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**THE HON MICHELLE ROWLAND MP**

**ATTORNEY-GENERAL**

**E&OE TRANSCRIPT  
PRESS CONFERENCE  
SYDNEY  
FRIDAY, 15 AUGUST 2025**

***SUBJECTS: Standing Council of Attorneys-General meeting; Working with Children Checks; Closing the Gap.***

**MICHELLE ROWLAND, ATTORNEY-GENERAL:** Well, good afternoon, everyone. Today, the Commonwealth, alongside state and territory Attorneys-General, met for the first meeting of the Standing Council of Attorneys-General (SCAG) for the 48th Parliament.

The foremost priority of any government is to keep Australians safe, and that particularly extends to most vulnerable in our community, our young people. That's why today, all jurisdictions have agreed to deliver ambitious reforms to address systemic gaps in the Working with Children Checks regime to improve the safety of children across Australia.

Attorneys-General today agreed to toughening the system by ensuring that if you're banned from holding a Working with Children Check in one jurisdiction, you're banned in all of them. Banned in one, banned in all.

I note a significant amount of work has been undertaken to achieve this measure. Now, we took this urgent reform to SCAG as a priority, initially expecting that this could take up to 12 months as a feasible timeframe that the Commonwealth states and territories could agree to for implementation. I'm extremely pleased that we have agreed to accelerate delivery of this reform, with states and territories agreeing to work towards implementation by the end of this year. There is a firm commitment from all states and territories to pull out all stops, and we are working together as a team.

Attorneys-General also agreed to stronger information sharing to ensure that changes to criminal history are captured and shared in near real time. This will be known as the National Continuous Checking Capability and will be established by the Commonwealth. I'm pleased that the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission is already working on a pilot to deliver this capability. Attorneys-General will now progress work to understand the costs and the IT requirements that are required to implement this.

We also agreed to strengthen the criteria used across the country when assessing who can get a Working with Children Check.

These three important outcomes will help to deliver a significant uplift to the Working with Children Check regime right across Australia. It is notable that nefarious individuals have been shopping around the Working with Children Check system and exploiting loopholes.

These are complex reforms, and they won't be delivered overnight, but they do demonstrate the commitment of the Albanese Government and our state and territory counterparts to keep our children safe.

Importantly, the measures agreed today will deliver near-term improvements to the Working with Children Check regime and establish concrete milestones to progress important national reforms.

I do note that these reforms are just one part of a significant volume of work occurring right across government to help improve child safety outcomes. This includes work under the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse, which considers child sexual abuse in all its settings, including within families, online and within organisations.

So, I sincerely thank my state and territory counterparts for working with the Commonwealth today, as we all strive to achieve a safer environment for our young people.

Now, this is not a set and forget exercise. We will continue to work together, including in future meetings of SCAG, to help keep our young people safe.

Importantly, today we also discussed Law and Justice responses to a range of issues, including Closing the Gap, sexual violence and family and domestic violence.

We're happy to take your questions, and individual representatives are also happy to take questions.

**JOURNALIST:** You mentioned initially that this reform would take 12 months to implement. Now you say to this will hopefully delivered by the end of the year. How have you been able to progress it at such speed?

**ROWLAND:** Well, two points there. Firstly, as I have explained, the reason why reform is needed in this area is because loopholes exist that enable individuals to game the system and to exploit those loopholes to their advantage. We recognise that this is an area of the highest priority, but it also means that the complexities of the IT systems, the legislative frameworks and the different ministerial responsibilities have their own challenges. So, we have for some time been working through these and I'm pleased that today we were able to land on an agreement to work towards the end of this year for delivery.

But secondly, this is a moment of political will. It doesn't matter which jurisdiction we're talking about, or who may be in government there, we all came together with the express purpose of doing whatever we needed to do to expedite these processes. And they are complex. As I have said, these changes are actually arising from a 2015 recommendation of a Royal Commission. We now have a moment as a country, as a federation, to get this done, and I'm pleased that my counterparts in the states and territories have committed to this important body of work.

**JOURNALIST:** Given that these changes were recommended by the Royal Commission 10 years ago, why has it taken so long?

**ROWLAND:** For two reasons. Firstly, as I explained, the complexity of the IT systems involved. In many cases, the responsible minister is actually not the Attorney-General. It is a different Minister or a variety of Ministers, and that within itself has different challenges, including different departments and also different funding streams. So it is complex, but again, I will reiterate that this is a moment. It is a moment that the states and territories and the Commonwealth have decided to address together. It is not the only piece of work. As my colleague, Minister Jason Clare, has announced today, there are important reforms progressing in other areas of child safety. As a federation, we are all committed to getting this work done and to achieving what is necessary, noting that this is long overdue reform that Australians rightly expect will be delivered.

**JOURNALIST:** This is a moment. But why should it take some truly horrific allegations and, in other cases, convictions, in order for action that was recommended 10 years ago to finally be taken. If, as you're saying, the obstacles are things like IT systems and who's in charge?

