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UNI, FURTHER STUDY ONE STEP CLOSER FOR REGIONAL STUDENTS

Transition from school to further study made easier for regional students following changes to Youth Allowance asset assessment and introduction of new VET Student Loans

Did you know that while a quarter of the general community lives in regional, rural and remote Australia, they only represent one in five students at university?

For too long, people from regional and remote communities have been under-represented at universities, and while we have some terrific universities in major regional cities across the country, it's simply not possible to build a university in every town.

We can, however, make sure that we've got the right policy in place to make sure regional students enjoy the same opportunities as their city-based counterparts, and that's exactly what the Coalition Government has done through its changes to the Youth Allowance parental income testing arrangements.

The changes, which came into effect on 1 July 2016, see all Family Tax Benefit children in the family pool included in the testing arrangements, meaning some working families in Victoria could now be eligible for additional payments.

Simplifying the parental means tests will provide much-welcome additional assistance

for working families in rural and regional Victoria, supporting them and their children in making the transition from school to further study that little bit easier.

In more great news for regional students, the Coalition Government will introduce a new affordable, student-focussed Vocational Education and Training (VET) student loans program, which comes into effect as of 1 January 2017.

The new program will replace Labor's failed VET FEE-HELP scheme, a poorly developed policy which blew out from costing \$325 million in 2012 to \$1.8 billion in 2014 and \$2.9 billion in 2015, and hit students hard by seeing VET fees more than doubled.

Our new program is a win-win for both students and taxpayers, with the waste and the rorting being stopped, and protecting students by suspending poor performing VET providers from the scheme.

For more information on Youth Allowance, including eligibility and claims, visit the Department of Human Services at www.humanservices.gov.au. To learn more about VET Student Loans, visit the Department of Education and Training at www.education.gov.au or contact the HELP Student Enquiry Line on 1800 020 108.

HELPING THE BEST ACHIEVE THE BEST

Changes to Wine Equalisation Tax delivered following consultation with winemakers

When you consider that Australian wine exports surged 14 per cent to \$2.1 billion last year to hit their highest value since October 2007, you will appreciate why it is so important that the Federal Government work with wine producers to protect the industry.

Recently, I was delighted to endorse Federal Government changes to the Wine Equalisation Tax (WET) that come on the back of extensive consultation with the wine industry and are the result of the industry calling for action to support to the Australian wine industry by addressing the distortions in the market through the misuse and exploitation of the WET Rebate Scheme.

I was joined by the head of Campbell's Wines in Rutherglen and Winemakers' Federation of Australia Board Member, Colin Campbell, who said the changes to the WET Rebate will better assist grape growing, winemaking and associated tourism in regional Australia.

Key changes to the eligibility criteria to protect the integrity of the WET Rebate Scheme mean that producers must own 85 per cent of the grapes at the crusher used to make the wine and maintain ownership throughout the wine making process.

The Rebate must be limited to branded packaged wine, in a container not exceeding 5 litres and branded with a registered trademark for domestic retail sale and the Rebate claims must be better linked to the WET being paid.

Mr Campbell said the wine industry is an important attraction to regions around Australia, including the famous Rutherglen region, which benefits from the tourists that come to visit our wineries.

So when you enjoy a glass of world class Aussie wine this festive season, spare a thought for the winemakers and those who work in the industry who turn out such a magnificent drop.



ROUNDTABLES HEAR FROM THE DAIRY INDUSTRY

I am pleased this month to represent the Deputy Prime Minister at four dairy roundtable meetings to be held in regional Victoria.

The purpose of the four meetings, organised by the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources, is to hear the views of dairy farmers regarding the delivery of assistance measures, including the Coalition Government's \$579 million dairy assistance package to support farmers affected by reduced farm gate milk prices.

The roundtables are being held at Tangambalanga (12/12), Congupna (13/12), Morwell (15/12) and Camperdown (16/12).

\$45.5 million in Dairy Recovery Concessional Loans have been approved for Victorian dairy farmers and there are currently 378 Victorian dairy farmers receiving the Farm Household Allowance, an increase of 263 since 2 May 2016.

Under the Coalition Government more than \$567 million in concessional loans have been approved to 1072 farm businesses Australia wide and more than 6,750 farmers have been granted Farm Household Allowance, including 1,907 in Victoria.

The Coalition is getting assistance out the door and it is hitting the ground to help farmers in need. By comparison, there was no support for dairy farmers under the former Labor Government when, in 2009, milk prices were actually lower than they are today.

These roundtables, a direct initiative by Barnaby Joyce, hear directly from dairy farmers, farming groups and those in the industry on issues that affect them and give us the ammunition to assist them.





NATIONALS FIGHT HARD ON BACKPACKER TAX

Victorian farmers, small business owners can breathe a sigh of relief following passage of 15 per cent Backpacker Tax through the Senate

Over \$3.5 billion is injected into the Australian economy each year by Backpackers, who provide an essential labour force in rural and regional Australia, particularly in our agriculture, tourism and hospitality industries.

In its last sitting for 2016, the Senate passed the 15 per cent Backpacker Tax, a decision which has been welcomed by the Victorian Farmers Federation and brought months of uncertainty in rural and regional Australia to an end.

The Nationals' fought hard to get this outcome and I spoke about the importance of backpackers to our farming industries in the Senate recently:

"During the state election, I spent a lot of time in the seat of Murray in the beautiful Goulburn Valley where 80 per cent of our national pear production occurs and the iconic business of SPC Ardmona is located. Horticulture in this country's heartland resides in the great state of Victoria.

