



# PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP  
SPEECH AT THE LUNCH HOSTED BY NEVILLE NEWELL MP,  
TWIN TOWNS SERVICES CLUB, TWEED HEADS, 20 DECEMBER 1995**

## **E&OE PROOF COPY**

Well we are going to run a little quiz. Why do you think we are here? You guessed it. We are here for the thing that Neville [Newell] and Harry [Woods] and Bob [Horne] have been on our backs now for about three years and that is the Pacific Highway. And it is, of course, the major civics works project of the East Coast of Australia and it has been in its current state the major inhibitor to development and, of course, the cause of so many deaths.

Now we have reached a point in our history where we are now as a Commonwealth Government doing things with the States. We have recognised, all of us, that the responsibilities to the nation, the communities, the regions, go beyond anyone's sphere of Government. And in the Council of Australian Governments, we have put together a tri-partite body which is the Commonwealth, the States and Local Government. And, today, we are working that same model across the sectors to do another great public work and that is to modernise and renovate the Pacific Highway.

You understand the Commonwealth has now for many years, as a result of the Council of Australian Governments processes, divided our responsibilities between the national highway system and the urban and arterial roads which were formerly, in part, managed financially by the Commonwealth. So that they are the responsibility of the States and we carry the national highway system.

And the national highway running between Sydney and Brisbane is the New England Highway and it is the highway for which the Commonwealth has taken responsibility. But the development and the movement of people, of course, in this State and in Southern Queensland, is along the coast. And while this Pacific Highway has been the responsibility of the States of Queensland and New South Wales, the financial responsibility and cost of bringing it to the status of a major highway, are beyond the financial capacity of any one State.

So my colleague, Laurie Brereton, brought to the Cabinet a proposal to fund a dollar for dollar funding arrangement with the States of New South Wales and Queensland, an augmentation of the national highway responsibilities and road programs of the Commonwealth, in a way where we could attempt to undertake this major work.

Now you might recall that the NRMA published a report, I think it was in July this year, about the Pacific Highway and I understand it is about to publish another. And it talks about the highway being the spine of the continent's East Coast and the need to upgrade and renew it. And I think, by and large, given that the Bureau of Transport Economics has now published quite a lot of data on this project, that we will find - probably in a reflection in the NRMA report - our own understanding of the costings of the project.

Essentially, what the Commonwealth is proposing today is that we will offer \$750 million in ten annual instalments of \$75 million each to the States of New South Wales and Queensland for the fast tracking and duplication of the highway over ten years.

The offer is conditional on New South Wales and Queensland maintaining their existing levels of commitment to the Pacific Highway and agreeing to match the Federal Government's contribution dollar for dollar and we have indications from both Governments that they will so make those contributions. And just to make sure they will, we have got their name on the maker's label here. We have tied them right in.

Now what this will mean is, of course, that we will see \$750 million from the Commonwealth and \$750 million from the two States and that will mean an additional \$1.5 billion will be spent on the highway over and above existing State commitments. So there is already a State program. This will be rolled together with this new program, but rather than simply dealing with black spots and some of the more difficult areas, with the current program and maintenance we would be looking at, of course, a complete rebuild of the highway.

New South Wales and Queensland will retain responsibility for the Pacific Highway and we will maintain our commitment, of course, for the National Highway system including the New England. But we realise, I think, that the reconstruction of the Pacific Highway is a national transport priority and we are prepared to pull our weight in it. We are very pleased by the indication of cooperation from the two States.

