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PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING MP
INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL BRISSENDEN, ABC 'AM' PROGRAM,
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MB: Mr Keating, you have seen the fires first hand over the weekend, what impression has it all left on you?

PM: The scale of it. I don't think many communities anywhere will have seen fires of this intensity on this scale and one has got to say that the fire fighting effort has been highly professional and very effective.

MB: This happens somewhere in Australia every ten years or so, what is your view of the way we handle such disasters as these?

PM: My view is that maybe we have become a little complacent about the bushfire problem. That is, it has been a long time since we have seen fires of this dimension and probably thought they might not happen again. Well, of course, they always happen again and I suppose following these fires there will have to be a reappraisal of policy in terms of management of these large forest areas particularly around Sydney which is, of course, a large city which is almost unique in the world with these very large reserves around it and about it.

MB: Does that suggest we haven't managed those resources properly or those areas properly?

PM: No, I don't think so. But, I think that Jannali was a tragedy. Half the homes were lost with a local fire in Sydney, the Jannali fire was not part of the large fires, it was a local fire in Sydney where of the 150 or 160 homes lost, half were lost in one place. It is for communities living on spurs, communities living on the spur of hill tops or mountain tops who are vulnerable where I think policy needs to be examined.

MB: There has been some criticisms from some quarters of the National Parks and Wildlife Service that they haven't been back burning enough

and they haven't managed the forests properly. Do you share those concerns?

PM: I'm not in a position really to make a judgement about that and I don't think you could ever get that absolutely right because who can say whether any particular area has been back burned sufficiently or not. The one thing I think that does need recording is that for fires of this scale and dimension were it to be almost any other place in the world we would have had probably thousands of homes lost and a greater toll of life. So the management of the fires I think, has been first class. The tragedy is that any houses were lost and of course, beyond that the greater tragedy that lives were lost.

MB: Overall, apart from that management question, what have we learnt from this experience?

PM: We have learned a couple of things. Firstly, that we see a tremendous volunteer effort. The volunteer effort here has been nothing short of magnificent and the enmeshing of the volunteer effort with the professional fire fighting effort has been absolutely first class and this experience can only make it better. On top of that we have had the integration of the defence forces with the bush fire fighting effort which includes the professional and the volunteers - that has worked very well as well. And the many thousands of ordinary people who have joined issue with them and joined with them fighting the fires have taken instructions and fought them competently. So, coming from this will be a better understanding of not just the management of fires, but the effort that can join the professional fire fighting service and join it effectively. As to deployment and equipment, even the forces own equipment and its rapid deployment, these are questions I think we should look at and happy to look at in the near future.

MB: All right, to the finances. The Federal Government has promised as you said on the weekend dollar for dollar assistance for NSW. Is that adequate?

PM: I think so. This is for the fire fighting effort. Then we have behind that what is called the NDRA - the National Disaster Relief Arrangements - they sit there with fires, floods, or any such natural disaster. In terms of the sharing of costs between any State and the Commonwealth and this of course, applies between NSW and the Commonwealth, but because the fire fighting effort itself has been so large and the state has had to incur funds in fighting the fires we have met them dollar for dollar on that, but normally the Commonwealth wouldn't be involved. Now, I have told John Fahey that if NSW makes a case to us, parts of any of these arrangements which they think are peculiar and outside of the NDRA arrangements we will consider them.

MB: You have also suggested that the Government might look at the provisions for emergency relief under the Social Security Act to see if there isn't some way of changing it. Obviously \$600 in this case isn't enough is it?

PM: No, well, we are looking at that and we've looked at it and I'm quite happy to tell you and your audience that we will be making declarations under the Disaster Relief Payments under Social Security and we will be increasing those amounts threefold. So we will be paying up to \$2000 for families. It will be graded, if you like, on the size of families so families with more children will receive more rather than less up to about \$2000 as an immediate payment just to help people through the circumstances of the last few days.

MB: So, how does a family qualify for that?

PM: For a start the declarations have to be on the basis of damage to property and loss of life. Well, those two conditions under the Act exist and therefore we will have Social Security hotlines set up and people who have been disadvantaged or lost property can phone and have Social Security deal with them and get a payment to them very quickly.

MB: Is this a one-off for this disaster or will this be changed now forever?

PM: No, this has always been there. It is there as I say triggered by those two things - loss of property and loss of life and that will remain in the Social Security Act. I think what will happen as a result of this we'll just continue to upgrade the amount as we have done now by trebling it.

MB: All right. Prime Minister, thanks very much for your time.

PM: Thank you.

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