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**ATTORNEY-GENERAL**  
**LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN THE SENATE**

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**ADDRESS AT THE NATIONAL ELDER ABUSE CONFERENCE**  
**PULLMAN ON THE PARK, MELBOURNE**

Elder abuse is a human rights issue and it is also an underappreciated and serious problem.

It should be a matter of concern to all of us: as sons and daughters, as people who may one day ourselves require care and assistance from others, and as members of a cohesive and caring nation. The essence of community is after all mutual respect and concern.

All of us are appalled by accounts of older people being mistreated, neglected; even physically or sexually abused. It sometimes seems that not a day goes by without a report of an assault, a scam, or some other mistreatment involving taking advantage of an older Australian. This is of course repugnant and the phenomenon has not received enough attention so I commend you on this conference.

I hope this conference and the remarks I'm about to make, and others including Susan Ryan will make during the course of today and tomorrow, will start a national discussion, a national conversation about the rights of older Australians and the problem of the abuse of older Australians and how we deal with that problem.

In that regard, I am deeply appreciative of Commissioner Ryan's leadership in raising the profile of the issue of elder abuse.

All Australians have the right to make their own decisions, to live self-determined lives, to live with dignity and free from exploitation, violence and abuse. Those rights do not diminish with age.

Our population is ageing. Projections over the next 40 years indicate that the proportion of the population over 65 years will almost double to around 25 per cent as life expectancy rises. Some commentators describe the ageing of the Australian population as a problem. I do not see an ageing Australia as a problem. I see an ageing Australia as an opportunity, an opportunity for people to give more, to lead more fulfilling lives for longer than in any previous generation.

However that is not to say that an ageing population does not raise specific issues. For example, more older Australians will be living with dementia – as many as 400,000 by 2020 and it is projected, as many as 900,000 by the middle of the century.

Dementia is the single greatest cause of disability in Australians aged 65 and over. More than 50 per cent of people living in aged-care facilities live with dementia. However, policy development in this area should not be seen through a lens of incapacity.

As I said a moment ago, older people contribute significantly towards all aspects of our community. Workforce participation of those 55 and over increased from 23 per cent in 1984, to 35 per cent in 2014. Increasingly that level of participation is evident as people grow even older still. Two of my distinguished predecessors in the Office of Commonwealth Attorney-General Bob Ellicott QC, the Leader of the New South Wales Bar, is still in practice in Sydney as the leader of the Bar at the age of 88, while Tom Hughes QC, the Prime Minister's father-in-law, was still a busy silk in Sydney at the age of 90. While arguably Australia's most famous son, Rupert Murdoch, who turns 85 next month, continues to run the world's biggest and most influential media company. So we can expect the trend of people participating in the workforce at an older age, at even greater ages, continuing.

Last year's Intergenerational Report projected that workforce participation rates among those aged 65 and older will increase from 12.9% in the last financial year, to 17.3% by the middle of the century. I know Susan Ryan is going to speak more about workforce participation in her presentation that will follow shortly.

It is worth noting, and you all know, older Australians perform a significant proportion of volunteering and unpaid work. Indeed, between 30 and 40 per cent of Australians aged over 65 are volunteers, and many support families as caregivers, particularly those who look after grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Older Australians hold almost one quarter of total household wealth in Australia. This is expected to increase to nearly half by 2030.

The opportunities for exploitation of that wealth will therefore escalate. It is vital to ensure that our legal frameworks respect and support the free and informed choices made by older Australians in managing and transferring their wealth.

Elder abuse is, regrettably, indicative of social attitudes which reflect a lack of respect or recognition of older persons as full participants in the community. Those attitudes may sometimes disproportionately value youth over age. Contemporary culture often portrays older persons as out of touch at best, and at worst – and all too frequently- as objects of ridicule. That attitude inverts traditional Western attitudes which have prevailed until the last two generations.

Transforming cultural attitudes and fostering intergenerational respect is central to combatting elder abuse.

As I said, Susan Ryan has made a significant contribution to this key transformation. Through the Age Positive campaign, Power of Oldness initiative, and Willing to Work inquiry, she has vastly improved our understanding of issues faced by older Australians and I want to thank and congratulate her for that heartbreaking work.

Susan's work has challenged the acceptance of discriminatory attitudes and behaviours towards older persons. As her five year term comes to a close I can tell you that the process to find a successor has begun.

It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the work of state and territory governments, and community organisations, in raising awareness of issues affecting older Australians. Those organisations provide vital support and services to support older Australians and respond to the problem of elder abuse.

We need to increase our understanding of the nature and extent of the problem, but even more importantly, we need to increase society's awareness of the nature and extent of the problem. And we need to foster a respectful, balanced and dynamic society - one in which all of its members, irrespective of age, have equal enjoyment of all of the benefits and amenities this wonderful country offers.

Our social, economic and legal frameworks must support older Australians so as to enable them fully to enjoy their freedoms and exercise their free and informed choices.

