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PRIME MINISTER

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ADDRESS AT THE MELBOURNE STATE COLLEGE

It is a pleasure to have this opportunity to participate in your orientation week at Melbourne State College. No doubt a large part of your time this week will be spent in orienting yourselves to the college environment, to one another, the coffee lounge, and the local pubs.

This is also a time in which you will be beginning to orient yourselves more deeply towards politics. The tertiary education period is characteristically the time in which students become more politically active and aware.

Exposed to new facts and ideas, students become more sensitive to injustice and inequities and desire to change things, to reconstruct and create something better. This is as it should be.

There are many things in our society that require reform, and sometimes radical change. The great question facing us as Australians is how these reforms can be brought about. Today there are two different answers to this question. Two different approaches to the issue of what sort of change is necessary and how it can be achieved.

These derive from the Liberal and socialist streams of thought. In Australia, broadly speaking, these streams are represented by the Liberal and the Labor Parties.

Both of these approaches to politics and society address themselves to some common problems and to the problems of human needs, to material political and social inequities. These approaches however differ as to how to best achieve a better society.

The choice of approach is of the most basic importance - the alternatives lead along increasingly divergent paths of different societies. At the core of socialist philosophy is the belief that the state should intervene in as many areas of social life as possible. In this view the truth is seen as being in the hands of a few select individuals. Individuals who claim a special insight and believe they are entitled to impose their view on the people. They know what is best - the people do not.

The result of this belief is a major emphasis on state control - the attempt to create a centralised political authority that progressively restrict individuals choice and freedom. That creates larger and larger bureaucracies which strive to regulate and control all aspects of social and political life.

Some justify this concentration of power by claiming that it is necessary if the position of the disadvantaged is to be improved.

Once we look at the results of socialism in practice, we see that socialism all too often creates social and economic change which defeats the objectives socialism claims to pursue.

Socialism translated into practice all too often not only fails to improve the position of the disadvantaged, but undermines it. This I believe is the lesson that the three years of the Labor Government can teach us.

As the Henderson Poverty report pointed out, the inflation that Labor brought undermined the position of the disadvantaged:

"In 1974-75" the report says, "it seems that inflation created poverty through unemployment but rapid inflation has contributed to poverty in many other ways.. the basic reason for this is simple - inflation favours the active and powerful: the position of poor people deteriorates"

The unemployment that inflation caused harmed the weaker sections of the community most of all. There was a massive growth in the bureaucracy, and there was an increase in the privileges of some vested interest groups.

Powerful unions benefitted from the Labor years - weaker workers - the less skilled, migrants, the young had to pay by suffering unemployment.

In the three years of Labor Government socialist philosophy showed it could not not achieve the noble ideals some of its adherents believe in. The nature of its failure have exacerbated some of the major problems of Australian society. The problems of bureaucratic power, the problems of materially assisting the disadvantaged which increasing their independence and freedom from the states, the problem of protecting the individual.

The Liberal approach identifies these problems as the critical ones facing our society and provides the means of resolving them. The essence of the Liberal approach is that the goals of Government action should be enhancing the freedom of every individual to achieve according to his personal goals and abilities.

Liberalism stands for maximum freedom of choice - for giving the people the opportunity to pursue their own goals in their own ways. It stands for freedom from anxiety and want - for the provision of effective assistance to disadvantaged groups in our community. Liberalism means diversity tolerance and respect for the views of others - the freedom to be different - not to

conform.

Liberals recognised that no group of men can have a monopoly of wisdom and that consequently power should be widely distributed in our society.

Since this Government has been in office, we have set about translating these commitments into practice. In the social welfare area we have taken major steps to improve the position of the disadvantaged members of our society and provide them with greater scope for choice in how to use the assistance to best benefit themselves. Just providing assistance in itself is not enough. The form of assistance should be such that it increases the independence of the disadvantaged from the agencies providing assistance.

There can be no more significant test of a social welfare programme than whether it can answer affirmatively to the question: does it improve the material position of the person receiving the assistance? Does it improve his range of options and his capacity to deal with a complex society? Does it improve his independence as a person or does it increase his dependence on what the state wishes to provide?

Our approach to social welfare is exemplified by the introduction of the family allowance scheme. The old system of tax deductions for children benefitted wealthy groups most of all and did not sufficiently benefit poor people. We abolished these tax deductions and instituted a family allowance scheme which paid money directly to the mother. This substantially improved the position of over 300,000 poorer families who benefitted only partially or not at all, from the previous system. And it did not add to bureaucratic overheads, to bureaucratic power.

The practice of Liberalism can also be seen in two experimental programmes. One concerns migrant resources centres, the other welfare housing. In the area of ethnic affairs, we are participating in an experiment with two different types of migrant resources centres to see which is the more effective.

In Melbourne the Government is contracting out the provision of services to an ethnic welfare group - the Australian Greek Welfare Society - which is in close touch with the needs of migrants. In Sydney, a resource centre is being established in which officers of Commonwealth and State Departments, ethnic voluntary groups and ethnic communities will all participate.

Both centres use the resources and expertise which are available in the community's voluntary organisations.

