



# PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP,  
THE MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, SPORT AND TERRITORIES,  
SEN THE HON JOHN FAULKNER AND MINISTER FOR PRIMARY  
INDUSTRIES AND ENERGY, SEN THE HON BOB COLLINS, JOINT  
PRESS CONFERENCE, ALBURY, WEDNESDAY, 24 JANUARY 1996**

## **E&OE PROOF COPY**

**PM:** I'll begin by saying that it is a great pleasure to be here in Albury and to be here making a major statement with my colleagues on the environment and sustainable land management in Australia and to be doing it at a place where we have a role and a commitment - we meaning the Commonwealth - in a Cooperative Research Centre on water ecosystems and water management and quality very nicely dovetails in with the strategy and the philosophy and the policies that we have articulated today.

There is no doubt that the magnitude of the challenge in dealing with the environment in Australia is a very great one because, I think, those with environmental consciousness in Australia realise that to deal with it we are dealing not only with the big icon areas such as Shoalwater Bay and Jervis Bay and the Gordon Below Franklin and Kakadu and the rest or beyond that to the big issue of the forests but that the environment in Australia also means tackling difficult issues such as biodiversity and land management, knowing as we all know that the land has been degraded over the 200 years since European settlement.

Now it is the responsibility of this generation to actually deal with the problem, not to wait to put it off any longer, but to actually look at it on an integrated basis as a whole. So questions such as land use management, dry land salinity, the problems of the rivers, river flows, endangered species, biodiversity all of these issues are issues which this government is prepared to tackle and that we believe must be tackled.

So, I think, this is an outstanding package in anyone's language. It is the biggest environmental policy that any Commonwealth government

has, as an integrated whole, ever introduced. It signals meeting the environmental challenge, that it must be met and will be met and that the problems of the environment will remain a central priority of the Labor government that will be returned after the coming election. It means that just on half a billion dollars will be spent, I think in a way which now builds on the existing programs we have had and the existing successes we have had and they are many, including involving the community through great movements such as Landcare, in getting farmers interested in whole of farm property management, in focusing on these really intractable problems like long term salinity and rising water tables. These can't be done by governments and by departments. They can be done only with governments and the community, drawing the community in. And, of course, going beyond that to making clear where we stand on one of the big issues and that is, of course, pulling a more comprehensive reserve system together in Australia and with the Australian states. This is something we are very committed to.

I'd like to take this opportunity of complimenting my colleagues. If we look back at the problems of recent memory, the drought and in dealing with it, support of the rural economy and rural communities, the challenge of the environment, the forests, and bringing all this together in this statement, I don't think any two ministers have ever done more together, have been able to present a more comprehensive package, a more comprehensive approach to the real problems of the Australian environment, threading them together, weaving them together, making them work as an integrated whole. That is what I hope the community will see from this package today. I want to thank them and compliment them and I know, on behalf of all those people out there that are interested in the environment in this country today, a very good thing has been done.

BC: Can I just say briefly that after the work that was actually put into this package and because he is here, I must say I was delighted to hear this morning the comments made, that I know were off-the-cuff, by a scientist with the research credentials of the Director of this CRC who picked up the major policy underpinning this package. And that is, he is quite right in fact, it is the first time that any government has ever put together an integrated package that links together the economic sustainability of rural Australia with environmental sustainability.

The point the Prime Minister made in his speech is very salient one in that respect. Sixty per cent of our entire land mass in Australia is managed by farmers. You can't, in the real world, expect farmers with the best will in the world to introduce what are expensive environmental programs unless they are economically viable. That is really the underpinning of this package. It is a \$176 million boost to Landcare which, I'm sure everyone that is involved in Landcare will be delighted to hear today. It could effectively be called Landcare Mark II.

That, in fact, is what everybody has been talking about. We are five years through the decade. Our original commitment was \$320 million for the whole 10 years, this package in fact, increases the total commitment to over \$1 billion, but it does one very important thing. The Landcare response has been overwhelming. We were anticipating 1000 groups maybe by the year 2000. It is 2500 already. What the demand is from farmers, from environmental groups is to provide resources for on ground works now that we have got that network of people out there. That is what this does. It actually provides enough funding in here.

