

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR E. G. WHITLAM, Q.C., M.P.,
TO THE N.S.W. COUNTRY PRESS ASSOCIATION, QUEANBEYAN,
THURSDAY 24 OCTOBER 1974.

THE REPORT OF THE WORKING GROUP ON AUSTRALIA'S RURAL POLICY - THE GREEN PAPER - DREW ATTENTION TO A VERY REAL DIFFICULTY FACED BY THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT AND BY INFERENCE POINTED TO THE IMPORTANCE OF THE COUNTRY PRESS. THE REPORT SAID: "EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IS AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF POLICY MAKING IN ANY SECTOR OF THE COMMUNITY. THERE ARE PARTICULAR FACTORS IN THE CASE OF THE FARM SECTOR THAT OUGHT TO BE GIVEN CAREFUL CONSIDERATION SINCE THEY SUGGEST RATHER SPECIAL NEEDS. FARMERS AND OTHERS IN RURAL AREAS ARE RELATIVELY ISOLATED IN TERMS OF THE NORMAL COMMUNICATION CHANNELS. THE MAIN DIFFICULTIES IN GETTING A BALANCED VIEW OF CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES ARE COMPOUNDED BY THEIR DEPENDENCE ON A SMALLER NUMBER OF COMMUNICATIONS CHANNELS AT TIMES PRESENTING ISSUES FROM A PARTICULAR VIEWPOINT".

ONE OF THE AIMS OF THE GREEN PAPER ITSELF WAS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT AND THE RURAL COMMUNITY. WHEN I WROTE ON 14 DECEMBER LAST YEAR TO DR STUART HARRIS AND ESTABLISHED THE WORKING GROUP, I SAID: "I HOPE THE REPORT WILL PROVIDE A BASIS FOR WIDESPREAD DIALOGUE IN THE PARLIAMENT, IN RURAL ORGANISATIONS AND IN THE COMMUNITY GENERALLY".

IN PROMOTING THAT DIALOGUE, COUNTRY NEWSPAPERS HAVE AN INDISPENSABLE ROLE. I EMPHASISE THAT WHAT WE SEEK IS A DIALOGUE. THE MINISTER FOR AGRICULTURE, SENATOR WRIEDT, HAS BEEN ASSIDUOUS IN PROMOTING IT. SOME OF THE DIFFICULTIES IN MAINTAINING A DIALOGUE WILL BE APPARENT TO THOSE OF YOU WHO SAW SENATOR WRIEDT ON THIS WEEK'S "MONDAY CONFERENCE" FROM TOOWOOMBA. IT IS VERY DIFFICULT INDEED TO HAVE A DIALOGUE WITH THOSE WHO ARE JUST DETERMINED NOT TO LISTEN. BE THAT AS IT MAY, THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT IS DETERMINED TO CONTINUE ITS EFFORTS TO ACHIEVE MEANINGFUL, CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE WITH THE RURAL COMMUNITY, NOT ONLY THOSE WHO LIVE ON FARMS BUT THE FAR LARGER SECTION OF COUNTRY DWELLERS WHO LIVE IN COUNTRY TOWNS.

THE QUOTATION I GAVE FROM THE GREEN PAPER REFERS TO THE PHYSICAL DIFFICULTIES OF COMMUNICATIONS. IT MUST BE ACKNOWLEDGED, HOWEVER, THAT THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT FACES AN ADDITIONAL DIFFICULTY NOT ENCOUNTERED BY ITS PREDECESSOR. IT STEMS FROM A BELIEF - A FALSE BELIEF - THAT THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY AND THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR GOVERNMENT IS EXCLUSIVELY URBAN-BASED - THAT WE ARE ANTI-RURAL, THAT WE ARE DOWN ON THE FARMER. THE MYTH IS SEDULOUSLY FOSTERED BY OUR OPPONENTS.

