

*Speech for Senator Louise Pratt representing the
Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and
Local Government, the Hon Simon Crean MP*

Official opening of Australia's Small Island Forum 2012

Lord Howe Island Community Hall

Monday 30 April 2012

Introduction

- It is my great pleasure to be with you today representing the Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government, the Hon Simon Crean.
- It's good to be here.
- I'm glad to see so many people made the journey to beautiful Lord Howe Island for this important Forum.
- I want to thank the Lord Howe Island Board and the Bank of Initiatives for the Development of Enterprising Actions and Strategies for their considerable efforts in organising this event, the first Small Islands Forum.

- Over the next few days delegates will have the opportunity to share their knowledge and experience to tackle some of the issues facing Australia's small islands.
- I know that many of you are also keen to share your success stories, which, I'm sure, will inspire others.

The Committee

- I am very happy to be here today accompanied by my colleagues from the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories.
- Our Committee is cross party and has members from both the Senate and House of Representatives.
- Here at the Forum are my fellow Committee members: Luke Simpkins, the Deputy Chair and a Liberal Member from Western Australia; Anna Burke, the Deputy Speaker from Victoria and a government member; Senator Steve Parry, the Deputy President of the Senate and Liberal from Tasmania and Patrick Secker, a Liberal member from South Australia.
- The Committee has taken a strong interest over the years in the development of the small island communities on Norfolk Island, Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands – having conducted

a number of inquiries into the governance, administration and economic development of these communities.

- The Committee has made regular visits and is always keen to meet with representatives from the small islands when they are in Canberra.
- We are here to listen - and to learn.
- And for that reason we are holding a public hearing meeting this afternoon at 4.30 pm in the School Library which you are all welcome to attend and participate in.

Small Islands

- The islands off Australia may be termed small but as the Chair of the National Capital and External Territories Committee I know these communities have big ambitions.
- As a former member of the Western Australian State Parliament and now, a very proud Senator for Western Australia, I know a thing or two about remote communities.
- These experiences not only help to inform my Committee work but I also have practical understanding of the issues faced by small, remote communities.

- I can assure everyone at this Forum that the Australian Government appreciates the complex economic, social and environmental challenges confronting small island communities.
- I'm here to emphasize the Government's commitment to investing in Australia's small islands, to help secure their future.
- Indeed, the Government is working with regional communities across Australia to help communities identify their priorities so they can find local solutions to local problems.

Small Islands Forum

- This Forum brings together all levels of government, business, tourism bodies, educational institutions and residents of islands to talk about the future...
- ...to share and discuss your challenges, opportunities and success stories.
- I want to look briefly at the big picture first.

The Big Picture

- Australia's economy is strong.

- The International Monetary Fund released its World Economic Outlook earlier this month.
- The news for Australia was excellent.
- It confirmed that Australia's fundamentals are solid, with our economy expected to outperform every major advanced economy over the next two years.
- Other facts speak for themselves.
- We are geographically close to Asia's booming markets, and we have long-established economic ties to the region...
- ...We are an innovative nation – our businesses and industries have responded to economic reforms over the last 20 years...
- ...We have some of the most creative minds in the world, particularly in research, development and design.
- The fundamental challenge ahead is how to ensure each region, each island, might tap into this to reach their full potential.

Investment in small island infrastructure in Australia's external territories

- We all know there are complex challenges facing small islands but these three examples I'd like to talk about show how they can be overcome.
- The Cocos (Keeling) Islands for example are tapping into their potential with the \$27 million Rumah Baru port facility which will make ship freight deliveries safer and more reliable.
- The new port will also provide better job opportunities for the population of about 600 people that live there.
- Similarly, a \$97 million¹ infrastructure package will benefit the entire community of Christmas Island with an upgrade of their waste water treatment plant and a project to boost power generation.
- The Norfolk Island Government and the Australian Government are delivering a Roadmap of shared intent – which is about diversifying the Island's economy and enhancing social cohesion and the Island's unique heritage and environment.
- Recently Air New Zealand won the tender to supply air services to Norfolk Island which means that the Norfolk Local Government won't have to carry the huge financial cost of running an airline.

