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PRIME MINISTER

FOR PRESS

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ELECTORATE TALK

Two reports of immense significance - the Fraser Island Report and the Fox Report on uranium development - have turned the spotlight on the Government's attitude towards the Australian environment. This spotlight is welcome.

It is a very healthy and encouraging sign when the strong views of special interest groups and the public at large can be debated in an open and responsible manner. I hope this trend continues.

It would be unfortunate for the community if views of environmental issues became so emotional and heated that reason and debate gave way to public disturbance. If this were to happen, those views would certainly lose credibility. The cause behind those views would not be helped - it would in fact be immensely harmed.

The Government's stand on the environment is clear. We recognise the quality of the environment is crucial for this and future generations of Australians. There is much greater understanding and concern for the natural environment now than ten or fifteen years ago. There are many more people aware of the care that we ought to show, and I think, increasingly are coming to show, in relation to the natural environment.

People understand that many parts of this and other countries have been polluted and destroyed because man has not recognised his own potential for environmental damage.

The Australian Government recognises that in a world of rapid population growth - and a world with severe problems of disease and hunger - Australia must accept responsibilities in the global context. In other words, the demands of conservation must be balanced with those of development.

Our commitment to the environment has been translated into positive action in the eleven months since we were elected to government. We promised to promote community involvement and responsibility in the environment issues. This meant that where development projects were likely to have a damaging effect on the environment, special impact statements would be prepared before Government decisions were taken.

We promised to support the public role of approved voluntary organisations and to publicise environmental issues. We undertook to improve consultation between industry and government in this field, and promised the preservation of the national estate.

I want to outline some of our specific achievements. Our concern for the national estate is evidenced by our support of the Australian Heritage Commission. This Commission has the responsible task of compiling a register of the national estate, in which a record of sites, buildings, and natural areas of national importance is being made. This is ongoing work. National trust organisations in each State have been allocated grants and conservation organisations have also received government financial support.

The Government has also established the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. This park area is within the boundaries of the tip of Cape York Peninsula to Fraser Island. The Great Barrier Reef is undoubtedly unique - the focal point of an exciting marine world.

The Government also promised to support the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service and to assist in establishing a national park of world significance in South West Tasmania.

The Government also undertook to observe in letter and spirit the Environment Protection Act. This Act is the legislative basis on which the Government ensures that environmental factors are taken into account before reaching decisions on proposals that could affect the environment. The Act was passed when we were in Opposition, but it received our full support.

As I indicated earlier the issues that have been most prominent in the environment field in recent weeks have been Fraser Island and the mining of uranium. The Government is considering reports from these two independent inquiries which carried out exhaustive examinations of these questions.

Fraser Island is an area of unique beauty. The Government fully recognises its responsibility to make sure this part of our national heritage is not lost to future generations. We recognise the fragility of the environment of Fraser Island. We recognise it needs protection. At the same time we are conscious that a number of people are dependent for their livelihood on the Fraser Island mining operations. Obviously the Government's decision on this important question will not be supported by all sections of the community.

We must, however, take decisions that will be to the lasting advantage of the entire community. As to the uranium question, there has already been many opportunities for all interested groups within the community to put their views. In addition, there will be a debate on the contents of the first report of the Fox Commission in the National Parliament fairly shortly. At this point it would not be fair of me to comment any further on the report, particularly as the Commission has yet to bring down a further report.

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The Government's track record on environmental issues is strong. We have shown that we are firmly committed to the preservation of our national heritage. We have shown our desire to ensure that all Australians are able to enjoy a high standard of living.

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