



PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
LAUNCH OF RURAL AND REGIONAL STATEMENT
WARRAGUL - 1 DECEMBER 1989**

At the outset I want to thank your local member Barry Cunningham and all those who have worked with him for arranging this very important function today.

I appointed Barry as the first chairman of the Country Task Force that I established in 1986 to advise me and the Government on the needs and wishes of rural Australia.

The Task Force is made up of Labor MPs who represent rural electorates, and it has been an outstanding success.

It has conducted a very wide range of consultations with groups throughout rural and regional Australia and has been instrumental in the development of what I proudly describe here today as a comprehensive, well-measured and effective set of policies directed at rural and regional Australia.

The Statement I am launching today shows the progress we have already made and the opportunities to improve further the effectiveness of the programs we have in place.

What is so very striking today about the rural scene in Australia is the dramatic changes that are underway.

Global trends and pressures are having a profound impact on Australia's rural communities - even the most remote ones. The introduction of new technology; the restrictions on world trade; the economic challenge to restructure, modernise and compete; the continued growth of tourism are all felt by the people and the communities outside the main cities:

- . The family farm continues as the basic element of agriculture, but many farms have become larger so as to increase their efficiency.
- . Exporters of primary products are becoming better at meeting the changing needs of overseas consumers.

- . Traditional regional industries - including clothing and footwear - are being exposed to international pressures, and many are learning how to compete with the best in the world.
- . The mining sector, which contributes some 36 per cent of the total value of our exports, is continually adapting and innovating to keep its international market share.
- . Coastal strips along the eastern seaboard are rapidly gaining population and experiencing strong economic growth.

All this activity and change in rural and regional Australia means the emergence of new social and economic patterns of life. So it is even more important now that we be firm in our determination to ensure the equity and effectiveness of Government policies directed to those people who live outside the major cities.

Our aim is simple: to ensure that all Australians have the opportunity to enjoy a high standard of living through vigorous and sustainable economic development, supported as necessary by a full range of public services.

It might often be thought that Federal Governments, based in Canberra, are remote from people in the bush and that they are concerned only with the big cities.

And it might often be feared that the so-called 'tyranny of distance' is an insuperable obstacle for a Federal Government seeking to deliver services to people throughout the breadth of our vast nation.

Now I don't say that we can completely overcome that 'tyranny of distance'.

But I do say that we have already considerably minimised its impact on the quality of life that can be enjoyed by people outside the major cities.

Just over a fortnight ago I addressed the bi-annual conference of the National Farmers' Federation.

On that occasion I described the comprehensive way in which we have acted to protect and advance the interests of Australia's primary producers.

Through our new soil conservation program, Landcare, we are protecting the most important ingredient of agricultural prosperity - the soil itself.

Through our micro-economic reforms we are improving the way in which products are moved and marketed within Australia and overseas. These reforms, unprecedented in their scope, will benefit all of those engaged in the export industries which are the life-blood of Australia: farmers and miners as well as manufacturers.

Through a comprehensive program of reducing the tariffs that have hamstrung our economy for too long we are boosting the competitiveness of Australian primary producers.

And, complementing all this, we are seeking, through our unceasing international campaign for a liberalisation of world trading rules, to ensure that our primary producers have fair access to all-important overseas markets.

But of course it is not just our policies towards agricultural producers themselves that are relevant to pursuing our goal of a better quality of life for all Australians.

We recognise that rural Australia is home for millions of people - farmers, to be sure, but also factory workers, tourist operators, the retired, those in provincial towns, young families who have chosen to live away from the big smoke.

Accordingly, our Social Justice strategy has placed particular emphasis not only on providing new services to alleviate the special hardships faced by those living outside the big cities but also on ensuring that those people have decent access to existing services.

Our Environment Statement that I launched in July - 'Our Country Our Future' - explained the progress we have made to date in achieving ecologically sustainable development, and the programs and methods we will be implementing in affirming our commitment to that principle.