¹ Media release 1 February 2011 - SCO12/2011

- These are just a few examples of small island priorities making a big difference in their communities.
- I'm sure there are several people at this Forum involved in these projects who would be happy to share their experiences with you.

Learning from each other

- Sharing the experiences of your community with others who may be facing similar challenges or indeed, have found a solution to a problem, is a good place to start.
- Each and every experience is an incredibly valuable insight into what works and what pitfalls there might be, on the way to achieving success.
- There will be as many questions as there are answers.
- Questions like...
- What actions have improved the job and educational opportunities and the liveability of a particular island community? Can these actions be transferred to my community?

- What are some of the achievements in the renewable energy space and how are the precious environment and heritage values of these places being managed?
- What practical and sustainable governance measures are being put in place by island communities of a similar size and demographic?
- I know several of the presentations over the next few days will address these issues and more.
- I am also sure there will be many 'light bulb' moments where the experience of one island community can, with a bit of tweaking, be applied in another island community.

Australian Government support – RDA network

- This is also where your Regional Development Australia Committee can help.
- RDA committees are non-profit organisations made up of volunteers drawn from the local region and represent the community, business and local government.

- These committees are an Australian Government initiative, jointly funded by the states, which brings together all levels of government to support and enhance the development of Australia's regions.
- Attending this Forum from RDA Mid North Coast committee is Richard Wilson the Deputy Chair, and Peter Tregilgas, the Executive Officer.
- I would encourage locals to seek Richard and Peter out!
- They are very experienced and highly regarded members of your local RDA.
- Like all RDA committee members they want their region—their 'patch'—to be the best it can be, and achieve its potential.

One Region – One Plan

- This is why the development of each local RDA strategic plan is vital.
- It's a roadmap for the future.
- You will be interested to know that there is keen interest in these Regional Plans by a range of Australian Government portfolios including health, climate change, immigration, agriculture,

communications and agencies with responsibilities for Indigenous matters.

- Much of this interest is in the issues and priorities detailed in these RDA plans and how these align with government programs and policies.
- I can't impress enough how valuable these plans are because they are a fabulously rich source of information about local issues and priorities.
- Priorities, for instance, that might include:
 - addressing gaps in skills training and education;
 - identifying failings in community infrastructure;
 - how to deal with issues of social cohesion at a time of rapid population decline or growth;
 - collaborating with others on a green energy future; or
 - developing innovative strategies in marketing and enterprise development.
- Every community will have similar or vastly different priorities but I have no doubt that every community will have innovative ideas and solutions...
- ...because nothing, beats on-the-ground knowledge.

Economic Development

- The 55 Regional Development Australia Committees around Australia are helping their communities to plan for the future.
- The Government is making this significant investment in the RDA network because it recognises that we have a patchwork economy, where some parts of the economy are strained by growth, while others risk being left behind.
- That is why the Government is investing heavily in infrastructure in regional Australia – in the last Federal Budget \$4.3 billion² was invested in areas like health, hospitals, education and skills development.
- We want to help individual regions identify the unique, long-term initiatives that will broaden their traditional economic base—helping them become more viable and sustainable in the future.

Localism

- Whatever way you look at pursuing opportunities and addressing challenges, regionalism's time has come.

² Budget Media Release 2011/12 – 10 May 2011 SC053/2011

- Local solutions for local priorities are what make small communities strong.
- Localism can actually be the greatest generator of our nation's collective strength, diversity and prosperity.
- This Government has laid strong foundations for the future and is committed to embedding localism into the way it governs.

Conclusion

- It's only through identifying local opportunities and sharing on-the-ground knowledge that practical and effective solutions will be developed.
- The power of localism is in the knowledge and skills of local communities to decide their priorities and fashion their responses to the economic, social and environmental challenges of our time.
- But remember, you are not alone.
- You will have a lot in common with other small island delegates at this Forum and be of enormous help to each other.

- I wish everyone at the 2012 Small Island Forum all the very best and I look forward to talking to you over the next few days.
- Thank you.

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