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PRIME MINISTER

17 AUGUST 1996

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON. JOHN HOWARD MP
SPEECH TO THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN DIVISION STATE COUNCIL
MEETING, ADELAIDE

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Well thank you very much Martin, to Dean Brown the Premier of South Australia, Robert Hill the Leader of the Government in the Senate, doesn't that have a nice ring about it? My Federal and State Parliamentary colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a sheer delight to be back here to address this State Council gathering as Prime Minister. This is the first of the series of full annual State Council Meetings of the various Divisions. And it is the opportunity to do a number of things. It is an opportunity to express to the collective body of the Liberal Party in South Australia my immense personal gratitude for the magnificent result that delivered in this State for us Federally on the 2nd March.

It is true, that in the back of the envelope calculations that we did endlessly in the lead up to the election, it is true that we thought after the superlative result in 1993, to imagine that we could even better was being a little bit greedy. But we didn't count on the great tenacity of Sue and Trish and others who did so absolutely superbly to win additional seats and I shared many elated moments with many people in this room on the night of the 2nd March but to see the defeat of one, in particular, former Labor Minister. You have no prizes who it might have been was a special pleasure.

So to all of you of the immense gratitude of a very grateful Prime Minister and a very grateful Parliamentary Party. And could I thank all of my Parliamentary colleagues for their loyalty and support and hard work. Can I particularly remark upon the fact that I

don't remember an occasion on the Coalition's side of politics and I'm sure on the Labor side of politics where there were four South Australian Cabinet Ministers holding such senior positions and exercising such a decisive influence on the direction, the policy direction of the Government of this country. And I want to thank each of those Ministers for the excellent work that they have done and I'm sure nobody will mind my particularly singling out Amanda Vanstone for the very difficult job she has done with great skill and great tenacity. It is a big portfolio, it has been in the news on one or two occasions over recent weeks and I want to thank her. I say that without denigration and without failing to be other than totally happy and warmed and enthused by the performance of all Senators and Members from South Australia.

We have a very strong Ministerial team and we have got off to a very strong start for a group of men and women but for one or two of us who had not had previous experience in office. They have taken to the responsibilities of Government with great skill and great determination. And I acknowledge very warmly, as I do the contribution of Martin Cameron and David Piggot at the organisational helm and can I take the opportunity Martin, of congratulating you on your unanimous re-election as the President of the South Australian Division.

May I also remark upon the very constructive and close relationship that Dean Brown and I have carried forward from my time in Opposition and his time in Government to our joint time in Government. Inevitably in relations with the Federal Government and the States there will be some areas of difference. But Dean and I have a good working relationship. It's a cooperative relationship. His success is my success and our success and vice versa.

I believe in cooperative Federalism. I believe in working with State Premiers. I believe that the best results are achieved when you talk out your difficulties in advance and I particularly thank Dean and Stephen Baker and the South Australian Government for the tremendous support you gave to the Federal Government on the issue of gun control legislation.

I know that issue was difficult for some. I acknowledge that but it is interesting, I spent a day in central Queensland yesterday in two of the most rural electorates you could find anywhere in Australia and interestingly enough the subject was raised by only one person and that was me when I said, as I do today, that I recognise that many good, law abiding, decent Australian citizens might find the laws inconvenient, even objectionable and I apologise to them for that fact. But it is one of those occasions where the aggregate national good had to take precedence over the individual personal convenience and comfort. But I wouldn't want anybody to imagine that I wasn't mindful at all times of the fact that some people were going to be particularly inconvenienced. And I want to thank Dean and Stephen for the understanding and support that they impressively displayed through the whole debate and it was very important. It was an exercise in cooperative Federalism. There was a national role of leadership for the Federal

Government but it needed the understanding, the sympathy and the support of the State Governments to be brought to fruition.

