

STATUS OF WOMEN

Opportunity and Choice

The Coalition is committed to promoting economic independence for women while respecting the choices they make about their lives.

Opportunity and Choice

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Executive Summary

The Liberal and National Parties believe that the role of government is to maximise the choices available to women in balancing their work and family responsibilities.

Unlike Labor, the Coalition's policies are not about promoting particular roles as a stereotype for all women. Rather, we will promote policies which maximise, and respect the choices which women make about their own lives.

The Coalition will:

- **provide \$24 million over four years to fund a Return to Work program** to provide skills assistance, build confidence, and increase familiarity with current technology for people seeking to re-enter the labour force after an absence of two years or more. This support will be targeted to those who have been absent from the workforce due to their roles as primary carers;
- **provide \$8 million over four years for a 'fly-in fly-out' female GP service** to rural and remote areas which are otherwise unable to obtain the services of a female doctor, as part of the Coalition's commitment to rural doctor retention;
- **provide an additional \$4 million over four years for support services for women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer.** This will include specialised nursing care and assistance with the costs of travel for treatment;
- **allocate an additional \$25 million over three years to the Partnerships Against Domestic Violence initiative;** and
- **provide \$3 million over four years to assist the continued growth and prosperity of women in small business.**

LABOR'S RECORD

Prescription Rather Than Choice

- Labor neglected women and mothers who chose not to be a part of the paid workforce;
 - the estimated 1.5 million carers in our community, around 65 per cent of whom are women, were largely ignored;
 - studies were conducted into violence against women but action to combat the problem was neglected;
 - reform of the treatment of superannuation upon divorce was put in the 'too hard' basket;
 - child care was unplanned and unchecked; many areas had an oversupply of places while others went without;
 - inadequate assistance was given to families with school-age care needs. Child care assistance to families using Outside School Hours Care was exceptionally low compared to other forms of care;
 - the industrial relations system was formulated by Labor for its union mates with little regard to the interests of working women with family responsibilities; most significantly by severely limiting opportunities for part-time employment; and
 - there were no effective strategies to boost the numbers of women on more than 750 government boards and agencies.
- **Highlights of the Government's Achievements**
 - **A Families**

(i) Financial Benefits for Families

The \$1 billion **Family Tax Initiative** was the centrepiece of the Coalition's **Family Tax Package promised during the last election.**

Commencing on 1 January 1997, the initiative demonstrated the Coalition's commitment to relieving the financial pressures on low and middle-income families bringing up children.

Two million Australian families with dependent children continue to benefit from the Family Tax Initiative.

The Family Tax Initiative recognises, through the tax system, the costs of bringing up children, including the income forgone by families with only one parent in the paid workforce.

The Family Tax Initiative benefits needy working families by increasing the tax free threshold by \$1,000 for each dependent

child up to the age of 16 and each dependent secondary student up to 18 years. This equates to \$200 a year for each child.

In addition, single income families including sole parents receive a further \$2,500 increase in their tax free threshold if they have a child aged under five. This translates into \$500 a year per family.

In 1997 the Coalition also introduced a rebate for families with private health insurance of up to \$450 a year, fulfilling another Coalition commitment to the Australian people at the last election.

(ii) Strengthening Families

The Coalition has implemented a comprehensive *Strengthening Families Strategy* to assist families cope with the pressures of today's society. The strategy includes funding for emergency relief, youth homelessness, child abuse prevention, outside school hours activities and family support workers.

(iii) Families and Relationship Support

The Coalition has provided additional funding of \$12.1 million over three years for a range of initiatives to assist people to maintain healthy relationships and, if a relationship breaks down, to help people resolve problems and avoid legal fees and emotionally debilitating court proceedings. These include funding for family relationship support and men's relationship support services.

(iv) Carers

There are an estimated 1.5 million carers in Australia, two-thirds of whom are women. The Coalition has recognised the vital contribution that carers make and the demanding role they undertake. Policies to provide support for carers have been announced every year under the Coalition government. Our *Staying at Home* package, announced in April this year and costing \$280 million over four years, is the most recent demonstration of the Coalition's commitment to carers.

