and student services of the Department of Employment, Education and Training and Youth Affairs. This means for people receiving unemployment benefits there will no longer be the disadvantage of having to deal with different government agencies in different locations. Other Commonwealth services will be added later, including Childcare Assistance and the Childcare Cash Rebate. There will be a large investment in the Teleservice facility to assist the 'one stop' service.

LAW AND JUSTICE

Violence and images of violence are issues which are of major public concern. The Government is committed to reducing substantially the incidence of violence in the community and secured the agreement of all the States and Territories to uniform control of automatic and semi-automatic firearms. The Australian Bureau of Statistics' Women's Safety Survey published in December 1996

provided the first comprehensive national data on the extent of all forms of violence against women in Australia. The evidence demonstrates that prevention of violence against women still requires concerted efforts by all governments.

National Campaign Against Violence and Crime

Through its \$13 million National Campaign Against Violence and Crime (1996-97 to 1998-99), the Government will be attempting to address some of the concerns women have about crime and violence in Australian society. In 1997-98 work will be undertaken in the following areas:

- a pilot project to prevent recurrent burglaries;
- a project targeted at adolescents and aimed at preventing violence/victimisation in future relationships;
- an early intervention project with children under 10 years of age, with the ultimate aim of preventing future delinquency;
- an audit and review of programmes provided for perpetrators of domestic violence; and
- other general community awareness programmes aimed at addressing fear of crime and reducing the culture and incidence of violence in Australia.

National Domestic Violence Summit

The Government remains strongly committed to reducing the incidence of domestic violence in Australian families. Domestic violence is not just a 'women's issue'. Violence, in all its forms, is an issue for our whole community. We have a responsibility to work towards a safe and secure society for all Australians and for those who are guests in our country. The Prime Minister will convene a National Domestic Violence Summit later this year, bringing together the Commonwealth and States in a joint approach aimed at more effectively preventing domestic violence across Australia.

The first step in the Summit process was the National Domestic Violence Forum, held on 23 and 24 September 1996 at Parliament House in Canberra. It was attended by some 130 experts in the area of domestic violence, including the judiciary, the police, peak welfare organisations and providers of services to victims of violence and to children who witness domestic violence. The recommendations arising from the Forum are informing the work of governments in preparing for the Summit. Significant resources are being committed to crisis support for women and children experiencing violence. The Government believes attention should now focus on prevention with initiatives aimed at parents, and at young people to break the cycle of violence; and on changing community attitudes so that we become a nation which resists and rejects violence.

Violence in the Electronic Media

Following the Port Arthur Tragedy last year, a Ministerial Committee was established to examine the portrayal of violence in the electronic media. The Ministerial Committee reported to Cabinet in July 1996 and made a number of recommendations, including the introduction of V-chips in televisions, the introduction of an industry code of practice for video and interactive software retailers and a review of the Classification Board to ensure it was representative of the community.

As recommended by the Committee, the Attorney General and State and Territory Censorship Ministers amended classification guidelines for films and videos to remove high level violence material from the R classification. Such material would now be classified as RC (Refused Classification). Several States have agreed to trial the expansion of the Community Liaison Officer (CLO) scheme which assists in monitoring and enforcing the censorship classifications regime.

The Committee recommended that free to air broadcasters modify films for broadcast in accordance with Office of Film and Literature Classification Guidelines. These are matters for national and commercial broadcasters to implement through their respective codes of practice. The revised draft Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations *Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice* contains a clear reference to the need to modify films in this way, and proposes a new AV classification for more violent programmes and restricts their broadcast to a 9.30pm to 5.00am time zone.

All of the recommendations are at various stages of implementation by the relevant government and industry bodies.

The Ministerial Committee received more than 700 submissions from the public. Matters arising from submissions were referred to the Senate Select Committee on Community Standards Relevant to the Supply of Services Utilising Electronic Technologies for more detailed consideration. The Senate Select Committee's *Report on the Portrayal of Violence in the Electronic Media* was tabled on 13 February 1997 and the Government is considering the Committee's recommendations.

X-Rated Material

The Government has moved to ban X-rated videos and to create a new category for non-violent sexually explicit videos which will contain tighter guidelines. The decision addresses community concerns about the availability of any sexually violent and demeaning sexually explicit material on video.

