

MEETING OF THE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENTS

CAIRNS – 9 AUGUST 2019

COMMUNIQUÉ

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) held its 47th general meeting today in Cairns: the first time COAG has been held outside a capital city. Leaders made progress at today's meeting on priority issues for keeping the Australian economy strong and improving the lives of all Australians.

Boosting the economy

COAG agreed to work together to reduce regulatory and bureaucratic barriers across the federation so that businesses can grow and create more jobs. Leaders committed to improving the design and efficiency of business regulation to support jobs and investment in the interests of the community. The Commonwealth's Deregulation Taskforce will work with state, territory and local governments, and businesses themselves, to identify and address the most significant regulatory barriers to investment for selected industries.

Improving population planning and management

Australia's continued economic growth and multicultural richness are benefitting from a dynamic, diverse and skilled population. Different parts of Australia are being affected by population change in different ways and therefore it is important that population planning and management is informed by the needs of local communities. Managing population change is a shared responsibility involving all levels of government working across many fronts – from investment in infrastructure through to service delivery. Accordingly, population planning and management is a standing item on the COAG agenda.

The Treasurers' Forum comprising Commonwealth, state and territory Treasurers and the President of the Australian Local Government Association met in February 2019 and commenced the development of the National Population and Planning Framework. Leaders welcomed progress and discussed a vision for the Framework, including to improve Australians' quality of life, support economic growth, ensure sustainable urban and regional growth, and encourage community cohesion. Leaders committed to continue working together to improve population planning, through better coordination and management, and look forward to agreeing the Framework at the next COAG meeting.

Delivering Australia's infrastructure pipeline

Leaders committed to delivering a record pipeline of infrastructure investment that will significantly boost construction, create jobs, support Australia's productivity and improve the amenity of our cities and regions. COAG discussed the benefits of increased or accelerated construction activity, and the need to manage cost and capacity pressures while maintaining the quality of construction. Leaders asked the COAG Transport and Infrastructure Council to commission analysis and provide advice on infrastructure market conditions in each jurisdiction to COAG by the end of 2019.

A vision for skills in Australia

A strong Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector is critical for our economy and ensuring Australians are equipped for the workforce now and in the future. Leaders agreed to a shared vision for VET delivering high quality education and training that meets the needs of students and employers. VET and higher education are equal and integral parts of Australia's post-secondary education system. The Commonwealth and states and territories will work together to deliver a system which helps all Australians – for those getting first qualifications or re-training – get the skills they need for employment. Skills ministers will work together through a new COAG Skills Council, in consultation with education ministers, to advise leaders on future reform priorities by the end of 2019 and provide a reform roadmap to COAG in early 2020.

Driving better outcomes for regional Australia

Australia's diverse regions make significant contributions to our economy and society. While resourceful and resilient, regions are facing a unique set of challenges. All governments invest heavily in our regions and improving coordination and collaboration will support regional Australia to reach its full potential. Leaders agreed to establish a Regional Ministers' Forum to identify and explore opportunities to deliver better economic and social outcomes. Targeted investment, tailored to the needs of individual regions and developed in collaboration across all levels of government and with the local communities, is key to ensuring regional Australia's ongoing success.

Reducing violence against women and their children

Domestic, family and sexual violence remains a scourge on our society. Women and children from all walks of life have a right to be free from all forms of violence and abuse. Eliminating it remains a key priority for COAG and all governments have a role in this. Leaders agreed the [Fourth Action Plan of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022](#). This Plan guides government policy and investment to reduce violence against women. A National Implementation Plan, which will be released later this year, will set out initiatives in all jurisdictions.

Improving mental health outcomes and preventing suicide

Every life lost to suicide is one too many. Each suicide has a devastating effect on families, friends and communities, with some groups particularly at risk. All jurisdictions are investing in improving mental health outcomes and preventing suicides. Leaders noted that Commonwealth has been working on a *Towards Zero Suicides* plan. They agreed to make mental health and suicide prevention a national priority and to work together on this priority drawing on the best experience and learnings across all Australian jurisdictions. COAG agreed that individual jurisdictions would take a lead on piloting specific initiatives and sharing best practice. They committed to working together to develop practical options to ensure that the right support is available to individuals, families and communities, at the right time and in the right place, drawing on existing community expertise. This includes working with the newly appointed National Suicide Prevention Adviser to improve the coordination and delivery of suicide prevention initiatives across Australia, and identify new approaches where required. A national focus on mental health and suicide prevention is essential to ensuring all Australians can navigate and access support.

Supporting early childhood education

High-quality early childhood education makes a significant contribution to life-long educational achievement and productivity. Leaders agreed to consider a long-term plan for early childhood education in 2020, informed by findings from the review of the National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education and the Early Learning Reform Principles agreed in December 2018.

