

20 November 2003

**JOINT COMMUNIQUÉ FROM AUSTRALIAN, STATE, TERRITORY AND
NEW ZEALAND WORKPLACE RELATIONS MINISTERS**

The Workplace Relations Ministers' Council (WRMC) met in Melbourne today and welcomed Minister Andrews who was attending WRMC for the first time.

The Council took the opportunity to discuss a draft review of WRMC operational arrangements and agreed to update the Standing Orders to reflect current arrangements, pending receipt of additional information.

The Council welcomed the Chair of the National Occupational Health and Safety Commission (NOHSC) Jerry Ellis, who spoke on the National Occupational Health and Safety strategy. The Council discussed developments on occupational health and safety (OHS) in the various jurisdictions and endorsed the NOHSC decision to communicate key OHS messages more effectively through national communication initiatives.

Minister Andrews spoke on progress with implementing the recommendations of the Royal Commission into the Building and Construction Industry. State Ministers reiterated their commitment to address unlawful conduct in that industry but maintained their opposition to the Australian Government's approach. Ministers agreed that officials would discuss the implementation of recommendations of the Royal Commission not covered by the Australian Government's legislation.

Minister Hulls presented a revised ten-point plan on changes to the Workplace Relations Act. The Australian Government agreed to respond to the plan to enable discussion at the next Council meeting.

A working party of the States and Territories will develop a paper on national long service leave standards, as raised by Minister Hulls.

The Council discussed a range of important developments in workplace relations. Ministers also noted recent developments in the States including agreement on the Victorian common rule referral which will allow Victorian employees greater access to the Federal Award system.

Minister Wilson reported on a number of workplace relations developments in New Zealand.

Minister Della Bosca addressed the issue of protection of employee entitlements including a possible contributory scheme. Minister Andrews maintained the Australian Government's position on the appropriateness of the General Employee Entitlements and Redundancy Scheme as a safety net scheme.

Ministers approved the publication of the Report on the Benchmarking of Federal and State Advisory and Compliance Services 2002-2003.

Minister Andrews reported that the Productivity Commission had now released its Interim Report on National Workers' Compensation and Occupational Health and Safety Frameworks. State Ministers discussed more collaborative approaches to workers' compensation. Ministers were encouraged to provide views to the Productivity Commission.

Ministers noted the progress report on the implementation of the prohibition of workplace use of all forms of asbestos and agreed that officials would examine importation of equipment with fixed asbestos items. Minister Della Bosca raised the increasing workers' compensation liability of asbestos-related diseases and options for cost recovery against negligent parties. Council agreed to continue discussing this important issue at the next meeting.

Ministers also noted progress on the Trans Tasman Mutual Recognition Arrangement cooperation program for hazardous substances, industrial chemicals and dangerous goods.

Minister Hulls proposed that WRMC develop and oversight a national strategy for the regulation of the sale and use and storage of explosives. Ministers agreed that officials would examine this issue and provide a report to the next Council meeting.

Ministers noted progress with complementary state and territory cross-border coverage of workers' compensation.

Ministers agreed to meet again on Friday 16 April 2004, in Sydney.

Attendees included: Federal Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, Kevin Andrews; NSW Minister for Commerce and Industrial Relations, John Della Bosca; Victorian Minister for Industrial Relations, Rob Hulls; Queensland Minister for Industrial Relations, Gordon Nuttall; South Australian Minister for Industrial Relations, Michael Wright; Western Australian Minister for Consumer and Employment Protection, John Kobelke; Tasmanian Minister for Justice and Industrial Relations, Judy Jackson.

The Northern Territory Minister for Employment, Education and Training was represented by John Kirwan, Commissioner for Public Employment. The ACT Minister for Industrial Relations, Ms Katy Gallagher, was represented by Garrett Purtill.