Because these organisations are in close touch with the community and because they are more informal and less highly structured than is the public service, they can often deal with individual problems with greater sensitivity and effectiveness than Government bureaucracies.

This Government intends to strengthen voluntary organisations even more in the future. In the area of housing for the disadvantaged work has begun on a housing voucher scheme which pays a housing subsidy **DIRECTLY TO THE INDIVIDUALS.**

It is the recipient who decides how to use the subsidy to meet his housing needs - not the bureaucracy. If the experiment proves practical, it could well revolutionise the area of welfare housing. Both these schemes give power and choice to people - they seek to provide effective assistance to those most in need and enhance the autonomy of the recipients.

It is very easy to provide a service that leaves no option for choice. Our approach is to provide assistance where needed in a way that leaves room for choice and that increases the dignity and self-respect of the recipient.

Our approach is in sharp contrast with the main thrust of Labor's approach of making people dependent on a service the Government supplies - where the recipient's only choice is to take it or leave it. The Government has also taken measures to improve the bureaucracy's capacity to deal more sensitively and effectively with its clients. A number of changes have for example been made in the administration of the Department of Social Security to improve the Department's capacity to assist its clients.

At a time when the power of Government and private bureaucracies is threatening to intrude upon human individuals rights, this Government has taken steps to protect individual rights.

In the last twelve months, the Commonwealth Attorney-General has embarked on a programme of law reform designed to protect individual and human rights which is more extensive than any since Federation.

The Administrative Appeals Tribunal has been established. The Ombudsman Act has passed through Parliament and the first Ombudsman will be appointed soon.

Bills will be introduced this Session to: establish a Human Rights Commission to promote human rights and ensure compliance of our law with the UN international Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; promote freedom of information; implement the report of the Law Reform Commission on Criminal Investigation - an important advance in civil liberties for persons detained for questioning or arrested and charged with a Federal criminal offence.

A number of references have been made to the Law Reform Commission including references concerned the protection of privacy, the reform of laws on defamation, an investigation of the possibility of applying Aboriginal customary law in criminal matters to Aborigines living in the traditional manner.

Reforms made by the Government in other areas reflect the same approach. Aboriginal Land Rights Legislation for the Northern Territory has been passed. An improved home savings grant scheme for people buying their first home as been introduced. Medical and hospital insurance has been reformed so that each citizen can choose his own level of insurance and insurer. Fraser Island has been protected, and those adversely affected by that decision have been compensated. An Industrial Relations Bureau will be established to protect the rights of individual unionists and of the community.

We are increasing the provision of day care facilities to give the children of working mothers adequate care.

A number of other major reforms have also been made which will render governments more responsive to their citizens. Tax indexation is one of these. In the past Governments could be assured of significant yearly increases in taxation revenues because of inflation. The result was that they did not have to justify their programmes to the people. Tax indexation will prevent this occurring in the future.

From now on if Governments want to begin new programmes they will have to either discontinue old ones or raise taxes.

In either case, the people of Australia will be in a better position to pass judgement on the actions of Governments and our democracy will be enhanced. Our Federalism reforms similarly increase Governments' accountability to their citizens.

Under these reforms state and local governments have been given access to a guaranteed proportion of income tax revenues and a far greater degree of autonomy in how they will be used.

Citizens will now be able to much more effectively evaluate Government's performance than when it was claimed financial resources did not go with constitutional responsibility.

These reforms are only the beginning of our programme to increase the power, freedom and opportunity of all Australians.

But it should be realised that along with freedom and power goes a considerable responsibility. In the case of tertiary students, this responsibility is one of considerable magnitude.

Tertiary students are given an opportunity because of their academic competence to engage in an extended period of reflection and learning. And the opportunity to gain qualifications enhancing their career prospects and future financial rewards. These opportunities, the financial sinews of tertiary institutions, are provided by the whole of the Australian population, not least by blue collar workers.

One of the prime obligations which flows from this is to make a meaningful and constructive contribution to the process of intellectual debate in our society. To rationally test alternative perspectives and debate them. This indeed is one of the traditional responsibilities of tertiary institutions - to be the guardians of academic freedom.

The role of the tertiary institution as a critic of society has been supported for hundreds of years because people have regarded them as places where a diversity of opinions can be held.

Where people can speak freely and openly. And where calm and rational debate can be conducted.

Unfortunately it is a fact that in recent times, academic freedom has been threatened.

It is sometimes easier to make a speech on the Melbourne waterfront, before members of the Waterside Workers Federation than it is to get a hearing on some tertiary campuses.

The plain fact is that members of a union with one of Australia's most radical traditions are more ready to listen to argument and debate, than a minority of students who believe that they have the right to suppress views different from their own.

If the views of this tiny minority of students prevail then the academic freedom of tertiary institutions will have been undermined by their own members, and much of the sympathy which the wider community has for universities and colleges will be forfeited.

If Australia is to progress, if more effective reforms are to be made, then we must have a constant process of free and open debate. Bringing about beneficial social change requires analysis and criticism. It requires the capacity to conceive of a better society and so the hard slogging work necessary to realise it. It requires a fusion of idealism and realism. I believe that the vast majority of Australia's students will want to participate in the task of reforming our society. There is much work to be done.