Content in the proposed non-violent sexually explicit category will not permit the depiction of violence, sexual violence, sexualised violence or coercion. It also does not allow sexually aggressive language, depictions which purposefully demean or for people over the age of 18 to be portrayed as minors.

Consultation and negotiation on the Government position will be undertaken with the State and Territory Censorship Ministers on this matter.

The Government also agreed to ban X-rated programmes and any replacement category on pay TV narrowcasting services. Such services will be limited to providing R-rated programming. Such programming, provided to the home, must be limited to late night viewing and can only be accessed by using a Personal Identification Number.

Model Criminal Code

The Government wants to see better protection under the law for women and, as a member of the Standing Committee of Attorneys' General (SCAG), has placed the reform of sexual assault laws as a priority in the development of a Model Criminal Code. The Model Criminal Code Officers' Committee, in association with the Office of the Status of Women, has just concluded a series of nationwide consultations on the discussion paper *Sexual Offences Against the Person*. The purpose of the consultations was to ensure extensive community input, especially the views of women, into preparation of the Committee's recommendations to SCAG.

Women's Legal Centres

The Government has maintained its commitment to the ongoing operation of Women's Legal Centres through continued support and funding at existing levels. The Centres provide a range of services for women, including legal advice, information and advocacy. This will continue to provide women with affordable and accessible information, assistance and support in relation to their legal rights and responsibilities.

BETTER HEALTH

Good health is fundamental to a fulfilling life. Health and well being of women requires a specific focus. The National Women's Health Programme focuses on improving services to women who are at a disadvantage - whether economically or because of geographical isolation - or for whom culturally appropriate services need to be delivered.

The Alternative Birthing Services Programme promotes greater choice for women in the public health system and encourages services delivered primarily by midwives. The next phase of the programme will build on models already successfully trialled and evaluated.

Funding is available for this programme for a further two years.

Pilot Study of Alternative Funding for Rural Obstetric Services

Key stakeholders will be involved in developing a pilot study of alternative funding to improve obstetric services in rural areas. A total of \$5 million will be available for the project. This funding will be provided by savings from Medicare benefits which will not be available for obstetric services provided in these identified areas for the period of the study.

Immunisation

Women instinctively want to protect their children. In a major push to boost childhood immunisation rates the Government launched a package of measures in February 1997. *Immunise Australia: A Seven Point Plan* includes:

- increasing maternity Allowance to \$950 per eligible child from 1 July 1998; paying the first \$750 following the birth of the child and \$200 at 18 months on proof of age appropriate immunisation;
- linking Childcare Assistance and Childcare Rebate from 1 January 1998 to a child's immunisation status;
- Immunisation Days to increase coverage;
- monitoring and evaluation of immunisation targets through the collection of data and incentive systems;
- a feasibility study for a national measles eradication programme;
- financial incentives to medical practitioners to achieve high immunisation levels; and
- in conjunction with the States and Territories, the introduction of firm school entry requirements linking entry to provisions of information on a child's immunisation status.

Building on this, the Budget establishes a new funding mechanism for the purchase of essential vaccines and provides in excess of \$14 million over four years for Hepatitis B, the first vaccine to be funded under this mechanism.

In addition this year's Budget provides \$1.6 million over four years for a school-based programme of Hepatitis B vaccination to protect children before risks related to life-style begin to become a factor.

The measure will involve the Commonwealth working with the States and Territories, the Commonwealth covering the cost of vaccines and contributing up to half the additional cost of delivering Hepatitis B vaccination in schools. States and Territories will be responsible for the delivery of the programme as well as the provision of their half of the additional funding.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health

Breastfeeding Strategy

The Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Services is developing and implementing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' component of the National Breast Feeding Strategy as part of the *Health Throughout Life* Maternal Health Policy. The Office has developed a

plan to encourage prolonged breastfeeding and the appropriate introduction of additional foods for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants. One strategy is to improve training for Aboriginal Health Workers and other health professionals in promoting and supporting breastfeeding and appropriate infant feeding; the second is to support community controlled health services in developing appropriate care protocols based on identified 'best practice'.