**ROWLAND:** Well, these are complex areas, but that is no excuse for saying this is too hard, as, let's be frank, that has occurred until now. The fact is that we have come together, noting that a significant body of work has occurred in the lead up to today's meeting. It has meant that my Department, for example, has established a specific task force within it to ensure that there is proper liaison between the states and territories.

What we are announcing today is real deliverables. It is a work plan. There is the immediate work that needs to be done, there is the near term work that needs to be done, and there is the longer term work that needs to be done. There are some 6 million Working with Children Checks around Australia, and each of them is subject to a bespoke scheme in each state and territory. They are systems that do not talk to one another. And yes, individual states and territories can talk to their own examples, but we know that, for example, Operation Tenterfield in Queensland, what we have seen with the horrific reports, only in the last few months in Victoria, but also as New South Wales has announced, the need to close down those loopholes and ensure that these perpetrators cannot get away with forum shopping is a top priority for us. We are acting to get this done.

**JOURNALIST:** What is the timeline for implementing the negative outcomes and information sharing?

**ROWLAND:** Well, we are aiming to have that banned in one, banned in all by the end of the year. As for the establishment of the National Continuous Checking Capability, we are scoping what is needed to get that done. But as I said, there is a pilot that is being undertaken at the moment by the ACIC that will be finished by the end of this year. So I should be clear, what is being established here is a Commonwealth capability. States and territories will need to plug into that capability. But what is significant is the Commonwealth has made that commitment to establish this National Continuous Checking Capability, and the states and territories will work towards ensuring that they can plug into. And yes, it will cost. It will require deliverables in terms of IT transformation. But again, once those costs are known, then we will come back and in the meantime, work together to actually identify what needs to be done and get that work done.

**JOURNALIST:** Attorney-General, what do you say to the parents of those children who have been abused in the time it's taken between 2015 when the royal commission made these recommendations, and now where the Federal Government has failed to act.

**ROWLAND:** Look 2015 is 10 years ago. They have been let down by successive governments at all levels. We are here as representatives of the states, territories and Commonwealth, to say, we're here to make that right, and that is why we are taking decisive action. Yes, it is absolutely horrific. What has happened. It should never have happened, but we know that these perpetrators are smart. They will look at any ways to be able to game the system. So that is why we are taking a comprehensive approach, working as a team to make sure that we get this done, so that we can prevent this from happening in future.

**JOURNALIST:** Would a National Working with Children's Check System actually stop the information gaps between the childcare regulator and the Working with Children's Check officers that we've seen in the state inquiry.

**ROWLAND:** Well, one of the areas that was agreed to today was to look at better information sharing between the states and territories and the Commonwealth, and what you have described is one of those pieces of information sharing. So whether it will prevent that in every case, that is not known, and that will depend on individual circumstances, but what I can say with confidence is that it will make the scheme more robust and it will make it better.

**JOURNALIST:** Attorney-General, some of the high profile cases that you've mentioned or alluded to, like the Ashley Griffiths case and the Josh Dale Brown case, in those instances, the offender or alleged offender had no criminal charges or convictions against them at the time they were arrested and charged. So actually, having a national Working with Children's Check would have made no difference in that case, because their Working with Children's Check hadn't even been revoked in their own state. Will you consider lowering the threshold at which a Working with Children's Check can be revoked? So, it's not just I'm aware it's different in different states, but in some it's only when a criminal conviction has or charges have been laid.

**ROWLAND:** Well, that goes to two points. The first is, as I mentioned, that there are other source of sources of information that could be checked against, and that is one of the areas that we are exploring, and we've agreed to explore because it is exactly as you say, not just criminal sentencing or convictions that are relevant in this instance. But also, let's be clear, there are individual reviews that are being undertaken by states and territories, including in Victoria, in the case that you've mentioned, and whether it will make a difference in every case. That is not known, but I can guarantee, as I said, with a high degree of confidence, that this will make the system better.

**JOURNALIST:** Can you give an example of how the criteria varies from different jurisdictions and when you would implement harmonised laws?

**ROWLAND:** Well I'll just step back one place there. When we talk about harmonisation, we are not looking at a scheme to make every single state exactly the same. We are not looking to redo individual state systems. We are looking for consistency and one of the key points that came about from today's agreement in SCAG was that no state or territory would be required to lower the current standards that they have.

Now they are different in between each state and territory, and I'm happy for my colleagues individually to speak towards that. But the key issue here is that we have agreed that no jurisdiction will be required to lower their standards. To the contrary, we want all standards to lift, to lift across the Commonwealth, so that we have the most robust scheme.

**JOURNALIST:** So, you're saying that if someone is banned from working with children in one state that has a higher standard or a lower threshold for cancelling a check, but that they that particular behaviour wouldn't lead to their cancelation of a Working with Children's Check, if they applied in another state with a different threshold, they will still be banned in that other state?

