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Minister for the Arts

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**Speech to the 2010 Sustainable Economic Growth for Regional
Australia (SEGRA) conference in Townsville**

**“Boosting Regional Australia – making the most of a once-in-a-lifetime
opportunity”**

Acknowledgments

- Kate Charters SEGRA convenor
- Other members of the SEGRA steering committee

I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we meet on the Bindal and Wul-gur-u-kaba people and pay my respects to elders past and present.

It is a great pleasure to be here to deliver this speech but unfortunately I will not be able to stay longer to participate in the conference because of the restrictions on pairing.

I only have that pair to cover my absence from Parliament - until mid-afternoon.

So this is a short visit to North Queensland but it is vital to be here as Minister to open this important conference looking at the future of regional Australia. Townsville is a great venue to host this conference as it is an example of what can be achieved in a regional centre. Townsville has a diversified economy, good infrastructure and is reaping the rewards through economic growth and jobs creation.

It is also good to be back speaking to a SEGRA (Sustainable Economic Growth for Regional Australia) conference after delivering a keynote address at the same event in 2007 in Wollongong.

I am excited to have the chance to implement the program I outlined in that speech in September 2007. Three years ago I used that speech to emphasise the importance of local empowerment and the key role of Regional Development Australia (RDA) committees.

The 43rd Federal Parliament is less than a month old but regional Australia is now getting the focus it deserves. The Agreement signed between the Government and rural independents has given it that focus.

This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to entrench regionalism into the system of Government. Done properly it cannot be unpicked.

The importance of localism

One of the important steps in exploiting this opportunity for regional Australia, is the recognition of the importance of localism.

Only through engaging with local communities and allowing them to develop creative long-term solutions will the real potential of our regions be unleashed.

I have a genuine belief that we deliver better outcomes when we give local communities a real voice. This is something I have learnt over more than 20 years in federal politics.

As Primary Industries Minister in the Hawke and Keating Governments, I recognised that local involvement through the Landcare network was critical in achieving more efficient and sustainable outcomes for the management of our natural resources.

As Employment and Education Minister in the Keating Government, I established local networks (Area Consultative Committees) to drive a better match between the demand and supply of skills needed in local communities. (These ACCs were the forerunner for today's network of Regional Development Australia (RDA) committees).

This year as Education and Employment Minister in the Gillard Government, the Building the Education Revolution program delivered another timely reminder of the true merits of local empowerment.

Without doubt, the most successful BER projects were those that featured genuine consultation between local school communities and the relevant State authorities.

Empowerment of local communities is the key to unlocking the economic and social potential in regional Australia.

But another key factor is the recognition that our diversity across regions is defined by our geography.

It is essential that people who do not live in the regions understand that diversity is a fact of life. This is the underlying reason why one size does not

fit all when it comes to the regions. It is why we have to pursue local solutions. Not wish lists, but solutions that stack up.

But just as it is important for those outside the regions to understand the aspects that define diversity, and therefore require a local solution, it is also essential that leaders in regional Australia understand their future will be defined by sustainable growth – economic, environmental and socially sustainable growth.

Role of RDAs (Regional Development Australia committees)

As part of strengthening local empowerment, there is a major role for the existing RDA structure. It provides a unique touchstone into regional communities.

The RDA presence in 55 regions nation-wide is critical to hearing the views in Canberra of your local communities.

If we are to balance the economics and our vast geography we have to do this in an effective way.

It is vital that RDA focuses energy on building local and regional partnerships and enter into an effective community engagement strategy.

This involves reaching across shire boundaries. It will involve engagement with health and hospital providers, universities, schools, local government, industry and community organisations.

It involves working constructively to develop creative solutions across a range of program areas, not just local infrastructure. It requires looking ahead to where your region will be in 20 or 30 years and what will be required to ensure its sustainable future.

In light of this renewed regional development agenda I am keen to explore how we can strengthen RDA most effectively.

I know that RDA boards are made up of local volunteers who give of their time, passion and expertise to make their region the best place it can be.

There will be a range of challenges and resourcing issues and these may vary from region to region, but I have committed to strengthen the network where needed to ensure they can deliver on your regional priorities.

We also have to recognise that some RDAs are better connected to their local communities than others. Some are working more strategically across shire boundaries to connect regions, and others have developed better relationships with local industry.

In strengthening the RDA network, we cannot apply the same formula to the whole network, but rather work with each RDA to strengthen each committee. In some places it is a question of resources and in others it will be important to build capacity in strategic planning or community engagement.

I am pleased that SEGRA hosted a professional development forum for RDA to build capacity within organisations here yesterday.

I will be talking further with RDA Boards and Executives over the coming weeks and months about how we can strengthen the network most effectively.