Our experience has shown us since we started Landcare, that in order to get a result on the ground you have got to seed about half a million dollars of Commonwealth money into a particular catchment. This funding provides enough funding to fund that level of funding for every major catchment in Australia. One hundred and forty catchments across Australia will be able to have integrated plans developed with this package that will actually deliver on ground works. It is a very substantial advance on Landcare.

The property management planning part of it, I know, is going to be warmly welcomed by farmers. This effectively provides, just to give you one bit of detail about it, up to a 75 per cent subsidy on interest rates for farmers who want to borrow money to improve the sustainability of their property. For example, in Shepparton just near here, last year I went to a dairy where a young farmer who had taken over the property from his parents completely reorganised all of the water effluent from the dairy and so on. So it was a completely self contained dairy with nothing going into the streams, everything contained on the farm. It was an expensive thing to do and this package will actually encourage a whole lot more young farmers like him and give them a real economic incentive to go ahead and do that. So, it is a very integrated package.

On the Murray-Darling and I'll finish on this point, I know that Don Blackmore is like a dog with two tails today, that Council over the last two years, the Murray-Darling initiative was an initiative of this Government. The Commission was established by this Government in 1988 and this has been a substantial boost to the work that was done.

This package, in fact, has come out of a water audit in which there was some publicity earlier this year, you may recall it. The water audit was commenced two years ago and the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council took the most important decision we have ever taken in July last year where we stopped all further diversionary flows from the Murray-Darling system. This package is a direct result of that. It will enable something like 1600 kilometres of river banks and stream banks, riparian zones as they are called, to be rehabilitated. It will enable the complete management catchment plans for every major

catchment in the Murray-Darling Basin to be completed. It will enable a substantial decrease, we estimate in the vicinity of 40 per cent reduction, in the amount of nutrients and chemical pollutants that are going into the river. It is a major advance of the Murray-Darling which will give us the tools to actually arrest the degradation.

I want to conclude on one final point. Both of these schemes - Landcare and the Murray-Darling - are marked by one thing they have in common. They both leave enormous additional funds from both the community groups and industry. Landcare does that spectacularly, but so does the Murray-Darling and, in fact, the Murray-Darling Basin Commission has formally advised me since the package was announced that they estimate that with this level of Commonwealth government seeding a total package of \$600 million will, in fact, result on the experience since 1988 from both State, local governments and industry.

JF: If I can just say that there is no doubt about this being a tremendous boost to biodiversity conservation in this country. The sort of integration that you have heard about is just a magnificent achievement in my view for the government. These programs, they have two elements - protection and production. That is what Landcare is all about and with it in relation to the environmental aspects of this package, we have really been able to deliver on protection of Australia's biodiversity and we have done that through the most creative set of measures in relation to the expansion of our national reserve system as well as dealing with those very important issues in relation to off reserve conservation.

So, I think, this is a great result for the environment. A terrific result for the protection of Australia's biodiversity.

PM: Thank you John. I think any one of us are happy to deal with your questions.

J: Senator Collins, what about the problem of sewerage and I know steps were taken last year as you said in terms of irrigation, but is there more to be done there, some have been critical, saying that these are the sorts of really hard decisions?

BC: Yes, a lot more needs to be done and I might add I guess it is a degradation of euphemisms, I suppose, I used an even softer euphemism I called it nutrient and you called it sewerage, you could call it something else I guess if you wanted to, but when I said that this package will be able to reduce by a very large percentage the amount of nutrients into the system we are also talking about the sewerage outflows. People don't appreciate, and they don't, the extent to which the Murray-Darling basin is actually managed today. We are pumping 800 tonnes of salt a day out of the Murray-Darling Basin now. The fact

is, that if we weren't engaged in the massive management practices we are now that Basin would be unsustainable now. The significance of that, of course, is that it produces almost half the total agricultural output of this country and when you have got an audit that took two years to complete, that says to you in black and white, that if the existing practices continue then the use of water, and I am almost quoting, it exactly in that Basin will become unsustainable by the turn of the century - that is five years from now - it does attract your attention.

