



## **PRIME MINISTER**

12 March 1997

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER  
THE HON JOHN HOWARD, MP  
ADDRESS TO THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE  
TORRUMBARRY WEIR - ECHUCA, VICTORIA**

E& OE.....

Well thank you very much Professor Luvering. To Mr Pat McNamara, the Deputy Premier of Victoria, to my Federal Ministerial colleagues Mr John Anderson, the Minister for Primary Industry and Energy, Senator Robert Hill, the Leader of the Government in the Senate and Minister for the Environment, to Marie Tehan, to Sharman Stone the Federal Member for Murray and to all of my other Parliamentary colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.

It really is a tremendous pleasure to be here on this very special occasion for this part of Australia. Can I say what an enormous delight it is to get out of Canberra and out of Sydney and out of Melbourne and out of all the big population centres of Australia and come to rural Australia. I mean, it's not that I've got anything against those other places it's just that on occasions we get accused of thinking that the world, sort of, rotates around those parts of Australia and when in reality Australia is made up of many parts - of many different parts. And one of the many things that I'm endeavouring to do and the many things that my Government is endeavouring to do is to establish a very profound and effective contact and resonance with rural and regional Australia. And as a token of that yesterday the Federal Cabinet had its first meeting in regional Australia at Pakenham. Some people might say that's just a tentative step into regional Australia, but it's going to get better and better as time goes on so that at the end of three years we will have chalked up a significant number of meetings that are being held outside the major population centres. So this event here today has a place in that but it's more important than that.

This is a very special event and it's an occasion that's marked quite a milestone so far as the locality is concerned. It marks a milestone in another example as the engineering capacity of Australians and the ingenuity of Australians. This is, I understand, the first major - the first intervention of any kind in the flow of the river since 1924 when the original weir was constructed. And what today's event does - it, sort of, brings together the modern engineering capacity and skill of Australians, but

it's also tinged with some of our history. And to travel here on that lovely paddle steamer, to be reminded by the local member that 30, what, 50, 60, 70 years ago you had a magnificent ship building industry here. That paddle steamer was built here and Echuca has the largest gathering, if you call a group of paddle steamers a gathering, the largest gathering of paddle steamers anywhere in the world and I think that's sort of a mixture of the old and the new and the wonderful historic touch is something that adds to the occasion. But even beyond that, of course, this is an occasion to remark upon the important work of the Murray/Darling Basin Commission. 40 per cent of Australia's agriculture is contained within the Murray/Darling Basin. The construction of the new weir is a cooperative effort between the Federal Government and the State Governments of Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia and I particularly want to acknowledge the contribution of the Victorian Government and the presence here today of the Deputy Premier of Victoria, Pat McNamara.

But ladies and gentlemen, looking to the future, fixing up the Murray Darling Basin is about the most important environmental challenge that this State can have. That lovely poem talks about the pollution in the River Murray, and there is pollution. There is pollution in the river. There is the degradation of soil through salinity. There are many other ongoing environmental challenges that this country has. And I think all Australians now want a balance between environment and development. They want to look after our national heritage but they also want industrial progress, and you can balance the two. It's not a situation of saying that all development is bad. That is crazy stupid nonsense. Equally worse we've passed the day when we could take action that effected our environment and believing that somehow or other the problem would cure itself. The problem doesn't cure itself. And we do need to invest time and resources into caring for our environment. And that's the reason why the Federal Government promised before the last election - and I'm very happy to say that we are now in a position to implement it - we promised the establishment of the Natural Heritage Trust of Australia. And that Natural Heritage Trust will have paid into it just under \$1.2 billion and that will be out of the proceeds of the sale of one third of Telstra. And that \$1.2 billion will be used over a period of years exclusively for environmental projects. And out of that we will fully fund the \$163 million that the Commission believes is necessary to carry out important environmental work for the Murray Darling Basin. And that \$163 million will be one of the first (inaudible) on that Natural Heritage Trust. And I'm therefore able to say to people who are intimately connected with the Murray Darling Basin recognising the long term importance of it to the agricultural base and the agricultural future of Australia, I'm able to say to you, to all of you, that we have a firm deliverable commitment in relation to the recommendations of the Commission and the changes to the environmental care that that Commission has recommended. And it does represent an historic commitment by Australian governments to the environmental future of our nation and it delivers on a very, very important commitment that I made to the Australian people at the time of the last election. Believing as I did then and I do now that the future of this nation rests very heavily upon getting the right balance between development, industry and the environment, particularly in the regional parts of Australia.

