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**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER  
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP  
ADDRESS AT THE OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF CENTRELINK  
(COMMONWEALTH SERVICES DELIVERY AGENCY)  
THE GREAT HALL, PARLIAMENT HOUSE**

E&OE.....

Thank you very much Senator Newman. To Senator Grant Tambling, the Parliamentary Secretary; to my other parliamentary colleagues; Ministers; to Mr Marrett, the Chairman of the Board; to Miss Vardon, the Chief Executive Officer; and most particularly to the 25 000 to 30 000 employees of Centrelink who are participating in this video hook-up.

This is certainly a very important day. It is a day to tell the Australian community that the process of reform and innovation and renewal is very much alive in the service delivery area of the Commonwealth Government and the Commonwealth agencies.

In administrative terms, this is probably the biggest single reform undertaken in the area of service delivery during the past 50 years. And it is a very special tribute to the ministerial leadership of my colleagues, Jocelyn Newman and Amanda Vanstone, and a particular tribute also to the heads of their departments.

I do want to take this opportunity in talking about the administrative significance of Centrelink and its launch. I want to take this opportunity on behalf of the Government as Prime Minister to thank all of those people who work in the area of public service.

Mine is a proudly private enterprise government. But that does not gainsay the fact that we regard a strong public sector providing necessary services for people as an integral part of modern government and as something that delivers necessary support to those in the community who need it.

There is nothing incompatible between a passion for private enterprise but ongoing support and respect for the role of the public sector. And those who work in the various agencies of the Government and those who will work for Centrelink in the modern face of a reformed and innovative service delivery system your work is highly valued. It is gratefully respected and I regard it as a very important part of the face of my Coalition Government as we move into the 21st Century.

Centrelink represents the culmination of the aspirations of people over a long period of time.

From the moment I entered Parliament in 1974 and began talking to constituents about their various problems in my electorate in Sydney, I began hearing complaints about the number of agencies you had to visit. It was one of the very earliest complaints. It pre-dated some of the complaints we now get about other activities of government. And what focused my mind at the time was that so many people felt that if only they could go to one place and have all their

business done in that one spot it would be a lot more efficient, it would be a lot more human and it would make a great deal more sense. And over the years, at various stages, attempts were made to do this and suggestions were made that it would actually happen. But it has taken the past 18 months and the arrival of a new government and, if I may so, new Ministers to bring it about.

The consolidation in Centrelink of so many of the services of the Government that interact with people will provide, of course, a more human face. It will provide a more efficient service. It will lead to far less public dissatisfaction. And very importantly, it will give a new sense of career and a new sense of career opportunity to the thousands of people who work for Centrelink. Because Centrelink is carving out a new horizon and a completely different horizon. And it's a demonstration that there is an Australian way, a unique Australian way, of delivering service support to those in the community who deserve and need our help and our assistance.

It will reach millions of people. It will touch millions of families. It will help the too many unemployed within our community. And I think it will bring a modern understanding all over the country to the need for public services to relate in, not only a sympathetic way, but also a responsible way towards those in the community who are getting government assistance.

I have often spoken in the last few months of the principle of mutual obligation. And that is a principle which says that it is the obligation of a decent, civil society to provide a social security safety net and underpinning to those in the community who need help. And I never want the Australian tradition of providing that safety net impaired or withdrawn.

We have a solemn obligation to help those in our community who are deserving of help. Equally we have a right, as a responsible community, to ask of those who are receiving help, where it is reasonable to do so, that they do something in return for that assistance and something that is commensurate with the help and their own circumstances. And that is the principle of mutual obligation and it's the principle that underlines our approach to Work for the Dole. It's the principle that underlines the determination, the responsible and sensitive determination with which Senator Newman, in particular, has pursued the eradication to the maximum extent possible of fraud and abuse within the social security system. It is only a minority of people who undertake that. And we owe it to the millions of honest Australian citizens who don't try and abuse or rort the system to ensure that in all the manifestations of government, those who would seek to do so, are properly pursued in accordance with the due processes of the law.

These services of Centrelink will provide new opportunities, more efficient services and more hope, not only for individuals, but also for families and for a whole range of those people. I understand that Centrelink will provide services and payments to over 7.8 million Australians, including 1.6 million pensioners, almost two million families receiving family allowance and 800 000 unemployed people. There will be over 400 locations across the country. And I'm not surprised that your Chairman calculates that if he started to walk from one to the other it would take him a year. I would have thought it would take much longer than that.

But ladies and gentlemen, the size and dimension of this reform should not be underestimated. It represents something that previous generations of administrators at a Commonwealth level have dreamt of doing but haven't been able to do. And I particularly want to commend the leadership that has been shown by my colleagues and also by the heads of the client departments.

So again, ladies and gentlemen, can I express on behalf of my Government and on behalf of the people of Australia our warm congratulations to the launch of such an innovative project.

Reform and renewal and innovation is not only confined to the private sector of the Australian economy. If we are to realise the true potential of Australia as we move into the 21st Century we must constantly look to ways of not only improving the efficiency with which the private sector of our economy operates but also the efficiency and the compassion with which services to the less fortunate, in particular, in our community operate.

We need, as far as possible, to take away the notion of dependency from the delivery of services. We need to develop a balance between compassion and responsibility. We need to deliver services in an efficient and friendly manner but, nonetheless, with an eye to our overall obligations to the taxpayers of Australia who pay for the services and the support which is delivered to others within the community.

We need to look at such things as service delivery through Centrelink as a partnership, a partnership between all sections of the Australian community to see that we have a society which encourages people and gives them the incentive to work hard and to achieve and to get ahead and to succeed, and in the process to pay their taxes and to use those taxes wisely to help the development of the country, to invest in necessary infrastructure, but also where appropriate to be distributed to those in the community who we judge to need some additional assistance.

In the past we have done this in a disparate way. In the past we have encouraged people to go from one location to another and we have often confused them with a lot of administrative duplication. And in one very big stroke Centrelink cuts through that duplication. Centrelink consolidates in an efficient, modern fashion the major service delivery activities of the Federal Government. And I am somebody who's very dedicated to sensible reform and change where necessary in all sectors of Australian society.

I am very excited and very proud to be the head of the Government which has been responsible for such a major public sector reform. And one that will have a lasting impact on the morale of those who work in this area. And we're talking about a very large number of people whose work is very greatly valued and it will also have a very, very significant effect on the way in which services are delivered.

So, I wish Centrelink well. I thank and congratulate all who work within it for their efforts of the last 12 months. I wish them great career prospects and plenty of encouragement in the years ahead. I particularly thank the Chairman of the Board and the Chief Executive Officer.

I want to therefore declare Centrelink officially opened and to launch the national campaign to inform the Australian public about the benefits of this important and innovative reform.

Thank you.