I am very pleased to say that, acting on the advise of the Commission and that is where this package came from, we can confidently say that this level of Commonwealth funding will actually result in arresting that degradation. I might also say on a personal note and I have got to say this here today sometime, after 18 years in this business I am really tickled by this constant theme that because you have been in government for 13 years that somehow or other that means that you have run out of ideas. Well, for people who actually have that view chew on this.

J: Prime Minister, true is it not that there is on these subjects a certain degree of bipartisanship. The Coalition has also said that they think that land care is important, they have announced funding for revegetation. Why is your plan so much better?

PM: Because it is the plan of the conceivers and authors of the policy that is why. The flippant press statements published by the Opposition, John Howard's appalling statement which he made and I have it, Bob responded to it, in October 1995, there is a South Australian Employers Chamber of Commerce mentioning the Murray-Darling, talking about catch up politics. It was a plight on Australian journalism that that media release was ever reported. The Government established the Murray-Darling Commission in 1988. We have spent \$400 million so far on it. I have committed myself as Prime Minister very much to the problems of land management in Australia. I had the pleasure of visiting the Sunraysia district to look at drip irrigation some time ago, a couple of years ago now I think, and also on the very point that Senator Collins mentioned about salt in the river, of pressing the button on one of the pumping stations just up river from Mildura, taking one of the underground aquifers and pumping it into a salt pan. A part of that 800 tonnes a day which is changing the nature and quality of the river.

It has only been the Labor Party that has made these commitments to the environment. You have got John Howard and his party now saying the external affairs power shouldn't be used, the world heritage powers which have flowed from that constitutional authority have, of course, been an important part of the development of an integrated environment policy. They have no policy on forests, none, and we

have introduced with that target of 15 per cent of the reserve system that reflected what obtained before European settlement. I mean the Labor Party will be the only party going into this election with an environment policy - total environment policy and this goes, also, for the Greens and for others.

It is only a party of government that can make environmental policy stick. This is not something that individuals can do - individual people in the Senate, or the House of Representatives, or minor parties. This is a business for the parties of government and the only party of government interested in the environment in this comprehensive, whole way is the Labor Party. It only ever has been the Labor Party.

And if we are living now with the problems of massive land clearance, and what have you, it is because of the view taken over many years. In fact, the first thing I did as Treasurer, the very first thing I did, was to remove deductions for land clearing in the year of expenditure, the very first thing I did 13 years ago.

J: But, Prime Minister, a few months ago John Howard made a speech about Asia and he talked about Australia becoming a supermarket into Asia. Now, today, you are talking about something called the Asia Food 2000 Strategy. He is going to say you pinched his idea.

PM: Oh, cut it out, cut it out.

BC: Fair go.

PM: Now I don't mind being questioned. But I do object to being offended with silly questions. It is an impertinence for this reason: that the Agri-Food Council was established by the government for this very purpose.

I mean you might recall me attending a meeting with it in Orange last year about these very subjects. You might recall that I have established an inquiry with Bob Collins and Laurie Brereton about how we get time-sensitive exports air freighted out of Australia, what the air freight impediments might be, how we can actually bring whole land in production and not see it lost to salinity or water table problems.

I mean dealing with the problems of the Sunraysia, or the water table problems of the Goulburn Valley - our success there in managing water table issues in the dairy production areas of the Goulburn Valley.

Cheap press statements by oppositions who have no thought for these issues at all. Bear in mind there were 23 years of Coalition government where the National Party had a major influence and did they do anything about dry land salinity, water tables, land clearance,

you know? Has John Howard got any record on these issues ever? None. No where.

J: Is the Federal Government committed to funding the Research Centre here?

PM: Well the whole Cooperative Research Centre programs are funded by the Commonwealth, they are our programs.

BC: Wouldn't have got off the ground without us.

PM: Wouldn't be here without us. The whole CRC movement is ours. We have put now I think, from memory, about \$800 million and we now have about \$1600 million, from memory, of private funding which has joined us. So we have got a very large amount of money now going into Cooperative Research Centres. I mean this one here, which I was very pleased to be involved today in the laboratory, on water eco-systems. You know you can find other ones on hard wood technology, or remote sensing, or whatever it might be.

