

**SPEECH BY THE HON TIM FISCHER MP, LEADER OF THE NATIONAL PARTY
TO THE 1998 CAMPAIGN LAUNCH IN WAGGA WAGGA
ON 18 SEPTEMBER 1998**

Don McDonald, Helen Dickie, Kay Hull and Christine Ferguson, 'Tim's Adjoining Angels', my wife Judy, and all my colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Friends all, I want to say to you today, the 1998 Federal Election represents the biggest challenge for the National Party in the history of the National Party.

It also represents the biggest challenge I have ever faced in politics. At the same time, it represents a big opportunity for the National Party, as the nation faces up to decide who will govern Australia into the new century and the new millennium....

Our critics and the pundits have argued that every election will be the last for the National Party, and this time they have said we would not even make it to the home straight of the election race.

Well, we are in the home straight, we have reached this day of policy launch with a new determination to provide a fair way forward for country Australia and boost the standard of living for all Australians.

You and I are here in this great inland city of Wagga Wagga to affirm that the National Party is the party of rural and regional Australia – your party representing your interests into the new century and new millennium.

Yes, we face new challenges in this election. But we have faced plenty of challenges over our proud history, and we have never backed away from the fight for what is right for the people of country Australia.

We stand for

1. The family as the basis of a strong and stable society,
2. Equal opportunity for all Australians, and
3. That the very young, the aged, and the disadvantaged are entitled to the support of society.

We have carried that fight into the Coalition Government, and we will carry it into the next Government.

When we entered Government just two and a half years ago the National Party team set about implementing our priorities - contributing to solving the problems that had to be fixed, helping to deliver solid outcomes from the Coalition Government led with dedication by Prime Minister John Howard.

Firstly, Commonwealth borrowing was out of control under Labor. We fixed that.

This Government stopped borrowing and started repaying its debts - and in two Budgets has reduced the Federal Government debt by a massive \$30 billion, with more to come.

High interest rates had crippled business and investment in regional Australia.

We secured five official interest rate cuts and the lowest home and business interest rates for 30 years.

In the dark days of the Keating Government, when interest rates soared to 20pc and more, who would have thought that this country would ever see single figure interest rates?

Well, we have delivered them - for homebuyers, for businesses, for farmers - not on special deals but as normal commercial rates.

Secondly, the Budget was \$10 billion in deficit. That is fixed, with the Budget not only back in the black a year ahead of schedule, but with Budget surpluses - substantial surpluses - planned into Budgets into the next century.

And the ALP had inflation virtually built into the system. This Government broke that cycle and has locked in historically low inflation.

We have created 300,000 new, private enterprise jobs over two and a half years.

Thirdly, we demanded a more efficient and smaller public service, and I make no apology for that. By December last year, we had reduced the public service by nearly 17,000 people compared with when we took office.

We wanted smarter government, and better government, and we have striven to deliver it. Less government, less taxes, more incentive and more jobs.

Fourthly, we wanted an honest and fair social security system, and by achieving that we are now saving you, the taxpayers, up to \$46 million a week by cutting out inefficiency and rorts.

While we worked to make the system work properly - which had to be the first priority - we were also working to make the system work better, to address the problems of infrastructure and service delivery in regional Australia.

As a result we have introduced a variety of incentives that have already seen an extra 130 doctors move into country Australia - with more to come.

We are spending \$24 million over the next four years on 30 new multi-purpose health services in country Australia, and \$83 million over five years in continuing support for the Royal Flying Doctor Service.

We have established the John Flynn Scholarship specifically to train country doctors.

We are funding training schemes specifically for rural and remote nurses. This program, incidentally, has been so popular that the initial funding of \$120,000 was used up in a few

months. Another \$280,000 that we provided in May this year has already been used as well - so we are boosting funding up to \$600,000 a year, or more than \$3 million over the next five years. We are determined to do the right thing by those bush nurses.

We are also doing the right thing by Medicare customers in country towns.

Under Labor, you could claim a Medicare rebate at Medicare offices. There were only 270 of those offices around Australia, and well over half of them were concentrated in Australia's ten biggest cities.