IT IS REINFORCED TO SOME EXTENT BY THE UNDOUBTED FACT THAT THE MARGIN OF OUR VICTORY IN 1972 CAME PRINCIPALLY FROM SEATS WE WERE ABLE TO WIN IN SYDNEY AND MELBOURNE. THE FACT THAT OUR SUPPORT CONTINUED FIRM IN THOSE AREAS ENABLED US TO RETAIN OFFICE IN MAY. NATURALLY I AM GRATEFUL FOR THAT SUPPORT; BUT IT IS IRRATIONAL TO DRAW THE CONCLUSION THAT GRATITUDE FOR ONE SECTION IMPLIES HOSTILITY OR INDIFFERENCE TOWARDS ANY OTHER SECTION OF THE AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY. THE FACT IS THAT THE LABOR PARTY IS NEITHER AN URBAN NOR A RURAL PARTY. IT IS A NATIONAL PARTY GUIDED BY NATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS. THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT ACCEPTS RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE WELFARE OF THE ENTIRE AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY, FOR ALL AUSTRALIANS WHEREVER THEY LIVE. THE BROAD RANGE OF OUR POLICIES ARE DIRECTED TO THE WELL-BEING OF ALL AUSTRALIANS.

THE IDEA THAT OUR POLICIES ARE DIRECTED AGAINST THE RURAL COMMUNITY WILL NOT BEAR EXAMINATION. IT IS TRUE THAT ON TAKING OFFICE WE CONSIDERED THAT AS A MATTER OF URGENT PRIORITY IT WAS NECESSARY TO REASSESS POLICY OBJECTIVES PURSUED BY PREVIOUS GOVERNMENTS. IT WAS NECESSARY TO RE-EXAMINE THE APPROPRIATENESS OF BOTH THE LEVELS AND FORMS OF ASSISTANCE PROVIDED TO ALL SECTORS OF THE ECONOMY, INCLUDING THE RURAL SECTOR.

AFTER 23 YEARS WE INHERITED THE CONSEQUENCES OF A LARGE NUMBER OF DECISIONS AND NON-DECISIONS WHICH WERE NOT ONLY INCONSISTENT WITH OUR DECLARED GOALS FOR AUSTRALIA, THE GOALS WHICH HAD BEEN ENDORSED BY THE AUSTRALIAN PEOPLE, BUT WHICH INDEED WERE OFTEN INCONSISTENT WITH THEMSELVES AND COUNTER-PRODUCTIVE. WE WANTED TO SEE THAT THE NATION'S ECONOMIC RESOURCES WERE ALLOCATED MORE EFFICIENTLY AND MORE FAIRLY. THAT IS STILL OUR OBJECTIVE.

IN THE CASE OF THE RURAL SECTOR I ACKNOWLEDGE THAT WE HAD TO TAKE SOME UNPOPULAR DECISIONS IN THE INTERESTS OF EFFICIENCY AND IN THE INTERESTS OF FAIRNESS. IT IS ALWAYS UNPOPULAR TO APPEAR TO BE TAKING SOMETHING AWAY, HOWEVER ILLUSORY THE PRESUMED BENEFIT MAY IN FACT BE. IF WE WERE SIMPLY WITHDRAWING BENEFITS WITHOUT ANY EFFORT TO SUBSTITUTE SOMETHING MORE SUBSTANTIAL, THEN WE WOULD DESERVE ALL CRITICISM, BUT WE HAVE NOT ACTED IN THAT WAY.

LET ME ILLUSTRATE A GENERAL PRINCIPLE BY REFERRING TO ONE PARTICULAR GRIPE* THE REDUCTION IN THE EDUCATION ALLOWANCE IS DEPICTED IN SOME QUARTERS AS A MEAN TRICK AGAINST THE COUNTRY STUDENTS OR THEIR PARENTS* THE FACT IS THAT WE ARE THE FIRST AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT FULLY TO RECOGNISE THE DISADVANTAGES SUFFERED BY COUNTRY STUDENTS AND TO ACT SERIOUSLY TO REDUCE THEM* WE WERE PARTICULARLY DISTURBED BY THE FINDINGS OF THE KARMEL COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION WHICH STATED: "THE LENGTH OF SCHOOLING AND PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION AMONG COUNTRY STUDENTS IN AUSTRALIA ARE CONSPICUOUSLY LOWER THAN AMONG CITY ONES ... THERE ARE INDICATIONS THAT THE PROBLEM GOES BEYOND RETENTION RATES ... HIGH TEACHER TURNOVER, BOARDING DIFFICULTIES AND THE ADDED EXPENSE OF TERTIARY EDUCATION IN DISTANT CENTRES ARE CLEARLY SIGNIFICANT IN LOWERING RETENTION; ATTITUDES TO EDUCATION, LIMITED CULTURAL FACILITIES IN THE COMMUNITY, LACK OF EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR THOSE WHO COMPLETE SECONDARY EDUCATION AND THE POSSIBILITY THAT THE CURRICULUM OFFERED IN THE SCHOOLS IS SEEN AS HAVING LESS RELEVANCE TO COUNTRY CHILDREN HAVE BEEN SUGGESTED AS EXPLANATIONS FOR LOWER ATTAINMENT."* SO FOR THE FIRST TIME WE ARE MAKING SPECIAL ASSISTANCE TO ISOLATED CHILDREN - ABOUT 5,000 IN N.S.W. ARE CURRENTLY RECEIVING GRANTS TOTTALLING \$2½ MILLION*

