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**NATIONAL PRESS CLUB ADDRESS BRIDGET MCKENZIE 27 APRIL
2022**

KATH SULLIVAN: Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen and welcome to the National Press Club of Australia and today's Westpac address. My name is Kath Sullivan, I'm a national rural reporter with the ABC, and a proud board member of the National Rural Press Club. Today's guest is Bridget McKenzie, Minister for Emergency Management for Regionalisation, Regional Communications and Regional Education, and maybe a couple of others as well. Two years on, the global pandemic has helped more people to realise the benefits of living in regional Australia, and we know there are many. But there are also challenges. Roads, phones, services that don't always match up with those of our city cousins. Now, four weeks out from a Federal Election, what are Australia's politicians offering those who live and work beyond the city limits? If you're following the information online today, you can find us on Twitter, or use the handle, @PressClubAust, and our hashtag is NPC. Ladies and gentlemen, would you please welcome Bridget McKenzie.

[Applause]

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: Thanks a lot, Kath, for moderating. You provide the regions with a great service through your reporting and much appreciated. I'd like to acknowledge Australia's next federal health minister, the fabulous senator, the Honourable Anne Ruston, a great friend and colleague. You're doing an amazing job as the coalition spokesperson during this campaign, Anne, so great to be here with you, Senator Ruston. I'd also like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet today and pay my respects to elders both past and present.

Last Sunday in Shepparton's Queens Garden, a brass statue was unveiled to commemorate the life of a great Australian soldier who led the charge of 4th Light Horse Brigade at Beersheba in 1917. The last great cavalry charge in history. Sir Murray Bouchier is not exactly a household Australia name, but in northern Victoria, he was a towering hero after his World War I service. But his contribution to our country did not end there. Bouchier went into politics for the then Country Party, and rose to become Deputy Premier of Victoria and later, Agent General in London. I pay tribute to this man today, because he possessed the traits we, who are privileged to be in public life aspire to. Courage, patriotism, candour, selflessness, service, and a deep commitment to the future of our country. But most of all, I pay tribute because he was a great son of regional Australia.

It's worth noting here today that other countries do not have a political movement based on geography any more. But because of our economic history, patterns of settlement and the dominance of our two largest cities with 40 per cent of our population living in just two places, we still have a party that is exclusively focused on rural and regional Australia, and has been part of our political fabric for over a century, and that's the National Party.

For us, the regions are not and never will be an add-on, which is why we've been given a very, very stark choice in just a few weeks' time, at what is a very pivotal juncture for our nation. For the more than eight million Australians who live and work in regional Australia, the choice at this election is even starker with far-reaching and stark consequences. More than any other election in recent memory, it is a choice about our nation's long-term future. A choice between safer, more prosperous, more sustainable regions, and one that is more uncertain, more unstable and that risks weakening our national economy. The Labor Party, the Greens and the independents do not have the political imperative that we do with our exclusive focus on regional Australia. Theirs is a one size fits all model, mono-cultural approach to policy and programs. They assume that we're all the same. Their philosophical logic is that what's good for the city must be ipso facto good for the regions.

But we saw very, very proudly and unequivocally, and indeed, based on very strong evidence, that precisely the opposite is the case. That's what good for the regions is actually great for the country. It's our industries, agriculture, mining, fisheries, forestry, manufacturing, transport and tourism, that underpin our national economy, pay for our essential services, fund our public schools, public health systems, our universities, our hospitals and our Defence Force. It is our people too, our men and women working day in, day out in sometimes very difficult jobs, strong, innovative and resilient. Eight out of ten of our top ten export industries and two thirds of our export income come from the regions. Take our amazing resource sector - and it's great to see the MCA here today. It alone accounts for around 10 per cent of Australia's GDP and more than 60 per cent of Australian exports directly employing in excess of 280,000 people directly, and indirectly supporting more than a million Australians. And by the end of this financial year, our resources exports are forecast to reach \$425 billion.

Yet, right now, regional Australia is being presented with some very, very poor alternatives. I'll just mention a few. A Labor Party that pays lip service to regional Australia. The leader of the Labor Party could barely bring himself to say the word in his budget in reply speech. There's no policy on live export industry. They've scrapped the AG visa, flip-flopped their way through that, and they're slashing the regional communications budget in their recent announcement and they're threatening to renew water buy backs if they're brought back into government. We've got a minor party who exploit people's personal grievances for pain and for political gain without ever being responsible for bearing and finding and developing and implementing and budgeting for the solutions to that pain.

And perhaps the worst is the so-called independents, who think the chaos of a hung parliament is progress, particularly in the face of a deeply uncertain world. The last time

the Labor Party and the independents held sway, we were gifted a carbon tax, we were gifted a mining tax and we were gifted a Murray-Darling Basin Plan and the live export fiasco. None of which resulted in a safer, more secure, more prosperous rural and regional Australia. Our political opponents in varying degrees of hostility actually seek to curb, constrain or shut down our traditional industries. We in the regions also face the systemic bias of sections of the political class and powerful cultural elites who neither understand nor care about regional Australians or our industries. It's a case of out of sight, out of mind.

At best, they ignore our views, and at worst, they see us as an impediment to their long-term political agendas. In a rare vote of thanks to the ABC, I'm a huge fan, but you should be applauded for getting your flagship programs such as *Q&A* and *Insiders* out of capital cities during this election campaign and on the ground in communities like Gladstone who are going to be severely impacted by the outcome either way of this election. Because the world view is different out there. Where we grow up and its impact on who we are as citizens and our world view is as a result of where we grow up. Place matters. Geography matters. And the proud people of Gladstone completely get that much of the world is shifting on emergency and emissions. These are well informed globally focused people who have been at the forefront of industrial and energy issues for decades.