Implementing the first part of the plan, the Office has commissioned an audit of current training in breastfeeding support and infant nutrition for Aboriginal Health Workers and other health professionals providing health care to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander women. Depending on the outcomes of this audit, if there is a need, the Office will develop core elements for training modules for Aboriginal Health Workers and advise on appropriate information to be included in training for other health professionals in the promotion and support of breastfeeding and early infant nutrition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

A second project which is currently underway is a review of current interventions and identification of best practice currently used by community based Aboriginal Health Service providers in promoting and supporting breastfeeding and appropriate infant nutrition. The information gathered from this review, and recommendations on successful interventions to encourage breastfeeding and good infant nutrition, will be offered to health services providing care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and infants. Funding of \$0.4 million is also scheduled to be available in 1997-98 to support the development, trial and evaluation of support and care guidelines.

Sexual Health

The Indigenous Australians' Sexual Health Strategy was launched by the Minister for Health and Family Services, the Hon Michael Wooldridge MP, on 26 March 1997. The Strategy, developed by the Australian National Council on AIDS and Related Diseases Working Party on Indigenous Australians' Sexual Health, is aimed at promoting and maintaining the sexual health of all indigenous Australians. The relationship between reproductive health and sexual health is well recognised, especially in relation to the effects that sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV, have on the ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to have children. Thus, any strategy aimed at improving sexual health will also result in improved health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in relation to their reproductive and maternal health. The Strategy provides for funding in the order of \$12 million over the years 1997-98 and 1998-99.

The Strategy strongly emphasises that one of the crucial factors required for the effective control of STDs and, hence prevention of HIV transmission, is access to high quality primary health care. The Office is progressing a range of initiatives in response to the Sexual Health Strategy that are aimed at strengthening the capacity of the primary health care sector to improve both access to, and the quality of, sexual health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These initiatives, such as facilitating the development of clinical care guidelines and the implementation of computerised patient information and recall systems within Aboriginal Health Services, are population health approaches and will have a positive impact on Indigenous health generally.

RURAL WOMEN

The Government acknowledges that many farm businesses, community services and town-based enterprises are dependent upon the hard work and dedication of women in rural and regional Australia. The Government has implemented a number of specific and broad-based measures that will benefit women as individuals, and as members of rural families and communities.

National FORUM on Women in Agriculture and Resource Management

In March 1997 the Federal Government, together with the State and Territory Governments, provided funding for the National Forum on Women in Agriculture and Resource Management. The Forum was convened to recognise and support women's current and potential contribution to increased competitiveness and innovation in agriculture and sustainable natural resource management. Rural women and men, industry and government recognise that there is an urgent need for the rural sector to be in a position to capitalise on the diversity of skills and experience that exists in the sector to more effectively bring about profitable and sustainable primary industries and viable rural communities.

Development of a National Action Plan

To ensure that the Forum has long term strategic outcomes for the sector and rural women, a *National Action Plan* will be developed. All major stakeholders in agriculture and resource management will have the opportunity to provide input to the Plan. It is envisaged that the guidelines within the *National Action Plan* will be implemented with organisations throughout the sector over a period of five years.

Integrated Rural Policy Package

Recommendations from a number of reviews have led to the realisation that current rural programmes require restructuring. Uncommitted funds from the Rural Communities Access Programme and the Rural Adjustment Scheme will be redirected to initiatives for the rural sector to be included in a new Integrated Rural Policy Package. This will be developed in close consultation with the industry, rural women and other stakeholders. The Integrated Rural Package will draw together the Government's response to a number of policy reviews and will address rural adjustment, drought, farm family welfare, risk management, farmer education and training and rural community development.

The objective is to promote a self-reliant productive rural sector supported by targeted Government measures which focus on building of skills and capacity of rural industries and communities to manage effectively in an uncertain environment. For example, a key recommendation from the National Forum on Women in Agriculture and Resource Management was the need for rural women to have greater access to leadership courses. This recommendation in particular will be considered in the context of the development of a new Integrated Rural Policy Package.