This represents one of the largest public investments in the Commonwealth, an investment especially in the future of Queensland and the north coast of NSW. The Pacific Highway reconstruction project will develop a world class highway up the Pacific edge of Australia. Currently only about 16 per cent of the highway features dual carriageways and even if we continued funding at present levels for the next 10 years, coverage would be less than 20 per cent. So, even if we carried on as we are, we would only have 20 per cent of it as a dual carriageway in a decade. But, under this new proposal 81 per cent of

the highway will feature dual carriageways by 2005 and 2006. All 192 kilometres of poor alignment and all 206 of narrow pavement will be removed - all of it - removed. All 63 narrow bridges will be eliminated and all major towns will be bypassed by the highway. This, of course, will make them more safer and more pleasant places in which to live, which will increase tourist potential. They are, of course, Nerang, Coolangatta, Tweed Heads, Chinderah, Brunswick Heads, Ballina, Woodburn, Cowper, Ulmarra, Woolgoolga, Coffs Harbour, Uranga, Kempsey, Kew, Taree, Bulahdelah, Karuah and Raymond Terrace. None of them will have the highway running through them.

In other words, we can get on with, essentially, recognising the needs of a dual carriageway highway, a safe road for conveyance and one which will be an artery which provides the building of greater communities along the coast as the natural shift to the coast takes place. As we see the growth in population and the growth in demand, we will be able to put this major national asset into place.

There are, I think, many people have been supportive of this being done for many years. My colleagues have made an enormous difference in this debate and I want to acknowledge that. There are things said in public life, people say things about members of Parliament in the due course of events, but let me assure you that Neville, Harry and Bob have made this, I suppose, amongst all of the things in which they have been involved perhaps the principal thing which they knew the Commonwealth had to be involved with. So, the point of electing local members of Parliament to take their place in the national Parliament and in the government is to be able to decipher what is needed, what can be delivered, what should be done by the Commonwealth, what other things should be left by the States or how we do things collaboratively. They have worked together and as a consequence of their membership of the government, this project is going to happen. I would like to acknowledge that. I would like to also acknowledge Laurie Brereton's role in this. Laurie has put down more cubic metres of concrete, built more bridges, more roads and had more local and regional arguments than anyone in the country I think. Maybe I could rival him, but the fact is I need to say, in NSW, "Mr Builder, thank you." I actually think that is going to be the case here again. Of course, he has seen the need for this to be done and neither he or I are into the semantics of what is a national highway and what isn't. There is a major need here and that is what we are responding to. We are not trying to find characterisations. I'd like also to acknowledge the work of the NRMA. I am delighted that Don MacKay could be with us today, for the conscientious effort as a Roads and Motorists Association, you represent the interests of people in the most difficult stretch of road in the country. They have done that consistently and conscientiously and their views about this have been material to the way in which the government has responded. I want to take this opportunity to thank Don and the Association.

But, I think, what it means, more than all of the technical things, is an endorsement by the Commonwealth, again, of the importance of this region of Australia. It is such a beautiful area. We were sitting in the plane coming up,

we were just to the landward of the coast on the way up, looking at all of the coastal towns as they came by and also the river mouths. And you see what a wonderful stretch of coast it is. It has got to be one of the most naturally beautiful places in the world and what a great bequest we have been left as a nation, to manage this coast line well, to give people their enjoyment of it and at the same time secure it as economic assets for the States and for the country. This is, I think, where we have seen a very big change in the government's policy with Better Cities. I was here just a week ago taking the first ride on the train from Robina back towards Brisbane where it will link up with the main electrified line out of Brisbane and I'm sure we are going to see a time too when that railway will come down here to Tweed Heads.

This is another thing that both Neville and Harry have been talking about now since under the Better Cities program we join with Queensland in the funding of the railway from Robina and given that this area of coast, particularly from Brisbane to Coolangatta, is the fastest growing area of Australia and, of course, the area from Tweed Heads down through Grafton et cetera has also got the same buoyancy of growth. What we do need to see in place are the appropriate bits of public infrastructure and the good thing about the railway, for instance, is that it is actually going to design the way in which the development moves around it. In other words, it is not coming simply at the end of the process, even though we have seen a lot of development in the Gold Coast and the hinterland, it is going to define, in fact, the way in which a lot of this development occurs.

So, there is a role for the Commonwealth. We see it under Better Cities. We have seen it where we have introduced stimulatory statements like One Nation, where we have put funding into various projects that are beyond a municipal government's capacity or the states's capacity and we have got now some very large rolling programs running as well. The main message is, I think, that we are very interested in the north coast of NSW and this area between Tweed Heads, Coolangatta and Brisbane. We have been happy to join with the Government of Queensland and now the Government of NSW in doing these things.