Governance

While the RDAs will be a key network for giving a voice to the regions, at the federal level there are important, concrete changes to advance regionalism.

As Minister one of my roles is to chair a Cabinet sub-committee on Regional Australia and Regional Development. I have made it clear to my Cabinet colleagues that portfolio Ministers and their departments will need to be more responsive to the needs of regional Australia.

In addition, we are moving to introduce a breakdown of the Federal Budget which more clearly shows the pattern and priority of Commonwealth spending across all regions of the country. Known as spatial accounting, this will be a major advance and will allow comparisons nationwide across regions. It will take transparency to a new level.

Entrenching local empowerment and regionalism in a whole-of-government ment approach at the Federal level will have important knock-on consequences at the State and Local government levels.

As a result effective regionalism will require more effective coordination at a whole-of-government ments level.

If we can have the different levels of Government working together for the regions, we will deliver a real, on-going productivity dividend for regions and in turn the nation.

Significantly, the resources available for regional Australia are substantial.

They include:

- Giving priority to the regions for the third round of the Health and Hospitals Fund of up to \$1.8 billion.
- A Regional Priorities Round of \$500m from the Education Investment Fund for regional universities and TAFES.
- Investing \$800 million in a new Priority Regional Infrastructure Program to fund projects identified by local communities.
- Investing \$573 million over the next four years exclusively in expanding regional economies.
- Priority in connecting regional areas to the National Broadband Network (NBN).
- Granting \$8 million for a new Regional Development Policy Centre.

This is an impressive list but the goal is tangible outcomes and improvements for the regions. This is how we will benchmark success.

The key to success will be ensuring expenditure and investment covers all portfolio areas, and is focussed on an outcomes response to regional strategies - not just an outputs response by individual portfolio programs.

Access to water - a key part of regional economic development

One of the most pressing challenges facing regional communities is how to respond to the bipartisan decision of the Australian Parliament to ask the Murray-Darling Basin Authority to produce a plan to restore the river system to environmental health.

Regional communities have always faced serious challenges to their economic wellbeing, whether from natural disasters like cyclones and bushfires or falling commodity prices and changing demand for product.

But communities have risen to the challenges and made the changes that were necessary. They have always adjusted and diversified their economic bases to meet the new circumstances.

This new challenge of reduced water allocations will also be met by the resilient communities of the basin.

Delivering more water for the environment is not optional, it is a given. The nation has decided through the national Parliament that more water is

needed to restore the rivers to health and the decision was supported by every member of the Labor, Liberal and National parties.

What has yet to be determined is exactly how much water must be saved, how water is to be saved and how communities can adjust to the new circumstances and diversify their economic base. This will mean developing strategies for sustainable growth in a more water constrained environment.

Our very diverse geography dictates that the solutions will be different for every valley within the Murray Darling system.

We need to look at irrigation infrastructure options as well as water buyback, and we need to look at economic development, greater efficiency, better water management and diversification opportunities in every catchment.

That is why detailed consultations with communities are so important and it is why we set up the Parliamentary Inquiry under Tony Windsor to increase the opportunities for communities to have their say, especially in relation to their economic futures.

It is important that key groups are fully engaged in the consultation process.

I have asked both the MDBA and Tony Windsor to ensure that the voice of key community representative groups, including RDAs, CMAs, Landcare groups, and local government are heard.

RDAs in the basin are already fully engaged with the water issues and they know that the future of their towns, farms and business will depend on how they respond and how they can harness the energy of their communities to explore new paths to economic growth and sustainability.

I know this because I have already met with many representatives of the RDAs in New South Wales and South Australia. I am sure the same is true of those here today representing RDAs from Queensland.

I can understand the anger in communities in response to the MDBA guide.

It is just a guide and the Government has to present a plan to Parliament and Parliament has to approve it. That is why local engagement is so important.

But I want the local engagement to do more than simply channel community anger. We need to join together to find creative sustainable solutions. I am convinced we can.

We will work with every community to deliver on the locally developed solutions that stack up.

Conclusion

This is an extraordinary time to be involved in regional development in this nation. Local communities are in the driving seat.

There is a new focus and a new opportunity for regions but there is also a new responsibility.

For those who are dedicated to Regional Development the time has come to stand up and be counted. This is the moment to act decisively and to make a difference.

SEGRA as a leading organisation with a commitment and focus on sustainable economic development knows how critical it is for local communities to get involved and take control of their future.

This is not the time to hold back. Use this conference and this opportunity to come up with the best possible creative solutions.

We cannot allow this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to pass us by.

I look forward to seeing the outcomes from this conference in a fortnight's time as SEGRA plays its role in this critical debate.

ENDS