Our Womens' Health policy recognises the special health needs faced by women living away from the major health care centres.

With that detailed but necessary background, I come now to the purpose of today's gathering: the launch of this Statement on Federal Government policy for rural and regional Australia.

The main purpose of this Statement is to demonstrate our continuing commitment to a certain way of undertaking the business of government in rural and regional areas.

Our approach is consistent; it is principled; and at its heart is the notion of social justice. This has special meaning for non-metropolitan Australians because, among other things, what distinguishes the city from the country is options, opportunities, access and information.

We understand the effects of sparse population: narrower choices of goods and services; higher transport costs; and, often, considerable personal inconvenience in gaining access to shops and services.

We are aware of the narrower range of educational and training opportunities, and the uncertainty that can be caused by being some distance from health and medical services. And we are aware of the all-embracing importance of the road network - just as you are presumably aware of the enormous cost to Government of maintaining and improving it.

I should say, as a counterpoint, that we also understand the great benefits of living in country Australia. I'm sure you agree: rural and regional Australia is a wonderful part of the world to live in. It offers a clean environment; it is a treasurehouse of natural beauty; and it embodies all the best community traditions of Australian life.

My conviction on these issues is based firmly on the fact that the policies and philosophy of the Labor Government represent the only comprehensive and effective framework for protecting and advancing the interests of rural Australia.

That is increasingly reflected in the substantial number of non-metropolitan electorates that return Labor candidates as Members of Parliament - candidates of the calibre of Barry Cunningham, and elsewhere in Victoria, John Brumby, John Mildren, Neil O'Keefe and Peter Cleeland. And might I add, never has the rural community been better served by a Minister than it is currently being served by John Kerin.

So as a Government, we are not prepared to relax in our commitment to social justice or to neglect the relevant issues of access and opportunity. Of course we could take the easy way out: we could simply say that people have a free choice about where to live; we could turn a blind eye; we could respond opportunistically to noisy sectional claims at a significant cost to the overall community - in short, we could do as the Opposition currently proposes to do: divert resources to the middle ground, and leave everyone else can look after themselves.

We reject that approach. The stock-take of our activities in this Statement shows why we have succeeded in genuinely promoting the quality of life in rural and regional Australia:

- . we have managed the economy in such a way as to achieve restructuring without recession: there has been record job growth;
- . our policies have been consistent, coherent and comprehensive;

- . these economic policies have gone hand in hand with our social justice policy: creating national prosperity and ensuring it is fairly shared;
- . we have not shied away from implementing special programs where they are demonstrably needed; and
- . we have worked closely with State and local governments to ensure services are coordinated and comprehensive.

And it is those principles that underpin the whole philosophy of this Statement.

The process of preparing this Statement has given us the opportunity to identify where we can further improve the effectiveness of programs already in place, and where we can implement new initiatives to fill the gaps.

Today I am launching a new series of modest and well-targetted initiatives:

- . to provide more support for people who provide long-term care for disabled people in rural areas and for geriatric care;
- . to improve the quality of information people in rural areas receive about Government policies;
- . to expand health services available for rural women;
- . to improve the services available to young people including an expansion of the system of hostels for secondary school kids;
- . to expand the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme which helps currently unemployed people to start their own businesses;
- . and, finally and importantly, there will be a review of the current system of tax zone rebates which provide relief to tax payers in remote and isolated areas. This review will consider anomalies in zone boundaries and special zone rebate arrangements, as well as problems with social security testing arrangements affecting people in isolated areas.

Ladies and gentlemen

We are a Government for all Australians, no matter where they live.

Together with our overall economic management policies, our micro-economic reform program, and our social justice strategy, the steadfast approaches and the new measures outlined in this Statement will allow us together to make further progress towards our goals for rural and regional Australia and for the country at large: economic prosperity, social justice and better quality of life.
