



PRIME MINISTER

Press Statement No: 515
18 June 1975

REGIONAL POLICY

The Prime Minister, Mr Whitlam, released today a statement on the Australian Government's policy on regionalism.

The Prime Minister said:

"On 5 February I announced the establishment of a small committee of Ministers concerned primarily with the Australian Government's relations with the States. I said the committee would also examine programs of direct assistance to regional, local government and local communities; that the Australian Government has laid considerable stress on the adoption of a regional approach to planning and decision-making; and that it was time to consolidate the Australian Government's initiatives.

"Regionalism in Australia is not new. It has been developed since World War II in a number of States in various forms and for various purposes.

"The Australian Government has adopted a regional policy in implementing some of its major new initiatives; the Australian Assistance Plan and the Area Improvement Program are notable examples. Agreement has been reached with all States on the regional boundaries used for Grants Commission purposes, and which are used for other Australian Government programs; in most cases these boundaries have been defined by the States themselves. These boundaries would be open to review in the light of changing circumstances.

"A regional policy is based on the concept that some programs and services of government are most efficiently and effectively planned, co-ordinated, and delivered at a level intermediate to those of State and Local government. There are many examples, electricity reticulation, water and sewerage, hospital facilities, libraries, some welfare services, and so on.

"Regionalism as it is developing in Australia, and as envisaged by the Australian Government, is based on the continued existence of Federal, State, and Local structures. A wide range of government services would continue to be best planned and delivered at each of these levels. Clearly, not all government programs could or should be based on regions.

"General acceptance of a regional policy, coupled with uniform regional boundaries, would enable co-ordination and harmonisation of those Australian, State and Local programs delivered at the regional level. The effectiveness of this co-ordination and harmonisation will be enhanced to the extent that regional administrative arrangements and organisations are acceptable to each level of government.

"Integral with the concept of regionalism are the concepts of devolution of responsibility for, and public participation in, planning and decision-making. Regionalism also opens up the possibilities of decentralisation and regionalisation of Australian Government administration to give the community better access to government services and to improve the effectiveness of the delivery of those services. The Royal Commission into Australian Government Administration is examining these possibilities. The Government has asked the Royal Commission for an early indication of its views.

Objectives

"The Australian Government has adopted, as a basis for its regional policy, the objectives that:

- (a) services and programs of the Australian Government should be provided on a regional basis unless it is inappropriate to do so, with regard to efficiency, economy, and effectiveness.
- (b) regional bodies or organisations should be given a responsibility for those services wherever possible, noting that this responsibility may range from direct involvement in decision-making through to consultation.
- (c) public participation in planning and decision-making for, and implementation of, programs should be encouraged and assisted.
- (d) State and Local Government should be encouraged to delegate to regional bodies more responsibility for those States and Local Government programs which are most appropriately delivered at the regional level and to foster public participation.

Proposed Action

"A great deal of progress has already been made by the Australian and State Governments in establishing co-operative arrangements for the exchange and analysis of information on, and the planning and delivering of, programs and services at a regional level. Ministers and officials have been, and are continuing to be, actively involved. The implementation of the Australian Government's policy on regionalism will require consolidation and extension of these co-operative arrangements, involving the Australian and State Governments and - as appropriate - regional bodies, Local Government, and community groups.

"Developments will need to be flexible and evolutionary. State Governments have established regional bodies and regional programs. Implementation of the Australian Government's regional policy will take these into account. Precise arrangements may vary from State to State, and region to region, to take account of particular circumstances - e.g. geographic, demographic, economic and political. It will take time to develop fully the skills needed for regional bodies and local organisations to contribute to, participate in, and make, major decisions. The Australian Government is already providing assistance for the development of these skills and will continue to do so, but is of the view that the skills will best be developed by experience.

"There will be a need to establish, where they do not already exist, regional bodies mutually acceptable to each level of government and to regional communities. There will be a need to identify and define the programs most efficiently and effectively delivered at regional and local scales and to establish a process of exchange of information between the levels of government so that programs and services can be harmonised.

"The Committee of Ministers concerned with Australian/ State and Regional relations will have a continuing role in the development of the Australian Government's regional policy."

CANBERRA. A.C.T.