The one bit left undone was, of course, the highway and, with this announcement today, that will be done as well. As a consequence we can start thinking in a unitary way of the whole region. That has come by virtue of the fact that the Commonwealth recognises and has a role in these regions with the States and with local government.

So, I think, this is a very big change and it also recognises the urbanisation of the coast and how important it is for us to get it right and how the devotion of public assets can be important. There is a place for private growth and private assets, a place for the public ones and invariably where the public ones are set, it will set the pattern of development which then follows it and this is what we have been seeking to do. As well as that, can I just mention that you might recall our Working Nation program which is a statement designed to deal with long term unemployment. Simon Crean announced recently under our New Work Opportunities project that we are going to see

1750 jobs created in the region here under that program and also we supported under Working Nation, Regional Economic Development Organisations. We have established one in northern NSW and the point of that is to focus on what the region needs and how best it should develop. We have found in the McKinsey study that the regions doing best - and there are many regions of Australia growing faster than the capital cities - the ones doing best are the ones that are locally led by the Federal members, by State members, by local government, by the business organisations, by unions, by non government organisations coming together and providing leadership.

In other words, if a community knows what it wants itself then it will draw its own investment to it and what we find happens is that most of the investment, in fact, doesn't come in from outside, it actually comes from the region, that existing businesses grow faster and it is giving a signal to the State and to the Commonwealth governments about what they might do with the area.

One of the great challenges, but I think one of the most exciting prospects for us, is to do all these things but to do it with an eye to nature and a beauty. The first thing you always think about flying in here is the nature and the beauty of it because it is an absolutely exceptional part of the country. It doesn't matter where you go in the world, when you come back here it always strikes you.

Just three weeks ago we made key decisions about the forests of this country. In what must be the biggest public decision in respect to the forests ever, six million hectares of Australian native forests have been reserved under Deferred Forest Areas for broader assessment into Regional Forest Agreements. In doing this, we will see I hope, the dual commitments to the environment, to representative stands of native species of trees and to the forest products industry, so we can have a sustainable forest products industry. And where those two objectives clash, we are going to have a very large reconstruction package of financial measures to support those industries and the people in those industries who have got difficulties dealing with the reconstruction of the forest industries arising from that package. But, I think we can do it and, in doing it, I know there are two things here: there is substantial environmental conscientiousness, as naturally you would expect, given the beauty of it and the forest resources in this region of Australia.

I think, people should be assured that no government has ever done more and more conscientiously something to actually keep important representative stands of forests in this country. But, we are also conscious of the jobs and the employment and the costs of reconstruction of these industries. And on this occasion we have been, I think, very cognisant of that and the financial commitments and adjustment packages we have announced recognise that too.

So, if you take the region as a whole, just looking at the difficulties of, say, development from Newcastle up to Brisbane, all the demands for population growth, all the demands for traffic, the settlement difficulties along the coast, the importance of the preservation of the hinterland, the importance of

agriculture and timber industries, what we are seeking to do is to do it together as a whole policy, and to focus that on the whole region. I think, what we are talking about today, the transport spine, the link that runs through it, important as that is going to be to all of these communities, what is I think, important beyond that is how we approach the whole region and we underline the beauty and preserve it, we secure the prime natural assets and we develop the place for the quiet enjoyment of those who have chosen to live here.

Can I thank you very much for coming to lunch today, to be here at this important announcement and let me again thank my colleagues Neville Newell, Harry Woods and Bob Horne for their interest in this and say that when communities get serious about their own needs and prospects, and they get serious members who know they have got to earn their freight and are not sitting there with some sort of God-given right or to be hearing voices, of being tapped on the shoulder by some supernatural force to represent the rest of us, that people are actually out there working and doing, this is the result of that sort of representation.

Thank you very much indeed.

ends