If you were in Winton, Edenhope, Finley just down the road from here, or Tom Price, you had to travel hundreds of kilometres to get to a Medicare office.

We introduced Medicare easy claim centres in country town pharmacies, into hundreds of pharmacies - 600 of them in fact across this wide nation.

So I am pleased that Announcement No 1 today on behalf of the Liberal-National Party Government is that we are going to expand that network, with another 600 easy claim centres in country towns, to be introduced over the next four years. That will cost \$40 million and it will be \$40 million well spent.

This is not only good for Medicare claimants. It is good for country towns. Each one of those centres is a reason NOT to go past your small local town to do business. Each one, in fact, is a positive reason to take your business to that town. It's good health policy, and it's good rural and regional policy.

Let me now turn to primary industry policy.

Triple A Package

The Triple A Package which my Deputy Leader John Anderson developed and introduced has at long last delivered a long term plan for the farm sector.

Let me digress to say that I could not have a more effective and capable Deputy Leader than John Anderson, who has stood up to enormous pressure on many fronts and deserves our recognition for a job well done.

The Triple A Package includes very specific measures for a very specific problem - a problem which strikes at the heart of the Australian family farm, but which has languished in the "too hard" basket of government policy for decades.

That is the problem of how to keep a family farm in the family, as generations change. Many politicians have talked about. I am enormously proud that it was my colleague John Anderson who grappled with it and found answers.

It is a problem that could only be properly understood by a farmer like John, and a solution that could only be developed and delivered by a Government with a strong and effective National Party presence.

We were also determined that this Government would address the run-down in rural and regional infrastructure which became a hallmark of Labor's years in power, and further announcements are to come.

Rail

We have put money back into rail, because we need a modern and efficient rail system for the new century. We have committed \$100 million toward the Alice Springs - Darwin rail link and we have put an additional \$250 million dollars into the rail system so we can at long last have one system - one effective system on one rail gauge across the country.

We will live to regret the amount of rail line we have ripped up in this century and we are doing something about it.

Road

Transport Minister, Mark Vaile, has set a scorching pace in the portfolio and earlier today has announced a detailed transport policy.

We have increased the Federal Government's commitment to road funding, and we found a way to direct Federal Government funding into fixing the problems of the notorious stretch of Pacific Highway from Newcastle to the Queensland border - arguably Australia's most dangerous major highway.

That particular project I know is a badge of honour for Gary Nehl, the NP Member for Cowper. Gary has lobbied for a better Pacific Highway for all the years he has been in Parliament and indeed became known as the Member for the Pacific Highway.

I have every confidence that the Pacific Highway will continue to be the focus for improvement, because this highway not only runs through Gary Nehl's seat, it also runs through the seat of the Minister for Transport, Mark Vaile.

Today, I have one further road related announcement - Announcement No. 2. – that the 'Black Spots' road program will be extended for the life of the next term of Parliament, beyond the current sunset of 1 July 1999, because it has been an effective practical program in national road safety.

So the Black Spots roads program, which was a personal priority of mine and which this Government reinstated, will continue to make its great contribution to saving lives on Australian roads.

Telecommunications

We also turned our attention to the telecommunications infrastructure of regional Australia, because it was just nowhere near good enough. It is still not good enough - because country people do not yet have exactly equivalent services to city people and that is our aim - but it is better, and getting better all the time.

The Regional Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund is pumping \$250 million into

innovative telecommunications projects all over the country - a host of projects that are not only bringing country Australia up-to-date in technology, but in some cases are trialing technology ahead of that available in the cities.

This fund will now be boosted to \$310 million.

We have fixed one problem which Labor left us - that is, their crazy contract which would have shut down the mobile phone network for vast areas of Australia on the stroke of 2000.

We came up with a solution that not only kept the remote network open, but which will in fact move country people forward to the "next step" technology in mobile phones.

We demanded of Telstra that it accelerate its roll-out of high quality, high bandwidth ISDN services across the country.

We introduced special measures which cap regional local call prices to city prices.

We introduced a special rebate for 17,000 remote area phone users to give them the equivalent of untimed local class for the first time ever.

And only last week I announced a \$25 million, three-year plan to give internet access at local call rates to 99.7 per cent of Australians.