So Professor Luvring can I say that we have taken notice of the views expressed by the Commission and we are very, very strongly committed to the implementation of an action plan of the type the Commission has outlined.

A great deal has already been said about the weir and I had the intricacies of it explained to me as I came here today. And it has been a collaborative project and it's been contributed to by all of the four governments that I mentioned. And it will improve the water quality. It will establish environmental (inaudible) capable of sustaining natural processes and it has developed an integrated management strategy for the river system.

But in addition to that of course, as Pat mentioned, I'm very happy to be associated with the announcement today of a further local initiative to compliment the new weir and to stimulate local development and that is the Logan - Murray 2000 plus strategy. And my colleague, John Anderson, will sign the memorandum of understanding on behalf of the Federal Government immediately after this opening ceremony.

But the purpose of this strategy is to bring together the Federal Government, the State government, the local community, in working out strategies that can most effectively secure and promote and maintain development in a coordinated, economically sensible way, a community sensitive way, in the local area. And we will, in association with the Victorian Government, be investing some \$660 000 to support the objectives of that memorandum of understanding.

But the last thing, ladies and gentlemen, I want to say to you today is something that is really at the core of what this region is all about and the core of what our nation is all about and that is that sense of cooperation, that sense, if you like, of community obligation, of mutual obligation that we each have to the other. This weir has been made possible through the cooperation of four governments. We each acknowledge the contributions of the other government. It is not just a Commonwealth Government project; it's not just a Victorian government project, or a New South Wales or South Australian government one. It is a project of all of the four governments. And our communities rest very heavily on that notion of cooperation and that notion of sharing responsibilities.

I have a very deep personal commitment to the future of regional Australia. I know some of the problems that regional Australia has passed through over recent years. I don't pretend to you that I have all of the answers, but I do have all of the energy and all of the commitment to try and address those problems. I know the importance of small business to areas such as this area. I know the importance of small business to the rural and regional towns of Australia and that is why my Government has placed such a great importance on small business. I know the value of infrastructure to regional Australia. I also know the value of community cooperation. And in that connection, let me say that the Federal Government's 'work for the dole' scheme, which I announced details of yesterday after the Cabinet meeting in Pakenham, is designed to harness the combined energies and commitment of local communities, local business organisations, the local service clubs and all the other groups that are interested in tackling some of the great national issues it confronts. So unemployment and youth unemployment remains one. And I salute the achievements that have chalked up in that area which Pat McNamara mentioned as a tribute to those that have taken risks and have invested.

But cooperation between different parts of the community and that sense that we do have obligations to each other and we do have obligations to cooperate with each other in tackling great national problems as well as regional problems is a very, very important message for all of us.

So in being here today in formally opening or commissioning - I think you commission weirs rather than open them, it looked pretty open to me on the way over - in being here today to take part in the commissioning of this Weir may I conclude by complimenting Thiess, complimenting Guthridge, Hascombe and Davies, complimenting the Commission and all of those that have been associated with this project. It always warms my heart, it always has, to see a great tangible solid engineering achievement. You really feel as though something's been achieved when you can see it and you can see what the money's been spent on and there it is, the direction of the river has changed, it looks as though it works and you are tremendously impressed with it. And I can see by the happy faces of some of the farmers here that it does work.

So ladies and gentlemen it's an occasion above all to be thankful about being an Australian, thankful for the great quality of life that you have in regional and rural Australia. Thank the lovely school children that led us in the singing of the National Anthem and that magnificent poem and those who organised that competition. But I may I, on your behalf, salute those that have made the weir possible. Their skill, their engineering capabilities and their design skills have brought it to fruition and therefore I have great pleasure in commissioning it and thank you very much for having me here today. Thank you.