But they're also wary about big promises on green energy that may be years from fruition. What will happen if their alumina plant, their smelter or powerhouse, or their LNG plant on Curtis Island closes and in what time frame? We make no apologies for backing in the traditional industries, whilst at the same time investing in our new industries and our new future. When you've been around as long as the Nationals have as a political movement, this isn't our first rodeo with structural adjustment. It's our communities that have been dealt the impacts of those adjustment, and we know that the more time and the more support that we can give, the better the outcome.

Meanwhile, the oranges, the greens, the teals, in cahoots with the reds, have their own aspirational goal to stop the development of all new gas, oil, and coal mines dead in their tracks and close existing ones within just eight years, eight years, regardless of the havoc that it would cause to our economy and to the local communities. They've set a deadline, and it's 21 January 2030, that all coal exports ended and all fossil fuel mining banned. And when Jim Chalmers conjured up a promise of regional jobs from its net zero policy multiplier effect, even former ACTU boss, Jenny George, called it unbelievable, because it is. Our growth plan based on our track record by contrast is real and achievable. And today, our Government is announcing a commitment to create 450,000 new jobs in regional Australia over the next five years. The choice is clear: it's only the Liberal and the Nationals Government that has the vision and the ability, the competency to deliver for regional

Australia. Our Government has invested more than \$100 billion into our regions in priority areas such as infrastructure, digital connectivity, education and health. No government has invested more in the regions than this Government.

In education, our measures have focused on making sure our regional students have improved access, improved achievement results, and improved aspiration. As a former public school teacher and a lecturer at a university in education, this has been a very dear policy endeavour that our Government has undertaken since we've come to power. That's why we introduced a needs-based funding model for the first time that recognises the challenges of educating students in small regional schools. We've also got a regional education commissioner to actually drive that policy agenda forward over coming years, to address the imbalance that still exists in the 21st century between regional achievement and those of our city cousins.

In health, we've got a 10-year stronger rural health strategy, which has already grown the number of full time equivalent GPs, nurses, and allied health professionals practising in the regions. We've got more than 5,000 since 2016. And we've recognised the need to increase the number of medical graduates working in rural areas and we based this policy decision on actual data. We know that if you train country people in the regions, guess what? They're going to stay there. They're going to practice in the regions. And that's why we've had to- been investing in the Murray-Darling Basin Medical School Network and why we continue to base our policy effort in research. The schools are training a new generation of medical students in more than 20 regional and rural communities across New South Wales and Victoria.

In telecommunications, we're continuing to ensure that Australians living and working in rural and regional remote areas and provided with the same level of access and service as their counterparts in the city. We've delivered more than 1270 stations through our mobile black spot program. We've installed over 220 telecommunication infrastructure projects to deliver locally place based solutions. Because guess what? Out there in the recent ones, the topography differs, and the seasonality capacity issues differ. So we need very place-based solutions to get that level of digital connectivity that businesses and households need and expect. These investments have allowed us to rapidly expand critical services like telehealth out to these communities that didn't exist previously.

In infrastructure, we've embarked on significant long-term nation-building projects like the 1700km Inland Rail that will better connect producers to markets and greater opportunities for regional centres, whilst ensuring safer and fewer trucks on the road. And guess what? It's good for the environment, too, by lowering emissions. Through our \$5.8 billion Roads of

Strategic Importance initiative, we're also upgrading key freight routes to help agriculture, mining exporters, and improve safety on key roads. They're billion improving safety on key roads. These are just a few examples of our \$120 billion infrastructure pipelines.

In agriculture, the Federal Government is backing the agriculture sector ambition to become a \$100 billion industry by 2030. We're helping farmers with labour shortages through the Seasonal Worker Program, Pacific Labour Scheme and creating a specific Australian agriculture visa, that now seems at risk if the Labor Party is elected.

In trade, we've negotiated 15 Free Trade Agreements with 26 countries reaching more than two billion people. And more recently, we've been able to secure trade agreements with both the UK and India, expanding that to another 1.4 billion customers.

In resources, under our watch, despite COVID-19, the mining sector employment grew by almost 40,000 new jobs, because we back our miners, not denigrate them. And we're unlocking new opportunities in critical minerals vital for the new energy economy. Regional development programs like Building Better Regions Fund, delivering tailored projects to help communities from water recycling facilities to refreshed street scapes. This fund has invested over \$1.38 billion since November 2016, with almost 1300 projects approved across the first five funding rounds, and more than 700 have been completed.

That's our record, and we'd spend the whole day if I had to go through it, Kath. But it's significant and it's not for nothing. The impact of these and other investments we've made and the reforms we've been able to complete are already making regional Australia an even better place to live, work, learn and start a business. And this became particularly evident over the pandemic. People not only moving to the regions, they're also less likely to leave the regions. The population of regional Australia grew by almost 80,000 people last year, and yes, that is creating additional pressures. That's the first time since 1981 that our regional population grew more than the capital cities. Why? Because people are seeing the regions as viable alternatives in terms of lifestyle, developing their careers and places to do business. They feel confident in moving to a regional town knowing that they have access to the services and amenities that they would find in big cities.

I just wanted to touch on what I thought that was a pretty school statistic. Digital commerce companies like Afterpay and Square have some of the most up to date and comprehensive data sets of people spending patterns, producing a barometer of in-store and online data which shows the rapid uptake of online shopping during the pandemic and a collapse in cash. Cue everyone in Victoria that was locked down for a long time. We

flocked to online shopping like nobody else. But the great part of their State of the Regional Small Business data shows that small businesses in the regions bounced back faster, and many new businesses creating an online presence for the first time. And that the growth in sales by small businesses in e-Commerce was much more rapid in regional Australia than in Metropolitan Australia in every single state. It shows that digital connectivity and improved telecommunications, your bricks and mortar location does not need to determine your success. It's part of what Liz Ritchie, the CEO of the Regional Australia Institute, has coined as the great regionalisation.