BC: I might just add too in respect of those previous questions. Commonwealth Ministers have chaired the Murray-Darling Ministerial Council ever since it was set up. It was a Commonwealth initiative. I have chaired it for the last two years and you know the reality of John Howard's contribution to this debate. He told somebody in his office to draft a press statement. That is it. You find anything else. In fact, I took the trouble to have a look at the Parliamentary Database, I pushed the button on it and I typed in Murray-Darling and John Howard and it came up with a blank screen. And you do the same. John Howard, in fact, has said nothing about the Murray-Darling Basin since he has been in Parliament. Now I only went back to 1981, you can go back beyond that if you like.

J: Prime Minister, there is an election coming up. \$463 million worth of funding. What would you say to voters who would simply dismiss this as an election ploy?

PM: Simply that it builds on existing programs. I mean Landcare was developed by this government.

BC: It has been two years in the making.

PM: It has brought people to it. We have brought this policy together from the policy structures we have built and the success of them. So there is the continuity here and this is announced by a government and things we announce, of this kind, will of course be as would announce things in a Budget, or if we were to announce things in any other context.

But, I think, the success of it is we know that no matter how committed a government is to these issues, you need the community to do it. You need it in land management, you need it in whole farm management and planning, you need it with the States in respect of Reserves Systems, etc. And the real world nature of this statement is not only the funding commitments, but the fact that we are building on that community support we have already garnered and which is now growing at a pace.

**J:** Prime Minister, the government has had a few spats with the environment movement. You have underlined the size and scope of this policy, particularly the innovation work. Do you expect this policy to overcome the individual differences you may have had with green groups over forests or other isolated issues and win unambiguous support from the environment movement in the coming election?

**PM:** Well, I think, if the ACF's release today is an indication of that, the answer will be yes. But, of course, you won't win everyone in the environment movement. There are the people with an environment consciousness in the environment movement, and there are political people looking for seats in Parliament who are calling themselves green. They are not the environment movement. They are a political party trying to draw down the public support of environment movement policies, or the imperatives of the environment movement.

So for those who are conscientiously committed, who know that only a government can do these things, who know that to deal with the forests, or to deal with the landscape, or to deal with biodiversity, or the reefs, or any of it, can only be done by a government. It is to those people, those conscientious Australians, interested - appropriately interested - in the environment that, I think, this package has the integrity and the appeal. The truth, the belief about it that is not going to be there with someone trying to find a seat in the Senate or in a minor party.

**J:** But, surely, Prime Minister you can't say that Bob Brown after his record on the Franklin hasn't got a conscientious record on the environment?

**PM:** He has got now a much more conscientious interest in getting into Parliament and that is the problem. If Bob Brown was really committed to the environment, he would be seeking the further development of policy such as this, rather than compromising any standing he has had to his own place in the Senate. I mean he is the one who has put his environmental credentials asunder by seeking political office, rather than being part of a broad movement which is looking for broad solutions such as this.



J: Are you going to be relying on the preferences from the Australian Greens in a lot of Lower House seats and in terms of Senate negotiations if that is the case?

PM: Well I don't know how strong the Greens will be. But, again, what is their option: to give it to a party, the Coalition that has no belief in these policies at all.

J: It worked in the Queensland State election.

PM: Well that was for a number of reasons. This has not happened federally.

JF: There have been a number of examples and perhaps the most recent and best example from a federal perspective, the by-election in Canberra where, in fact, there has been a recommendation from environment groups for a preference vote against Labor. And Labor still, of course, won the vast majority of Green preferences in that seat.

From our perspective, look, we are very confident that those voters who will go to the polls later this year with the environment as a very high priority, or their highest priority, are going to look at the record of the parties, they will certainly compare the policies of the major parties, they are going to compare the records of the major parties on the environment and, I think, this government has an extraordinarily strong record and we are very confident that those voters with an environmental commitment are going to strongly support the return of this government.