B Work and Family

(i) Child Care

The Coalition has:

- implemented a child care planning system so new child care places are

in the areas of greatest need;

- increased the funding allocation for child care by \$86 million in 1998/99, compared with Labor's last year in office. The Coalition has allocated close to \$1.1 billion this year compared with \$990 million spent by Labor in its last term of office;
- established more child care places across Australia with new places in long daycare centres (26,500), outside school hours care (10,300) and family day care (3,200), all during our first term in office;
- ensured steady, sustainable growth with 310 during our first term more child care centres operating than when Labor lost office;
- provided for 71,000 new child care places over the next four years; and
- improved child care assistance estimated to benefit more than 70,000 families who use outside school hours care.

(ii) Employment Opportunities

The Coalition's policies have achieved:

- the creation of almost 317,000 new jobs during our first term of office. Over 60 per cent of these jobs have gone to women; and
- increased participation by women in the workforce, with total female employment growing by almost 3 per cent between August 1997 and August 1998, with the number of women in the labour market exceeding 4 million for the first time.

C Workplace Relations

The Coalition has:

- removed restrictions on part-time employment, giving women access to family friendly hours of work, as well as pro-rata entitlements, regular work patterns and career path opportunities;
- introduced Australian Workplace Agreements, enabling women to tailor working arrangements to better suit their personal and family commitments;
- reinforced the flexibility provided through improved workplace arrangements, with protection against discrimination and respect for the principle of equal pay for work of equal value;
- ensured that women have access to advice on workplace relations matters, through working women's centres and the Office of the Employment Advocate; and
- provided a reference to the Sex Discrimination Commissioner to inquire into discrimination in employment on the grounds of pregnancy.

D Health and Well-Being

The Coalition has:

- provided \$24.3 million over four years to improve the health and well-being of rural and remote families by establishing a Rural Multipurpose Health and Family Services network providing aged care, child care, accident and emergency assistance, immunisation and general practice services;
- introduced a rebate for families with private health insurance of up to \$450 a year;
- implemented a major media campaign promoting cervical screening to reduce the incidence of cervical cancer;
- promoted good health and well-being for senior Australians under the *Healthy Seniors Initiative* by removing impediments to older people participating in physical, recreational and community activity; and
- initiated the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Army project to provide housing and infrastructure to remote indigenous communities, on top of funds to improve indigenous primary health care.

E Law and Justice

(i) Domestic Violence

The Coalition has:

- implemented gun controls resulting in the surrender of more than 640,000 dangerous firearms during our first term, making Australia a safer community particularly for women and children;
 - held a national domestic violence summit with states and territories and provided \$25.3 million over three and a half years to fund initiatives to assist the victims of domestic violence and educate perpetrators;
 - provided \$300,000 to assist adolescent and young women to identify and prevent domestic violence in their relationships;
 - proposed reforms to domestic violence laws through a national framework, and
 - maintained funding for womens' legal services in all States and Territories.
- **Superannuation**
- The Coalition has:
 - announced historic reforms to ensure greater equity in the treatment of superannuation on the breakdown of a marriage;
 - extended beyond 65 the age at which a person may contribute to

superannuation - helping women with broken patterns of workforce participation;

- introduced the spouse rebate providing tax deductible contributions of up to \$3,000 a year to the superannuation fund or retirement savings account of a lower income spouse;
- introduced retirement savings accounts providing simple, portable products to maximise small amounts of superannuation; and
- funded an internet calculator and website to provide information and advice to women on superannuation options.

(iii) Law Reform

The Coalition has taken a strong leadership role in reforms to criminal laws of particular benefit to women. These include:

- removing the 'drunk's defence' so that drunkenness is no longer an excuse for a federal offence;
- proposing uniform national domestic violence laws; and
- introducing legislation to prohibit sexual slavery and servitude.

F OLDER WOMEN

Most older Australians are women. They have benefited substantially from the Coalition's commitment to older Australians.

