

Time Running Out

"It's a report about the future. A report that emphasises the need for economic development in Australia's regions so that we do not become a nation divided."

With those comments, Fran Bailey and Dick Adams, Chair and Deputy Chair of the House of Representatives Primary Industries and Regional Services Committee, launched the report *Time Running Out: Shaping Regional Australia's Future*. Released on 13 March, the report features 92 recommendations that were accepted across party lines. These recommendations, developed by the Chair and the Committee throughout the past year, cover every aspect of the daily challenges facing Australians living and working in rural and regional communities.

"*Time Running Out* is a call to action for governments at all levels," said Fran Bailey. "Governments, in partnership with the private sector, must be prepared to take up our recommendations and invest in the future of rural and regional Australia. Otherwise we lose the opportunity to bridge the divide between country and city."

Taking an active interest in the report are three Federal Members representing rural and regional electorates. While they come from different political parties and represent diverse electorates, De-Anne Kelly (Dawson, Queensland), Gavan O'Connor (Corio, Victoria) and Barry Wakelin (Grey, South Australia) all agree that the ongoing economic viability of Australia's regions is one of the nation's most pressing concerns.



**Gavan O'Connor -
Federal Member
for Corio,
Victoria.**

The electorate of Corio includes the regional centre of Geelong, and contains such industries as automotive, petroleum, textiles, aquaculture, glass, aluminium and tourism (including home to the fictitious Pearl Bay - the setting of the award-winning television series *Sea Change*).

"People living in rural areas want to give and want to feel part of this country's future," De-Anne Kelly explained. "They don't just want handouts, they want to be able stand up tall and be able to achieve with the same opportunities that city people have. Every time we try to move forward there is a leg rope around our legs pulling us back. And without the right infrastructure we don't go forward, but backwards. This isn't just a perception - it's a reality!"

Barry Wakelin believes the report's opening recommendations on leadership, skills development and relocating Commonwealth Government departments out of Canberra to rural and regional areas would greatly assist many parts of his electorate and also other country areas in Australia.

"One of the greatest difficulties in rural areas is losing knowledge and talent," Mr Wakelin said. "Most kids in this area have to go to the city for an education and then stay on because the jobs are there. That is a big concern and leadership



Fran Bailey, Chair, and Dick Adams, Deputy Chair, of the House Primary Industries and Regional Services Committee at the launch of the *Time Running Out* report, Parliament House, Canberra.

is a community obligation. At the same time that we are losing talent, we find we don't attract the city people who can help invest in the intellectual life of the community. Lifestyle is a real issue in regional Australia because people in the city don't believe we have the right flavour of coffee, the best restaurants or the latest movies. Therefore we can't attract them, but we need their knowledge and for them to want to share their experiences to make us more economically viable. Moving a government department like ATSIC or Regional Services would be a huge boost to regional South Australia."

'People in rural areas want to feel part of this country's future.'

De-Anne Kelly

The *Time Running Out* report supports skill development initiatives. During the past decade some regional centres, such as Geelong, have placed great store in promoting leadership at the municipal, industry and community levels. These initiatives have certainly strengthened the region's economic base.

"Our problem is different to many other regional cities and towns," Mr O'Connor said. "Geelong is a provincial city, however its economic future is inextricably linked with Melbourne and other major cities in Australia. But the full benefits do not always flow through to us. When it is appropriate we are part of Melbourne - our television is considered part of the Melbourne network and our radio stations compete with Melbourne-based stations. At other times we are more like a distant cousin - we still have STD charges for telephones and in places in my electorate mobile coverage is inadequate. These are simple things, but clearly pinpoint the daily issues that face country Australia. If we can't get telecommunications access right, this close to Melbourne, then how can we help areas that are more remote."

As with skills development, all three Members claim that telecommunications and information technology are the key concerns facing regional Australia and if these are not addressed soon, then the divide between country and metropolitan Australia will increase even further. Approximately a third of the report's recommendations focus on telecommunications and IT.