Countering terrorism and violent extremism

Leaders recognised there are a small number of individuals with extreme and violent views who want to divide us and threaten our safety. These views can take many forms and have no single ideology. One of our most effective ways of countering terrorism is preventing radicalisation and the progression of violent extremism. COAG agreed that the Australia–New Zealand Counter-Terrorism Committee (ANZCTC) will review and update Australia’s Counter-Terrorism Strategy, to ensure that our counter-terrorism arrangements continue to be fit-for-purpose and suited to the changing threat environment.

Reaffirming commitment to Closing the Gap

Leaders reaffirmed their commitment to ensuring that the finalisation of targets and implementation of the Closing the Gap framework occurs through a genuine formal partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, through their representatives. Since COAG met in December 2018, governments and the National Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations have formed the Joint Council on Closing the Gap. This is the first COAG Council to include non-government members as equal partners in decision-making and marks an historic change in the way Australian governments are working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This partnership embeds shared decision making into designing, implementing and monitoring the Closing the Gap framework. Leaders welcomed an update on progress from the co-chairs of the Joint Council and look forward to finalising a new national agreement on Closing the Gap with the Coalition of Peaks.

Waste and recycling

Leaders agreed Australia should establish a timetable to ban the export of waste plastic, paper, glass and tyres, while building Australia’s capacity to generate high value recycled commodities and associated demand. They tasked Environment Ministers to advise on a proposed timetable and response strategy following consultation with industry and other stakeholders. Leaders agreed the strategy must seek to reduce waste, especially plastics, decrease the amount of waste going to landfill and maximise the capability of our waste management and recycling sector to collect, recycle, reuse, convert and recover waste. Leaders agreed the strategy should draw on the best science, research and commercial experience, including that of agencies like the CSIRO and the work of Cooperative Research Centres.

Federal financial relations

Leaders discussed ways to improve the dynamism and efficiency of federal–state financial relations. COAG and Treasury senior officials will examine and report back to COAG on options for streamlining agreements in key sectors, while maintaining accountability for, and transparency of, funding. Leaders also agreed that as a general principle all significant national funding agreements will be considered by the relevant Ministerial forum and agreed by Treasurers, through the Council on Federal Financial Relations, prior to COAG consideration.

Collaborating in the digital world

Leaders recognised the importance of delivering government services in ways that meet the expectations and needs of Australians. Barriers to sharing data between jurisdictions can impede achievement of this vision. Work is underway to streamline data sharing between jurisdictions, although much more can be done. Leaders also acknowledged the importance of ensuring digital initiatives have appropriate privacy and security safeguards. The Australian Data and Digital Council (formerly the Australian Digital Council) has been elevated to a COAG Council to identify and drive digital transformation and data collaboration projects across jurisdictions to better respond to the needs of all Australians.

Murray-Darling Basin

Leaders from the Murray-Darling Basin reaffirmed their commitment to the Murray-Darling Basin Plan and worked through next steps in its implementation. Leaders discussed the unrelenting drought afflicting the Basin, which in many areas is the worst on record. They acknowledged the hardship being felt by farmers and communities and the importance of them having the support they need to get back on their feet and build their resilience. Leaders agreed to the importance of ongoing transparency on what each jurisdiction is doing to implement the Plan and support communities and farmers. Leaders also agreed to expedite planned infrastructure for improving water availability.

Basin leaders agreed to a joint response to the Productivity Commission's *Murray-Darling Basin Plan: Five-Year Assessment*, and endorsed the establishment of an Inspector-General of Murray-Darling Basin Water Resources, to improve transparency, accountability and community confidence in the delivery of the Basin Plan. These actions were informed by discussions on the findings of the Productivity Commission's Five Year Assessment, South Australian Murray-Darling Basin Royal Commission and the Independent assessment of the 2018-19 fish deaths in the lower Darling. Leaders also signed amendments to the 2013 Intergovernmental Agreement to Implementing Water Reform in the Murray-Darling Basin.

Northern Australia Strategic Partnership

Meeting in Cairns, the Northern Australia Strategic Partnership (NASP) reaffirmed its deep and enduring commitment to Northern Australia, and emphasised that a strong north is critical to our nation's future security, identity and prosperity. Jurisdictions reaffirmed that Indigenous Australians, their land and culture are fundamental to the past, present and future of Northern Australia. Leaders noted progress on the development of the landmark *Northern Australia Indigenous Development Accord* which reaffirms a shared commitment and recognises the key role of Indigenous Australians in developing a strong and prosperous Northern Australia. Leaders agreed to continue to involve Indigenous stakeholders across the north through a genuine partnership approach. The NASP noted the progress on implementing the White Paper on Developing Northern Australia and recommitted to working together to deliver the 20-year vision to unlock the north's full potential. Leaders look forward to receiving advice from the Ministerial Forum on Northern Development at the next NASP meeting on a new five year plan.