



PRIME MINISTER

PARTIAL TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP

PRESS CONFERENCE AND DOORSTOP INTERVIEW AT THE BUSHFIRE OPERATIONS CENTRE, ROSEHILL, SYDNEY

8 JANUARY, 1994

PM: I think it is worth recording the fact that the fires have been fought notwithstanding the loss of life we've had, and property, quite successfully over the last week, and particularly in the last 24 hours. Yesterday there was a reasonable expectation of many hundreds, maybe thousands of homes being lost, that not having happened, and now the weather conditions being the all important variable, and this day in particular being significant as some meteorological advice gives us the hope, as the premier said, that we could have a shift in conditions by about six this evening. Now if that's the case, with damper air, the containment task should be something which this force now deployed is capable of. Could I just say from the Commonwealth's view we have as many Defence Force assets deployed here as needs be. We have got more standing in reserve. We've got another five hundred people ready to be deployed if needs be, and that also goes for equipment. I think we have got now about 25 helicopters committed. We are reaching a point where Commissioner Koperberg's view is that if more aircraft are deployed there is a risk to the aircraft and to firefighters, and that we are fighting these fires conventionally, and conventionally has proven to be the best way to fight them, augmented by aviation services as needs be.

So I have indicated to the Premier this morning that for the firefighting task, which is outside the National Disaster Relief Arrangements, the NDRA arrangements, that is the actual task and cost of fighting such fires on such a large scale, the Commonwealth will meet NSW dollar for dollar on those arrangements.

Also we are this morning, the Commonwealth, the acting Minister for Social Security, John Faulkner, will be declaring under the Social Security Act the provision of emergency payments to families which are affected by the fires, with a one-off payment which was set sometime ago and we are reviewing the quantum of that payment...at the moment it is \$600. We will probably increase that, but it will have to be increased by a change retrospectively to an act of parliament. So that will be there to support those people who have been affected in the immediate sense. Of course, the National Disaster Relief Arrangements are there for the longer run re-instatement of infrastructure and other assets.

So could I perhaps round up my remarks by congratulating the firefighting effort and task in NSW starting with the Government, the Premier, Minister Griffiths, Commissioner Koperberg, his deputy, the fire Chiefs, and the normal services who have behaved in a way which is of course way above normal. And that was the fire brigade, the ambulance, the police and the defence force, but most particularly all those volunteers who have come and given their Christmas break to their fellow Australians to make this burden easier on them. To those, and to the thousands of people who were just simply helping, I think we all owe a great debt of gratitude.

J: Are you going to inspect the damage?

PM: We are going to look at the fires which are the ones probably the most threatening at the moment. I have made clear though that neither I nor the Premier, nor any of the other Ministers here or officials involved would want to be taking aircraft which are needed in the effort. But we have now aircraft which are surplus to the effort, and therefore I think it is probably worth our while to have a look.

J: With the end of the Cold War, do you think the defence forces should be more aimed towards civil emergencies?

PM: The nature of the equipment of any conventional armed force will always have some civil applications in circumstances such as these, and it is the adaptability but more than that the willingness of the defence force to actually apply them effectively which matters. And I think that's what matters rather than the equipment selection or the rest, and that is that there will always be people there. And in this case, certainly from the Government's point of view, and that of my colleague the acting Defence Minister John Faulkner, we take the view that wherever the defence force effectively help, then it ought to. And I know that is certainly the view of the chief of the Australian Defence Force, chief of general staff, and the general willingness of the defence force personnel to actually be involved, and to do it well and to do it quickly.

J: Mr Keating, you're a Sydney resident, are you shocked by the way the fires have ripped through NSW?

PM: I am, and we all are, but these are unusual weather conditions. And I mean Sydney has assets which very few cities in the world have, and they are very large areas of reserve around it, which the people of this city enjoy variously from time to time, but it always carried with it some risks, and I think it is a matter of managing those risks. It is the nature of NSW, and the fact that there are many national parks, which does make the place such a beautiful place. But large forest areas will always attract some of these risks. It is a case of managing them. But out in the very large areas, as the Premier said, it is a moot question about whether you can ever effectively manage such a risk, with clearing et cetera. But in the inner city areas, or areas near to the city proper, it is important I think that we do manage these areas well, particularly in the future. But preserving what we've had luckily, which other governments in the past have given us, that is, the foresight to declare reserves around the city which has made Sydney one of the nicest cities in the world.

TRANSCRIPT OF DOORSTOP WITH POOL TV CREW, OPERATIONS ROOM

J: What's the extent of the fires now?

PM: Well, the first element of the briefing was that the containment of fire overnight, and the minimisation of loss of life and housing was probably the best news of the day, because as John (Fahey) said earlier, we expected yesterday that more homes would be lost in the evening. Now it depends very much I think on the prevailing weather conditions today. If there is a successful containment over the course of the day there is some prospect on meteorological information of the wind shifting by about lunchtime tomorrow.

J: How have you been able to help the fire fighters?

PM: Well, we've got maximum deployment I think. We talked about aircraft, and we now think if we put any more aircraft in the air there is a danger to aircraft and to firefighters. So there is a maximum level of commitment of resources one can make, and I think in the case of the services we have more aircraft on standby and more personnel, but I think the message John and I received today was what we have deployed at the moment is the optimum that needs to be deployed for the problems at hand.

J: What do you think the costs will be to the governments?

PM: Well let me just say this before I give you that answer, I think the spirit here has been remarkable. That is, the co-operative spirit that has seen the work not just of the professional fire services, the police, ambulance, and the defence forces, but the volunteers, and of course the thousands of ordinary people who have thrown their lot in with this. I think we are seeing Australia at its best in this environment. On costs, I've indicated to John this morning that we, the Commonwealth, with NSW will pick up half the cost of the fire fighting effort. On the larger issues of replacing and putting back some of the lost infrastructure facilities and homes we have a set of formulae in place for that, but we are also having a talk about that as well.

DOORSTOP AFTER PM'S AERIAL INSPECTION OF FIRE SITES TO THE NORTH OF SYDNEY

PM: I think the impression we have is that the wind conditions at the moment, I mean the fires are burning on very broad fronts, and some of them are still quite intense, you can see very large flames. Others are burning through grasslands below the trees, but they are burning on a broad front and you can see the extensive damage, and where certain localities have been saved you can see where the fires have come right up to the edges of the homes. I think we'd say that the wind conditions at the moment are, if you like, retarding the progress of the fires somewhat. And with the wind change we hope that doesn't accelerate them off into another direction. They will help in one respect, but not in others.

J: Mr Keating, were you shocked by what you saw?

PM: Well, it is the extent of it. But the fires which have taken homes, they are small local fires which have come up a gully, they are not part of the big fires. The big fires have largely been contained in terms of communities and homes. But of course they have devastated a very large area of, if you like, the State's estate.

J: So you are hopeful, are you?

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PM: Well I think the conditions today are better than we thought they might be, and by the end of the day if we get a wind change that suits the fires I think we could be in better shape than we thought 24 hours ago. Bushfires are nasty things, especially seeing them work on such a big front and with very high flames. But some are the high flame variety, others are the low grass burning variety which are moving up through the hills, and they are moving inexorably, now that the bushfires themselves are not being fought, so they are just going on. If the wind goes the wrong way on us, they'll jump some of the creeks, and that's some of the concern.

Some of the small communities, you can see where the towns have actually been saved, the fire has burnt right down to them. So while there has been loss of life, which is tragic, and loss of housing, it is nothing on the scale that it could have been without a quite magnificent fire fighting effort.

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