



PRIME MINISTER

22 September 1996

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
ADDRESS TO THE QUEENSLAND DIVISION
OF THE LIBERAL PARTY STATE COUNCIL**

E&OE.....

Thank you very much Bob, to Joan Sheldon, to all of my Federal and State Parliamentary and Ministerial colleagues. But most importantly of all, to the members of the rank and file of the Queensland Division of the Liberal Party, statistically, in terms of absolute political movement, without doubt the most successful Liberal Division on the 2nd March, welcome and thank you.

I do want at the beginning of my speech this morning to extend my great gratitude for the skill and the application and the persistence and the organisational astuteness of the Queensland Division of the Party. You know better than anyone the difficulties you have been through over recent years, difficulties of money, difficulties of organisation, difficulties of being out of power, difficulties occasionally with Parties on our side of politics. But all of that was overcome. It all came together and I thank Bob Tucker as President and all the other members of the organisation for what you delivered to the Liberal Party nationally on the 2nd March.

I also compliment you on the working partnership that you established with the National Party. You demonstrated the truth of that old Australian political adage that when the Liberal and National Parties work together they win together.

It was a great victory. It was an exhilarating victory and it was a victory in which all of us are entitled to feel an immense amount of pride and joy and satisfaction. Political faith is important. The political philosophy through the good years and the bad has got to be maintained. And the true beliefs of any political party sustain it during the lean years. But success at the ballot box and the capacity in government to do something to change

the direction of a nation is ultimately what politics is all about. It is ultimately about winning power to do good things for Australia. And the Liberal Party as we come towards the end of the 1990s, as we come towards a new millennium and we come towards the centenary of the Federation of the establishment of Australia the Liberal Party of Australia has unparalleled opportunity to mould the future of this country into the next century.

We have an unparalleled opportunity to leave deposits of the values and the beliefs and the ideals of this generation of Liberals, just as that generation of Liberals that won power in 1949 were able to leave the deposits of the values and the beliefs and the ideals of that generation of Liberals.

It was no accident that we won overwhelmingly on the 2nd March. All of us in our more reflective moments must have wondered whether it was possible. I must confess I went from a majority of one to a majority of a few more to a minority of one and the possibility of losing by an even bigger margin because somehow or other the opinion polls were all wrong. I went through all of those emotions multiplied on the 2nd March. I don't mind admitting I was a fairly nervous political leader at five minutes past six.

And I will forever be indebted to the people of Portland in New South Wales. That poor bloke from the Australian Electoral Commission who had his computer in the Inter-Continental, and I kept pestering him saying "have you result yet, have you got a result?". And finally at 25 past six he said "I've got a figure" and he said "there has been a 15 per cent swing to the Liberal Party in Portland" and I said, "How many on the roll?" he says, "83". Grahame Morris said to me "It's a bit early to claim victory yet mate".

But when you reflect ladies and gentlemen, it was not accident that we won. It was no accident because we had planned and worked and dedicated ourselves to a change of Government. We managed to get unity with the Parliamentary Party and I thank all of my Parliamentary colleagues most sincerely for that. We got the organisation and the Parliamentary Party working together. We got Presidents around Australia who were prepared to put their authority on the line to get the right candidates in the right seats. And that is what you have got to do. The Party organisational leadership is not just a passive funnel through which things pass without any kind of interruption. You have got to make certain you get the right candidates. In New South Wales for example, four pre-selections were changed in order to get better candidates. And we got very handsome dividends as a consequence of that.

It was also no accident because our opponents more than any group of people I've seen in the years that I've been in politics had not only lost touch with the mainstream of the Australian community, they had quite literally stopped listening to the mainstream of the Australian community. The only people they listened to were the flatterers and the fawners amongst those in the national Press Gallery who themselves had become a self-deluded, political elite, no longer understanding what people out there were thinking. And the leaders of noisy minority groups. Because the vote on the 2nd March was a vote

against government in submission to noise of minority groups as much as it was a vote against anything.

They stopped listening. They had lost contact. And I think one of the reasons was that their views about leadership. You don't remember that leadership, that leadership was the slogan. Thank you. I'm glad it was. Leadership was the slogan in the campaign. I mean, I have views about leadership. Political leadership is very important. Let me tell you what political leadership doesn't consist of. It doesn't consist of believing that you are Prime Minister of Australia because of some kind of process of divine selection.