Announcement No. 3 today is that through a combination of new generation DRCS (digital radio concentrator system) and the introduction of satellite internet delivery systems, this Government is committed to ensuring, in the life of the next parliament, further upgrading of internet access to all Australians, including those beyond the 99.7% of Australians covered by last week's \$25 million announcement.

I am aware that, in regard to Telstra, some people in country Australia are worried about what might happen to their levels of services, and the price of services, with changes in the ownership of Telstra, so let me say a few words about that.

First, let me make clear that the rules under which Telstra operates have nothing to do with its ownership. Those rules are set down in legislation. They apply equally to Telstra, to Optus, to Vodaphone and to anyone else who cares to get into the Australian market, irrespective of their ownership.

It is the legislation that makes the rules. It is the legislation that sets service obligations and exercises control over them - not the board of a particular company. They all play by the same rules, and it is Parliament that sets the rules.

Second, you will be aware that the Government has proposed selling to 49pc of Telstra, at which time there will be a review of Telstra's services standards. Let me just make it clear that this review will be independent and will its own findings and recommendations.

But the final judgement on whether Telstra has come up to the mark will ultimately be made by the Government.

Your National Party Ministers and Members will be part of that judgement - and let me assure you that when it comes to services to regional Australia, we will be marking hard!

If the Telstra review does not satisfy the National Party it will be a case of No Sale.

This Government has also worked on the natural and cultural infrastructure of regional Australia - thanks in part of course to funds provided by the sale of the first tranche of Telstra.

In our management of the Federation Fund and the Natural Heritage Fund, we have very deliberately recognised that cultural heritage is not limited to Australia's cities, and natural heritage is not limited to our coastline.

For example, last week I had the great pleasure of announcing, in Longreach, funding for three projects involving the Stockman's Hall of Fame, the Qantas Museum, and the Waltzing Matilda centre in Winton. A trifecta of Australian icons - the stockman, the flying kangaroo, and our best-loved folk song.

These projects - like others flowing from these funds around the country - not only preserve heritage. They provide direct jobs in country centres, and they boost the development of tourism.

We have the interests of regional Australia at heart.

Let me give a further sign of that. Many of you who have been involved in legal proceedings will be only too well aware that getting legal assistance in regional Australia is far more difficult than it is in the cities.

We have already helped with that. In the last Budget, we put an extra \$11.4 million into community legal centres in regional Australia. Tenders have been called for six new services, in Albury -Wodonga, Central West Queensland, South Australia's iron triangle, the South Coast of NSW, the Kimberley and the south-west in Western Australia.

We want to do better. Announcement No 4 today is that in our next term we will put a further \$3.6 million into community legal centres in rural and regional Australia.

That will provide an upgraded service in Darwin, plus five additional centres - at Broken Hill, Mount Gambier, the South Australian Riverland, the Gippsland, and Kalgoorlie.

At this point I would like to say a few words about the hard work that has been done by National Party Ministers Warren Truss and Bruce Scott.

Warren has been a most effective Minister for Customs and Consumer Affairs - and in two policy areas in particular has delivered for country Australia.

The first is his work in streamlining Australia's anti-dumping system. Warren has slashed the time taken to investigate and complete an anti-dumping inquiry from 220 days to just 155 days. He aimed for, and has delivered, the fastest and fairest anti-dumping arrangements in the world.

Warren's second achievement has been to bring some sense to the confusion around labelling of products - particularly labelling to identify whether a product is imported. Under Warren's system, if it says Product of Australia on the label, then you know it is Australian - it's that simple.

Bruce Scott as Veterans Affairs Minister has done a magnificent job for Australian veterans and their families. The extension of a gold card to thousands of World War Two veterans, a comprehensive study of the health of Vietnam veterans, the injection of an extra \$750 million into veterans hospital care, and the return home after 96 years of the records of 500 Australians who died in the Boer War, give some idea of the breadth of responsibility that Bruce has brought to this important portfolio.

For my part as Trade Minister, I was determined to improve our export performance - and well before we came into Government I was worried by the Keating concentration on Asia as a trade meal ticket to the future.

I am not going to pretend to you that I saw all aspects of the Asian crash coming.

