COAG COMMUNIQUÉ

The Council of Australian Governments held its 38th meeting today in Canberra. Leaders thanked Mayor Felicity-ann Lewis, President of the Australian Local Government Association for her contribution to COAG at this her final meeting.

Counter-Terrorism Measures

COAG committed to taking all necessary steps to protect the Australian community from home-grown terrorism. The Commonwealth has already announced $630 million for enhanced counter-terrorism measures, including expanded intelligence collection, law enforcement capability and border control measures. The states and territories (states) are working cooperatively with the Commonwealth on enhanced security measures. COAG noted the ongoing strength of that operational cooperation.

The Commonwealth committed to working with the states to ensure the Commonwealth’s $13.4 million commitment to strengthening community engagement and countering extremism augments and complements existing state programmes.

COAG discussed the issues of extremism and terrorism. It reaffirmed its firm commitment to work together to strengthen engagement with Australian communities and community leaders to counter radicalisation, and to reduce the influence of Australians returning from fighting with terrorist organisations abroad.

Our counter-terrorism efforts are targeted at preventing criminal activity. They are not targeted at any specific ethnic or religious groups and will never be so targeted. While Australians should be vigilant, they need to maintain their usual lives.

States agreed to introduce legislative amendments to their parliaments to safeguard the national laws underpinning our ability to arrest, monitor, investigate and prosecute domestic extremists and returning foreign fighters.

White Papers on the Reform of the Federation and Australia’s Taxation System

COAG acknowledged the importance of the federal system to Australia’s success as a nation. It supported a collegial approach to reviewing current arrangements with a view to reducing overlap and duplication in roles and responsibilities between governments and working together better in areas of shared responsibilities. COAG resolved this would contribute to the G20 objective to grow the global economy by improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the federation. This wide-ranging review will be conducted in a spirit of partnership in order to achieve consensus as far as possible on reform directions.

COAG agreed that clearer lines of reporting and accountability to the public should result in better education, health and other social and economic outcomes for Australians, and more efficient and lower cost service delivery. Clarifying roles and responsibilities could involve significant reform in some areas, but would ensure taxpayer funds are better targeted and deliver better results for the Australian people. Greater clarity would also avoid the ‘blame game’ between governments if policy and services are poor.

Jurisdictions will work together to ensure there is a well-informed, open and constructive public debate about the need for change and about any potential changes to existing roles
and responsibilities put forward through the Federation White Paper process. The main focus will be on health, early childhood learning, schools, vocational education and training, housing and homelessness.

Any change of roles and responsibilities will require governments to have certainty about appropriate revenues to fund their associated spending and service delivery responsibilities. The Federation and Tax Reform White Papers will therefore need to progress together.

**Overseas Adoption**

COAG noted the Commonwealth will fund a new service that will be consistent with Australia’s obligations under the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption. The Commonwealth service will work with existing state services to assist families and adoptees throughout the overseas adoption process, while recognising that eligibility rules for adoptions will remain the responsibility of the states.

**Indigenous Affairs**

COAG agreed jurisdictions need to work together to ensure Indigenous people have access to the same opportunities as non-Indigenous people.

All governments agreed that greater effort is required to meet our educational targets for Indigenous children and this will require commitment and integrated action at a community level. COAG agreed to further actions to improve Indigenous students’ school attendance and to share evidence of actions that work to improve school attendance. The Commonwealth will work bilaterally with states on:

- more regular reporting of school attendance where there are significant attendance issues, so attendance remains a focus and evidence-based action is taken quickly if rates do not increase;
- effective use of truancy measures, so parents and communities see a direct consequence if they fail to ensure their children attend school; and
- aligning and integrating each government’s efforts.

COAG acknowledged there are already many accomplished teachers and principals working in regional and remote schools. COAG asked Education Ministers to report on strategies to attract and retain quality teachers and school leaders to regional and remote schools. A progress report on this, and school attendance, will be provided to COAG at its first meeting in 2015.

COAG noted Mr Andrew Forrest’s report to the Commonwealth, *Creating Parity – The Forrest Review*, on his review of Indigenous training and employment programmes. Jurisdictions noted his key finding that a decent education provides a strong basis for parity in employment outcomes.

