



PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON. P J KEATING, M.P.
KIRRIBILLI HOUSE, SYDNEY
MONDAY 10 JANUARY, 1994**

PM: The Government has today substantially increased the disaster relief payment under the social security system, which will triple it in many cases, for families, to just under \$2000 and over \$1000 for a single person. Now, this will be paid to people who have had their homes damaged or whose income has been severely dislocated - for instance firefighters who've not been paid by their employers would qualify. And we've already issued cheques this morning through the Department of Social Security, particularly to some of the residents of Jannali and those areas, and there is a Social Security hotline through which people can enquire and have these things paid.

So, the Government takes the view that this is a natural disaster and a very large one, the most significant bushfire we've seen, and it is appropriate that the Commonwealth Government help people through this period with these immediate and personal payments.

J: How will people be assessed?

PM: This payment is not income tested or asset tested. It is only on the basis of whether their homes have been damaged or destroyed, whether they have suffered material income loss in the course of the fire or fighting the fire. So, for instance, it won't be paid to somebody who has simply been evacuated and is coming back to their house which is undamaged. But it would be paid to others who have suffered an employment loss or loss of income.

J: Will this include volunteer firefighters who have lost income?

PM: It will include volunteer firefighters who have lost income. Volunteer firefighters who've lost income or have not been paid by their employer - we would be able to pay them this payment.

- J: Is there a limit on the amount of money?
- PM: Well, it's a formula and it would depend on whether someone is single, married or with children and it rises accordingly. With two children under 13 it's about \$2000, roughly.
- J: How many people do you think would be eligible?
- PM: Well, it's very hard to say. But, obviously, with the nature and the extent of the devastation it's going to be quite a significant number of payments.
- J: So it's Social Security who are doing the assessing and processing?
- PM: Social Security regional offices will handle all of the processing and the payments. And, as I've said, quite a number of cheques have already been paid this morning.
- J: Where will the funding come from?
- PM: It's from the Commonwealth Department of Finance through the Department of Social Security.
- J: In terms of the fire fighters and emergency workers would you like to see some sort of public recognition or tribute for them?
- PM: Well, I think this has been a magnificent effort on the part of the firefighting services. The fact that we have lost 155 homes, or thereabouts - too many of course for those who have lost them - but considering the scale of the fires it's been a very successful firefighting effort. A success only guaranteed by the professionalism of those engaged and the volunteers; that is, those who help occasionally with firefighting and who are engaged, if you like, as part time firefighters and those ordinary people who've just decided to pitch in. I think it's been an absolutely wonderful effort and, as I said a couple of days ago, it's Australia at its best - you see the best things about the country coming out of it.
- J: Prime Minister, should you have come back from holidays sooner to deal with this matter?
- PM: No, well, I was back a day or two - the acting Prime Minister was dealing with this matter from the moment it became a problem beyond the normal capacity of the firefighting services. And I was kept informed and a day later I had an inspection of the area.
- J: Does forest management need to be reassessed at this time?
- PM: Forest management is essentially a state issue, particularly in terms of fire control, and no doubt the state government will assess the questions about burn backs and

all of the other preventative things which could be material to diminishing the impact of large fires. And, also, I think, educating communities who are in vulnerable areas about how they might protect their homes. Because most of these homes are lost through the roofs. They start burning in the roofs first and if there is protection of the roofs the likelihood is many of the homes, in Jannali for instance, might have been saved. So, this is something that I think is worth assessing after all of this and, no doubt, the whole campaign will be assessed. But, one would have to say there has been experience brought to this firefighting effort from past fires and the success therefore, is, I think, pretty obvious.

