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LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION
MEMBER FOR MARIBYRNONG**

SPEECH TO THE NATIONAL FARMERS' FEDERATION

'PRODUCING OUR FUTURE'

TUESDAY, 21 OCTOBER 2014

**** CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY ****

Before I turn to my prepared remarks, I want to briefly pay my respects to the memory of the great Gough Whitlam, who passed away this morning.

Today the Labor Party has lost a giant, and I think it is fair to say regardless of ones politics, the nation has lost a legend.

Like no other Prime Minister before or since, Gough Whitlam redefined our country - and in doing so he changed the lives of a generation.

His vision, his ambition offered Australia a new sense of what it might be.

He reimagined Australia – as a modern, multicultural nation, where equality of opportunity belonged to everyone.

There will be millions of Australians who will feel his loss and will mourn his passing in the days to come.

I wanted to make those remarks before I make the talk on behalf of the Labor Party to you, the leaders of the farming community in Australia.

Before entering Parliament, for 14 years I would often represent and visit rural workplaces throughout Australia: council workers, fruit packers, broiler chicken

growers, civil construction workers, wild dog trappers, tomato pickers and plenty more.

I represented shearers and my time on the boards of the shearing shed gave me an understanding of the hard work that shearers, roustabouts, wool classers and farm families do.

Those visits gave me a glimpse of an Australia that many Australians don't know enough about.

Today I'm here as the leader of a party that respects hard work – and respects the hard work of farmers and their families – and wants you to be rewarded fairly for your efforts.

A Labor party that appreciates the contribution you make to our nation.

A Labor party that wants to lift sales and open up new markets for Australian farmers, for you.

A Labor party committed to improving farm margins, not just commodities and farm gate prices, but boosting productivity by drawing on low cost farm finance processes.

A Labor party proud to support young people studying Ag. Science, particularly the growing number of young women - leading a new wave of innovation on the land.

For Labor, investing in regional Australia is not a side portfolio or some novel social program.

Strong regions are essential to our prosperity, they should be at the heart of national policy and they are at the centre of my vision for Australia.

I acknowledge this is a challenging time for some parts of our farming sector.

A high Aussie dollar always puts pressure on exporters.

And I know, in particular, that the pause in live exports, followed by drought was the cause of real pain in the North.

We've all learned from that.

Perhaps we should have done things differently then – but today we can be proud that Australia’s world-leading animal welfare system has put the trade on a sustainable footing, giving us opportunities to grow and reach new markets.

We are seeing that it is possible for increased animal welfare to coincide with increasing export volumes.

I want our northern cattle producers to thrive – because their success is integral to our nation’s wellbeing.

I am optimistic for the future of our whole agriculture sector; I am ambitious for what our regions can achieve.

This is an exciting time to be an Australian farmer.

On our northern doorstep, the most significant economic transformation of all time is underway.

By 2025, our region will be home to the world’s largest middle class: three billion consumers.

It’s easy to talk about a new ‘dining boom’ or Australia as the ‘food bowl’ of Asia – but it’s more complex than that.

Feeding the entire Asian middle class would require Australian producers and growers to increase their output by a factor of 40.

That’s not a realistic or smart ambition.

Nor should seizing the opportunities offered by a rising China mean neglecting our traditional markets in Saudi Arabia, Japan, the United States – or the huge and growing market in Indonesia, with a new President taking office yesterday looking to reboot relations with Australia.

Australia’s agricultural future won’t be defined by the quantity of our output – it will be shaped by the quality of our produce.

This is where ‘Brand Australia’ comes in.

Already ‘Brand Australia’ stands for clean, green and safe products – and we need to capitalise on that.

This is not about building a monolith, or swallowing smaller farmers.

'Brand Australia' is an umbrella that allows for regional brands to specialise and differentiate themselves.

Consider the success of the 'King Island' name, or A2 Milk – a piece of marketing nous that sidestepped the supermarket 'price wars'.

Look at new sheep breeds like the Australian white- a low maintenance meat sheep, developed here.

And it was great to see the recent float of Bellamy – another agricultural company successfully listed on the stock market, and meeting China's demand for clean Aussie produce.

Brand Australia also allows us to capitalise on the price differential between here and Asia.

At Australian supermarkets, a litre of milk costs \$1.

Yet in Shanghai it's been known to sell for as much as \$9.

This is not because China is not producing milk, it's because Australian milk is recognised as a high quality product, produced in a safe and clean environment within a reliable and safe supply chain.

Norco, for one, has seized this opportunity, and played to this strength.

Of course, if we can't get access to the markets we need – then building a strong brand is meaningless.

Labor has long been committed to free trade – in the national interest.

We believe free trade is good for farmers – and more free trade in agriculture is better.

In government, we laid the groundwork for the Japan and Korea agreements.

Were the final outcomes this Government agreed the best possible deal for Australian agriculture?

Will we think they were a good deal as they are implemented in the years ahead?