As a Government, we've delivered over 500,000 square kilometres of new mobile coverage. This has transformed communities, businesses, and livelihoods. But we know that one big telco company has dominated our market, which is why it can make it more expensive, less competitive, unreliable, and unfair. There is more to do and our Government has a plan to fix it. And today, I'm very pleased to announce as part of our \$1.3 billion commitment to regional communications over the next five years, a \$418 million from the Connecting Regional Australia Initiative is going to be spent for open access, mobile expansion right across regional Australia. And for all of us that have been stuck with one carrier or the other, because that's who's got the dibs on the local tower, this is going to be a game changer. And as we've seen people flock to the regions- I was out at Mount Isa a few months ago, the grey nomads and not so grey people in caravans, the capacity constraints of that local system, because they'd all arrived in town, was significant. And they were all struggling if they didn't have certain carriers. So this is going to be an absolute game changer, enabling the mobile base station to support multiple providers and deliver more than 8000 kilometres of new coverage.

We have the record of delivering for our regions, but more than this, we have a clear plan and an optimistic vision for their future. We believe in the regions. We don't just say that. Our- we back it in. This plan is founded on three objectives to make our regions more secure, more prosperous and more sustainable into the future. For 75 years, the Liberal Party and National Party in Government have delivered for the regions.

There have been disrupters of recent times - the COVID pandemic, an uncertain geopolitical outlook, a digital revolution, and, our transition as a country to lower emissions economy by 2050. These disruptions have presented both opportunities as well for the region, not just challenges. Living in rural and regional Australia comes with many, many benefits - being closer to the beauty of the natural environment is one of them. And if you're still speaking to your spouse after COVID, you probably worked out that you want to spend a lot more time with them. So- And you want to do it in a place like rural and regional Australia, where you have more time to enjoy each other's company and the

activities that we have on offer out there.

But with that benefit comes risk. The cost of natural disasters - human, economic and environmental - is growing. Now, totalling in excess of \$16 billion a year, predicted to grow to more than \$50 billion a year by 2050 - that's all governments. That is why we're transforming the way that we respond to natural disasters. Following the outcome of the Royal Commission, we invested in mitigation like never before in this country. Traditionally, we've spent 97 per cent of our effort and money on cleaning up – in the immediate response, and only 3 per cent for figuring out what to do next time. And in a country like this, where droughts and flooding rains are an everyday occurrence, only predicted to increase in and intensity over time, that's just a crazy way to continue to do your mathematics.

So, we've flipped that, and we've been able to commit \$950 million to future mitigation projects - making communities more resilient to flooding, to bushfires, and to cyclones. We've set up the Emergency Response Fund to be accessed responsibly. Starting out at \$4.2 billion, we want to see that grow to in excess of \$6.6 billion over the next eight years, to assist future societies and future generations with future disasters. One of the ways we've been able to use that fund responsibly is to support our Northern Rivers communities following the recent flooding events. We were able to put \$10 million into the CSIRO Northern Rivers resilience study to inform the significant investment of up to \$150 million to fund the outcomes of that study in the Northern Rivers and to make sure Lismore and surrounding communities are better protected for the next flooding events.

And despite the media commentary to the contrary, what our Government was able to deliver over the flooding events in New South Wales and Queensland is, work with both states. It's been a most collaborative effort thus far in dealing with a natural disaster, to ensure that we had the fastest rollout of financial and non-financial supports on the ground. The ADF deployed in the quickest manner possible, ever. And in terms of the Commonwealth response in responding with our Commonwealth payments, able to get that money out the door incredibly quickly - \$3 billion in three weeks in people- affected people's pockets to assist them in the immediate aftermath.

Communities need to be assured that state and federal governments, irrespective of their colour, are working together to ensure that support reaches those in need in a timely manner. I'll be- As a result of these recent events, I will be reviewing the disaster recovery arrangements and the risk reduction framework that we have nationally, in consultation with the states, to make sure that future arrangements work for people, not politicians.

COVID-19 has exposed domestic and international supply chain issues. We have a plan, as a Government, to make things in Australia again. We're strengthening our supply chain resilience for critical products, monitoring vulnerabilities, and working with international partners to prevent disruption. For example, we have a plan to bolster the production, domestically, of urea – a key ingredient in diesel exhaust fluid. Now, unless you're a truck driver, you will have no idea what I'm talking about, but it's really, really important. If we don't have that available to our domestic trucking industry, food and groceries arriving at the local supermarket within weeks. That is actually the impact of us not being able to produce this onshore. And it's our Government's set-up to make sure that we're able to do that. We're also establishing a \$2 billion critical minerals investment fund to ensure our competitive advantage is maximised. And we're not just digging them up, but transforming them here into essential products for the global digital hardware industry.

To be prosperous in the 21st century means backing our traditional industries and pivoting to make sure that the most of the opportunities this century's going to provide a country like ours. We're coming out of COVID stronger and we need to keep that momentum going. Twelve flagship programs will share \$2 billion through the regional accelerator program to unlock growth prospects for local industries and businesses to ensure thriving regions are internationally competitive. For example, our very popular modern manufacturing initiative, which assists manufacturers to convert good ideas into commercial successes and provide local jobs in advanced manufacturing, is going to be receiving half a billion dollars of the regional accelerator program to run another two rounds that will be focused specifically on those regions that have the ambition and plan to grow.

Since the budget, I've been able to visit a few regional capitals, which has been fantastic - Alice Springs, Shepparton, Mildura, Gladstone and Bunbury, I'll be visiting more over coming weeks - to discuss with local communities the opportunities of the regional accelerator program has for them. This policy is a place-based approach. It draws on the hard work of the Business Council of Australia, the Regional Australia Institute, the NFF, Regional Capitals Australia and the Productivity Commission, which approach- which favour an approach to regional development that is data driven, that is place-based, that recognises that different regions have different competitive advantages. What's- you know, going to work in Gladstone, is not going to work in Shepparton. And we need to recognise that every region has its own competitive advantages and its own unique challenges. And sometimes, when you get a top down approach to policy development, that gets very hard to recognise and implement.