You are Prime Minister of Australia through the gift of the Australian people and never forget it. And never let anybody who represents us in the Federal or State Parliaments ever forget that they are representatives there through the gift of the Australian people. And I have never forgotten and I will never forget what I owe to the Liberal Party. I would never have been a Member of Parliament if it hadn't been for the Liberal Party. I would never have been a Cabinet Minister, its leader and now the Prime Minister of Australia were it not for the Liberal Party of Australia and I owe it everything that I have achieved in public life. And I want to take this opportunity of reporting my thanks to my Party which has been my great obsession for all of my adult life and a bit more. It's a great movement and it's hung together and it's stared down those that derided it only a few years ago and said it was finished. Remember some of the articles written by some people, even on our own side of politics who should have known better, saying that the Liberal Party faced extinction if it didn't win another election, that it had lost touch with the mainstream of the Australian community. I think we've demonstrated very clearly that we haven't and that we won't.

The leadership to me has always consisted in really two facets. There are some issues in politics where quite literally you must stand in the middle of the road and dare people to run you over, where you must say this is my position, I don't care what you think about it, I think it is the right position and I want you to follow it and support me and to trust me and to have confidence in me. And on occasions all political leaders must do that.

There are other issues though where the art of good political leadership consists in listening and understanding and comprehending and absorbing and persuading and cajoling and explaining. And the art of good political leaderships is to get the right mix of those two approaches and those two qualities depending on what the issues might be.

A few months ago, it was necessary as a matter of national political leadership that a strong stand be taken on the prohibition of dangerous weapons in this country and I am very proud that the Government I lead with the support of the State Governments of Australia and I pay great tribute to the assistance that I received on that issues from Rob Borbidge and Joan Sheldon. It wasn't so easy in some parts of Queensland as it was in other parts of Australia but that was an issue where political leadership consisted in staring down opposition and daring people to oppose you. And that was the issue.

There are other issues where a different approach is needed. But above all good political leadership represents never forgetting that you are there not to tell people what they should think or what they should believe but you are there to give expression to their hopes and to their aspirations, to respond to their concerns and their fears but always to listen to what they have to say to you. And one of the reasons why there is more cynicism about politics in this country than there ought to be is that too often too many Australians believe that their political leaders never listen to them. And unfortunately too often they are right and it is very, very important. But now that the Liberal Party has this magnificent opportunity with the present generation to leave its mark on the political and social landscape of Australia. It's important that we keep that in mind.

One of the great changes that have come over Australia in the last six months is that people do feel able to speak a little more freely and a little more openly about what they feel. In a sense the pall of censorship on certain issues has been lifted. I think we were facing the possibility of becoming a more narrow and restrictive society and that free speech could not be taken so easily for granted as we might in our calmer moments have assumed. I think there has been that change and I think that's a very good thing. And I hope it continues but like everything a right such as free speech carries with it responsibilities and I welcome the fact that people can now talk about certain things without living in fear of being branded as a bigot or as a racist or any of the other (inaudible) expressions that have been too carelessly flung around in this country whenever somebody has disagreed with what somebody has said.

And it is very easy to forget that a bare three and a half years ago at the height of the debate on the Native Title Legislation which has proved in its detail rather than its aspirations to have been legislation that contains a lot of defects. At the height of that The Melbourne Age carried a cartoon depicting Peter Reith and myself mounted on horses shooting Aborigines and the caption of the cartoon was "The second dispossession". Now, you know, that's not bad is it? When you think about it that's three and a half years ago. Merely because we disagreed with the Government, the then Government's version of what ought to be done to help. And I think that was symptomatic of the mood that was then developing. The election of the new Government has done something to make that kind of neo-MacArthyist, zealous prejudice reaction against something that you don't agree with, made that a little less acceptable and I think that is a great thing for healthy democracy in Australia.

There is an important caveat to that. While we must always welcome removal restrictions on freedom of speech and we must always treasure the right to free speech as being a cardinal principle, a given of our free and open society, we must always remember that rights always carry with them the responsibilities as well. And that freedom of speech carries with it a responsibility on all of those who exercise that freedom to do so in a tolerant and moderate fashion and to not convert the new-found freedom, if I may put it that way, into a vehicle for using needlessly insensitive and intolerant language.

Mr President, you will remember all of you that we campaigned on a number of basic issues in the lead up to the election. Our slogan "For All Of Us" brought together in a very effective fashion the mood and the gathering resentments of the Australian people towards the type of government that they had experienced over 13 years. But we did campaign very strongly on the importance of the family unit within the Australian community. We said that we wanted to reaffirm unambiguously the belief of the national government that it was with all their imperfections, that it was through families more than any other personal association within the Australian community that we best saw to providing individuals with not only emotional support and happiness and satisfaction but also material comfort. It is a true statement that in addition to all its other great value, a stable, functioning family remains the most effective social welfare system that mankind has ever devised.