Ladies and gentlemen in the weeks, indeed the months that led up to the election campaign and throughout the campaign itself there were a number of themes that we in Coalition repeated again and again. We said that our goal was to achieve reforms and to achieve policy advances in three key areas. We said that we were determined to strengthen the role of families in Australian society. We said that we were determined to re-invigorate the small business sector, both in the cities and in the rural areas of Australian. And we said that we were committed to practical solutions to the great social blight of high youth unemployment.

Those things were a mantra, a constant mantra of our election campaign. They were issues that went to the concerns of the mainstream of the Australian community an Australian community that had watched policies over a number of years erode the authority and the status of the family unit, that had watched regulation upon restriction stultifying the activities of small business. And they have watched despite the expenditure of millions if not billions of dollars on certain programmes, a naggingly high level of youth unemployment. So we did offer new and different policies in those three areas. We offered them because we believed they went to the heart of the concerns of mainstream Australia. And the Australian people responded in a very positive way to our practical understanding of what concerned them and what was a worry to them and their children.

And I am very happy to say to all of you, ladies and gentlemen, that next Tuesday night the central message of the Budget will be that we have

The budget will be about the Australian mainstream reclaiming its right in the concerns and the decisions and the considerations of the Government of this country. The policies that we took to the people in those three areas in particular will be fully validated and fully announced and implemented in what we say next Tuesday night. We will deliver on our commitments in relation to the family tax package. We will deliver on our commitment to give people an incentive to take out private health insurance. We're not prepared to see the public hospital system of this country further damaged and placed under further strain by the steady haemorrhaging of Australians out of private health insurance. We will deliver on the commitments we made in relation to the role of small business in our community. We took early action within weeks of coming into government to change Australia's industrial relations system. Changing our industrial relations system will do more than anything else to free the small business community in Australia of the stultifying level of regulation and constraint it now suffers under.

Central in those reforms is a repudiation of Laurie Brereton's stupid, job destroying unfair dismissal law. Now we've had a bill... I want to say to every man and woman in Australia who is in small business that we've had a bill in the Parliament to get rid of that

law since about the 20th of May of this year. It was put in within two weeks of the Parliament assembling after the election and I hope and I know many men and women in small business around Australia hope that that bill will be passed by the Parliament well before the end of the year so that the new industrial relations law can come into operation on the 1st of January. We are prepared to talk, to explain and to discuss with the minor parties in the Senate the impact and the nature of our legislation. I seek intelligent co-operation with all parties in the Parliament. We were given the authority of the Australian people to do certain things and we are doing that but in the course of doing that it's part and parcel of the job to talk in an intelligent, constructive fashion with those who hold the balance of power in the Parliament.

We are in the business of getting our programme through and the Australian people want us to get our program implemented and that is the kind of approach we are going to adopt and if we can get that industrial relations legislation through, there will be no greater constituent beneficiary of that industrial relations reform than the small business community of Australia. It is a charter for small business regeneration and that is why the industrial relations legislation is so very important to the future of this country.

Ladies and gentlemen, next Tuesday night will be an opportunity in a sense to draw a line under the first five months. We will have tackled that terrible problem that we were handed on the third of March, Labor's huge Bankcard, Beazley's Bankcard, much bigger than we were ever told or had any reasonable grounds of suspecting and we have set about it in a systematic fashion and we will deliver a budget on Tuesday night that is strong but fair, a budget that does the job of tackling the debt problem that we inherited but does it in a compassionate way, that does it in a way that doesn't undermine the essential social fabric of this country, and I have been amazed beyond even what I thought was the battle-hardened belief of a bloke who had been in politics for 22 years at some of the descriptions that had been made, at some of the things that we stand for and might be announced on Tuesday night.