Running Out

for Australia's regions

"The distinctions between metro and rural are getting more obvious," Mrs Kelly said. "There is a huge divide between cities on the golden highway and country areas that are on the goat track. An obvious example is that the average income in Sydney is twice that of my electorate. We aren't like city centres – we don't have water, we don't have the sealed roads, nor do we have the transport networks. We just don't have the infrastructure that someone working and living in the city has come to expect. A company that was recently looking at setting up in my electorate



**De-Anne Kelly -
Federal Member
for Dawson,
Queensland.**

The Dawson electorate is a mix of both rural and regional areas, including the city of Mackay and the spectacular Whitsunday Islands on the Barrier Reef. In addition to tourism, its key industries are sugar, beef, dairy, coal and aquaculture.

decided against it because it would cost them \$300,000 more each year in telecommunications charges than if they established in an urban, metro area. How can I fight that?"

Barry Wakelin believes that if there is a weakness in regional Australia it is the reliance on existing industries.

"In Port Pirie and Whyalla – two of the major towns in my electorate – they rely on the one industry for employment. We shouldn't rely solely on one industry, and to do this we need to be able to attract other investments, but to do this we must have the right infrastructure. We need to be able to sustain the old industries and at the same time have the right and appropriate facilities to attract new ones. At the moment we are unable to do this."

*'We shouldn't rely solely
on one industry.'*

Barry Wakelin

Even though Geelong has better infrastructure than most regional areas, Gavan O'Connor shares Barry Wakelin's concerns about the need to establish economically viable, alternative industries.

"Geelong has all the key transport links in close proximity – air, rail, road and sea. We have an international airport at Avalon, the national standard gauge rail network, a state and national highway system and the Port of Geelong. Our aim is to better link these transport modes and establish Avalon as an integrated transport hub servicing the south eastern region of Australia. This development will diversify the region's economic base and provide some buffer should one of Geelong's traditional manufacturing industries withdraw from the area.

"The report (in its transport recommendations) clearly focuses on an intermodal approach and the Federal Government needs to play a key facilitative role in coordinating the efforts of other levels of Government. The issues facing regional Australia should transcend party politics and a change of government!

"This report is a blueprint for the future success and viability of regional Australia. But we need to further establish and maintain strong financial partnerships between all levels of government and the private sector if we want to make this work. Some of the recommendations are already out there being implemented and some are totally new. If the Government is serious about supporting regional Australia it will respond quickly to this report," Mr O'Connor added.

*'The issues facing regional
Australia should transcend
party politics.'*

Gavan O'Connor

Barry Wakelin agrees that the report appropriately highlights the essential issues in rural and regional Australia, and that the Federal Government must act as the facilitator so positive changes can be achieved. Like Gavan O'Connor, he suggests that everyone needs to work together and be flexible in their approach in order to help change the culture that divides rural and metropolitan Australia.

"Politicians and the public alike don't put much store in reports," De-Anne Kelly concluded. "But this one has the opportunity to increase the groundswell, and hopefully this will encourage the Government to strengthen its attention on regional Australia."



**Barry Wakelin -
Federal Member
for Grey,
South Australia.**

Grey is the largest electorate geographically in South Australia. It features the towns of Coober Pedy, Oodnadatta, Port Augusta, Port Lincoln, Port Pirie, Roxby Downs and Whyalla. The rural nature of the electorate is reflected in its major industries of iron ore, steel, oil, gas, salt, mining (including copper, silver, gold and uranium), wheat, wines, cattle and sheep.

To obtain a copy of *Time Running Out: Shaping Regional Australia's Future*, visit the Primary Industries and Regional Services Committee web site: www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/primind. Copies are available through Government Info Shops in all capital cities or by telephoning Ausinfo, free call 132447, for \$14.95 including postage and handling (quote catalogue no: 9929321).