



PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## **MEDIA RELEASE**

4<sup>th</sup> December 2002

### **PM confirms Government looking at dole payments to businesses affected by drought**

#### **Windsor asks locals for facts & figures to present to inquiry**

Independent Member for New England, Tony Windsor was pleased with the answer given by the Prime Minister, John Howard confirming that the Government is currently considering the payment of unemployment benefits into the workplace of farm and farm support businesses as part of drought assistance.

Mr Windsor raised the issue in Question time today after reports that the Government intended to investigate the possibility of using the Work-for-the-dole scheme participants as farm workers and also having written to the Prime Minister on November 6 suggesting the proposal raised in Gunnedah during the 2000 floods be further investigated.

Mr Windsor said the Government should consider the payment of unemployment benefits into farm and farm support businesses in order to preserve the integrity and skills of those businesses and have ensure that they are still there when better times return.

“Now that large areas of Australia are in receipt of Exceptional Circumstance Provisions or about to be declared eligible for Exceptional Circumstance assistance, it is time to ensure that the skill levels required when the drought breaks should be assisted during the time that they are in an Exceptional Circumstance area.

The Prime Minister’s response is therefore very encouraging.

However, farms and businesses should be putting together a case to present to the Government that quite clearly shows that without this form of assistance, they will have to lay staff off and run the risk of losing that long term skill level, not only from their business but also from the region, as these people will have to look elsewhere for employment.

I would therefore ask businesses to undertake this task of showing the impact of the drought on their staffing levels, forward them on to me and I will then pass them on to the Government’s investigating body in support of this form of assistance being instituted.

Details will be treated in strictest confidence, however it is important to show the government how widespread the impact of this drought is,” Mr Windsor said.

The Hon John Howard MP  
Prime Minister of Australia  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

6<sup>th</sup> November 2002

Dear Prime Minister

**RE: Drought assistance through unemployment benefits to affected business**

I draw to your attention correspondence I wrote to you whilst NSW State member for Tamworth following the floods that went through the North West of NSW about two years ago with such disastrous effects.

In that letter, which followed a meeting organised by the Gunnedah Chamber of Commerce to look at impacts on the business community, a proposal was put forward that would help sustain business through the period of the flood and its aftermath during recovery.

This proposal was for the Federal Government to assist those businesses who were impacted on by paying direct to the business the equivalent of unemployment benefits for a period of time to be decided having regard to the circumstances.

This form of assistance would help those businesses, employees and communities in a number of ways.

The business would be able to keep a full complement of staff so that when drought conditions and impact pass, they will still have experienced staff to provide their service.

The staff would be able to remain employed rather than going on to unemployment benefits and leave the area in search of other work. Unlike metropolitan areas, in most cases, there are no alternative employment opportunities around the corner or in the next suburb as the next suburb might be over an hour away without public transport to get there.

The community would benefit through the maintenance of an employed population not losing people to other towns or metropolitan areas in search of employment. Public infrastructure like schools and health facilities could at least be maintained rather than suffering from the loss of population.

I'm sure Prime Minister that you understand fully the ramifications of the drought on country communities and this form of drought assistance to businesses in affected communities would not cost the government any more and in fact would cost less in the long run as employees would have a guaranteed position at the end of the period.

I ask that you look closely at this proposal from the Gunnedah Chamber again with a view to including it in Exceptional Circumstances assistance for businesses in those drought declared areas that move to EC declared areas.

Yours sincerely

Tony Windsor MP  
Member for New England