One would think that we were setting about, ripping up the social network of this country. We're not. You will find on Tuesday night that the essential guarantees that we gave before the election about the preservation of proper social welfare benefits in this country will have been met. Australia has its own particular passionate view of social welfare. We don't have the view of any other country to that - we have our own view. We don't have the American view, we don't have the European view. We have an Australian view and the Australian view is that people who really need help are entitled to have it but the Australian view is also that if people who aren't entitled to help are trying to help themselves to it, they ought to be stopped and that incidentally applies whether you are trying to rot the social welfare system or you're trying to rot the tax system. It's all about fairness at both ends. We're not in the business of bashing around the vulnerable. We're also not in the position of unfairly advantaging the greedy and the budget is going to reflect those values and those priorities. They are values and priorities of a fair Australia and they are the values and priorities that all Australians believe in.

and they're the sort of things that we were elected to do and you can run this test of fairness over what we are proposing to do, and I will be able, as I have said on a number of occasions, I will be able to sit down after the budget and to look every interest group and say, can you really argue that what we have proposed to do is unfair.

Let me take the question of the changes that have been announced in higher education. I know they have been criticised in some quarters but is it really fair to have a society in which people who never go to university, whose children don't go to university, who are low income earners by any stretch of the imagination, is it right that their taxes should be used to fund the education and the ultimately high income receipts of a small section of the Australia community, and those who argue for a completely free education system at a tertiary level or one that is overwhelmingly subsidised by the taxpayer are really saying that the taxes taken from the poor should be used to educate the future wealth and income streams of the middle class and the higher income earners of this country? I don't think that's fair. I don't think that many Australians when it's explained to them think it's fair and that's one of the reasons that we have proposed the changes that we have made and have been announced by Amanda Vanstone.

They don't represent an attack on higher education in this country. They represent a reasonable contribution of that sector of the Australian community towards the budget problem that we have inherited and they also contain a number of reforms that are important. I notice the proposal to allow the universities to charge for full fees over and above the Government-funded places that are given to the universities, full fees to Australians, that that has drawn criticism from the Labor Party and from some others. Now I think it's a very strange attitude, it's a peculiar double standard for people to say it's perfectly all right for an American or somebody from Japan or somebody from England or Germany or Indonesia to buy a place in an Australian university but it's not all right for an Australian to do so, because that essentially is what those who critics that proposal are arguing. I think it's very important that the philosophical context of those changes be understood and I think as increasingly they are, people will see the essential justice and the essential fairness of what we have done. And of course I can't make remarks about fairness and the attacks that have been made on our fairness over the past few days without saying something about the funding decisions that have been made in relation to ATSIC.

I might remind you ladies and gentlemen that I had this to say on the question of Aboriginal affairs before the last election. I want to read, I don't often read anything when I give these speeches but let me read this, I said it is our desire to have a special place in our community for the original Australians, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We will continue the process of reconciliation, we will continue to put great emphasis, indeed increased emphasis on the importance of lifting the health and educational standards of Aboriginal people and their job opportunities. Now I can say to you that there was nothing announced by John Herron last Tuesday that in any way invalidated that commitment, that in any way fell short of that commitment. The contribution that is being made in this area is not unfair, is not disproportionate. It is not

unreasonable. We are not decimating Aboriginal funding. We are not threatening the process of reconciliation. We are not engaged in any kind of racist pursuit. All of those criticisms are baseless and exaggerated and completely unfair.

I mean, in the light of them it may astonish everybody in this audience indeed to know that funding for Aboriginal health for example will be \$97 million more in the next four years under the Coalition Government than it was under the past four years under the Labor Government.

It may astonish you to know that funding for ATSIC's community housing and infrastructure program will be \$26 million more in the first four years of the Coalition Government than in the last four years under the Labor Government, that funding for ATSIC's Community Development Employment Program, essentially a work for the dole scheme for 30 000 Aboriginals will be \$337 million more in the first four years of the Coalition Government than the last four years of the Labor Government. Now those figures hardly represent a decimation of Aboriginal funding. They hardly represent an attack upon a vulnerable section of the Australian community. Of course there are cuts in other areas. There are cuts in what can loosely be called some of the more political areas. But there are not cuts in the areas that go directly to the health and the welfare and the educational well-being of Australia's first and original citizens. So I want to reject very emphatically and with some feeling this ridiculous attack that has been made on my Government and on the integrity of the Liberal and National Parties when it comes to the treatment of indigenous communities of this country.