Our national economy is indepen- underpinned by our wealth generating regions, and part of our future plan to build our national wealth is our \$7 billion energy security and regional

development plan that recognises our future economy requires decadal investment in new places and new products, so we can continue our record investment in essential services such as defence, aged care and health. It also recognises the changing environment for communities whose local economies would benefit from greater diversification towards 2050. We're opening new frontiers in the Pilbara, on low emissions and we're bracing new opportunities with hydrogen in the Hunter. This vision will not be realised until long after this generation of MPs has long left Parliament, and it's for future generations to join the investment of this Government in these places, in these industries.

Regional Australians are the original conservationists, long before the environment was weaponised for politics. We care about our environment because it sustains us. It sustains our families, it sustains our identities, and it sustains our businesses. We need to care for our water sources, our soils. Our plan to secure Australia's future water includes measures to make farmers more resilient to drought - building dams to store and regulate water use, and the development of climate services to better inform our decision making. When it comes to the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, there will be no more water buy backs. Instead there needs to be a common sense approach, there needs to be a focus on outcomes – not numbers – because the science is in. And when this plan was developed, it wasn't. We do not need to decimate regional communities to achieve a healthy river system.

Our plan for Australian agriculture supports farmers in biodiversity stewardship. Sustainable regions are more than just the natural environment and having a well-paid future, globally focused career. It's about ensuring, for them to be sustainable into the future, that the wellbeing of our residents and citizens are cared for as well. That means having access to a high quality education. We plan to get more doctors into country towns across Australia. And we're continuing our record of training them in the regions, and this week we're able to announce a clinical school partnership with La Trobe University and Golden Valley Health in Shepparton, to make sure that allied health professionals are going to be trained in that community and accessed through that healthcare service. Very exciting to deliver that.

Securing opportunities in the regions unpins our Regional Accelerator trailblazer initiative, which I was very proud to announce with the Prime Minister last week in Perth. It's a partnership between Woodside, Curtin University, James Cook University and UQ, with 33 small to medium enterprises, the majority of which have a large footprint in regional Australia- in regional Australia. And it's going to create over 1300 jobs in the critical minerals supply chain. World class research happening in rural and regional communities, partnering with our industries. It's very, very exciting.

We don't want to lose our connection to place and each other. That's the characteristics that make regional Australia and regionals- and Australia unique. Can I just get a- who is from the regions here? Put up your hand. Nice and proud. Okay. Alright, alright. We've got about a third, about- you know, reflective of the nation's population spread. Now, not to the future. If Australia is going to face our challenges, both economic and social, then we need to continue our focus on the regions and that means reconciling the current divide between city and the regions in terms of outlook, aspiration and competitive- comparative wellbeing.

The fundamental question we must ask and endeavour to answer is: do we want to be a nation that is simply defined by two or three megatropolises. Seriously? We want Melbourne and Sydney to define who we are as a nation? Or, do we want to be a nation that is defined by a greater spread of multiple important cities and major centres. This possibility for our nation has the potential to provide a range of benefits. From reduced congestion and pollution and emissions in our capital city, to great social cohesion and a more culturally diverse, equitable and democratic society.

Last century, we built the hard infrastructure – the ports, the roads, the bridges, the rail. This century, we need to focus on the next piece of hard infrastructure, and that's digital connectivity. Bernard Salts very clear about who's going to be the haves and have nots post pandemic, and it's who has access to this critical infrastructure. It is why we are so singularly focused on it as the side of politics that cares about the regions. Spreading our population will not make us weaker. It makes us stronger – but only if we can respect each other's ideas and differences. It is true that we live in times of uncertainty, but I look forward to the future, not with trepidation, but with optimism. The great regionalisation has once again demonstrated the amazing capacity of our regions to adapt and innovate in times of adversity, and I believe that our nation will come out of this uncertainty stronger because we will charge forward with country values – courage, candour, selflessness, and service – those values exemplified by Sir Murray Bouchier and his young soldiers in the deserts of Sinai all those decades ago. This election provides a clear choice with real consequences for Australia. For us in the regions, identity and place matter. We are proud of who we are. We're incredibly proud of what we do out here. We're proud of where we come from. And no election has mattered more than this in ensuring we continue to make that significant contribution to our nation going forward. This election is not just about the next three years for us in the National Party. This is about the next three decades. And when you're as old as we are, we have a different approach to timelines in government. Maybe it's because we think seasonally; inter-generationally, it's part of our culture and who we are, and we bring that to the political battlefields that we've been participating in for over a century. We backed the regions, and we hope this election, the regions back us

and a stronger future for our country as a result.

Thank you.

[Applause]

KATH SULLIVAN: Take the questions standing up, please.

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: I'll take the questions standing up. Thank you.

KATH SULLIVAN: Minister, thank you very much for your address, and very interesting to see you bookend your presentation by talking about Shepparton – of course, the centre of one the hot contests for the Nationals at this year's federal election, three-cornered with a strong independent candidate challenging both the Libs and the Nats.

Just before we open the floor to questions from the working journalists, I thought I'd give you a multiple choice; try and help you keep it succinct.

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: [Laughs] Okay. Noted, Kath.

KATH SULLIVAN: Not a reflection on you, but I have noted some politicians don't mind a bit of waffle. If we're talking about Australia's approach to net zero by 2050, is it, A, dead, B...

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: No.

KATH SULLIVAN: ...does it have wiggle room, or C, does Matt Canavan, your colleague in the Senate and the Nationals party room, need to pull his head in, as Michelle Landry said this morning?