**ROWLAND:** They would still be banned. But again, I've described three streams of work to ensure that we have consistency in terms of both information sharing and quality standards as well.

**JOURNALIST:** So, you've said consistency, but it sounds like the individual states aren't changing their existing systems. Why is it better to go this way, rather than have a blanket approach across all states?

**ROWLAND:** Well, the key issue there is time. We do not have a national scheme, and the states and territories administer those schemes. We're looking at a way in which we can get the most efficient outcome, and that is by individual state schemes talking to one another.

That's what we are going to do through the National Checking Capability, and that's what states and territories have agreed today.

**JOURNALIST:** Is that something you're looking to do in the future?

**ROWLAND:** Well, again, I'm talking about consistency here. So each state and territory has its own criminal justice systems. We're not seeking to replace any of those, and we are not seeking to replace the individual administration that they do have, but each state and territory, through the agreement today, will be lifting their standards and examining, as part of the SCAG process, what they need to do to get better outcomes in that.

**JOURNALIST:** Is the government considering further reforms beyond what you're announcing today?

**ROWLAND:** This is part of a wide suite of reforms, and in fact, what we've agreed to at SCAG today, with regards to Working with Children Checks goes towards a number of key elements in child safety, but they are certainly complemented with the work that Minister Clare is doing in education and his state counterparts, but also what we are doing through the various national action plans to counter sexual abuse.

**JOURNALIST:** Do you think the national register should be public like it is for doctors and teachers?

**ROWLAND:** Look, that's something that, of course, we will examine as a SCAG, but we do know that in some states that has been examined. If I'm correct, I think New South Wales examined that, and it wasn't particularly helpful. But certainly we are looking at every mechanism that we need to do to keep young people safe. What we've agreed today at SCAG are important steps forward.

**JOURNALIST:** In 2022 a National Reference System was established by the Australian Government, which would allow holders of New South Wales Working with Children Checks to be screened continuously at a national level. Can you explain how that fits in with this new system we're introducing?

**ROWLAND:** Well, certainly. That's a national database that records any adverse Working with Children, Checks decision made by another participating Australian state or territory about people who have applied to work with children.

The issue here is plugging into that National Reference System. So that does exist, exactly as you have said, but in terms of getting the states and territories not only to all plug into it, but also to implement a policy change that if you're banned in one, banned in all is one of the key features of what we agreed to today.

**JOURNALIST:** Attorney-General yesterday, the New South Wales Police child sex abuse chief called for a national register that went far beyond just the name and employment history of childcare workers, but called for a database that allowed red flags, including if someone had been fired or investigated, but unsubstantiated findings have been made against them, so that police and centres could be aware of problematic behaviour. Firstly, do you support that? Is that something the Government's looking into and secondly, is that something that could feed into Working with Children's Checks?

**ROWLAND:** Well, firstly, I won't comment on what's been recommended in individual states and territories. My colleague, A-G Daley, might want to speak to that. But certainly, as I've said, there are other pieces of information outside of convictions and sentences that actually we know are relevant in determining the suitability of someone to holding a Working with Children Check, and that's exactly what we're examining.

**JOURNALIST:** You don't need to comment about it in relation to New South Wales, but if we're talking about a national register of childcare workers, could that register go further than just the name and employment history of them and go into problematic behaviour?

**ROWLAND:** Well, again, in terms of childcare workers, these are matters that my colleague, Jason Clare is working on, and I'll let him respond to that.

**JOURNALIST:** We've heard stories about workers who've been prohibited and then found out to not even have Working with Children's Checks in the first place, even though they've been working in childcare centres. Would this national scheme stop those workers?

**ROWLAND:** Well, again, this is not going to solve every problem, let's be very clear, every single nefarious actor who is out there who seeks to do children harm, but it will indeed make this better.

**JOURNALIST:** Can IT systems cope with this speed up in delivery? How can we be sure there are no glitches?

**ROWLAND:** Well, firstly, we know that this will be a significant transformation for some jurisdictions and an even more significant transformation for others. We do know through experience that these are complex and they do need strong oversight. What I can assure all Australians today is that working as a team, the states and territories and the Commonwealth have made this a top priority. We will continue to work together to establish the most robust scheme that ensures the safety of our young people.

**JOURNALIST:** Just a quick one again for Minister Rowland, did you seek to engage the Northern Territory Attorney-General on what has been called an incarceration crisis of Indigenous people in the NT?

**ROWLAND:** Well, we had a very fulsome discussion about Closing the Gap and also meeting those targets and what is needed to achieve that. I'm very pleased that my colleague, Minister Malarndirri McCarthy, attended, she provided insights that were very valuable to state and territory colleagues. But again, this is an area where we know more needs to be done. The Productivity Commission's most recent findings have pointed to that, and it is incumbent on the Commonwealth as well as the states and territories to do whatever we need to do to close that gap. Thanks everyone.

**ENDS**