Last year, I asked my Department to commission the Australian Institute of Family Studies to conduct a scoping study to define the nature and scope of elder abuse in Australia because as we all know, one of the most important initial steps in raising the Government's awareness of a problem is to define the scope of it.

So the Australian Institute of Family Studies examined Australian and overseas research to develop a picture of the nature of the abuse of older people. This work, which I am releasing today, identified that elder abuse can be financial, physical, sexual, or psychological. It includes mistreatment and neglect, as well as actual acts of malicious harm. I want to take this opportunity to thank Professor Helen Rhoades and Dr Rae Kaspiew for their work in completing the AIFS scoping study.

The consequences of abuse, as the study found, are, as we all know, severe. It can destroy quality of life; it can isolate and disempower; and it can significantly increase the risk of untimely death.

We believe that financial abuse and psychological abuse are the most common forms of elder abuse. We know that abuse is most likely, I'm sorry to say, to be perpetrated by adult children taking advantage of their parents' love and trust. That is why an understanding of intergenerational dynamics is critical.

Sadly, although such conduct is often already unlawful, it appears that it is often unreported and commonly invisible, or at least invisible outside the family, no doubt in part due to a reluctance to speak out.

Older people may fear separation from the broader family unit. They may be prevented from coming forward because of disability. Professionals may be reluctant to become involved for fear of being seen as meddling in family matters.

To ensure that abuse is prevented and detected, we must identify cohorts of older Australians who may be most at risk, and those least able to mitigate that risk. We do know isolation, disability and previous trauma put older people at greater risk. We know that abuse, in

particular, financial abuse, is most commonly perpetrated against older women by an adult male child.

Older women are also more susceptible to family violence. We need to talk more about that issue as well.

As I said a moment ago, let me repeat, I thank Commissioner Ryan for initiating the public discussion over the past few months, and identifying promising points for action on the issue of family violence as it affects older Australians. We must first strengthen our understanding and respect of older peoples' rights, to combat discrimination and negative attitudes, and raise awareness about the broader social causes of that abuse.

As well, we must truly listen to older people when they speak, and support them in exercising their freedoms and their right to live as they choose. We must reduce the impacts of trauma and social isolation, and ensure that particularly vulnerable older Australians receive respectful support.

High profile Australians speaking powerfully about violence against women have demonstrated that widespread cultural change is possible. That same kind of cultural change, as we've seen recently in elevating the profile of the problem of violence against women, needs to develop and I hope this conference will be a significant milestone in it developing in relation to the problem of the abuse of older Australians. Much of society's work in this area will happen at a grassroots level, undertaken by local health, legal and social work organisations, by police working to protect our communities, and within families.

But all levels of government can, and should, work to draw attention to the issue and to encourage a change of attitude. While I have spoken at length about the challenges, let me acknowledge the work that is already being done.

States and Territories have developed elder abuse strategies and education material and led awareness raising campaigns. All have established elder abuse helplines, which assist thousands of people every year. The recent Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence and the New South Wales Government's current inquiry into elder abuse will further inform our understanding of this issue and potential strategies to deal with it. At the local level, community organisations provide practical information to social workers and legal and health professionals.

I know that industry is turning its mind towards the issue of financial abuse. The Australian Bankers' Association has worked with the sector, including COTA and Capacity Australia, to develop practical guidelines and innovative online training tools for staff of financial institutions. At the level of the Commonwealth Government, the *Moneysmart* website, maintained by the Australian Securities and Investment Commission, provides information on retirement, wills, and powers of attorney. Information is essential to empower older Australians to manage their finances and to be aware of the risk of exploitation.

The ACCC has also developed practical advice for consumers, including older consumers, about how to avoid scams. The Aged Care Complaints Commissioner provides an independent mechanism for care recipients and their family members, advocates, and carers, to make complaints about Commonwealth-funded aged care services.

The government also funds community services, including legal services, financial counselling services, and family relationship centres, which provide other avenues for older persons to seek assistance.

The Federal Government can build upon this, and we intend to. We will collaborate with other governments, the community sector and the private sector to raise awareness, to campaign for change and represent community views and experiences so to bring about the cultural and attitudinal change of which I have spoken.

I'm taking the opportunity of this address to announce today I have sent a reference to the Australian Law Reform Commission to conduct a new inquiry into laws and frameworks to safeguard older Australians from misuse and abuse. The inquiry, which will report in May 2017, will identify best practices for protecting older Australians through the legal system, while minimising interference with their rights and preferences.

The Government is also identifying opportunities to raise community awareness and understanding of the rights of older persons.

In conclusion, let me thank you once again for the opportunity to tell you about the Turnbull Government's initial steps to address the issue of elder abuse and, more broadly, to foster the cultural changes and attitudinal changes necessary to support older Australians to participate fully in society, free from exploitation and abuse.

This conference offers a valuable opportunity to inform that work. So it is with great pleasure that I declare this conference open and wish you all the best.

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