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: I've been very public when this debate was occurring last year about what the National Party's thinking had to be around this. There's- as anyone that's been watching politics, there is a very broad range of views on climate change within the National Party party room, from net zero never to net zero yesterday and everything in between. But the one thing- I've never seen our party more united in that moment. The one thing that we all focused on was ensuring that in the move to net zero by 2050, which the Prime Minister had made that commitment to, that we were able to mitigate, protect our communities in regional Australia towards- over the next three decades, and that is what our long-term plan that I've outlined today actually does. We need to make sure that

communities that- and this has been one of the myths of this debate in this country. It's not about whether you believe the science or not. I mean, I think the science is settled. That's my personal view, and I've been unequivocal about that in my time in this place. It is about who pays the cost. And for rural and regional Australia, because we're out of sight, out of mind and we're in industries that political elites and cultural elites don't like, places of power don't like, it's very easy for them to make sure we pay the cost. And so I think, as a party, we stood up in that moment and said, not a problem, but we're going to make sure that we can care for our communities, make sure our national economy's not going to take the hit, and make sure that regions are not decimated as a result, and we've done that.

KATH SULLIVAN: And would \$20 billion worth of spending in this year's Federal Budget and an extra spot at the Cabinet table, has that offset those concerns?

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: Well, I think that's going to remain to be seen, Kath. I mean, it's trite to say that. I mean, these are five-year funding commitments, but the impacts of this decision on places like Gladstone, on the Hunter, are going to be seen over decades. We've seen the Latrobe Valley, where you're from, in Gippsland, when governments make decisions and don't give communities time and space to support their future aspirations, then it has terrible consequences, not just in local median income levels, in health, you know, mental health issues, family break-up, abuse. So, we want safe, sustainable, prosperous regions until, you know, the 22nd century. And that's what we're about. We're in that moment for that fight and we will continue over decades to come, to continue to make sure that our communities are not negatively impacted. But there's heaps of opportunity in this as well, and I think- that's what I hope you can see from the measures that we've put forward, are making sure our communities are buffeted from some of the challenges, but are also able to seize the real opportunities that exist.

KATH SULLIVAN: Are you frustrated that this conversation is continuing?

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: I think what's before the Australian people in this election is a serious choice. And if you live, work or give a damn about rural and regional Australia and its future, there is only one side of politics that you can back.

KATH SULLIVAN: With that, we might open the floor for questions. Julie Hare is with us. Julie.

QUESTION: Senator McKenzie, thank you so much for your speech. I'm Julie Hare from the Financial Review and also Director of the National Press Club. I'm going to follow on, unsurprisingly, from Kath's question. In October last year, you said that it will be ugly, in quotation marks, if the PM committed Australia to net zero with the imprimatur of the

Nationals. The eventual agreement was the Nats would back net zero by 2050 if rural and regional Australia was looked after. Given the size of the Regional Australian Budget Paper, \$20 billion with \$7.1 billion in infrastructure alone, it looks like regional Australia was looked after, but it's still very ugly. I guess the question is, why are some high profile Nationals prepared to blow up the Government over coal?

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: Yeah, I don't think they are, Julie. I mean, anyone that thinks that Matt Canavan hasn't always held the views he's articulating this week hasn't been paying attention for his- since he arrived in this place. Does Matt's views reflect the National Party? No, it doesn't. We were very, very united in our decision to back the Government's move to net zero by 2050. We did not- we do not back a linear transition. We do not back a transition to zero emissions by, you know, 2050 in a way that decimates our industrial base. We want to see an approach that has been put forward by our Government, which is around employing new technologies rather than actually putting the onus, if you like, on businesses, which obviously affects local jobs.

So, we don't know what those technologies are going to be over the next two decades. I mean, anyone put your hand up, I'll invest in the start-up right now, but the technologies that we do know exist right now, we are investing in. So they are going to provide future opportunities. So the National Party is absolutely lockstep united in moving our economy towards net zero by 2050, and I think we've done the right thing by the people who've sent each and every one of us to Parliament – and we all come from very, very different places and spaces around this great country – to make sure that any move is mitigated.

QUESTION: So you say you're united, but Matt Canavan is obviously part of the National Party and is not united in that position.

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: [Interrupts] But you were suggesting he's blowing up the Government. He's not blowing up the Government.

QUESTION: How's it going to work out in the next term if the Coalition wins?

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: We'll be moving towards net zero by 2050 with a technology not taxes approach, with regional communities supported through the Regional Accelerator Program and other programs.

QUESTION: Thank you.

KATH SULLIVAN: Jess Malcolm from The Australian.

QUESTION: Thank you for your speech, Bridget.

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: Thanks, Jess.

QUESTION: Before you returned to Cabinet, you had voiced your support for a new coal-fired power station to be built in the Hunter Valley. Do you remain supportive of new coal-fired power stations being built in Australia? And should coal-fired power stations be eligible for funding under the Clean Energy Finance Corporation or NAIF?

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: Well, that's actually a Government position. When we have carbon capture and storage technology employed, then we actually lower the emissions significantly of that type of power generation, and so that is absolutely something that we continue to support. If it- you know, if it is going to be a coal-fired power station that is much lower in emissions because we're actually employing carbon capture and storage technology, then why wouldn't we support that? But only in that case. There's- I'm not suggesting that we're setting up coal-fired power stations on every street corner that don't actually result in lower emissions. One of the great crises that we will see in this country if we don't look at the energy supply is the reliability piece. And I know Angus Taylor's been working very, very hard to ensure that whilst we move towards a low emissions future, we still have the reliability that manufacturing requires to actually ensure we can still be competitive globally.

QUESTION: Thanks.

KATH SULLIVAN: Lucy Barber from the ABC.

QUESTION: Thanks Kath, and thank you for your speech. Just a question regarding the Energy Security and Regional Development Fund. That's \$7.1 billion; could you explain for us why all of regional Australia below Newcastle is effectively excluded from that fund when it comes to money? And can you also give us some really specific examples of how that fund is going to work?