We committed ourselves to a family tax package and a private health insurance rebate scheme and every last dollar of those two central commitments of our election campaign were delivered in the first budget of the new Government, brought down on the 20th August. We also made much of our commitment to the role and the place of the small business in Australian society. Small business has always been part of the Liberal ethos. It has always been part of the Australian ethos. It has always been part of the Australian dream that I was brought up to believe in and there are many things that have got to be done to improve the operating conditions of small business in Australia. We have made a start. We promised relief in the area of provisional tax and that has been delivered, \$180 million worth. We promised capital gains tax rollover relief and that has been delivered in the budget and it will start on 1st July next year. We promised that we would reduce the burden of red tape on small business and we have made a down payment by already reducing by 20% the number of statistical collections by the bureau of statistics.

More importantly, I will have in my hand by the 1st November a report from Charlie Bell, the Managing Director of McDonalds advising on ways and means of implementing the Government's promise that we will try and reduce the red tape on small business by 50% by the end of our first three years in Government. The constant bane of existence of every man and woman I know in small business is the endless, time consuming, wasteful, unaffordable exercise of filling out forms in the Government, be it the Federal Government, the State Government or the local government. They each carry an equal share of the blame, and I mean the most ridiculous thing is that so many of the forms are filled out just for the sake of getting them out of the way with little regard because of the time involved with scientific accuracy. There's a lot to be done in that area. We have a group of men and women, all with a business background, who are committed to the task and I hope to have in my hands by the first of November as promised a report that is going to tell us how we are going to achieve that objective.

Finally and most importantly in the area of small business, we introduced within two weeks of the Parliament sitting, our historic Workplace Relations Bill which amongst other things will sweep away Laurie Brereton's stupid, job destroying unfair dismissal law. I mean it's an extraordinary piece of legislation, that little sort of nugget of stupidity that

was introduced without warning. I mean, what mandate did he have in 1993. They talk about mandates. I mean it's a pretty perverse situation. In 1993m, the Labor Party, having said nothing about the unfair dismissal law before the election, gets it through the Senate and we in 1996, having said everything about our Workplace Relations Bill have got to negotiate like mad to get it through the Senate. Now I hope we can and right at the moment Peter Reith is engaged in detailed negotiations with the Australian Democrats and I'm not going to say any more about the substance of those negotiations. I will keep saying a lot about the value of the legislation to the Australian community.

I will keep reminding you that there are five things about that legislation. We get rid of unfair dismissals, we entrench voluntary unionism, we bring back the prohibitions on secondary boycott conduct under the Trade Practices Act that were only take out by the Labor Party because they were working, not because they were failing - they were working so they threw them out and those things acted as a marvellous protection for small business against the predatory conduct of trade unions. We're also going to give people an absolute right to be in a workplace agreement, or an award according to their choice. And finally we're going to give those Australian workers who want to belong to a trade union, and there are many and that is their right, and they will be protected in the exercise of that right to the absolute hilt, we will give them the right to join the union of their choice.

Now they are the five principles that underline our industrial relations legislation. There is nothing anti worker or anti union in the legislation. It is a pro-worker, pro-free choice bill, not an anti worker, anti union bill. And because it entrenches the principle of free choice, Jennie George and Bill Kelty don't like it. Haven't heard much of them lately. They've had a bad month, a very bad month. Bill told us about the sonata and the symphony before the election that struck a few discordant notes over the last few weeks, it really has and so they both should have hung their head in shame, and their pathetic, inadequate, "not me, maybe him, not either of us, don't know, didn't hear the noise, wasn't in the same room, different meeting". I've never seen guilty language more obviously displayed in the rather attenuated meeting I had with them after that rally.