Time will tell.

Staying at the table longer may well have generated a better outcome, with fewer barriers.

Labor supported the Korean FTA because we made the decision that the national interest was better served by signing rather than not signing the agreement.

My concern with the way the Government handled these FTA negotiations – and the way it has managed discussions with China so far is that ‘getting pen to paper’ seems to have taken political priority over the content of the agreement.

They seem more focused on booking a venue for the signing ceremony than examining the fine print.

I’ve spent most of my working life negotiating outcomes – and whenever you publicly impose a deadline on yourself, as the Government has done, whenever you say ‘this is the date when we must get a deal done’, as the Prime Minister has said – all you do is weaken your position.

That’s why Labor will be examining the content of any Australia-China FTA closely.

We won’t be rushed – and the government should not be rushing.

We should stay at the table for as long as it takes to get the right deal in Australia’s national interest.

We want an FTA that delivers new markets for our grain exporters and a ‘New Zealand Plus’ level of tariff reduction for our dairy industry.

Guaranteeing market access also goes beyond tariff reduction – it depends on reducing non-tariff barriers to trade.

Technical barriers, red tape and batch testing inhibit our exporters, even as tariff rates come down.

They bring an estimated \$1.3 billion cost for our meat industry – and \$1.57 billion for dairy.

Our goal should be to gradually reduce these technical barriers to trade, especially in Indonesia, China and the Middle East.

This means going beyond FTAs to negotiate smoother passage for our produce over their borders and into their retail markets.

It means helping grain exporters, by bringing down the costs associated with shipping and the control of terminals.

It also means that the work of an FTA doesn't end when the signing ceremony does - delivering the benefits of free trade demands continual effort.

If our farmers and companies cannot bank the proclaimed benefits of an FTA, then it is just an empty photo-opportunity.

That's why Labor is committed to delivering real free trade outcomes.

Friends, you are more than just drivers of our national prosperity – you are parents, children, citizens – and members of a community.

And right now, too many young people are leaving our regional communities – for good.

Too many young people feel like there is no future for them where they grew up, no opportunity to better themselves, to learn new skills or study for a degree.

And as long as young Australians feel as if their future depends upon leaving for the city – our future prosperity is at risk.

The median age of all occupations is around 40 years old.

Yet the median age for farmers is approximately 53.

We have to turn around this exodus of young people, so that you can pass on your skills, expertise and knowledge to the next generation.

This means investing in our regional universities and training centres – not ripping away resources or leaving them exposed to the erratic unfairness of a wholly deregulated system.

It also means supporting strong communities: fair funding for regional hospitals and the right resourcing for regional schools.

It means better reporting and better attention to superannuation for the agriculture sector.

And it's about bridging the digital divide – using super-fast broadband to connect Australians in the regions, to each other and the world.

Choosing a life in regional Australia should never mean second-tier healthcare, second-class education and a second-rate NBN.

And under Labor – it never will.

Yesterday, my colleagues and I were surprised to see that the scope for the Government's long-delayed green paper on agricultural competitiveness contains no discussion of environmental sustainability.

Twenty-five years ago Bob Hawke stood with the head of the Australian Conservation Foundation, Phillip Toyne and the chief executive of the National Farmers Federation, the late Rick Farley, to announce 'a decade of Landcare'.

Your organisation, working alongside the ACF, helped to author, drive and deliver one of the most comprehensive environmental policies in Australian history – that should never be forgotten.

Farmers and conservationists are not implacably and irretrievably opposed – never have been, never will be.

Australian farmers are champions for our environment, you are the stewards of 61 per cent of our continent.

And 94 in every 100 farmers actively undertake natural resource management.

For you, water shortages, salinity and erosion are not just lines on a map or numbers in a report – they are pressing problems, which carry a tangible cost.

And every day that Australia fails to act on climate change, exacerbates these problems, it exposes our farmers to more risk and it hurts our economy.

Worse still, the biggest variable in the success of our agriculture sector – the weather itself – will become more unpredictable and more extreme.

If we choose to do nothing, we are choosing more floods, more droughts, less certainty for cropping and less feed for livestock.

That's not the track we want to go down.

It's not a future Australia can afford.

Friends, for me today is the beginning of a conversation – not the end.

Labor's dedicated and energetic advocate for agriculture and rural affairs, Joel Fitzgibbon has established a new Country Caucus – with the Member for Richmond, Justine Elliot as chair and the Member for Bendigo, Lisa Chesters as Secretary.

John Kerin, one of the finest Ministers for Agriculture that Australia has ever had, has agreed to act as the patron of our Country Caucus.

We will be consulting closely with your organisation – and Australians everywhere.

We will be drawing on the partnerships and the vision of your NFF blueprint.

We are determined to make the next election a genuine competition for the best ideas for the people of rural and regional Australia.

We want to work with you to build a better future for farming, and for our regions – and that work starts now.

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