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: Well as I said, there's been four hubs that have been identified through- this isn't a fund that's actually going to be spent in the short-term. This is actually developing new areas and new products over the next decade. So we've got the Pilbara looking at low emission technologies. We're looking at Alice Springs and the Northern Territory. We've been- Barnaby's looking at a port, a second port in Darwin as one of the projects that potentially could be funded through that: The Hunter and hydrogen is also

another project that's being examined through this particular investment. When you talk about- if you only see our investment in regional Australia from that program, you're kind of missing the point. I think that I outlined \$120 billion of money that has gone out into rural and regional Australia from natural disaster responses, from education funding, funding rural healthcare mechanisms, infrastructure and the funding of doctors, etcetera. Roads, bridges, I could go on and on. That is one aspect of our budget which is focused on future wealth generating and creating projects for decades to come.

QUESTION: There's no investment though from this fund in your home state of Victoria, and already in Nicholls that's been seized upon by the independents. They're using it as an example of pork barrelling, for example. So I mean, what do you say...

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: [Interrupts] That's interesting because pork barrelling- yeah, that's an interesting claim from an independent who hasn't come clear on where he- which, you know, side of politics here would support in one of the most conservative seats in the country. He's beholden on doing that. That is not the purpose of that fund.

QUESTION: [Indistinct]

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: I would point you to the \$2 billion- Luce, I'll point you to the \$2 billion Regional Accelerator program that I'm responsible for. That's available exactly to places like Shepparton, Wodonga, Mildura, Geraldton, Bunbury, to regional capitals to really leverage their ambition to grow to that next level. We've got a whole raft of programs in government that support my home state. In fact, in the infrastructure spend, I think it's a little in excess of 22 per cent of our infrastructure budget goes to the state of Victoria, which is about proportional for our size.

QUESTION: Thank you.

KATH SULLIVAN: Paul Karp is from The Guardian.

QUESTION: Paul Karp from Guardian Australia. Thanks very much, Senator McKenzie. In your speech, you mentioned achieving a lower emissions economy by 2050, skirting around the language of net zero by 2050. If this is an absolute commitment that will be done, why not just legislate it so that candidates like Colin Boyce can't wander around saying that there's wiggle room?

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: Well, Paul, we had these debates last year, as you'll recall, so we aren't legislating it. We put our plan to Glasgow, we're committed to it. We can't be

clearer. Both parties of government in the Coalition are absolutely committed to moving to net zero by 2050. We've got the long term plan to achieve it. We've also got the long term plan, as I've outlined today, to support the regional communities that are going to be impacted by that transition going forward. So I don't know how we can be clearer. It's- a lot of countries in this debate make the claim, but they don't actually have a plan to get there. We do, and we're not going to leave anyone behind in our journey to that destination.

QUESTION: But if the commitment is absolute, shouldn't you stop the situation where the conservative side of politics is able to talk out of both sides of their mouth and to continue to appeal to a constituency that does not want to achieve net zero by 2050 by just legislating it?

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: Paul, we're very, very comfortable with what we took to Glasgow. That's why we've handed down the Budget we've handed down. It's why every minister is letting The Guardian know and right- our Australians know that we are committed to moving to net zero by 2050. Nothing will dissuade us from that path. To think that's a linear progression I think is a mistake. Anyone who understands the development of technologies over time understands that that can be quite an up and down process. So we've built that into our plan as well, recognising that over time, new technologies will emerge and we will be adopting them. Right now, we're investing in the technologies that are going to get us there in the short term, and we'll have more to say over coming decades.

KATH SULLIVAN: If you'd legislated it, we might be able to ask questions about the Murray-Darling Basin, or...

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: Yeah, or something else about the regions.

KATH SULLIVAN: Sarah Bashford Canales is with us from the Canberra Times.

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: [Laughs] It's almost proving my point. Yes.

QUESTION: Thank you, Senator. Australians vote- Australian voters consider political integrity as one of the most important issues leading into the federal election. The model your Government put forward has been criticised by legal experts as being toothless and held behind closed doors. How can voters trust your Government's cares about integrity when you yourself were returned to the frontbench following a stepping down after it was revealed that you failed to declare your interests...

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: [Interrupts] Which is the right thing to do. When someone breaches the ministerial standards, she should do the right thing...

QUESTION: Absolutely.

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: ...which is what I did.

QUESTION: And just to add to that, sorry, before you answer. Also the model that your Government has put forward wouldn't actually be able to capture, for example, the ministerial breach that you were involved in, as it wouldn't fall under the sort of- the category of non-criminal misconduct. So how can voters trust what you say, given that track record?

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: Because I follow the Westminster Conventions. That's how you can trust it. I'm part of the side of politics that has done the heavy lifting on developing an integrity commission, 300 pages of legislation. I look forward to it being implemented. We need to be able to differentiate between criminal corruption and political hit jobs. I think in a Westminster system like ours, there are conventions that ministers adhere to, and appropriately so. And you know, our public does need to be assured that public service, both political and bureaucratic, we're not seeing that sort of systemic political corruption that you can see in other places. So we've done the hard work. We've got the legislation there ready to go. We took it to the last election. I would love to be standing here today with an integrity commission delivered, and that is up to the Labor Party. And hopefully after this election we'll have the mandate and they'll respect that.

QUESTION: Just on the political hit job comment just then, are you saying that the breach of ministerial standards was a political hit job? Because this is something that...

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: [Interrupts] No, I took responsibility for that.

QUESTION: But that's something that wouldn't fall under that Federal ICAC [indistinct]...

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: So in a Westminster system, when you breach ministerial standards, it's beholden on the minister to do the right thing and resign. That's what I did over a \$30 honorary membership to a gun club. That's all very public knowledge. If you want more details, there's a 6000 words public submission on the issue.

