One of the significant changes in our society in the last few years has been the growth in the number of working wives and mothers. Since 1961, the proportion of married women in the labour force has increased from 17 to over 35 per cent. These include mothers with young families. It is known that at the present time over 25 per cent of mothers with children under the age of six are in the labour force.

Some of these mothers are engaged in paid employment in their own homes and care for their children at the same time. But there are over 150,000 pre-school aged children whose mothers (or single fathers) work outside their homes.

Last week, my colleague, the Minister for Labour and National Service, Phillip Lynch, introduced legislation to ensure the development of child day care facilities of good quality throughout Australia. We are particularly concerned about the situation where young children are left in the care of untrained and unsupervised child minders who do not have the facilities conducive to the social and emotional development of young children.

In summary, the bill provides for assistance to non-profit organisations, including local government bodies, to establish and operate centres which provide day care for children of working and sick parents and which give priority to admission to children in special need.

It is hoped to establish some 50 new centres catering for about 3000 child care places in the first full year of the scheme. This would provide an increase of about 20 per cent in the number of child care places available in Australia.

A total of $4.8 million has been provided in the budget for the scheme. During the scheme's first full year, the grants should total $6.5 million, and over the first full three years,
it is expected that at least $23 million will be spent.

There are one or two points about the scheme which I think are of particular interest.

The grants for the running costs of the centres demand that qualified staff should be employed in the centres, including staff capable of providing pre-school education.

Thus, the centres will be much more than child minding depots.

For the last five years, the Commonwealth has been providing unmatched capital grants for the building of pre-school teachers' colleges, and has thereby more than doubled the nation's capacity to train such teachers. Now we are about to change our support so that we will be contributing to the capital and the running costs of pre-school teachers' colleges.

Thus, simultaneously the supply of trained pre-school teachers is being increased and opportunities are being created for their employment.

Finally, the recurrent grants will enable the child care centres to offer reduced fees for children from low income families and those in financial need.

Attendance at the centres will not be free except for the most needy cases, and the fees normally charged to parents of children not in financial need will be about the same as those now being charged in the community. Of course, the quality of care will be superior to that otherwise available.

The result of this policy will be that reduced fees will be charged to parents in financial need, varying with their circumstances.
Consistent with the Commonwealth's general approach, the money will be directed mainly towards those who need help the most.

Last week, the Prime Minister introduced into Federal Parliament legislation to establish a National Urban and Regional Development Authority.

When the government's decision to take this step was announced last month, it naturally attracted a good deal of attention, but the concept is so vast and far-reaching, I wonder whether we have stressed its importance sufficiently.

In introducing the legislation, the Prime Minister remarked that a properly conceived and well managed programme of urban and regional development could mark a turning point in the social and economic life of the country.

The Country Party Leader, Mr. Anthony, has also accorded the initiative great significance. The programme would be a continuing one, he said in Griffith recently, extending into the next century.

Briefly, the authority, to be headed by Sir John Overall of the National Capital Development Commission, will advise on the grant of financial assistance to the States for regional development projects, on the selection of the centres, and on how the centres can be rapidly developed.

The programme will be guided from the highest level - by a Ministerial Council, comprising the Prime Minister and the Premiers.

The Commonwealth's objective is twofold - to develop regional growth centres and to promote sub-metropolitan centres around existing cities. In co-operation with the States and local authorities, this will amount to by far the most extensive programme of decentralisation Australia has seen.