The Coalition has:

- extended the Commonwealth Seniors' Health Card to all retirees who have taxable incomes of less than \$40,000 for singles and \$67,000 for couples. This has reduced the cost of a prescription to \$3.20;
- guaranteed pensioners' living standards by legislating for the first time to link the maximum single rate of pension to 25 per cent of Male Total Average Weekly Earnings when Consumer Price Index increases fail to maintain that level;
- introduced a tax rebate for low-income aged persons which has ensured that all retirees on the same income, whether pensioner or self-funded retiree, have the same tax-free threshold;
- introduced a deferred pension bonus plan which benefits many older women who wish to remain in the workforce beyond pension age; and
- changed voluntary work provisions for older unemployed people. People aged 50 and over are now able to undertake unlimited full-time voluntary work and remain qualified for social security allowances.

G RURAL WOMEN

The Coalition has recognised the role of women in rural industries and

rural communities by:

- maintaining a special rural women's unit and increasing opportunities for rural women to participate in decision-making processes through meetings, grants, scholarships and awards;
- funding the *Bush Crisis Line* to assist health professionals working in remote parts of Australia, assisting with clinical advice and personal counselling; and
- distributing 70,000 copies of the rural domestic violence kit in rural and remote areas, with assistance from community groups.

INITIATIVES

A Employment Opportunities and Workforce Assistance

Many women combine work and family responsibilities. The Coalition is committed to supporting women in maximising their choices and options. Family-friendly jobs, child care, tax and benefit arrangements, and the age of children are key factors in decisions about work and blending work with family.

Many women choose to remain out of the paid workforce while caring for very young children. However, many also wish to return to the paid workforce and may face difficulties in securing employment due to loss of skills and unfamiliarity with changes in technology.

- **The Coalition will assist the return to the workforce by providing \$24 million over four years to fund a *Return to Work* program. The program will provide skills assistance, build confidence, and increase familiarity with current technology for people seeking to re-enter the labour force after an absence of two years or more. The program will be targeted to those who have been absent from the workforce due to their roles as primary care-givers.**

B Health and Well-Being

Strengthening Health Services in Rural and Regional Areas

The Coalition recognises the difficulties faced by women in rural and remote areas in accessing health care. As part of the Coalition's initiatives to boost rural doctor retention, the Coalition will:

- provide \$8 million over four years for a ‘fly-in fly-out’ female GP service to rural and remote areas which are otherwise unable to obtain the services of a female doctor; and
- develop thirty new Regional Health Service Centres to provide a variety of health and communities services, investing \$41.6 million in regional and rural areas.

(ii) Strengthening Support for Women with Breast Cancer

Every year in Australia almost 10,000 women are diagnosed with breast cancer. In recognition of the impact of breast cancer on the lives of Australian women and their families, the Coalition will:

- **provide an additional \$4 million over four years for support services for women diagnosed with breast cancer. These will include specialised nursing care and assistance with the costs of travel for treatment.**

(iii) Help for Training Needs of Nurses in Remote Areas

Many remote communities rely heavily upon nurses and other health professionals for their health care. Those who work in these conditions face unique pressures of isolation. The Coalition will:

- **provide a First Line Emergency Care program to address training needs of nurses in remote areas.**

(iv) A New Medicare Rebate for High-Risk Pregnancies

The Coalition will:

- **introduce a new Medicare rebate for high-risk pregnancies at a cost of \$8.4 million a year. The benefit for this new Medicare item will be \$950 compared to the existing benefit of \$400.**

C Law and Justice

(i) Domestic Violence

We have held a national domestic violence summit and initiated a co-operative agreement with states and territories under the *Partnerships Against Domestic Violence*. To renew this programme and build upon its success, the Coalition will:

- **provide additional funding of \$25 million over three years.**

(ii) Superannuation

The Coalition has shown leadership in its proposed reforms to the treatment of superannuation on the breakdown of marriage. The reforms will provide greater equity and fairness and provide clear rules to the courts on how superannuation might be divided if parties disagree.