But we are not taking that for granted. We are going to continue throughout this period to point out very strongly the very clear differences that exist between the Labor Party and the Liberal Party on the environment issue and they are very stark.

J: Prime Minister, you quoted before the Australian Conservation Foundation. In their release today they site a list of things you get to do, they say energy in greenhouse, forest World Heritage for key sites, legislative reform, clean industry initiatives, and a framework for ecologically sustainable development. Are they too greedy?

JF: Let me make this point in relation to the release from the Australian Conservation Foundation. What you have is a very strong endorsement of this biodiversity conservation package which has been announced today. The ACF makes the point that there are a range of other environmental issues. No one can deny that.

In the last Budget, you saw this government for the first time take the responsibility to really do something about protecting Australia's coasts. Late last year, you saw this government deliver the best ever

package to protect Australia's forests. Now, you have seen this government produce a package that undoubtedly is the best ever in terms of protection of Australia's biodiversity. I don't think anyone can argue that and I don't think anyone will argue that.

There are other environment issues. They will all be important and we will be, of course, pointing out the strong differences that exist between the government and the Opposition on those issues as well. And issues like World Heritage, a commitment to protect World Heritage Areas and exercise our World Heritage obligations there is an enormous difference between ourselves and the party that John Howard leads. And we are going to demonstrate and show and expose those differences as the election campaign develops.

J: Mr Keating, just from a local media's point of view is there anything more that you can tell us about the Asia Food Strategy and what it might mean for farmers and country towns?

PM: Well on Friday we will be saying more about it. I think Senator Collins could probably tell you now.

J: Is there anything more that you can tell us though as far as .... like will you be talking about ... [inaudible] .... for exports for farmers, can they expect more market technology?

BC: Yes, we are. But those detailed proposals are going to be announced in a far more detailed way on Friday. And, in fact, I was very pleased to see that very senior members of the Australian business community, Reg Clews is here for example, as well as John Claringbolt, members of the Agri-Business Council are actually here today.

J: Is there any possibility of the inland air freight terminal at say Parkes, or the Narrandera region?

BC: There is nothing of that kind of detail in it. These are broad initiatives to assist the Council in substantially increasing the global amount of exports into Asia. You should never, ever, overlook the fact that we are extremely successful in that market and this is building on the success. It is not as if we haven't already succeeded, we have. There has been an enormous boost in exports into that region. And as the Prime Minister mentioned today in his speech, we know from what has been achieved already that that original target of \$7 billion can be exceeded and this package is designed to achieve that.

J: ... [inaudible] .... air freight terminal. Would that have the government's support?

PM: Well one of the studies which Bob Collins and Laurie Brereton are looking at now is what are the air freight needs, how do we handle

perishable commodities, time-sensitive perishable commodities, how do we get the linkages working better, what is the capacity like, where should it be? These are the issues we are currently studying.

J: Prime Minister, how is it going to be paid for, the \$460 million?

PM: Well we will be making announcements as we do in the course of any budgetary year, in the course of - certainly - the forthcoming election campaign commitments we make, how they will be funded will be made very clear to you, clear to the media, clear to everybody and they will be, of course.

And need I say, you know, we are sitting in the position with a Budget in surplus, we have got today confirmation of the underlying inflation rate, again, at the bottom end of market expectations, making it very clear that the target for inflation of 2 to 3 per cent over the cycle is well within our grasp, the government is sitting with a relatively strong low inflation economy and a Budget surplus. So it is a pretty good position to be in.

And I might just say, I don't know whether someone has doled out some truth serum to John Howard or not but today he made a very revealing commitment - uncharacteristically revealing - he said "I mean nobody can guarantee that somebody, for example, won't lose their job somewhere in the economy over a three year period and have to accept another job at a lower rate of pay." What he has done is confirm exactly what the government has been saying, and that is that the 1.7 million people who change jobs in a three year period under the policies of the Coalition will lose their award protections and would have to take jobs at lower rates of pay. And that is why 63 per cent of Australians said they didn't believe John Howard when he made claims of the contrary. Now he has corrected his own claims.

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