



## PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P. J. KEATING, MP  
INTERVIEW WITH JULIE FLYNN, RADIO 2UE, RE: NSW BUSHFIRES  
SUNDAY, 9 JANUARY 1994**

### **E&OE PROOF ONLY**

**JF:** Mr Keating, what's been your personal response to the scale of the devastation the fires have caused?

**PM:** Well, it just demonstrates how vulnerable people are even in the relatively inner city suburbs in modern brick homes. Sydney, and NSW in particular, is well served by its very large areas of open space and forest. But, I suppose, as the years have gone on people have believed that large fires of this nature are more the exception than the rule. It has been the unlikely weather conditions which have produced this. But, I must say, that I think the fighting of the fires have been very professional and losses have been while too high still minimal for the size of the fires that have been experienced.

**JF:** It has been an extraordinary performance by everyone involved. How long do you think the fire fighters can sustain this effort?

**PM:** Well, the latest advice I have is that if conditions prevail as is now that is as of late Sunday there is an expectation that within 72 hours the great majority of fires will be brought under control.

**JF:** Is there anything more that the Commonwealth can do at this stage?

**PM:** Well the Commonwealth has got as much equipment really and personnel there as can be taken. We have got 30 helicopters currently deployed and we have 10 on standby, we have got 400 people deployed, 200 on standby not yet required as well as dozens of water tankers and four wheel drive vehicles etc. So in terms of, I think the cooperation between the Australian Defence Forces and the emergency services have been tip top. And so everyone says, but we stand ready to deploy more if needs be. I think one of the important things out of this Julie (Flynn) will be the experience of the fire fighters, the volunteers in these fires each episode of these fires

brings the professionalism of fire fighting up and I think after it would be important to get peoples' views to see in which ways both in terms of equipment and personal deployment we can better fight the fires in the first instance with the emergency services and volunteers and with the Australian Defence Forces.

JF: Do you think we probably also need a national review of bush fire strategies overall, particularly in the question of burning back?

PM: I think that will come fairly naturally with this. It is a long time since Sydney has seen fires like this or the NSW region generally and of course, because of this time there has been some complacency in the community but this has not been true of the professional services as I think the success in fighting these fires has demonstrated.

JF: Do you have any message for the employers who have staff working as volunteer fire brigade officers?

PM: I think most employers would take a fairly sensible, I hope humane view of the services which volunteers can provide, and that is on these times every professionally qualified person who understands how to fight a fire it is of course very important. But I think what we have seen is quite magnificent efforts on behalf of volunteers, and pulling the volunteer service in together with the professional services is not a very easy thing to do but it has been done very affectively here.

JF: There have been calls for a nation wide appeal to raise money for the victims of the fire do you think that is necessary?

PM: Well I made clear yesterday that any contributions to designated funds will be tax deductible to encourage people to make contributions towards it. There will of course be assistance to people affected by the fires and the natural disaster relief arrangements which the Commonwealth has in place with NSW. But also can I say that the Commonwealth indicated yesterday that we would meet NSW dollar for dollar in the cost of fighting the fires.

JF: Have you had any overall cost conveyed to you yet by either the Premier or the Bush Fire Authorities?

PM: Well, no not of the fires or the cost of restoration or replacement of infrastructure but as of yesterday the cost of actually fighting the fire was about \$15 million, we are meeting half of that. I also indicated yesterday that the Commonwealth will be declaring a disaster relief payment under the Social Security Act. And at the moment that payment is limited to a formula, we will probably increase that formula a number of times which will mean a more generous level of payments.

JF: Prime Minister, having a look around at what has happened you say you have been impressed by the work of the people who have been fighting the fires, but there has also been an extraordinary response from just the people who have been affected and ordinary Australians who have rushed into help, hasn't there?

PM: There has been a magnificent response I think from just general members of the public trying to give a hand and there the ones who are fighting effectively many fires, way beyond the course of the capacity of volunteers. I mean the effort has been nothing short of magnificent and just shows you when things get tough in this country the country does pull together in a very strong and meaningful way, and I think that has been demonstrated very clearly here. The main thing is where does this now go and I think the next 24 hours are going to tell the story. My latest advice was that in the suburban fires in the Sydney area, the likelihood that sufficient resources could be deployed to contain them, there has been no property loss in Sydney in the last 24 hours despite the fact that many homes were lost yesterday around Bonnet Bay and Jannali. There are 155 homes lost I think in total so far but none lost today. That is my advice which if of course we can maintain that record we will then be fine. There is the Blue Mountains Kariong area which is a problem. There are spot fires there, the wind conditions are not good but resources are being deployed. The overall view from the emergency services is as conditions currently are there is some expectation that within about 72 hours most of the fires could be contained.

JF: Prime Minister thank you very much.

PM: Thank you Julie.

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