When people choose to play politics with the businesses, particularly small businesses,

regional Victoria's ability to do what it does so well – that is, get the crop off, get it processed and get it out to market – is affected. It is not just the domestic markets that are affected but markets around the world employing so many locals through the processing facilities at a local level. That is a task that is not always able to be fulfilled with local labour, as we know. As, indeed, my own Senate committee inquiry into working visas found last year.

... Indeed, we employ a lot of workers under that visa class in our dairy industry, a \$1.9 billion industry with 4,200 dairy farmers. In the actual production of milk, 10,600 people are employed and just over 9,000 people are in processing. We do use that particular class of worker to assist us in the dairy industry, so it is not just in horticulture."

In this holiday (and picking) season, I am sure many farmers and business owners across regional Victoria will be pleased to know that the strong campaign by the Nationals, acting on community and industry concerns, resulted in the outcome that ensures Australia remains a competitive, attractive destination for Backpacker workers.



BUILDING AND CONSTRUCTION COMMISSION BACK IN BUSINESS

Construction industry regulator to cut out misconduct and lead to greater productivity, stronger economy

Misconduct, bullying and trade union standover tactics in Australia's construction industry will now be stamped out following the passage of the Federal Government's legislation to re-establish the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC) through the Senate in late November.

The restoration of the ABCC will mean unlawful action in the building and construction industry, which employs more than a quarter of a million Victorian workers, will now be properly investigated, actioned and penalised.

The Federal Government's decision to reintroduce the ABCC follows the recent Royal Commission into Trade Union Governance and Corruption, which found evidence of systemic corruption and unlawful conduct in the building and construction industry, including physical violence, threats and intimidation.

In its final report handed down in December 2015, the Royal Commission recommended that an industry regulator be charged with investigating and enforcing industrial laws in the building and construction industry.

Restoring the ABCC will not only succeed in bringing back law and order to our construction industry; just as importantly, bringing back the ABCC is good news for Victoria's economy.

Currently, industrial disputes in the building and construction sector are nine times the national average and are estimated to add around 30 per cent to the cost of infrastructure.

The restoration of the ABCC will ensure that infrastructure projects in Victoria are delivered in a safe and cost-effective way, and enable growth in the construction industry, which contributes around \$23.9 billion to the state's economy each year.

With more certainty for investors and improved productivity in the building sector, Victorians can expect more infrastructure projects to be completed on time and within budget.

MOBILE RECEPTION AND CONNECTIVITY TO IMPROVE IN RURAL VICTORIA

Mobile phone coverage in rural and regional Victoria set to improve through one of the largest ever expansions of mobile coverage in regional, rural and remote Australia

A string of regional and remote Victorian communities are set to benefit from the Coalition Government's \$60 million investment in Round 2 of the Mobile Black Spot Program, which will deliver 32 new and upgraded mobile base stations across the state.

In the electorate of Indi, which has long struggled against mobile black spots, new coverage for the Baranduda Range, Beechworth – Wodonga Road, Kevington, Mt Dom Dom, Omeo Highway, Tallangatta South, Tallangatta Valley and Wandiligong will provide much greater coverage.

These areas are in addition to 30 Round 1 locations for new or upgraded mobile base stations throughout Indi announced earlier in the year, and further locations under the Mobile Black Spot Program will be announced next year.

Nationwide, the program will deliver improved mobile coverage across 17,700 square kilometres, as well as 1,900 kilometres of major transport routes, and cover an estimated 6,300 homes and businesses.

You can find information about the Mobile Black Spot Program at www.communications.gov.au/mbbsp, or view a map of locations which will receive new or upgraded coverage under the Mobile Black Spot Program at www.nationalmap.gov.au.



OLYMPIC STARS ATTEND PARLIAMENTARY FRIENDS OF SHOOTING LAUNCH

Parliamentary friendship group aims to raise profile of recreational shooting and hunting

The launch of the Parliamentary Friends of Shooting Group was held in November, where I was pleased to welcome Australian Olympians Catherine Skinner and James Willet who were both able to join us for the event.

Catherine, who is currently ranked first in the world in Trap Women, took out the Gold Medal in the Women's Trap event at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, while James, ranked third in the world in Double Trap Men, was a finalist in the Double Trap Men event.

There are many different Parliamentary Friendship Groups advancing various causes, and our group aims to coordinate events which promote responsible shooting and hunting sports, and is a fantastic way for parliamentarians from both sides of the political fence to come together and show our continuing support for recreational shooting, a pastime which is enjoyed by over 800,000 Australians.

The event was particularly relevant considering all the recent ill-informed hoo-ha regarding the Adler shotgun's classification.

SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITY THIS CHRISTMAS SEASON

I know it's a message we send out about this time every year but it's a message vital to local communities, where ever you live – shop locally and support local communities.

We all love living in regional Australia with its clean air, its spectacular scenery and lovely people but local communities can struggle, indeed many do without the support of locals, just like you.

My friend and colleague in Canberra, the Minister for Small Business, Michael McCormack is also pushing the shop locally and support local communities theme.

He too lives in regional Australia and knows at first hand the importance of local support

from local people – so please join the gang – let's get together to support local traders in your area this holiday season.

Could I also add my thank you to everyone who has supported me throughout 2016, it's been a momentous year in many ways but I think the Nationals have finished the year well with a resolution to the backpacker tax issue, the setting up of the ABCC and strong support for the wine industry (see this issue).

My staff, Russ, Amanda, Lauren, Cian, Christie, Haidee and I hope your year has been a good one and that you have a very restful Christmas and a great 2017.