The Business Plan for Australian Agriculture will be used as a basis for consultation with stakeholders on the development of the Integrated Rural Policy Package. The Business Plan will outline a broad vision for the sector and set goals for the next decade, based on reforms which must be achieved if Australian agriculture is to improve its international competitiveness and realise its significant growth potential. The Business Plan will also identify the roles and responsibilities for industry and other stakeholders, including Government, in creating an environment in which Australian agriculture will prosper in the twenty first century.

Funding in this Budget for the package will be some \$199 million over four years. The Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, the Hon John Anderson MP, will be consulting with his state colleagues, farm groups, rural women and other stakeholders during 1997 to finalise the details as part of the package which will be announced in the second half of 1997.

Rural Women's Unit

The Government's commitment to increasing rural women's opportunities for input to policy making is demonstrated by its support of the Rural Women's Unit (RWU) in the Department of Primary Industries and Energy (DPIE). The Unit provides an important link between the Commonwealth Government and women in rural Australia.

WOMEN AND SMALL BUSINESS

Small business is playing an increasingly important role in Australia's economy, especially in relation to generating new job opportunities. Employment in small business has grown more rapidly than in big business or employment in the public sector.

The Government recognises the enormous contribution made by women in small business to Australia's economy. Women now comprise one third of small business owners and operators in Australia. Research indicates that over the past decade, this number has been increasing more rapidly than the corresponding rate for small businesses owned and operated by men. Of these small businesses, 10-12 per cent are owned/managed exclusively by women, and in 20 per cent women share the leading role in managing the business.

Currently more than one million of the 2.7 million people (40 per cent) working in small business are women (ABS, 1996). Small business employment is one of the areas which is continuing to attract significantly higher levels of women's interest and involvement.

The Office of the Status of Women (OSW) is currently undertaking research on women and small business which focuses on impediments which women may face as small business owners or managers to the expansion of their business.

The Government is committed to reducing 'red tape' for small business. The Prime Minister's Statement on 24 March 1997 entitled, *More Time for Business*, outlined an ambitious agenda to reduce significantly the paperwork and compliance burden for small business.

It contains a comprehensive package of initiatives which will deliver to small business the necessary incentives to prosper and grow. These initiatives include:

- simplifying taxation compliance;
- reducing the complexity and delays in business approvals and registration;
- accelerating Commonwealth, State and Territory reform on rules and regulations; and
- requiring government departments to justify new regulations in a Regulation Impact Statement.

The Government has put in place a number of measures to support and encourage the small business sector to promote the rate of job growth. Unfair dismissal laws introduced by the previous Government have frequently been cited by small business owners as being unfair to employers, and a major impediment to small business employment.

The Government has responded with specific measures for employers in the *Workplace Relations Act 1996*, repealing previous provisions from 31 December 1997 and replacing them with a fair and simple process of appeal against dismissal, based on the principle of a 'fair go all round', that is, fair to both employers and employees. The Government has decided to go further in recognition of the disproportionate burden that unfair dismissal claims impose on small businesses, by excluding (from 1 July 1997) new employees of businesses with 15 or fewer employees, during their first year of service. Safeguards will remain - these employees will not be excluded from protection against dismissal on discrimination grounds, such as pregnancy.

WOMEN IN DECISION MAKING

The Government wishes to see more women appointed to both private sector and public sector boards. To draw out best practice and strategies for success, OSW commissioned two research papers: *Women's Participation on Commonwealth and Private Sector Boards* and *Women in Public and Private Sector Senior Management*. It is expected that these papers will be available later this year.

Executive Search Pilot Programme in government

A focussed strategy will be tested in Commonwealth Departments. OSW is implementing a pilot programme with a small number of government departments aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of an executive search process on improving the participation rates of women on Commonwealth boards and bodies. A similar successful scheme has operated in South Australia and elements of this project have served as a model for the pilot.

***Appoint* database**

The *Appoint* database is a monitoring system used by the OSW to provide whole of Government information on the appointment of women to Commonwealth bodies. *Appoint* data is collected on a six monthly basis. OSW is currently the only user of this aggregated information. Some departments use the system for annual reporting purposes.

Political representation

A revised and updated version of *Every Woman's Guide to Getting into Politics*, a non-partisan, user-friendly handbook providing information and advice to women interested in getting into parliament was published in December 1996 and is expected to be available on the Internet by June 1997 (<http://www.nla.gov.au/osw/>). The handbook is available free of charge on request.

