



Speech by

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RURAL SUMMIT

Mr HOBBS (Warrego—NPA) (12.10 p.m.): I want to brief the House on the rural summit that was held in Canberra recently. Many people are aware that rural Australia has been hurting for a long time both economically and socially for a number of reasons that have been well documented and debated in this House over a number of years. The combination of these events has led to a lack of confidence, a mistrust of Government, anger and frustration.

I believe very strongly that the summit was a turning point. The representatives at the summit were from all over rural and regional Australia. They had a very, very positive attitude. The issue was that we know the problems of the past; we are now looking for solutions for the problems of the future. We heard various speakers talk about the OECD countries, which are facing similar circumstances to those that we are experiencing in Australia. Australia may even be in a slightly better position than some other countries. In Europe in the mid eighties direct assistance did little more than delay the adjustment that was going to inevitably have to be made.

We heard of individual successes, particularly of the township of Mitchell, which is located here in Queensland. In 1991, as a result of the Goss Government closing down courthouses, railway lines and other services in the area, the people of Mitchell formed the Booringa Action Group. That group was the catalyst for the progress that was made by that town. When the local sawmill burnt down recently, they were able to obtain a new one. They were able to put some tourist attractions in place. They were able to obtain a dredge in order to dredge sand out of the local weir. All of these achievements have led to the creation of jobs and a win for that community. It shows just what small communities can do.

Another success story was a community that had been left \$200,000 by a beneficiary. That \$200,000 was lent out three or four times to businesses within that community to assist them to get established or to expand. The money has all been paid back and now that community has extra businesses that were generated and supported from within their own community.

The outcomes to emerge from the summit, which are common to a number of themes, include that there are no easy solutions to the problems facing regional Australia. These problems are shared by many countries. Community development will not happen without Government, business and community stakeholders each making their various contributions towards locally developed plans within a regional context. Communities want to share responsibility with Government for the development of their regions. Communities do not want solutions imposed upon them. One size does not fit all. Government, industries and communities must invest significant ongoing resources in skilling, learning, education and training and leadership to develop the human capacity of regional Australia. Distribution of these resources needs to be inclusive of all sectors of regional society.

Governments must accept responsibility for facilitating adequate provision and maintenance of basic infrastructure. People in all sectors of regional Australia need equitable standards and access to essential services, including telecommunications, power and energy, water, transport, health and education. Creative ways of providing infrastructure that is widely accessible need to be explored without imposing unreasonable costs on regional industries or communities. The three tiers of Government must remove unnecessary regulatory impediments which increase the cost of doing business and stifle innovation and action in regional Australia. Governments must create a climate, including tax incentives, which encourages investment for rural enterprises and philanthropy.

Participants in the summit welcomed the announcement of a new rural foundation which demonstrates the commitment to a partnership between Government, industry and regional Australia. Delegates look forward to details of the implementation plan before Christmas with regular reports on progress.

The rural foundation that was set up is basically an umbrella foundation with the option of setting up smaller foundations in those regions. It offers everyone in the nation—Government, corporations, small business, urban centres, regions and small communities—the opportunity to share responsibility for and ownership of the future of Australia, particularly of regional and rural Australia. The Federal Government started off the foundation with a \$10.7m grant, with a further \$3.8m to be provided up until the 2008-09 financial year. The Sidney Myer Foundation will also put in \$1m over the next three or four years. The foundation will have tax deductibility status for contributors. That means corporations, businesses and all those other people who wish to contribute will be able to use that as a facility to assist those in regional Queensland.

Australia's economy is going well, but we are only as strong as our weakest link. We need to recognise that if we are to go forward as a nation with much strength we need to be able to do so as a totally united front. The foundation was set up with an emphasis on economic development and job creation and training in economic and business skills. In particular, it benefits the younger generation by offering exchange student arrangements and scholarships that will skill young people up. They can be educated in the modern ways of doing business and coping with the changes in this information age. The foundation will provide mentoring, research and seed funding for suitable projects in the regions. Local branches of the foundation will be set up and local representatives will manage them. Basically, they will be a locally oriented group who will have some knowledge of the particular region.

We cannot hold back the tide of change in this new information age. Our challenge is to provide the environment for local communities to grow from within, enhance social capital, improve the institutional framework for the creation of enterprises and the facilitation of local networks.

I find it extraordinary that the Labor State Government was not officially represented at the summit. No-one from the Department of State Development and no-one from Regional Communities or Rural Communities was there. The only representative of the Parliament was me—a member of the National Party. I understand that the Premier issued an instruction that these departments were not to attend owing to the fact that he had the grumps over Minister McGrady being required to attend Parliament so that he could answer serious questions on the unauthorised salary hikes in his department. He could have authorised another Minister to go or sent some departmental staff. In many instances, the departmental staff have a lot of information and a lot to offer, and they have done a great deal of work in relation to rural and regional Australia. It was only the National Party which demonstrated its commitment by having a presence there. It was only the National Party which was prepared to play a professional and sympathetic role at that summit to help rural and regional Australia.

The urban media needs to take a good look at the way in which it reports events around Australia. Rural industry is not getting a reasonable go from the urban media. Every time some environmental issue comes up, the general consensus is that it is caused by tree clearing or something. We need to be able to make sure that we go forward as a nation. We need to be able to tell the younger generation that milk comes from cows, that houses come from forests, that bread comes from wheat grown on land that has been cleared, and that the dams that have been built enable irrigators to grow cotton for clothing. That has to be publicised, as were the opposing cases by the media during the referendum campaign. The rural areas voted 77% against what the urban media was pushing for very strongly. That shows how out of touch the media is with the needs and aspirations of rural and regional Australia and Queensland in particular.

Last Saturday, referendum day, the headline of the Australian displayed a big "Yes". The result from rural Australia was a big "No". Other measures such as the regional forest agreement, regulations relating to the development of water resources and tree-clearing guidelines which this Government is trying to impose on rural industry will stifle development. Those measures will have the opposite effect to that which is intended. We are trying to put together a plan for the future. This Government is stifling moves in that direction.

Time expired.
