



the voice of older Australians

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The Hon. Kevin Rudd MP
Prime Minister
Parliament House

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BY HAND

Dear Prime Minister

It has been extremely gratifying to observe the level of commitment and collaboration emerging from the December meeting of COAG. In the view of COTA Over 50s, your leadership played a pivotal role in COAG's success, and we are confident that the priorities that you have set, and the working groups that have been established, provide the appropriate conditions for COAG's effectiveness as 'the workhorse of the nation'.

We note from the 20 December communiqué that in March 2008 the Working Group on Health and Ageing will be delivering implementation plans on aged transition care and on public dental programs. COTA Over 50s has a longstanding interest in these issues. We would welcome any opportunity to contribute to the Working Group's deliberations. As the national peak seniors organisation, we consult regularly and widely with our stakeholders, and will be keeping older Australians in touch with the Group's progress.

We look forward to the June 2009 report of the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission, especially in relation to the integration of acute and aged care services, and prevention and intervention strategies related to chronic illness. Again, COTA Over 50s will be seeking opportunities to contribute to the Commission's work in these areas. The Housing Working Group will also be a focus of our attention especially in the context of rental affordability and the impact of rental stress on low to moderate income households.

Another Working Group of particular interest to COTA Over 50s is the Working Group on the Productivity Agenda. While early childhood development, schools education and skills training are vital to the improvement of Australia's human capital, it would be a serious oversight not to consider the significant resources of experience, skill and ideas that lie with mature workers, and with those who wish to retain productive links with the workforce as they transition to retirement.

I am aware that you have already acknowledged the value of older workers in your proposal to have them serve as mentors to younger trainees. But their value goes well beyond mentorship. The repertoire of skills that older workers have built up - including in recent decades enhanced skills in IT and advanced process technologies - means that not only are they well positioned to further enhance workplace productivity, but they already possess the relevant numeracy, technical and collaborative skills to respond rapidly to emerging challenges. Assumptions about old dogs and new tricks are nothing more than foolish prejudices that do not withstand scrutiny.

As population ageing continues, maintaining growth in per capita human

capital is a key issue for policy makers. Older Australians continue to show themselves eminently capable of adapting to new workplace technologies and thereby contributing to greater productivity. They should not be discriminated against in terms of access to education and training, either on-the-job or in formal, campus-based training programs.

Productivity, of course, is not simply a function of what goes on in the workplace. Older Australians make a substantial contribution to the economy – notwithstanding its going unrecorded in GDP or other conventional measures of economic wellbeing. The November 2007 edition of “Older Australia at a Glance”, produced by the Australia Institute of Health and Welfare, documents the extensive financial and labour contributions made by older Australians. Such contributions require careful consideration in the context of the productivity of the nation as a whole.

The indicative forward work program for the Working Group on the Productivity Agenda includes the determination of priorities for the contribution of education and training to the broader objectives of social inclusion, creating opportunity and tackling disadvantage. COTA Over 50s applauds this direction, and stands ready to contribute information and advice to the policy development process.

In 2008, COTA Over 50s will be pursuing a number of policy and research objectives that align closely with the goals and activities of the COAG Working Groups. We are keen to assist governments at all levels to maximize the effectiveness of policies and programs aimed at strengthening Australia's productivity, cohesiveness, social inclusiveness and environmental sustainability. Older Australians have both the capacity and the desire to contribute to that strengthening.

COTA Over 50s is well placed to advise and assist COAG on how to maximize engagement with, and draw greatest benefit from, Australia's growing number of older, energetic and enthusiastic citizens.

Yours sincerely

Geoffrey Bird (Dr)

CC Nicola Roxon, Minister for Health and Ageing
Jenny Macklin, Minister for family, Housing, Community Services & Indigenous Affairs
Justine Elliot, Minister for Ageing
Senator Jan McLucas, Parliamentary Secretary, Health & Ageing
Senator Ursula Stephens, Parliamentary Secretary, Social Inclusion.