QUESTION: Okay, but you were returned to the frontbench, just to clarify, only a year later. So I'm just wondering in terms of what that Federal ICAC might've achieved? Would it

be something that you would step down, you know, for the remainder of your career or...?

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: At the end of the day, you serve at the Prime Minister, and in my case, the Deputy Prime Minister's pleasure.

QUESTION: Thank you.

KATH SULLIVAN: Tess Ikonomou is from the AAP.

QUESTION: Thank you for your speech. Should the Government keep the fuel excise cut in place beyond its cut-off date, given the continuing pressure on the cost of living?

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: We've been really clear that the pressure on fuel prices has been as a result of international factors. We've seen these issues. We've seen inflation going through the roof around the world, an increase in fuel prices as a result, particularly of the war in Ukraine. We took a decision to reduce the fuel excise for six months. That's had immediate effect. That's one of the most popular measures of the Budget as I travel around rural and regional Australia. We've been clear we will be lifting that, because our all our forecasts are that those international pressures will not actually still be there in six months' time.

QUESTION: But the new inf- the inflation data released today, is it not something that the Government is reconsidering?

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: Not at this time.

KATH SULLIVAN: Nic Stuart.

QUESTION: G'day. Thanks very much minister. Two brief follow-ups. Firstly, on the coalmine in the Hunter Valley. We've heard from business numerous times that CCC, carbon capture and storage, doesn't stack up as a genuine answer. Rather than carbon capture and storage and a new coalmine, would you consider instead wind power? More wind power? Or solar power? Are you behind those technologies? If so, will you commit for them now because they're economically viable. And so they will actually work. Whereas carbon capture and storage, as we both know, is really pie in the sky. It may be some time in the next couple of decades sort of solution.

Secondly – and perhaps more importantly, following up on Paul Karp's question, we had a situation where you say yourself that climate change has affected the regions because

we've seen up in Lismore the effect of climate change with the floods and other problems like that. Are you going to actually commit when you get some holdout who doesn't accept the science, like that bloke in your party? Are you going to say, look, basically, the National Party has a policy, and we are proud of our policies as a party? We are the National Party. We actually stand for something, we represent something, and what we represent is an admission that we've got to get to zero emissions by 2050. Are you going to say that? Or are you going to say, oh, no – as Paul Karp said – we'll speak out of both sides of our mouth.

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: Ok, carbon capture and storage, I think that we'll have a differing opinion there. You've got businesses that say it doesn't work; I've got businesses and researchers that say it does. Mineral Council of Australia

QUESTION: [Talks over] Who? Who? Who? Name one. Name one, any one, I'll take it.

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: Mineral Council of Australia-

QUESTION: [Interrupts] Okay.

KATH SULLIVAN: Let's let the Minister answer.

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: Okay. Yeah, it would be nice. Thanks, Kath. Let's- yeah. Yeah. And in terms of the national party having strong policies, we're articulating our vision for the regions each and every day, not just in the Federal Parliament but in all our divisions in state parliaments as well. We want to see a prosperous, safe and secure sustainable rural and regional Australia, and that isn't just one policy area that we're focusing on there. We're making sure we're going to be economically sustainable, that our people are well looked after. The services you enjoy here are taken for granted by people that live in Canberra that aren't able to be accessed 500 clicks down the road. You have- there is not a conceptualisation, there's not a conceptualisation, as I said, of political elites and cultural elites of the realities of living out in rural and regional Australia. That's why the National Party still exists 100 years later – because we deliver for our regions. We're very proud of the policies, and we'll continue to do so.

QUESTION: Sorry, am I an elite?

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: That's for you to answer.

QUESTION: Well, I'm saying I'm not. Are you saying I am?

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: No.

QUESTION: No? Well, can't I understand?

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: [Indistinct].

KATH SULLIVAN: Astrid Watts.

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: Did you want to be?

QUESTION: I'd like to be. Sure(*).

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: You want to be an elite?

QUESTION: Yeah, no, I'd like to be like you with a perfect retirement plan just like you.

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: You don't know my back story, mate.

KATH SULLIVAN: We might need to give that one a bit more thought. Astrid Watts is from Journability News.

QUESTION: Hi, Bridget. I'd like to actually ask you about why it's taken two years after the Black Summer bushfires hit the Bega Valley for \$20 million in grants to only just last month to have been released? And also, if I may, there's so many people in the Bega Valley who are still deemed as homeless, living in caravans. What are you going to do to help them and change things?

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: Yeah, I think this is a really great question. It's great that you've given me the opportunity to be able to unpack this, because it's true-

QUESTION: [Interrupts] I'm from the Bega Valley, so...

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: Yeah, yeah. So when we have an immediate disaster response, you get the boots on the ground, you get those quick cash payments, the clean-up grants, etc., that are very quickly rolled out. Then we have a recovery phase, which can- as you well know, takes in excess of two years. It's going to take longer. Not just for Bega, but we think of the flood victims as well. And that's why after the Royal Commission into natural disasters, it recommended setting up a national recovery agency, which we have with the

NRAA. So part of what they're do- their job is to get on the ground, ask Bega, ask Lismore, what do you need to recover? So part of the funding you're talking about was as a result of those community consultations that have been undertaken for the last sort of maybe year and a bit. They've resulted in a funding round for Black Summer grants recently, which are community-led and driven projects. We couldn't have- government couldn't have thought of those two years ago, because we needed to get in on the ground and find out what did they need to be better prepared for the next time. And that's what those- that grant round was about. We've recently got a grant round still open for the northern flood rivers up in northern Queensland because we know, even two years on from that event, that there are still communities suffering and we need- and industries that are needing that support. So this is an example of the Federal Government's commitment to not just be there in that immediate aftermath, but we recognise that recovery takes a long time, and your community needs to know that we're going to be there all the way. One of- I mentioned in my speech the Disaster Recovery Funding arrangements, the partnership that we have with state governments. So when we have joint announcements between state and Federal governments of funding packages – and they can be all the types of thing a state government thinks that they might need for that particular community. We agree. The money goes out. It's up to, in your case, Resilience New South Wales to directly engage with communities and constituents about how that money gets out. Now, Queensland – can I say – Queensland are the gold star in that sort of methodology and system. Probably because, unfortunately, for them, they deal with more natural disasters than the rest of us, so they've got a very well-oiled machine with getting that money out the door in those systems. So what I am confident about, having worked very closely with my state Labor Party counterpart in Queensland, Mark Ryan, and Steph Cook, in New South Wales, that every single level of government, every emergency service provider, every ADF person on the ground, we're all working as hard as they could to support people, not just in that immediate term, but for the longer term future.