THE KANGAN COMMITTEE ON TECHNICAL AND FURTHER EDUCATION NOTED IN ITS REPORT THAT COUNTRY PEOPLE HAD PROBLEMS OF ACCESS TO TECHNICAL EDUCATION AND TO RETRAINING FOR A NEW CAREER AND CONSEQUENTLY WERE OFTEN OBLIGED TO MOVE TO THE CITIES*

THE NEW STAGE OF OUR EDUCATION POLICY EMBODIED IN THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE KARMEL AND KANGAN COMMITTEES ADOPTED BY THE GOVERNMENT WILL BRING NEW OPPORTUNITIES TO COUNTRY BOYS AND GIRLS; AND WE WANT THEM TO BE ABLE TO ENJOY THOSE OPPORTUNITIES IN THE PLACES WHERE THEIR PARENTS LIVE*

EDUCATION IS JUST ONE EXAMPLE OF THE GREAT MOTIVE BEHIND OUR PROGRAM - THE DRIVE FOR NEW OPPORTUNITIES AND MORE EQUAL ACCESS TO THESE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL AUSTRALIANS* THIS IS THE PRINCIPLE BEHIND OUR APPROACH TO REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT* IT IS JUST NONSENSE TO PUT THIS IN TERMS OF CITY VERSUS COUNTRY* WE DO NOT THINK IN THAT WAY AND THE MACHINERY WE ARE CREATING TO PROMOTE EQUALITY BETWEEN REGIONS IS NOT DESIGNED TO WORK THAT WAY*

FOR YEARS AND YEARS I HAVE PUT TO THE PEOPLE OF AUSTRALIA THE PROPOSITION THAT INCREASINGLY A FAMILY'S STANDARD OF LIVING DEPENDS NOT SO MUCH ON ITS INCOME AS WHERE IT LIVES* WE HAVE SET OUT DELIBERATELY TO REDUCE INEQUALITIES BETWEEN REGIONS AND THEREBY PROMOTE THE REAL STANDARD OF LIVING OF ALL AUSTRALIANS WHEREVER THEY CHOOSE TO LIVE OR ARE OBLIGED TO LIVE* WHEN THE AUSTRALIAN GRANTS COMMISSION WAS ESTABLISHED IN 1933 IT WAS EMPOWERED TO MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT ON THE FINANCE NEEDED TO REDUCE INEQUALITIES BETWEEN STATES* WE LEGISLATED TO DO FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREAS - FOR REGIONS WITHIN THE STATES - WHAT THE GRANTS COMMISSION USED TO BE ABLE TO DO ONLY AS BETWEEN THE STATES* WE HAVE ACCEPTED A GREAT AND GROWING COMMITMENT ON BEHALF OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT* WE WANT TO SEE THAT THE STANDARDS OF ALL REGIONS - THE COUNTRY TOWNS JUST AS MUCH AS THE NEW SUBURBS - ARE BROUGHT UP TO THE BEST STANDARDS - ACCEPTABLE MODERN STANDARDS WORTHY OF THE REAL WEALTH OF OUR NATION*

AND AS TO THAT WEALTH, LET THERE BE NO DOUBT ABOUT OUR RECOGNITION OF THE CONTRIBUTION TO IT WHICH IS MADE BY THE AUSTRALIAN RURAL COMMUNITY. OUR BASIC OBJECTIVE FOR RURAL INDUSTRY IS TO PROVIDE A FIRM AND LASTING BASIS FOR INCREASED TRADE IN THOSE RURAL COMMODITIES WHICH WILL PROVIDE ASSURED LONG TERM MARKETS AT FAIR PRICES. WE HAVE BEEN VIGOROUS AND SUCCESSFUL IN SECURING TRADE AGREEMENTS, MANY OF THEM WITH COUNTRIES WITH WHICH HITHERTO WE HAD HARDLY ANY COMMERCIAL CONTACT.

