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PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
ENVIRONMENT 1990 CONFERENCE
SYDNEY - 2 MAY 1990**

Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

All elements of the Australian community must be involved in this vital task for the 1990s: developing the strategies for safeguarding the environment that our children will inherit and demanding of government at all levels, of industry and of interest groups that those strategies be implemented.

This conference, bringing together a diverse group drawn from industry, government, conservation groups and academia, is a valuable contribution to the consideration of these important questions, and I am grateful for your invitation to address you this morning.

The range of topics to be addressed at this conference clearly demonstrates how pervasive environmental considerations have become. It highlights the stark fact that the environment has never been more prominent in the public mind than it is today. It highlights too the range of pressures that will be exerted on, and opportunities that will be available to, the Australian business community, as it responds to this critical issue.

To an outsider it might seem that the community debate about the future of Australia is being conducted in two entirely different languages. One language is the language of aesthetics - this is the language spoken by some who regard preservation of the environment as a totally overriding and inflexible goal. The other language is spoken by some industrialists. In this hardheaded language, natural resource development is seen as the lone goal, bringing with ~~it a boundless number of jobs and easy solutions to~~ Australia's economic difficulties.

As in the tower of Babel, the proliferation of languages does not improve the level of communication between human beings. It impedes constructive dialogue and handicaps those who wish to develop workable solutions.

If Australians were to conduct a debate on these issues in such uncompromising terms, we would make no progress. We would simply talk past one another; we would not in fact have real debate at all but merely assertion, antagonism and name calling. The real question is not, which of the two languages must we speak? But, how do we translate the best concepts of both languages into a new language that we can all understand and that will break through deadlocks in the resolution of environmental and development issues.

The name of that new language of course is ecologically sustainable development.

For its part, my Government has never accepted a dichotomy between economy and ecology. Economic development is sustainable in the long term only if it is environmentally sustainable. My Government has succeeded both in creating jobs at a rate twice as fast as the rest of the western world and in preserving the environment to such an extent that the World Heritage Bureau has acknowledged Australia as having done more to promote world heritage values than any other country.

So it can be done: economy and ecology can be made to go hand in hand. But for Australia the job is far from complete. It is time to move to the next stage.

One of the principal tasks facing my Government, as it enters its fourth term in office - a task that confronts the entire Australian community as it enters the 1990s - is the challenge of turning the principle of sustainable development into practical policies for each major industry sector. We want sustainable development to be not merely a concept, but a recipe for decision making.

Certainly, the community will sometimes be faced with a stark choice between the development of, say, a mineral resource and the preservation of a pristine wilderness area. The notion of multiple land use is not applicable in all instances. But often the task will be one of ensuring that development activities are managed in such a way as not to cause irreparable or unacceptable damage to the surrounding environment.

Sustainable development must start from the proposition that our environmental assets need to be looked after and maintained in much the same way as we care for and invest in ~~other assets that sustain and enhance our productive~~ capacity for the future. In that sense, good environmental management means sound economic management.

Environmental considerations must be fully integrated into our decision making.

It is essential that business, along with other interest groups and governments, are all involved in the task of identifying problems and developing solutions to overcome them. I have therefore asked State Governments and industry, union and environmental interest groups to work with us in the formulation of a sustainable development strategy.

The first step is the preparation of a discussion paper on the concept of sustainable development. Once that concept has been well articulated and the key principles identified, I propose to establish working groups to translate these findings into practical policies for particular industry sectors. It will be vital for the success of this process that industry and other key interest groups participate fully in the development of these strategies. The Commonwealth's part in the formulation of a sustainable development strategy will be over-sighted by a special new Cabinet sub-committee on sustainable development.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Most of the issues which you will be considering over the next three days - indeed, most of the problems that we are facing - are also being experienced in other countries. Success in dealing with our national problems will mean that we are well placed to assist others. We have already increased the environmental component of our aid program. And there could also be significant export opportunities to be grasped for those in the vanguard of developing new products and more environmentally benign technology.

There are, however, other problems that are global in scope and which cannot be solved by any one country acting alone. Their very nature demands a co-operative and co-ordinated international effort. It is an extraordinary mark of the increased public consciousness of previously arcane scientific issues that these problems are now familiar to us all - especially the greenhouse effect and depletion of the ozone layer. And it is an extraordinary mark of the modernisation of Australia's foreign policy objectives as we enter the 1990s that Australia is now playing a leading role in international efforts to deal with these problems. We shall continue to do so.

We will continue to work hard for an international convention on climate change that will bind all countries to ~~a program of reducing greenhouse gas emissions.~~

At the same time we must ensure that Australia continues to be at the forefront of world responses to this problem. A special working group has been set up at my direction to examine options for reducing greenhouse gas emissions in Australia. Its preliminary report was released at the end of 1989 for public comment.

We will be continuing to support a greenhouse research program to improve our knowledge of the atmospheric changes taking place and of their likely impact. Over the next three years we will be providing funding of at least \$5.7 million per year for this purpose.

Australia has also taken a strong stand in response to the threat to the ozone layer. Under the Montreal Protocol, Australia is required to have reduced consumption of ozone depleting substances by 50 per cent by 1998. In fact, under our Strategy for Ozone Protection, developed after extensive consultation with industry, unions and public interest groups, we will have achieved a reduction of 95 per cent by 1995 and a complete phase-out by 1998.

The greenhouse effect and the hole in the ozone layer are matters which could affect all Australians directly and profoundly. Our interest in promoting international action to deal with this is clear. My Government is also very conscious of our responsibility to act on other international issues even though the benefits may be less obvious or immediate.