Clearly, there was a danger we might have too many trade eggs in the Asian basket.

So in the development of the Coalition's trade policy, diversification was there from the start. It was always a case of Asia first, but never Asia only.

I take considerable pride in the fact that, when the growth rates of our Asian trading partners did start to falter, our exporters were ready. Ready to diversify into the markets that were holding up and still going ahead- like the Europe, the US, the Middle East.

I also take considerable pride in the fact that in the first term of this Government we have added literally billions of dollars worth of access for Australian exporters.

We have done that by using the multi-lateral forums like the World Trade Organisation.

We have used the regional organisations like APEC.

But I have also made a very deliberate point of using bilateral negotiations - sitting down with the trade Minister from another country, one on one, discussing problem areas, and cutting a deal.

We have cut some big deals - like opening up a new wool pipeline tariff-free into Mexico from where Australian woollen garments go tariff -free into the huge US market.

We have cut small deals, like convincing the Koreans to relax their shelf-life regulations on UHT milk so that good Australian product can get access.

Big or small, every one is a new market opportunity for Australian exporters, an opportunity that your Government has gone out and asked for, rather than wait until it is offered.

But ladies and gentlemen, this Government is not perfect. We could have done some things

better, and we have made some mistakes.

The retention of services in regional Australia has been a growing problem, not just in the past couple of years, but over a generation. I know it is something which is a real and growing concern for many country people - they feel that the forces of globalisation and change are leaving them behind.

We have started to address those concerns, but I am honest enough to admit that sometimes we have not explained what we are doing as well as we should, and that we could do more.

In this term, this Government has confirmed single desk export status for the wheat industry and for the sugar industry, and we will confirm that same status for the rice industry. That is core National Party policy, and so is the next matter I want to raise.

A couple of months ago we received a report recommending significant changes to Australia Post. We made the judgement that those changes were too broad. We retained the standard letter service at a standard rate across Australia rather than open it to competition. We retained full public ownership of Australia Post, and Australia Post will continue subsidies to 700 licensed post offices in regional and rural Australia.

I might add that this Government has opened 150-plus post offices and agencies in its first term, compared with Labor's record of closing 270 of them!

Let me turn to some vital National Party priorities and policies, especially competition policy.

There must be a comprehensive view on competition policy to determine its impact on rural and regional Australia. We must establish a human dimension, a jobs dimension in relation to the area of competition policy.

I affirm here today that there will be a comprehensive inquiry into competition policy which will have regard to the established economic, social, environmental, and regional development objectives of Australian Governments. It will give consideration to other influences on the evolution of markets in regional and rural Australia, including the role of international trade, foreign investment and globalisation generally.

It will report on four specific areas:

- the impact of competition policy reforms on the structure, competitiveness and regulation of major industries and markets supplying to and supplied by regional and rural Australia;
- the economic and social impacts on regional and rural Australia (including on small businesses and local governments) of the changes to market structure, competitiveness and regulation flowing from the reforms and the effect of these impacts and changes on the wider Australian economy;
- possible differences between regional and metropolitan Australia in the nature and operation of major markets and in the economic and social impacts of the reforms promoted by national competition policy; and

- any measures which should be taken to facilitate the flow of benefits (or to mitigate any transitional costs or negative impacts) arising from competition policy reforms to residents and businesses in regional and rural Australia.

Just in case you haven't got the message yet, let me make the message clear as Announcement No. 5: your Government shares some of your concerns that competition has not had enough regard to "public interest" as we see it in country Australia, so we are going to put it under the microscope.

Economies are comprised of people and many of those people choose to live well beyond the capital cities. Governments have an obligation to ensure the provision of health, education and transport services – within reasonable parameters - to people wherever they choose to live. People are also entitled to live in a safe environment, and I commend the recently announced policy to establish the \$50 million CrimTrac system to monitor fingerprints, DNA samples, car registration and other information across Australia.

So there is more work to be done in this regard. And there is more work to be done on the Australian economy.

The system now works better, and we are making it work better for regional Australians.

Now we need to improve the system itself to give Australia the tax system and economic structure it needs and deserves for a new century and new millennium.

