



Speech by

**HOWARD HOBBS**

**MEMBER FOR WARREGO**

---

Hansard 7 December 1999

### RURAL SUMMIT

**Mr HOBBS** (Warrego—NPA) (11.50 a.m.): I have already briefed the House on the rural summit held in Canberra in October this year. Today I will summarise some of the points raised at the summit. I advise the House of further issues relevant to the outcomes of the summit. I believe the summit was a turning point in Australia's history, particularly for rural and regional Australia. The people who attended had a very, very positive outlook. The summit was a case not of considering the problems but of considering ways to solve those problems and look to the future.

From a financial perspective, Australia is going okay. But there is a sector missing out, and that is the regional sector. At the summit it was recognised by the Prime Minister and by everyone else concerned that a mechanism must be put in place to share the support of the nation. Any country is only as strong as its weakest link. If we want Australia to go ahead in a strong and forceful way, we need to give everyone on the land a reasonable go. We are not asking for handouts; we just want a fair, even go.

Red tape and restrictions that stop rural enterprises from developing should be reduced. In the past, that was one of the biggest problems facing rural enterprises. We are hoping to resolve some of the issues that I will deal with soon. The one-policy-fits-all approach of Governments creates problems. They tend not to be equipped to get their minds around the fact that needs are different in regional areas. Housing needs are different in the Torres Strait from those in Stanthorpe. Education needs are different in Hebel from those in Hervey Bay. Queensland is a particularly diverse State and Australia as a whole is even more diverse. Governments and bureaucracies need to understand that the needs of different communities may vary. Simpler guidelines are needed in some particular instances to allow businesses, education and other Government services to be delivered in those regions.

I turn now to the major priorities identified by each theme group. The delegates believed that a great need exists to improve the communication structure within Australia. The summit urged delivery of communication services that meet anticipated economic, social and cultural needs to allow businesses to compete in the use of electronic commerce and the Internet in order to allow people to live interesting and fulfilling lives where they choose to live. Local call access to the nearest service centre should be ensured. The coverage, affordability and functionality of mobile communication should be improved to ensure that regional Australia is not left behind in the telecommunication revolution. For most Australians, a mobile phone service is a normal thing. In many areas—as one finds when travelling on regional roads—mobile coverage just does not exist. Currently, that is being addressed, particularly by funds from the sale of the second tranche of Telstra shares. We are on track to improve the coverage, but that will not solve all the problems that we have. We often hear it said that 80% or 90% of the population will have this or that, but the reality is that many of the people who do not have adequate coverage are spread over a very large portion of Australia's land mass.

As to infrastructure—the summit urged delivery of a basic level of access to services, particularly energy, water, health and education, as a right of all Australians in regional areas. A national coordination strategy for infrastructure recognising special solutions for special problems is essential. The Federal Government can lead the process through a proactive approach by facilitating infrastructure provisions and funding. Delivery of projects is the responsibility of all levels of Government and the private sector. A good example is water infrastructure development. That can be done.

Members of the previous Government put together the Water Infrastructure Task Force. We put together an implementation plan. That is a very, very simple process. All the Government has to do is follow the steps. This Government has a problem with providing water infrastructure. The argument is that that difficulty is based on environmental grounds. The reality is that most of those environmental issues were resolved. If they have not been resolved, they certainly should have been resolved. There is no reason why we cannot progress in that respect. Those initiatives would benefit the more remote parts of Australia.

The summit urged recognition of the fact that optimal health status for all regional Australians requires the recognition of the specific health needs of rural and remote residents. That can be achieved only through empowering communities and developing partnerships that change the dominant metropolitan-focused mind-set, overcoming barriers to access and ensuring equitable resource allocation. Health is also a very important part of the package.

As to community wellbeing and lifestyle—the summit urged the development of community capacity and leadership, including our young people. That resource exists. Unfortunately, for many years we have been exporting our greatest resource: our kids. They have been moving to the coast and overseas. They have been taking jobs that are closer to the metropolitan regions. We need resources to attract them back or provide opportunities so that they do not need to leave in the first place.

In relation to finance and facilitating entrepreneurship, the summit called for action to achieve a more efficient and effective market for capital in regional Australia. It urged the removal of regulatory impediments to entrepreneurship. It called for the development of a new, modern regional business culture and paradigm to be stimulated by rural and regional business foundations.

As to value adding to regional communities and farming industries—the summit urged recognition of the need for Government to create a supportive business climate ensuring provision, maintenance and enhancement of infrastructure and cost-effective delivery of accessible services. Governments and businesses should form partnerships to meet the enormous opportunities available for value adding to industries and local governments. As recently as this morning and yesterday, we heard about rural industries trying to go about their maintenance. They were being attacked for doing that by the Premier in his statement about the smoke he saw from an aeroplane. That is unbelievable. That statement will go down in history as a particularly unfortunate statement. He will wish he never said it. Those fires are a normal part of maintenance that occurs all the time.

**Mr Reeves:** How do you know every one was?

**Mr HOBBS:** They have been there since Captain Cook sailed up the east coast. Fires are more regulated and managed now. People are trying to go about their normal business.

**Mr McGrady:** Were there any fires before Cook arrived?

**Mr HOBBS:** Absolutely. We presume so. Australia has been burning for centuries. That is the way it is. It will continue for many years to come.

**Mr Gibbs:** They reckon you are a bit of a hot flame.

**Mr HOBBS:** You never know.

Vegetation management is one of the significant issues about which people always seem to be under attack in this place. It is not necessary. Most farmers are very conscious of the environment. They do not wish to do anything that would go against them in the future.

In relation to new industries and new opportunities, the summit urged that Governments, the corporate sector and communities develop partnerships to create an environment that encourages and supports new industries and supports opportunities for regional Australia through eliminating unnecessary bureaucratic processes and encouraging the spirit of community interest. The Government's role should be that of a catalyst to ensure that that happens. One good example of that sort of measure is the Water Development Incentive Scheme. It seems that that has been thrown on the scrap heap.

As to community and industry leadership—the summit clearly identified that effective leadership in all sectors at all levels is a key to building the future. The summit called on the Federal Government to commit to leadership development in regional Australia through the provision of sufficient funds to empower communities and industries to shape their own futures as vibrant and productive communities and industries. The objective is to engage all levels of government, industry and the community in partnership to build leadership from the inside out throughout regional Australia.

Education and training are also very important. The summit urged all levels of government, industry and communities to develop strategies that ensure equality of access to quality education and training in regional Australia. Regional Australians must develop a culture of life-long learning to enable them to adapt to and maximise the benefits from change. Education providers, Government,

businesses and community members must collaborate to deliver significant improvements in learning and education opportunities that should be determined by the communities themselves.

As to philanthropy and partnerships—the summit urged a greater understanding of and renewed respect between regional and urban Australia. There is opportunity for philanthropy to take a strategic role.

Time expired.

---