I think the reality is that those, many of those who have attacked us in this area have taken the quite mistaken view that although there has been a change of Government there can be no change of emphasis in certain areas. The fact is that our compassion for vulnerable people in the Australian community is no less than the compassion of our political opponents, and in some areas it's even more. But we have different ways of doing things in different areas, and that's what you would expect when you have a change of Government.

The first understanding is that we are all citizens together in one nation. We've never had two nation view or a three nation view towards the sort Australian society that we want to build. And what we've set out to do in this area is to establish some principles of accountability.

We have set out to reorder priorities. We have set out to shift the emphasis towards the essential tools of removing under-privilege and that is improving health, educational and other opportunities. So let's have no more of this ridiculous attempt to typify us as being in the business of destroying communities, in the business of destroying the legitimate hopes and aspirations of particularly vulnerable sections of the Australian community. When you examine the facts, that kind of allegation and that kind of charge simply doesn't add up.

Ladies and gentlemen simply beyond the Budget there are many issues of a non-economic kind that are of very great importance to the future of this country. Our relations with the rest of the world. It may, in some of the flurry of the consideration of the Budget and perhaps the euphoria of the preparation for the Olympic Games, it may have escaped the notice of many Australians that the AUSMIN talks held in Sydney, attended on behalf of Australia by your two home-town blokes, Alexander Downer and Ian McDonald, which was I'm sorry, Ian McLachlan, apologies. All the same, he said you would never know, they're all the same.

Those talks attended on the American side, for the first time ever, by the Defence Secretary, the Secretary of State and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It represented the highest ranking American political delegation sent to this country in thirty to forty years and the arrangements that were made, the agreements that were reached at that particular meeting were quite historic. They reestablished in its full these special and intimate relationship between Australia and the United States. And we are able to do that as I said in my opening address to the conference without in any way raising the spectre of this country having to make a choice between its history and its geography. This ridiculously childish idea that if you reaffirm the importance of the relationship with the United States you are in some way playing down the importance of our association with the Asian-Pacific region has to be completely dismissed for the nonsense that it really is. It is possible to do both and in fact there is an advantage in doing both. The fact that we have close links with the United States, the fact that we have close links with the United Kingdom and with other nations of Western Europe. Those associations add value to our association with the nations of the Asian-Pacific region because we bring to our association with our regional allies and partners an understanding and a network of contacts that would not otherwise be available if we didn't have those associations.

And one of the characteristics of the conduct of foreign policy and defence policy under Alexander Downer and Ian McLachlan is that we will not be carrying forward that sort of tepid immaturity which characterised the Labor Party's approach, this idea that in order to make your mark with the Asia-Pacific regions somehow or rather you had to insult your past associations. It was immature, it was seen as immature by the sophisticated leaders of the Asia-Pacific region and I won't have any part of that and I won't have any truck with it. But I will continue to build as Prime Minister of this country the very close relationships that have been established over decades by a succession of my predecessors, commencing with Sir Robert Menzies and on both sides of politics. It was after all, Malcolm Fraser who forged closer relations between this country and mainland China. It was Malcolm Fraser who showed the humanitarian leadership in relation to this country's attitude toward Indo-Chinese refugees in the wake of the Vietnam war.

It was the Menzies Government that saw the trade agreement with Japan that laid the foundation of Japan and Australian being such close trading partners against the fierce opposition then of the Labor Party back in the 1950s and I acknowledge the contribution

made by Gough Whitlam and Bob Hawke and Paul Keating towards the building of close relations between Australia and the nations of the Asia-Pacific region.