We have been instrumental in shifting world opinion towards the view that humanity should conserve the Antarctic, the last pristine continent on earth, for scientific and recreational purposes; and that the barbaric and inefficient practice of drift-net fishing should be banned. And we will be working hard for the development of an international biological diversity convention.

Now, Australia cannot talk with influence and credibility to the rest of the world about the need to preserve the global environment unless we are practicing what we preach at home. I am proud that we are meeting that obligation.

Last year, in my statement on the environment, I outlined the program of action that we are undertaking. Last month I issued a progress report and announced a new series of measures which continue our commitment to the protection of the environment. I do not propose to itemise them all today, but several are worthy of particular mention.

One of our most serious environmental problems has been the threat to our soil. But the point is that this is a problem for the national economic interest as well - a clear cut case where preservation of the environment and protection of ~~vital industry, our farming industry,~~ go hand in hand.

It is encouraging that large numbers of Australians not only recognise the importance of addressing this problem but are prepared to do something about it themselves. The response to the Landcare program has been very encouraging and gives us great hope for the future.

If balanced, reasoned decisions on the environment are to be made then we must have extensive and reliable data to facilitate the decision making process.

My Government has long recognised this need and has made significant progress towards the establishment of a system of data bases that will satisfy it. These include the National Resource Information Centre, the National Forest Inventory and the National Wilderness Inventory. These systems are being developed so that they can be integrated to allow ready assessment of the full resource implications of alternative courses of action.

The Resource Assessment Commission, established last year, will also assist better decision making. This independent advisory body will conduct inquiries into complex resource use matters with terms of reference that range across both the environmental and economic factors involved. The public inquiry process will contribute to a better and wider understanding of the facts of a particular situation and of the issues and options open to us as a nation.

There could be, perhaps, no more contentious and vexed question than the subject of the Commission's first reference: the use of our forest resources.

A growing number of Australians have made it clear that they want to see substantial areas of our native forests preserved. But the community's demand for timber, paper and paper products continues to grow. The industry provides jobs for many thousands and makes a very significant contribution to the Australian economy.

We are confident that, in time, a strategy can be developed which can accommodate both the demands for forest preservation and the need to maintain a thriving and secure timber industry. We have committed ourselves to that end and have already announced that we will be taking steps to expand the supply of pulpwood by encouraging the establishment of eucalypt plantations. We will be continuing to work closely with the major interest groups and the States in the further development of a national forest strategy. In the end governments must take the decisions - that is what we are elected to do and we will not shirk that responsibility. But we will be looking to the Resource Assessment Commission's report to provide a major input into our decisions.

We have also announced that we will strive for national standards of air and water quality - and national strategies ~~to implement them. We are committed to establishing an~~ Environment Protection Agency to coordinate this work. Constitutionally the responsibility for these matters rests in the main with the States, but, as the national Government, we will assert a role. We must, for a very simple but compelling reason - problems of air and water quality transcend State boundaries.

The advantages of establishing national environmental standards are, I believe, also demonstrated by the guidelines developed for bleached eucalypt kraft pulp mills. These were developed in consultation with the States as well as with industry and environmental groups. I am not saying that there is no place in our system for regional and indeed local variations in attitudes to issues of the environment and economic development. But where - as with pulp milling - we are concerned with issues impacting on the national economy, our current account situation and the environment beyond a particular locality the Commonwealth has a clear interest and role.

I referred earlier to the pressures and opportunities of the new environmental awareness for businesses and companies. Those who own or manage operations with clean, environmentally sound processes will increasingly gain commercial advantage over those without. The recent announcement by the Heinz company that its subsidiaries will not accept tuna caught in drift nets is a clear and dramatic example of the commercial power of the community's environmental consciousness - and a welcome and sensitive expense by a major corporation.

For Australia there will be increasing commercial opportunities in helping others to make their production processes more environmentally friendly. New technologies are needed to increase energy efficiency, to replace chlorofluorocarbons, to reduce gas emissions.

Some Australian companies are already taking advantage of these opportunities. The Neutralysis process of waste disposal and lightweight aggregate production is a significant world development in waste technology. I am happy to say that the Commonwealth assisted in this development through an Industry Research and Development Grant exceeding \$1.5 million. We announced recently that up to \$4 million a year from this scheme will be made available for the development of new technologies in waste and environmental management. The MEMTEC filtration system is another example of innovation and development by an Australian company.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The debate on environmental issues is not only more widespread now than ever before - more prominent on the ~~national political agenda than ever before~~ - but also much more informed. It is also increasingly co-operative rather than adversarial. The focus of debate is moving away from whether we need to change our ways towards the best way of going about it. This is an extraordinarily healthy development and one, I suggest, we must all encourage.

Companies in all sectors of the Australian economy are boosting their environmental sections to ensure that they keep up with the best of their competition. It is more and more simply good business practice to do so.

We are all faced with a challenge today, a challenge we cannot avoid. This challenge is to continue to meet the reasonable economic expectations and aspirations of all Australians - something which has always been central to the objectives of my Party - without incurring an environmental debt that will doom future generations to an impoverished land of greatly reduced opportunities.

I am confident that we can meet this challenge. But to do so we must work together - governments, businesses, unions and environmental groups.

This conference is evidence of your commitment to co-operative solutions. We need it - we need more of it. So I wholeheartedly congratulate the organisers for their vision and hard work, and I have great pleasure in declaring the International Environmental Solutions Conference open.

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