ABOVE ALL WE HAVE SHOWN THE GREATEST DEGREE OF FLEXIBILITY IN OUR EFFORTS TO HELP THE RURAL COMMUNITY TO ADJUST TO OUR DRIVE FOR GREATER EFFICIENCY AND EQUALITY. WE HAVE HAD TO TAKE MANY DECISIONS IN THE NATIONAL INTEREST AS PART OF THE FIGHT AGAINST INFLATION AND PART OF THE CAMPAIGN FOR GREATER PRODUCTIVITY; BUT WE HAVE BEEN SENSITIVE AND SYMPATHETIC IN DEALING WITH THE IMMEDIATE PROBLEMS CREATED BY THESE MEASURES. FOR INSTANCE, ALTHOUGH THE 25 PER CENT TARIFF CUT IS ADVANTAGEOUS TO THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF PEOPLE LIVING IN THE COUNTRY, WE HAVE RECOGNISED THAT THERE ARE COUNTRY CITIES AND TOWNS WHICH HAVE FOUND IT DIFFICULT TO COPE IMMEDIATELY WITH THE CONSEQUENCES.

ONLY THIS WEEK WE APPROVED A NEW SCHEME OF ASSISTANCE TO COUNTRY TOWNS ADVERSELY AFFECTED BY OUR STRUCTURAL CHANGES. THIS ASSISTANCE IS BASED ON THE INABILITY OF COUNTRY TOWNS WITH A LIMITED RANGE OF JOB OPPORTUNITIES TO ABSORB SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN THE STRUCTURE OF EMPLOYMENT.

I AM INDEBTED TO MY COLLEAGUE BOB WHAN, M.P. FOR EDEN-MONARO - THIS ELECTORATE - FOR DRAWING TO MY ATTENTION TWO SETS OF FIGURES WHICH I THINK PUT INTO PERSPECTIVE THE POLICIES OF THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES. THE BUREAU OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS STATES THAT IN 1971, ~~7,570~~^{10,500} AUSTRALIAN FARMERS APPLIED FOR ASSISTANCE FROM THE RURAL RECONSTRUCTION BOARD. THIS YEAR, THE FIGURE IS DOWN TO ~~523~~¹¹⁸⁶ APPLICATIONS. SECONDLY, THIS YEAR'S BUDGET PROVIDES FOR \$487.6 MILLION IN RURAL ASSISTANCE, AN INCREASE OF \$158 MILLION ON 1972/73. THIS SURELY IS NOT THE RECORD OF A GOVERNMENT INDIFFERENT TO RURAL INTERESTS OR INADEQUATE TO DEAL WITH THE PROBLEMS OF RURAL INDUSTRY. I DON'T BRUSH ASIDE THOSE PROBLEMS. BUT WE HAVE TO RECOGNISE THAT THOSE PROBLEMS, LIKE SO MUCH OF OUR CURRENT ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES, SPRING FROM AN INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT AND COMPLEX WORLD SITUATION.

THEY CAN'T BE SOLVED BY HYSTERIA OR FEAR OR PANICx
THEY CAN'T BE SOLVED BY CREATING NATIONAL DIVISION
AND BITTERNESS, PARTICULARLY THE MOST ARTIFICIAL
OF ALL DIVISIONS - THAT BETWEEN CITY AND COUNTRYx
WHEN I ADDRESSED THE UNITED NATIONS I EMPHASISED
THE INTERDEPENDENCE AND DEPENDENCE OF THE WORLD
COMMUNITYx IF THIS IS TRUE ON THE INTERNATIONAL
LEVEL, HOW MUCH GREATER FORCE IT HAS WITHIN THE
NATIONx I REPEAT, WE ARE DETERMINED AS A GOVERNMENT
TO MAINTAIN A GENUINE, A RATIONAL DIALOGUE WITH THE
RURAL COMMUNITY IN ORDER TO ESTABLISH RATIONAL
POLICIES WHICH WILL PLACE AUSTRALIA'S GREAT RURAL
INDUSTRIES ON A SECURE AND SOUND COURSEx AS THE
POSSESSORS OF A VERY VALUABLE MEANS OF COMMUNICATION,
YOU CAN PLAY A CRUCIAL PART IN PROMOTING THAT DIALOGUE
AND I SEEK YOUR CO-OPERATION IN ACHIEVING ITx

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