PRESS STATEMENT:
WALCOM FRASER :

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1963/64 BUDGET

In making this report I have been trying to estimate the
most significant aspects of the Budget debate. It has been difficult to
find any constant thread of criticism. This is, perhaps, natural because
most members of Parliament, and this includes the Opposition, all have
their own particular projects which they like to advocate as much as
possible. Very often, unless the Government is under extreme criticism,
the Budget debate turns into a forum in which Member after Member gets
up speaking on certain matters which may be important but which are not
necessarily directly related to the Budget.

There was, I think, one aspect which all Members of
Parliament emphasised in differing ways. That is the question of national
development and the need to do as much as is humanly possible to develop
Australia as rapidly as possible. This last Budget makes a reasonable
contribution to assist in the process of national development.

After drawing attention to the fact that our gross
national product had increased 8% in the year, the Treasurer went on to
announce measures that were designed to give a further boost to national
development in certain particular spheres.

The Government's philosophy about this is that the
Government should do those things that private individuals cannot do
for themselves but that, in undertaking a certain activity, the Govern-
ment should, at the same time, open the way for further initiative and
development by private citizens.

The Snowy Mountains Scheme, which has won world fame, is
a classic example of this. The water is dammed by the Snowy Mountains
Authority. It is made available for producing hydro-electric power
which is used in the homes and factories of New South Wales and Victoria.
Secondly, it is made available to the irrigation farmers on the Murray and
Murrumbidgee Irrigation valleys where additional millions of acre feet
have been made available as a result of the Scheme.

Although the engineering works involved were on a massive
scale, the Snowy Mountains project as a whole was one that did not present
Governments with any real problems. The reason for this is simple. It
was always known what the power would be used or what the water would be
used for and therefore it was only a question of building the dams and
constructing the giant turbines to make the water and the power available.
Many other national projects do not come into this category. These are
ones that require, sometimes, years of painstaking research before you
can achieve spectacular results. Examples of this can be found in the
Northern Territory and in the Kimberleys.

Only a few weeks ago, the Prime Minister opened the
diversion dam on the Ord River which cost £5M. This will make it
possible to irrigate 15,000 acres and farmers are already being selected
for the first farms. Several crops can be grown in the Kimberleys -
rice, sugar, cotton, safflower and peanuts - to name but a few. However,
it is not just a question of growing something. You then have to be able
to sell it at a price that will give the farmer a good livelihood. It
has been demonstrated fairly conclusively that rice, peanuts and safflower
in themselves do not offer much chance of success.
The West Australian Government is pinning its main hope on the economic development of cotton farming in this area. C.S.I.R.O. has proved that the Kimberley region can grow the best cotton in the world under irrigation but there have been tremendous problems with insects and disease. In recent years, C.S.I.R.O. has been tackling this problem, trying to develop some cheap means of pest control. In the initial stages the cost of the insecticides needed to keep the cotton crop free from pests would have made cotton farming quite uneconomical.

All this demonstrates the fact that in difficult areas like the Kimberleys you cannot rush in, build the dams and suddenly say: "We are going to irrigate half a million acres." You have got to know precisely where you are going before you act. If this large scale experiment which involves the irrigation of 15,000 acres is successful, there will be no problem involved in building much larger dams on both the Ord and the Fitzroy Rivers and irrigating up to a quarter of a million acres or more. This is the great hope for the Kimberley region. It is too early yet to say that there will not be further difficulties but now everyone involved in the project is much more optimistic than they ever have been.

There is no doubt that if this initial Ord River experiment is successful, the other major development projects will not be held up for lack of finance. Meanwhile, the Commonwealth Government is making special grants to the Western Australian Government so that the road network and other facilities in the Kimberley region can be rapidly improved. Port facilities will be developed at Derby and Broome and by these means progress is being made over the whole region.

There is an outstanding problem remaining, however. Up to the present time, the only really important industry in the Kimberley region has been the cattle industry. So far, the people experimenting on the Ord River have not found the means of blending the farming developments that are going to take place with the cattle industry. My own view is that the farming areas must find a way of producing good fattening feed either by irrigated pasture or by other means so that the Kimberley cattle growers can sell their cattle sooner and fatten them quicker. By this means they will get a higher price for their product and would be encouraged to introduce better blood stock.

I would like to give one other example of how painstaking research is essential before other developments can follow. At the present time, the Department of Territories is calling for farmers to take up 3 experimental farm blocks near the Adelaide River township in the Northern Territory. These farmers will fatten cattle partly on native pasture, partly on improved pasture and partly on irrigated pasture. They will also grow some rice. The experiment is designed to prove or disprove techniques worked out at the Katherine Research Station. Nearly £200,000 has been spent in research directly related to the sort of things that these farmers will be doing. If this £200,000 had not been spent it would still have been possible to make this country available to farmers but they would have had no idea what to do with their farms once they were given to them. Again, if these initial farms are successful this will open the way to a moderately large scale development. This just goes to show that in these areas of Northern Australia it is not possible to wave a magic wand that will give an easy answer to the problems of development. Painstaking research and effort is required. This is the first prerequisite. Successful research and the adaptation of it can, however, open the way for large scale experiments and development. It is my belief that the research undertaken in the last 10 to 15 years is shortly going to pay off in this northern region.
Meanwhile, the Government is spending many millions of pounds in different areas across the north developing cattle roads, improving facilities and doing those things that Governments must do before proper development by private people can be begun. This, of course, has involved very close co-operation with Western Australia and Queensland, and I believe all three Governments deserve praise for the way they have co-operated in this difficult task of deciding what to do with the northern areas of Australia.
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