- **The Coalition will proceed with reforms to superannuation and family law to provide greater equity and certainty in the distribution of superannuation benefits in the event of marriage breakdown.**

D Families

The Coalition's new tax plan helps ease the cost of raising a family. Families will benefit from personal income tax cuts, totalling over \$13 billion a year from July 2000. These will include:

- an increase in the tax-free threshold for all taxpayers from \$5,400 to \$6,000, with the greatest proportionate benefit to low income earners;
- a reduction in the 20 per cent marginal tax rate to 17 per cent;
- a reduction in the 34 per cent and 43 per cent tax rates to 30 per cent, with the result that over 80 per cent of taxpayers will pay a top marginal tax rate of 30 cents in the dollar or less; and
- an increase in the threshold of the top 47 per cent marginal tax rate so that it cuts in at \$75,000, almost twice projected full-time average weekly earnings in 2000.

Building on the Coalition's Family Tax Initiative, family benefits will be increased and simplified. This will benefit over two million families at a cost of more than \$2 billion a year.

The tax-free threshold increases under the Family Tax Initiative will be doubled. From 1 July 2000:

- All single income families, including sole parents, with one child under 5 years will have an effective tax free threshold of \$13,000, more than double the new general threshold. This provides an additional assistance of \$490 a year; and
- For those with two children, one under 5 years, the additional assistance is \$630 a year.
- Dual-income families with one child, and single income families where the youngest child is aged 5 to 16 years, will receive an increase in family tax assistance of \$140 a year (a 70 per cent increase) and, for those with two children, an increase of \$280 a year.

Additional incentives to work and save also will be achieved by **reducing the family benefits withdrawal rate from 50 cents a dollar to 30 cents a dollar and increasing the income at which family payments are tested from \$24,350 to \$28,200.**

Families will also benefit from:

- A 30 per cent non-means tested tax rebate or benefit on private health insurance premiums from January 1999 – worth \$600 a year for a family with a \$2,000 health policy.

This benefit is at least as generous as full tax deductibility for 80 per cent of taxpayers, who will face a marginal tax rate of 30 cents or less in the dollar.

E Small Business

Small business is vital to generating and maintaining employment, growth and prosperity. Small business is a means by which women can assume greater control and increased flexibility in their working arrangements. Small business is often a family business where family members and friends obtain their first work experience, where the living standards of families are determined by the success of the business.

The growth of female small-business operators between February 1995 and February 1997 (9 per cent) was more than three times that of male operators (2.6 per cent). When the farm and agricultural sectors are included, there are more than half a million women small business operators in Australia (sources: *Characteristics of Small Business*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 19 February 1998).

- **The Coalition will provide \$3 million to assist the continued growth and prosperity of women in small business.** As a first step, we will establish a consultative group that represents women across the small business sector, including regional and rural areas and ethnic communities. The consultative group will identify the special needs of women in small business. It will focus upon barriers to participation and impediments to success and advise the government on how to address these issues.

To further assist women succeed in small business, the Coalition will also:

- **develop with the Australian National Training Authority nationally recognised training materials on small business**

management skills, to be available through vocational education and training institutions, and as a self-paced training package; and

- **improve access to information through on-line technology, seminars and information packages designed to meet the needs of women in small business.**

F Work and Family

Child Care

The Coalition will continue to assist families access high quality child care.

- **A new, simpler child care benefit**, combining the existing Childcare Assistance and Childcare Rebate payments. There will be an increase in weekly assistance of up to \$7.50 per child in formal care, with additional weekly benefits where there are two or more children in care; and
- **the new child care benefit will improve affordability of child care for families, particularly low-income families.**

G Older Women

To mark the International Year of Older Persons in 1999, the Coalition will:

- **develop education programs with industry to assist older women to adapt to new technology, make sound decisions on superannuation and investment issues, and increase awareness of available housing;**
- **produce an inventory of services for older women and education on consumer fraud;**
- **implement health promotions and preventative care programs.**