The Forrest Review makes broad and ambitious recommendations to the Commonwealth on areas of Commonwealth, state and shared responsibility. COAG discussed priority areas and agreed to identify areas that would benefit from bilateral action, with agreements to be finalised by the end of the year.
COAG noted that the Commonwealth, the Northern Territory and Queensland will urgently investigate Indigenous land administration and land use to enable traditional owners to readily attract private sector investment and finance to develop their own land with new industries and businesses to provide jobs and economic advancement for Indigenous people. The Commonwealth, Northern Territory and Queensland will report on this issue to the first COAG meeting in 2015.

**Deregulation**

Reducing regulatory burden to free up business and individuals from government red tape remains a key priority for COAG. All jurisdictions are identifying reforms to reduce the regulatory burden in selected small business and manufacturing sectors, and will report on findings and actions to COAG in December 2014. COAG agreed to explore adopting, as a general principle, trusted international standards or risk assessment processes for systems, services and products, unless it can be demonstrated that there is good reason not to.

COAG also agreed to consider changes to the regulatory framework governing chemicals to improve its efficiency, with the Standing Committee on Chemicals to recommend a reform pathway to COAG by the end of 2014.

In higher education, all jurisdictions will ensure information is not already available before requesting data so that universities only need to provide higher education data to government once.

COAG reaffirmed the importance of addressing duplication in environmental approvals, while maintaining high environmental standards. It underlined the importance of implementing effective one-stop-shops as soon as possible.

**National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)**

Trials of NDIS are now underway in New South Wales, Victoria, Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania, the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory.

COAG noted reports from the Disability Reform Council (DRC) on the implementation of NDIS to date, and agreed the DRC would report to each COAG meeting on NDIS implementation, including management of costs and the transition to full scheme.

**Infrastructure**

Jurisdictions reaffirmed the importance of infrastructure to boost productivity and unlock economic growth, including in regional economies, and recognised the need for improved processes and project selection methodologies to get projects underway.

COAG noted a Commonwealth response to the Productivity Commission’s report on public infrastructure will be released by the end of the year. It will identify opportunities to improve the financing, governance and delivery of new infrastructure.

COAG also noted good progress is being made to agree asset sales or leases and new infrastructure under the $5 billion Asset Recycling Initiative. Agreements will be announced as they are made with each state. The Commonwealth, New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland announced their intention to conclude an agreement as soon as possible.
The Commonwealth signed agreements with New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory under the new $27 billion National Partnership Agreement on Land Transport Infrastructure. This funding will support freight rail and road projects that help deliver a safe, sustainable and efficient national transport system.

G20

COAG welcomed the focus of the G20 summit in Brisbane on measures to lift economic growth and create jobs, build economic and financial resilience, and strengthen global institutions. COAG noted that, if the G20 can increase its GDP by 2 per cent over expected forecasts over the next five years, it would deliver over $2 trillion to global GDP and create millions of jobs. COAG expressed its appreciation for the co-operation and resources being provided from jurisdictions to the Queensland Police Service to support security arrangements for the summit.

Royal Commission into the Home Insulation Programme

COAG noted the update on the Commonwealth’s interim response to the findings of the Royal Commission into the Home Insulation Programme (HIP). In particular, it noted the Royal Commission’s findings on ways to improve the safety of people working in roof cavities and raising awareness of the dangers involved.

COAG agreed work is required in this area to ensure the tragic deaths under the HIP are not repeated. It noted that some states have satisfactory arrangements and others have already taken action to address these issues. All states agreed to work cooperatively to ensure the safety of people working in roof cavities and consider what further action should be taken. A report will be provided to the next COAG meeting.

Gas pipeline connecting the Northern and Eastern Gas Markets

COAG supported the work being undertaken by the Northern Territory to establish a competitive process for the private sector to bring forward proposals for the construction and operation of a pipeline to connect the Northern and Eastern Gas Markets. COAG agreed that connecting these gas markets is the next step to developing a national gas grid and will contribute to the development of a more national and competitive domestic gas market, helping to improve supply security.

Ebola virus

As yet there is no confirmed case of Ebola in Australia, but COAG agreed all governments need to be prepared. COAG noted ongoing cooperation between the Commonwealth and states, to ensure any suspected case is identified immediately and dealt with appropriately. COAG agreed these arrangements are robust, and need to be continually updated.

COAG noted the Peter Doherty Institute for Infection and Immunity, which recently opened in Melbourne as a national centre of excellence, and houses a coalition of infection and immunology experts to lead the fight against infectious diseases including Ebola.

10 October 2014