It is a bi-partisan given of Australian foreign policy that we should have close relations and we should see our economic future as being very bound up in the association between us and the Asian-Pacific region. But it not a bi-partisan given of Australian foreign policy that in order to do that you have got to insult our traditional and historical associations and I think there is a growing understanding in the region and in the world of the importance of that particular proposition.

And could I finally say to you ladies and gentlemen that as I survey the last five months and I think of the changes that have already begun to become apparent in this country, they are not changes related just to economic issues and foreign policy issues, industrial relations issues. But I think one of the benefits of the change of Government is that that mood that was growing in the Australian community before the 2nd March that we were reverting to some kind of modern form of McCarthyism, where if you took a strong view on something and it wasn't a fashionable view you were automatically silenced by being labelled as a bigot or a racist or something else, I think that mood has largely dissipated since the 2nd March and in saying that I'm very conscious of the fact that there are people within our community who will always abuse freedom of speech and they are not people with which the Liberal Party should ever have any association or any truck at all. We are a Party above everything else of tolerance and a Party of respect for personal difference of opinion.

We are a Party that is more respectful of the diversity and more representative of the diversity of the Australian community than any other political party in this country.

One of our great strengths in the last election was the way in which we were able to attract support right across the socio-economic spectrum and right across the ethnic and cultural spectrum of Australia. And it is very important to understand that part of the post-war Liberal tradition is the immense contribution that has been made to our Party by people of a non-English speaking background. And one of the most sustaining experiences for a Liberal Party leader in this country is to go to different parts of Australia and for people who immigrated to this country not long after the World War II to come up to you and say that and speak to you of great emotion about how they found this country and what it's meant to them and what it meant to them to come to a country when Sir Robert Menzies was Prime Minister, and the way in which they were received into the Australian community. We ought always to remember that we are a society made of people of different cultures and of people who have come from many countries with their particular contributions to make.

But we ought to be able to have a society where people can speak their mind without being silenced by the dismissive smears and attempts to brand people as having prejudices which in reality don't exist.

So finally, ladies and gentlemen, can I return to the theme I had at the beginning and that is a theme of tremendous enthusiasm and gratitude for what has been achieved particularly here in South Australia and what has been achieved throughout Australia.

We did win a great victory on 2nd March but as I told the Party Room at its first meeting when we were all utterly euphoric. We're only still mildly euphoric but we were then utterly euphoric but the first danger signs appear when political leaders and members of the political party fall victim to the disease the Greeks described as hubris. When they begin to imagine that they hold their office because of some divine gift, when they begin to imagine that in some way they were elected overwhelmingly, exclusively and undeniably because of their personal genius and it had absolutely nothing at all to do with the fact that their political opponents were a bit limited, a bit shop-soiled, completely on the nose and utterly arrogant.

You've really got to keep your feet very firmly on the ground. Political power is a gift of the Australian people. It is not right, there is no natural party of Government in Australia. You stay in government for so long as you remain in touch with the people who put you there and for so long as you are doing the right thing by the national interest. And all of us have an obligation to remember that.

I have an obligation, my colleagues have an obligation and you have an obligation as members of the Party organisation to tell us when we are not doing it. I am a creature of the Liberal Party. I have spent all of my adult life in the Liberal Party and I love it dearly and I owe it everything in a political sense. I would never have been a Member of Parliament without the grace and favour of the Liberal Party, I would never have been Leader of this great Party without the support of the Liberal Party and I would never have been Prime Minister of our country without the Liberal Party, so I owe it so much and I feel for it so very deeply. But there is a reciprocal obligation in all of that and that is that you should, when the time arises and in the appropriate way if you think the occasion demands it, remind me and remind my colleagues that we may in fact be succumbing to that disease that the Greeks describe so eloquently.

Ladies and gentlemen thank you very very much for your support, your loyalty, your political skill and for the tremendous victory you gave us here in South Australia in March. Thank you.

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