Let me say to you ladies and gentlemen, that the right of lawful, peaceful, noisy dissent is a fundamental right of a healthy, functioning democracy and even though inevitably it will be directed against the government in power, it is something I will always defend as Prime Minister of Australia, but violence in political advocacy has no place in the Australian community. So it is as we go on ladies and gentlemen, well to remember the things that we were elected to do and it is well to remember that in a short space of six months, we have set about implementing so much of that agenda. The Federal budget has rightly been acclaimed throughout Australia as a strong but fair response to the economic difficulties that the new government inherited. It is true that the level of economic growth and the level of inflation that we inherited on the second of March were very satisfactory, and I've never denied that. I see no point in manufacturing criticism or difference. There's plenty of natural criticism one can make of our predecessors without making up things. So let's get on with those issues where there are real differences. But we also inherited an

Australian economy that had a very big deficit and when you have five years of growth, there's something wrong with the mob in charge when you're still in the red, and that's basically what we inherited. It's as simple as that. There was a huge run up on the bankcard that we picked up on the second of March and to have done nothing about it, or to have pretended to the Australian people, oh well, we won't do it this year, we'll do it next year.

That's like taking two and then three and then four unaffordable annual holidays. In the end you have a huge blow up and that is exactly the choice we faced. We knew we had to make some decisions that we would rather not have made but we set about doing them in a fair manner and I said before the budget that I would be able to look every interest group in Australia in the eye and say that the measures that we have taken have been fair and defensible and the reason why the budget has been well received around Australia is precisely that. People knew there was a problem. They expected their Government to do something about the problem and they responded positively to the fact that the pain was spread around and that we didn't leave people who are genuinely vulnerable in the community exposed. And we have reached a stage in the Australian community where there are certain things accepted on both sides of politics. There are people in need, in desperate need. There are underprivileged Australians. There are poor people in our midst and it's always been the Australian way to look after the poor. But it's also been the Australian way to make certain that people who try and help themselves to something they're not entitled to, shouldn't be allowed to do so. And that applies whether it's the social welfare system or whether it's rorting the taxation system. It applies at both ends and that's part of the Australian fair go and it's part of the Australian approach.

The budget has been very well received and great credit is due to Peter Costello and the other ministers responsible for putting the budget together. And I would say to those in the Senate who must decide in the next few weeks whether all of it goes through, just remember that the fundamental responsibility of a government is to get the national accounts in shape. And strangely enough, when you examine some of the things that our opponents have said about the budget, I mean, Gareth Evans, and I will come to him in a moment in more detail, but Gareth Evans said in an interview only a week before the budget, he said, what we really need is to, eventually after three years, to get the budget into balance. But that is exactly, Gareth, what we are doing. We are proposing a rate of fiscal consolidation that will deliver that outcome in Year three.

And I don't think any Liberal supporter around Australia would have thanked us if we'd have got up on the 20th August and said, oh look, we won't do it this year, we'll do it next year, and they'd have thought, yeah, fat chance of that. If you don't do it the first year, you never do it.

That's one of the iron laws of politics and we've done that and we're now in a situation that if we can get the budget through, largely intact, then by year three, the year whereon that balance of statistical probabilities there'll be another election - the constitution says that - we will have budget, all things being equal, in balance and that is a very, very healthy

thing, both economically, and may I whisper it, politically to be in and we should never lose sight of the fact that one in government has got to balance the requirements of economics as well as the requirements of politics. But Gareth Evans is an interesting study. He said the other day that he was suffering from a disease. He called it - nobody apparently takes much notice of him anymore. He's suffering from, he called it "relevance deprivation syndrome". He said that when in opposition you made statements and speeches, he said you were impotent and irrelevant. Gee, he's saying, can I just say one thing. You're saying that after six months. I hate to think how you'll be feeling after twelve and a half years, that's all.

Now I know something about opposition. Opposition is a great training ground for Government because it makes you hate the thought of being there again and it's a great training ground for Government. Can I just say of our opponents, nothing to me represents a prize example of the arsonist claiming respectability as the fire fighter when you hear the Labor Party giving us lectures about unemployment. I mean, for 32 consecutive months under the former Labor Government, unemployment in Australia was higher than it was at any time under the previous Coalition Government, not for one month or two months but for 32 consecutive months it was higher than it was at any level under the Fraser Government. We inherited an unemployment rate of 8.5%. The unemployment situation in Australia at the present time remains overwhelmingly the product of the economy of the past four or five years. Don't let anybody lose sight of that. Unemployment has always been a lagged indicator. Unemployment always rises last when you go into a recession and it is always the slowest to recover and any suggestion that a mob that presided over post-depression high levels of unemployment for thirteen years have got any moral credibility six months after a change of government to start pointing the finger at us about unemployment, that is absolute fairyland stuff. It is an insult to the intelligence of the Australian people and quite frankly I don't think it is washing with any man or woman anywhere in Australia.