- J: Can you give us an assessment of how much this is going to cost Australia in dollar terms?
- PM: No, I can't do that. I think it would be impossible. There are obviously big property losses and then there are also all the other things like timber resources, for harvesting, which would have gone. So, at this stage, I think it's impossible to say.
- J: (inaudible)..... defence force personnel a bit earlier to help out?
- PM: No, there was not a question about bringing them in a bit earlier, they came in when they were needed. Normally when fires start they are under the control of emergency bushfire fighting services and I think you'll find Mr Koperberg and others tell you that the cooperation that they've had with the Defence Department has been exemplary. We've had, really, more reserves and equipment available than can be used. That's still the case today.
- J: NSW has been asking the Federal Government to contribute more to the cost of infrastructure, rebuilding etc. Would you consider that?
- PM: Well, we're meeting half the cost of fighting the fire because fighting the fire itself is just a very large cost in itself. Now, normally this would be met by NSW, we're going to meet half of that. But, for the replacement of infrastructure and other things there is a set of arrangements in place. The National Disaster Relief Arrangements (NDRA) which has an assessed formula where a state picks up the first 'X' millions at 100 percent and then the Commonwealth comes in for 50 percent and there's a formula where the Commonwealth picks up more thereafter. Now, the Premier has asked me to look at that and I've said to him to give us any advice which is germane to the question of the peculiarities of this particular circumstance and why the NDRA may not be entirely appropriate on this occasion. We'll look at that but I think in the first instance the main thing is to help them in the cost of fighting the fire and to help people who've been affected by the fires and to keep Commonwealth defence resources wherever they're needed until the fires are put out.
- J: Should the defence forces put more emphasis on firefighting in training and those sorts of things?

PM: Well, I think the defence forces have been not only very, very useful in the deployments which we've had in helicopters and in personnel, in evacuation and in fighting fires, but I think they'll probably be very useful in the mopping up operation. Because of the numbers which they have at their disposal and also the materials so I think the ADF has been a very cooperative force in this, I'm very happy to say.

J: Can you give us an idea of when you think this will all be over?

PM: Well I think that's a question you should properly address to the firefighting authorities. I think these weather conditions, rain and cooler weather, has obviously got to help the containment of fires. I think you'll probably find that the firefighting service is now in a containment policy with back burning so that they can limit the damage which fires might cause when weather conditions change, as expected later in the week. I think the key objective of their policy now would be to be ready for a change in the weather later in the week. So, that now, they can actually back burn and take advantage of these conditions.

J: Do you have a personal message for those directly affected, those who have lost homes?

PM: Well, for those who have lost homes one can only express one's deepest sympathy and concern to see one's possessions gone. Of course, the loss of life and the loss to those families of people - one's heart goes out to them. To see people obviously devastated, their possessions, all their worldly goods gone, is a heart rending experience and one doesn't like to see that happen to anybody least of all, particularly, the people we live amongst.

J: Prime Minister, it's gained worldwide attention, have you had any enquiries from other governments about what is going on here?

PM: No, but I set up some enquiries myself earlier in the week, with New Zealand about whether they could help, particularly with water bombers. There were a couple of Canadian water bombers there but they've already gone back to Canada. But, I did arrange for these water buckets to be delivered to Australia and, I think, eighty of them were delivered late yesterday on a Hercules. And, they're helping today to mount a larger anti-fire storming effort.

J: Is that equipment to be kept here or just on loan?

PM: No, they're on loan for the moment but you need as much as you can bring to bear as quickly as you can get it and whether we can use all of those I don't know, but they're going to be here anyway and some are being used today.

J: The New Zealand Government has also set up an appeal and donated a million dollars, what's your reaction to that?

PM: That's very commendable and I appreciate their concern. I appreciate the cooperation of the New Zealand Government and people in this.

J: Has it been put to you or any talks been held about buying more of these buckets locally or having better equipment?

PM: Well, there's always been a debate about water bombing; because of the nature of the Australian bush canopy a lot of the water actually hits the leaves and doesn't get to the base of the fire. And, therefore, they are obviously not as effective as many people think and, of course, water, heavy water hitting at great speed can also damage property, but worse than that, affect materially the health of firefighters. So, there's no simple solution. I think the key point is if the fire is not difficult it can be fought with conventional firefighting means -- if it is not difficult it doesn't need water bombing. If it is difficult, water bombing is less effective but so, too, is conventional firefighting. This is a very difficult problem. A bushfire has a character all of its own and is very difficult to contain. So, it is the preventative measures, in the long run, which are worth, I think, thinking about.

Ends.