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Crime and the Elderly, ISBN 0 642 22739 X

Opening Address

[Unedited. Paper as presented at Conference of 23-25 February 1993]

Senator The Hon. Michael Tate
Federal Minister for Justice
Senator for Tasmania

I have been kindly invited to open this conference on Crime and Older people and to launch the monograph by Marianne Pinkerton James titled *Crime Prevention for Older Australians*.

I am pleased to see that a broad range of voluntary groups who are committed to the well-being of older people, representatives of the police forces of many states, academics including Professor Ezzat Fattah from Simon Fraser University in British Columbia who has tirelessly promoted the rights of victims over many years, a distinguished member of the judiciary from the ACT, Chief Magistrate Ron Cahill, and my Labor colleague, the South Australian Attorney-General, the Hon. Chris Sumner, have decided to contribute to this conference. This is a strong indication of the rightful prominence which this disturbing social phenomena has been given.

The topic, Crime and Older People, raises issues which are fundamental to our society: that is the ways in which we as a society treat and respect older members of our community. This is not limited to issues of crime prevention, of course. It also encompasses social welfare support, health care and support for the many dedicated carers of older people.

Politicisation of Fear

The Prime Minister said in a recent speech on Violence Against Women that no women should walk the streets in fear.

The same can be said for both older women and men. In the book we are launching today, the author shows that in 1991 in Australia the older people are, the more likely it is that they will avoid going out after dark in their area because of fear of crime (James 1993, p. 45). Marianne Pinkerton James' study (James 1993) finds that in areas of theft and violence, in particular, the exceptionally high level of concern among elderly Australians is not supported by the figures. However, one word, "fear", keeps emerging over and over again.

There was an unfortunate politicisation of this fear of older people and crime last year by Dr Hewson in a pamphlet which had an old lady cowering behind the door. This politicisation of the real fear which older people feel ought not to be ruthlessly exploited. The only way in which this exploitation can be prevented is by providing the community with the real facts. Marianne Pinkerton James did this with her issues paper on *The Elderly as Victims of Crime, Abuse and Neglect* (James 1992). Ms James found that "the risk of an elderly person being victimised is substantially lower in most categories (of crime)".

Community Safety Council

Crime Prevention for Older Australians continues in the highly professional tradition of the Australian Institute of Criminology in providing the Australian community with intelligent and accessible works on the scope of the crime problem and recommendations to counter it. The author has recognised the need for all levels of government to cooperate in their crime prevention and community safety strategies. I would like to speak particularly on one idea expressed in the monograph on multi-agency cooperation.

Ms James suggests that:

The idea of multi-agency cooperation stems from the basic premise that preventing crime is not simply about law enforcement. It recognises that local crime problems are associated with a range of conditions, and by implication, policy arenas. Multi-agency cooperation therefore is the planned coordinated response of the major social agencies to problems of crime (James 1993, p. 15).

These agencies include the police, the courts, social work, housing, recreational and educational institutions, voluntary organisations as well as all levels of government.

Ms James (1993) points out that:

through multi-agency cooperation at the local level, particularly in respect to community participation, the elderly are more likely to experience independence, self-esteem and social integration. This way they are less likely to become victims of, or be unduly fearful, about crime in Australian society (James 1993, p. 65).

Towards the end of 1992 as the Federal Minister responsible for the Australian Federal Police I launched the Community Safety Council in Melbourne. The Community Safety Council is a serious attempt by the Commonwealth in cooperation with the States, local government, community groups and business to develop a nationwide approach to develop strategies to prevent crime and reduce fear in our community.

Community groups such as the Australian Council for the Ageing contributed to the formulation of these strategies. I was particularly grateful for the contribution made by Mr Robert Johnson in their submission which brought concern about the judicial system to the forefront.

The Community Safety Council recognises that problems relating to crime cannot be "solved" by simply pouring more resources into police forces. Crime is a community problem and it has to be taken seriously by all levels of government and by all members of the community.

One well-known example of a successful cooperative strategy between police, business and the community is the Neighbourhood Watch scheme. The philosophy of the scheme is about taking individual and collective responsibility for property crimes which happen at the community level.

Forums such as Neighbourhood Watch are important because they empower people to band together for a common goal of crime prevention. Older people can especially make a contribution to such groups since they are often at home for longer time periods than other age groups. More importantly, the model should be adjusted to allow for care of the personal safety of the individuals of an area and to be the vigilant concern of others (respecting the bounds of privacy).

Flexibility and innovation are the keys to crime prevention and fear reduction. Through the Community Safety Council, governments and community-based organisations with neighbourhood networks will be able to learn from each other the best practices for crime prevention. I hope that in conjunction with older peoples' organisations we can develop a flexible approach.

An example of the type of partnerships which I envisage is working in South Australia. The Commonwealth Government's Home Assist program is a partnership between all three tiers of government and community service organisations. The Home Assist Scheme provides assistance to many frail older people (amongst other groups) to reduce the safety and security risks of those people.

This includes not only security advice, but also acts as a link to other services such as the Telecross service run by the Red Cross which provides a daily telephone link to those who are frail or disabled and may fall, Neighbourhood Watch and Together Against Crime Action Groups.

Commonwealth Initiatives

There is a strong commitment from the Commonwealth to confront the problems of the abuse of older people in cooperation with the States. In 1981 Australia became a signatory to the United Nations Council on the Aging. In 1986 the federal government established the Office for the Aged. The Government has developed a Social Justice Strategy whose principles include equality of civic, legal and industrial rights, fair and equal access to essential services. It has always been envisaged that older people would benefit from and contribute to the development of this societal vision.

This vision includes reducing fear and so improving the quality of life to such an extent that individuals are able to exercise their independence to remain in their own homes and communities as long as possible.

I am pleased to be able to indicate an initiative of my colleague, Peter Staples, Minister for Aged Care and Family Services on the abuse of elder persons. Mr Staples plans to establish a working party to suggest possible modes of action within the community to protect frail older people in the community against the risk of physical and psychological abuse.

The Consumer Forum for the Aged has also called for the development of a National Strategy on Elder Abuse. This call follows a similar call for the implementation of standards monitoring teams for nursing homes and hostels where some older people may be at risk of abuse. This working party on the abuse of older persons will, however, concentrate its efforts on the abuse of older people in the community.

Conclusion

I congratulate the Australian Institute of Criminology which has sponsored this conference and contributed so positively to the establishment of the Community Safety Council. I hope that the type of framework which the Commonwealth envisages for the protection of community safety will provide an effective mechanism to implement some of the policy suggestions which will be generated by this conference.

I am confident that this conference will enhance our understanding of the fear of victimisation, negative media representation, economic dependence and the personal isolation which many older people suffer. I am equally confident that positive suggestions will be made on the ways in which governments and the community can improve the position of older people in Australia.

References

James, M. Pinkerton 1993, *Crime Prevention for Older Australians*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

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