Now the Labor Party in Opposition can do something very constructive to reduce unemployment. They can let us get on with our Workplace Relations bill. Because that will do more to reduce, in a structural sense, unemployment over the medium term than other change you can make. There are two things you have got to do to reduce unemployment in Australia. You have got to run the economy at a faster rate of economic growth because high growth generates more jobs and on top of that you can take away the rigidities and the impediments in the labour market to make it easier and more attractive to employ people. I mean the worst thing about the unfair dismissal law is not its stupidity in relation to people who are already in the workforce but the intimidatory effect it has on small business about employing additional staff. I mean everywhere I go in Australia, men and women running businesses say to me I'm not going to take the risk of taking somebody on. I can't afford to pay them \$20,000-\$30,000 to settle an unfair dismissal claim. BHP may be able to afford it, the Government may be able to but I can't.

And you see it was symptomatic about how out of touch that lot were that they didn't understand that when you were talking about the unfair dismissal law you were really

talking about those tens upon tens of thousands of small businesses to whom the loss of \$20,000 or \$30,000 a year meant the difference between making an ordinary living and having to go cap in hand to your bank again. And if they had understood that, if they hadn't seen business in terms of the large constellations and the big employers, they would have seen it in it's micro level they might have understood how absolutely ludicrous that was. But I don't think it would have mattered, it was the payback that Jennie George and Bill Kelty extracted for their support in the 1993 election campaign. And they paid on time, they paid the protection money on time as they always did in the past and they always will in the future.

Can I say to the Labor Party if it really cares about unemployment now pass the employment relations bill. Withdraw your objection to it, let us get on with doing what the Australian people voted us in to do and that is reform the Australian labour market.

Ladies and gentlemen time doesn't permit me to say any more. I just want to, no, don't push me, don't do that. Very, very dangerous. If my wife were here she would bury her head in the hands and say, no, don't let him go on anymore, but ladies and gentlemen, can I say what a tremendous honour it is to be here today as not only the leader of the Federal Parliamentary Liberal Party but as Prime Minister of Australia, what a humbling experience it is to be amongst people that have stuck by the cause in the good years and the bad years and we've been through all of them, all of them in spades over the last few years around Australia and here in Queensland but we've lived through it, we've kept the great principles of our party and this is an opportunity to remember why we won, to learn the lessons of arrogance from our opponents. They had that story about Bill Clinton having a sign above his desk before the 1992 election, it said "It's the economy, stupid".

I think I've sort of got a sign that says "It Was Arrogance, Stupid".

The Australian people want in their leader and their leaders, they want people who know what they believe in, who are prepared not to be intimidated, who are willing to stare down their opponents and their critics but they also want people who remain essentially part of the Australian community, people to whom they can relate, people to whom they can talk, and people they know will listen, not always agree with them, not always take their advice, that is never possible and I promise you that in what I hope will be many years of Federal Government, I will continue to lead a government that listens to what the Australian people have got to say. I continue to lead a government that listens to what the rank and file of the Party organisation has to say. I make you that promise and I want you to make a promise in return and that is that when we stop doing that you tell us and you tell us before we lose the election, not afterwards because when we stop listening, we will lose just as surely as Paul Keating and his colleagues lost when they stopped listening. I mean, any Prime Minister who would write off a 16% swing in the Canberra by-election as some kind of municipal rumble had to be so out of touch with what the Australian people were saying as to be doomed in retrospect to political failure and political destruction.

Now that can happen to us. Don't anybody think we're any different. You get a few years into Government and you start believing your own PR. That's always very, very dangerous. You always ought to have a healthy bit of scepticism. So I've got a responsibility to you. I will try and live up to my part of the bargain and I want you to do the same. Ladies and gentlemen, this is a moment where Liberals are entitled just for a bare bit of triumphal, happy reflection on what was achieved. You Queensland Liberals did us proud on the Second of March. That sweep of seats, those cheers, I said last night when I mentioned Con Sciacca's defeat and I think of the exhilaration when, as one of my colleagues, as the glummer of the glimmer twins, Wayne Swan was knocked over.

Anyway, I won't be able to go through all of them, I'm bound to get one of them wrong. It's funny how some sort of stand out but it's like Robert Tickner in Hughes, he stood out. Ladies and gentlemen, it was a great night, it was a great win, it was a great credit to all of you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for having stuck by me, for having stuck by our Party, for having kept the faith and finally delivered the goods, but most importantly, given to the Liberal Party of Australia an unparalleled opportunity as we go towards the next century, a hundred years of the Australian nation gives us uniquely the opportunity to do good things for all of us. Thank you.