QUESTION: Sure. And what about the homelessness part? I know that sort of addresses that, but is there anything else that you could actually do from the Federal level to actually change the fact that there are still, two years on, people living in caravans? They've gone through two winters with absolutely freezing conditions. I mean, compared to Canberra, it's not as cold, but it's still...

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: Yeah, it's not, you know- and we saw that after the Black Saturday bushfires in my own home state of Victoria. There's a lot of reasons for that. The state government, obviously, in seeking for household packages, whether they're able to source that. Sometimes people want to- haven't quite decided what they want to do on their property. Do they want to rebuild? Do they want to leave their community? Are they

comfortable still living where they're living? These are really serious conversations, and people need to be accessing the service support, not just mental health providers, but the planning support in order to be able to get rehoused as quickly as possible.

QUESTION: Thank you so much.

KATH SULLIVAN: Julie Hare.

QUESTION: Thank you, Senator. An issue close to both of our hearts, I think. You said in your speech, we back our miners. You were talking about the post-pandemic or during the pandemic, how the mining sector has thrived. And you said we back our miners, not denigrate them. However, just before the pandemic, international education was the country's third largest export sector, and yet it was neither- it was both denigrated and it wasn't backed by the Coalition. Why is mining seen as a higher value to the Coalition than a high value added knowledge industry such as international education?

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: Yeah, I don't agree, Julie. This is an issue both of us agree on from yours and my previous roles. International education is a significant provider, not just of export dollars, but I think minds and research, creativity, and spark when we can get those students in. And I was just up in Coffs Harbour a couple of weeks ago announcing the Destination Australia Scholarship Programme, which actually backs international students not to study in capital cities, which has been their want. You know, they see the allure of studying at some of those sorts of institutions, instead of getting a great world class education out in our regional institutions, also potentially learning how to surf and joining the local CFA to boot. So having a really Australian experience. So we've actually put dollars on the table to back our regional institutions, back our research capacity in the regions, and then back international students as our borders open, coming back in and studying locally with us out in the regions. I want to see more of that.

QUESTION: Thank you.

KATH SULLIVAN: Thanks, Julie. And our final question for today goes to Lucy Barbour.

QUESTION: Minister, I know it's not directly your area, but housing, affordable housing, access to affordable rentals, it's such a massive issue out there at the moment, and it didn't really feature a great deal in your speech today. Why was that?

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: Well, Lucy, it's a result of both demand and supply issues, as you would know, and anyone that lives in the regions knows you can't find a tradie for love,

nor money. We also have supply constraints of goods such as timber. We also have local government planning issues around opening up more land and state governments funding and partnering with local governments around sewer connections and culverts, et cetera. Making sure that you can develop that land out in the regions. In terms of our Government's commitment to supporting greater home ownership in rural and regional Australia, we've been able to guarantee 10,000 of our home ownership guarantee package going to people from rural and regional Australia, which I think is fantastic, because we have seen pressures, as I outlined in my speech, as people from the cities head out our way, it has put pressures on our local communities. And we need to work with local government and state governments to address those.

QUESTION: Thank you.

KATH SULLIVAN: Thanks very much to Lucy Barbour and all of the working journalists who have asked questions today. I'm going to sneak in one last one if that's okay.

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: [Laughs] What'll it be, Kath?

KATH SULLIVAN: Just interested in Scott Morrison's announcement today about 450,000 regional jobs, I think it was. You cannot swing a cat in regional Australia at the moment without running into a job advertisement or bumping into somebody who simply cannot find anybody to work for them across a range of sectors. In fact, I think the Regional Australia Institute had- was it more than 80,000 (*) job adverts last month.

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: [Talks over] Yeah, 80. I'm looking, yes it's 80.

KATH SULLIVAN: So where on earth are you going to find these people?

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: Well, I think we've got to recognise there's been a global pandemic. Our border's been closed. One of the great successes of our response as a nation to the pandemic is we're able to shut those borders. It's meant that we did not have an excess of 33,000 Australians die, which was the projections at the time. It's also meant that our usual influx of workforce hasn't been able to occur either. That is a reality. And those challenges aren't just in the agriculture industry. So we do have the agriculture visa, which we're, obviously, working with other nations to get that skilled workforce. We've also upped by 30,000 the number of skilled workforce we're taking in our immigration program across a raft of visas. I'm working with Josh Frydenberg to make sure any future population growth in this country, that 50 per cent of it is out in the regions, and that we use our immigration system to incentivise that in better and more sustainable ways. So yes,

it's an absolute pressure- an issue, pressure point in our regions today. It's a consequence of the pandemic. But as the borders open and we get those backpackers back, all those international students back, and we fulfil our skilled workforce quotas, we'll be well on the way to achieving workforce participation. But in that environment Kath, there is good news for Australian domestic workers with four per cent unemployment, the world's your oyster. And so I think that's a really exciting time for our domestic workforce too.

KATH SULLIVAN: Might have to get off the online shopping and get back into stores again. Would you please join me in thanking Bridget McKenzie for her address today?

BRIDGET MCKENZIE: Thank you.

[Applause]

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