



PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP
ADDRESS AT "TIMBAROO", DUARINGA, QUEENSLAND, THURSDAY,
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... John and Thelma, Ian (McFarlane), Don (McGauchie) President of the National Farmers Federation and my colleague the Premier, Wayne Goss, Marjorie Henzell my federal parliamentary colleague, John Purcell from the Cattleman's' Union and distinguished representatives of rural organisations and ladies and gentlemen.

Well, let me at first, on behalf of the Premier and myself, thank John and Thelma for this opportunity to see the drought as it affects them and for the reception they have given us, which Ian has said, is one given on behalf of the rural communities of this country and of Queensland. So, we thank you most sincerely for that, to be able to come here and see it.

A century ago we had the worst drought and the worst of depression in Australia's history. And, it was also the century where the nation was born with the Federation of the Australian States and where much of the Australian legend was created. A large part of the Australian legend is the legend of the bush and the fortunes of rural Australia and the bush have been very much tied up with the fortunes of the country. Each time we have faced adversity we have invariably weathered it and over come it. We are now, I think, experiencing whether it is for the moment, this is for these last three or four years or whether it is actually a sea change in climate at least a substantial change in the weather patterns in this country. And, it means that large parts of our rural communities and our farm and grazing communities have been devastated by it. Their lives have been hurt. Their incomes have been slashed. Our national income has been reduced and now we are facing not simply an economic matter in the bush, but a social matter: where families have been under pressure, where children have been withdrawn from school, where genuine hardship and sustained hardship is a part of daily life.

During the election campaign or at the end of it in 1993 I said that we would never leave the unemployed behind. Well, let me also say in the same terms,

we won't leave the country people of this nation behind - the farmers and the graziers and their families - who have been beset by this drought and have faced difficult conditions after a prolonged period of bad seasons. And, I think, that that can be said and should be said because the country notwithstanding this epoch is wealthy enough to say that we will help people through. That we won't forget them. That we will put into place some systematic support for them.

I think, one of the real worries about this drought is the impact it is having on the psychology of the bush, on the psychology of farming and on families and on family breakdown. I was telling Jan Darlington the other day a parish priest who used to give sermons where I went to mass as a boy, used to say when poverty flits in love flits out the door. It is very true, I think, that when families are put under financial pressure you see a lot of marital breakdown and a lot of stress and it is particularly, I think, sad when you see it starting to impact on children and on their education.

So, there is a real worry here, I think, about the viability of the farming family, the rural family and, of course, the people in the towns who live from this sort of generated wealth from the land. And, it is the holding of those family units together, I think, which becomes our principal concern and seeing people able to work through their financial problems and stay in the business of farming and grazing when the drought breaks and to see them ease through it and back into better times in the future is what we have to do.

So, I have taken this opportunity to look at first hand, at the impact of the drought. I have been in drought affected areas before, but each area tends to be different. In this case it is so prolonged, it followed a period of high interest rates ... (inaudible) ... knocked cash flows around. So, each epoch is different. This one is different and I am pleased to have the opportunity to hear what farmers and graziers and farm and grazing organisations have to say about this and to try and take that in and to think about some way we can have some sort of tiered support. Be it in income support or interest subsidies to deal with debts taken on in carry through periods or the funding that is necessary to actually kick off after a drought, restocking and what have you. And, it is that, I think, that the Federal Government is now considering. We have already, under the RAS scheme, seen in a joint arrangement with the States funding for rural adjustment assistance needed to carry on finance. And, I think, already since 1992 the Commonwealth spent about \$100 million there. The Premier was telling me yesterday, I think, in Queensland between the Commonwealth and the State Governments we spent about \$130 million in Queensland for that period.

So, it is not as if there isn't funding going in. It is a matter of whether it is targeted well enough, whether it's of the kind that is actually helping people out with income support, where their own financial capacity is simply run out with the prolongation of these conditions.

So, this is, I think, a first rate opportunity for me to come. As I said I very much appreciated the hospitality which John and Thelma have given us this

morning and their friends who have come around and those of you who represent rural communities and the towns, the Mayor, I appreciate seeing him here and the businesses who rely upon the growth of incomes off the land. It gives us a chance to get a handle on ... (inaudible) ... to see it at first hand and to listen to what people say. You have got to be a good listener in public life and let me assure you I am and to always listen to those ideas, the odd jewel that comes through, that you can build upon or marry up with something else, to end up with a better ... (inaudible) ... policy.

I think in this country, because drought has now become somewhat endemic to the country, that areas are drought declared for six months, out of it for a year, then back in for six months. We really need, I think, a long term policy in place. ... (inaudible) ... drought or a flood is ... (inaudible) ... it is an easy enough thing to do. Taken by some to mean that one has a heart. Well ... (inaudible) ... I think it is better to have a head about it and a heart, that is, put the two things together and perhaps a consistency in policies and a proper and appropriate funding.

That is what we will try and do, but thank you all very much indeed to give us a chance to try and to it better.

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