I want to lift the dead hand of \$3.5 billion worth of transport taxes from regional Australia because I know just how vitally important transport costs are to people living outside the cities.

I want to lift the dead hand of \$4.5 billion worth of input taxes and production taxes from our exporters because I know that those taxes are a tax on jobs. That saving is the equivalent of 100,000 jobs for Australians

I want to give small businesses a fair go from their tax system, remembering that all GST on all business inputs and business purchases are fully refunded.

I want to give average Australians more incentive and more take-home pay, and wage earners and families in country Australia a fair go from their tax system.

Let me close on that note of a fair go, and equality.

Many farmers around Australia have, in the past, not been eligible for family assistance benefits simply because they own a farm - the farm has been counted as an asset and stopped them receiving family allowance.

This is despite that fact that for many the farm is not an asset that earns income, and despite the fact that their real circumstance is quite desperate. These families have not had a fair go compared with city people; they have not had equality.

One of the measures contained in our tax reform package is that the assets test for family

allowance and minimum family allowance will be abolished.

The farm will not be counted. Farm families who need family allowances will be able to get them.

There is another area of inequality in country Australia that needs attention.

Right now the humble outback lunch supplied by the station management being eaten by a jackeroo sitting under a gum tree, is subject to the same Fringe Benefits Tax as is paid on the luxurious business lunch being enjoyed by a senior executive in the CBD of Sydney or Melbourne.

The application of Fringe Benefits Tax in outback Australia is wrong. It was never meant to be this way. In fact it was intended to apply to the boardroom and not the bush.

We have addressed that inequality too. Announcement No 6 today is that we will abolish all fringe benefits tax on all meals provided as part of pastoral industry employment conditions, as well as abolishing all fringe benefits tax on accommodation in the mining industry, which follows the abolition of all fringe benefits tax on accommodation in the pastoral industries throughout remote rural and regional Australia.

It is another legacy from the Keating-Beazley years which at last we can get rid of.

But if there is one area of inequality that really galls people struggling to make a living in the remote areas of Australia, that is the inequality between city educational opportunities and country educational opportunities.

Remote families, many of them doing it tough, have exactly the same hopes for their children as do city families. But when it comes to realising those hopes through a decent education, they do not have the same opportunity.

They do not think they are being treated equally. They do not think it is fair.

And I agree with them. It is not fair and equal.

This Government has already addressed some of these problems with funding of \$33 million a year under the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme (AIC), and we allocated \$16.9 million this year to the country areas program to help schools and students in rural and regional areas.

Again we think we can do more. Announcement No 7 on this day is this that one component of a package of measures that will be provided for isolated families will bring the maximum level of AIC additional boarding allowance to \$4347 per student.

This measure will align the additional boarding allowance to the ABSTUDY School Fees Allowance (Away) - which in itself will reduce another educational disparity which annoys and frustrates many people in remote Australia.

About 3,000 students will benefit from this measure which will increase the maximum

additional boarding allowance by more than \$150 per year.

These are not special policies for one sector of Australia. This is giving country Australians a fair go.

A fair go is what the National Party is all about - equality of treatment for all Australians, equality of opportunity, and equity from your Government no matter where you live.

That's what the National Party started fighting for, that is what we have always fought for - and that is what we will fight for into the next Government and into the next Century.

Ladies and Gentlemen, this election presents a great opportunity for country Australians - the opportunity to break the tyranny of transport taxes.

We will deliver \$3.5 billion in reduced fuel taxes.

I guarantee you that I will resign as Party Leader and walk out of Government if we do not deliver that \$3.5 billion in reduced fuel taxes.

The Labor Party will not give you lower fuel taxes. The Democrats won't. One Nation won't. An Independent can't.

Only the National Party and the next Coalition Government will give you cheaper fuel for cheaper transport, which means cheaper food and goods in country towns.

This is a key part of our blueprint for Australia. It is the very essence of the partnership which we have with country Australia. It is vital to our vision for a confident, cosmopolitan Australia with low cost transport corridors exporting profitably to the world.

Cheaper fuel is the key. Cheaper fuel is the great opportunity.

That's the big National Party message - a great opportunity - a great message -

So let's get on with selling it.

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