WOMEN AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

OSW has contributed to development of government policy on information and communications technologies to inform debate on associated gender issues. Between October 1996 and January 1997 three research papers focussing on the key issues for women in relation to information and communications technology were published on the Internet, linked to the OSW's home page. The research papers were: *Women's Access to Online Services*; *Women's Involvement with Online and Interactive Content*; and *Regulating the Internet: Issues for Women*.

OSW's home page on the internet

Located at <http://www.nla.gov.au/osw/>, the OSW home page provides information on OSW including information on the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women. OSW's email address is women@dpmc.gov.au. This statement is linked to OSW's site, or accessed directly from the AGPS homepage at <http://www.agps.com.au>.

IMPROVING ACCESS

The Government is working to provide greater opportunities for women's organisations to communicate effectively with government and to access mainstream resources in recognition of the broad impact of women's issues.

The Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women has taken a number of initiatives designed to improve communication and access between Australian women and the Federal Government. The measures include:

A new grants programme

Major Australian national women's non-Government organisations (NGOs) have been invited to apply for grants for operational funding in 1997-98. Grants of up to \$50,000 will go to a core group of truly national organisations capable of representing the broad issues of concern to Australian women at Commonwealth, State and community levels. Women's organisations with a specific focus will be encouraged to apply to the department or agency which reflect its needs and Ministers will ensure that women's organisations can compete on a level playing field.

Australian Women's Round Table

The Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women will host the Australian Women's Round Table meeting on 27-28 August 1997, in Canberra. The Round Table will provide an extended opportunity for national women's NGOs to be informed first hand of government policies and programmes and to speak directly to the Government on the concerns of women in the community. Women's NGOs are being consulted about the priority issues for discussion. The

extended meeting will allow NGOs more time for networking and meetings with government Ministers and other Parliamentarians.

National Women's Communication Network

The Government recognises that information sharing is vital to ensuring the ongoing effectiveness of both Government and NGOs and has agreed to fund a national women's communications network. This network will facilitate the exchange of information between the Government and women's NGOs using a range of mechanisms to disseminate this information.

Parliamentary Advisory Group

This group, comprising a Parliamentary representative from each state and territory, was established to provide feedback to the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women on Federal issues affecting women in their respective States. This is intended to facilitate the flow of ideas and concerns of women throughout Australia back to Canberra. The panel comprises:

NSW		Senator Helen Coonan	ph: 02 9251 8966
Vic.	03 9544 7411		Senator Kay Patterson
Qld	07 5591 1011		Mrs Kathy Sullivan
WA	09 481 0349		Senator Sue Knowles
SA	08 8410 2669		Ms Trish Worth
Tas.	003 341 755		Senator Jocelyn Newman
ACT	06 247 6444		Senator Margaret Reid
NT			Senator Grant Tambling
089 9813 567			

information on women in federal parliament

The Government released the booklet *Getting the Message Through* in December 1996. It provides information and contact details on all women in Federal Parliament as well as information on Parliamentary Committees to assist women to gain greater access to the Parliament and the Parliamentary Committee system. Copies are available free of charge by calling Senator Newman's Canberra Office on 06 277 7560.

Annual Report of the achievements of national women's non-government organisations

The Government is coordinating input into an Annual Report of the achievements of national women's NGOs to promote the valuable work which these organisations are doing to raise the status of women. The Annual Report will be published in both book form and on the Internet to coincide with the Australian Women's Round Table meeting.

Constitutional Convention

Constitutional issues are a matter for all Australians, and all Australians should be able to participate in a mature discussion on the range of issues surrounding our system of government and proposals for an Australian republic. To this end, as promised during the election campaign, the Government will hold a constitutional convention in December 1997. The success of any discussion on constitutional issues will depend on the breadth of attitudes that can be engaged, and the Government will be encouraging all interested Australians to participate. As promised during the election campaign, half of the 152 delegates will be appointed to ensure that groups which might not otherwise be adequately represented are afforded the opportunity to participate, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and young people between 18 and 25 years of age. The Government is committed to ensuring that the appointments reflect an appropriate balance between men and women.