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PRIME MINISTER

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SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
ALP STATE CONFERENCE
SYDNEY - 11 JUNE 1989

Delegates,

Before I turn to address my main theme today, I want to say something about the events of the past week which have so dramatically captured the world's attention: the tragedy which has been unfolding in China.

Ever since Gough Whitlam made his dramatic visit to China as Opposition Leader in 1972, successive Australian Governments have put enormous effort into developing a genuinely constructive relationship with China, built on our mutual interests and respect.

I have personally devoted much time and energy to the relationship with China, and up until this point it has been a most valuable and rewarding effort.

We have worked tirelessly with our Chinese friends as they embarked upon and progressively implemented a far sighted program of reform which has brought great benefit to the people of China.

It is my sincere hope that China will get back onto that course, enabling a continuation of the high level of cooperation that has been so productive for both our countries.

But the events that have taken place in China over the past week cast a dark shadow over that.

It is still too early to make an accurate assessment of where things might now go and the implications for the region.

But the sheer scale, callousness and barbarity of the slaughter in Beijing cannot but affect substantially the international standing of the leaders who ordered and condoned such action.

They stand condemned by their own people and by all countries with a concern for the fundamental rights and dignity of human beings. That concern transcends national boundaries.

The Australian Government has taken firm and decisive steps to underline to those who perpetrated this massacre that their action cannot be cost-free and cannot be neatly compartmentalised. Clearly, the action we and others have taken will need to be kept under review against developments in China itself.

However, as I have said, it is my hope that sanity will prevail and that true leadership will once again emerge in China. I am confident that all delegates present here today would join with me in that sentiment.

We extend, too, our sympathy to the Chinese-Australian community, sharing their profound sense of mourning for those who have lost their lives, and for those whose ideals and aspirations for their nation have been so barbarously crushed.

Delegates,

Almost 100 years ago, the Australian Labor Party was founded on a deep and enduring commitment to the creation of a more just society.

Through the succeeding decades, as our Party was organised at the State and national levels, that commitment never died and it never diminished.

But it was when Labor Parties began to receive the electoral mandate of the people, and were called upon to form Governments, that Labor's real task started: translating its commitment into programs and policies for the betterment of Australian society.

It's one of the healthy features of our Party - and it's certainly a feature that distinguishes us from our opponents - that we tend to spend a lot of time analysing the rate of our progress towards that goal, and debating the merits and demerits of particular strategies.

But that only shows how seriously we take our responsibilities to those who elect us, those who support us and those who need us.

This state of New South Wales knows better than most the dynamism of these Labor Governments and the magnitude of their achievements over the years.

At the Federal level, being in Government is, for us, still a relatively rare experience. Since Menzies defeated Chifley in 1949 we have led Australia for less than ten years.

So we have not acquired the born-to-rule disdain, or indulged in the profligacy of lost opportunities, that characterised the decades of conservative rule.

When we do win Government we are determined to stay in Government - not for its own sake but because we have that special responsibility for reform, a commitment to change, an obligation to all Australians - and we set about our task with foresight and with energy.

That's what Fisher did in the years after 1910 when, for the first time, the Australian people gave a Federal Government a mandate in both Houses of Parliament.

That's what Curtin did when he was thrust into leadership of a nation already at war, though grievously unprepared for the challenges ahead of it.

That's what Chifley did in the years after the war, setting the stage for reconstruction of the economy and its transition to a peacetime footing.

It's what Whitlam did when he set about his program of reawakening Australian society after 23 years of conservative rule.

These were massive achievements - true evidence that the commitment to social justice that motivated the founders of our Party was alive and well, constantly reinvigorated by new generations of Labor activists.

But these were not blind dogmatists, afraid to adapt the Party's strategies to meet the changing needs of the Australian people. As our Party matured, those planks of our platform judged to be outmoded have been thrown out.

Curtin changed his mind on conscription for World War Two; Whitlam repudiated the repugnant but once fundamental plank of White Australia.

What such changes were about was refining the strategies we employ to achieve our goals.

The goal itself - the original vision, of a more just Australian society - has never changed. Nor will it.

So what does our commitment to social justice mean as we enter the 1990s and prepare to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of our Party?

How do we make a truly just society in the era of the global economy; the nuclear era; the era when development is needed as never before to feed the people of the world but threatens as never before to ravage the planet we live on?

I judge it one of my very great privileges to be in leadership of a Party and a Government that, I am confident, are equipped as none others to answer that question.

New South Wales consistently provides Federal Caucus with men and women of the highest calibre. Across the factions, they have proven again and again their dedication, determination and commitment to the great goals of our Party.

This Party and this Government understand the global problems, and the problems of the Australian community, because we are in touch with the people.

What I find one of the most stimulating and rewarding elements of my job is getting out of Canberra, meeting people in the cities and towns and country areas of Australia and hearing for myself their views and concerns.

Being in touch means travelling, meeting ordinary Australians, and listening and talking with them - being in touch means being confronted every day with evidence, through the media and directly, that one's plans are or are not being fulfilled - being in touch means discussing with industry groups and trade unionists and interest groups, their views about the direction of Government policy. I do all that - and that's what keeps me informed and in touch with the needs and aspirations of Australian people.

It's especially rewarding when this involves seeing the decisions we have made in the Cabinet room in Canberra transformed into bricks and mortar, into real measures to protect our environment, and into new opportunities for the less privileged in our society.

We often talk in Canberra, for example, about the retention rate of our schools - which is the technical term referring to the proportion of school kids who stay on at school to finish Year 12 rather than leaving early.

You have probably heard me say many times that this Government has massively increased the retention rate of Australia's schools.

There can hardly be a better proof of our commitment to egalitarianism, and of our capacity to put in place the essential preconditions of a more just society, than this.

The year before we came to office, in 1982, the retention rate had crept up by just one percentage point over the last five years of the Fraser-Howard-Peacock government and stood at 36 per cent - one of the lowest rates of the Western world. Only one in three school students was finishing Year 12. After six years of this Government that rate now stands at 58 per cent and by the early years of the next decade it will be 65 per cent - getting on for double what it was in 1982.

You get a vivid picture of what these statistics mean when you actually visit a school and talk to the students and teachers and parents.

Back in March, as part of a visit I made to the Hunter region, I visited the High School in Singleton and I spoke to an extraordinary crowd: 1200 primary and secondary school students and teachers drawn from ten schools in the district.

On just about every visit I make to an electorate in New South Wales and interstate I make similar school visits.

The official part of the visit is brief - handing over a flag or planting a tree.

The really important part is simply listening to the kids. We talk about the importance of staying on at school to acquire the skills to contribute to society in a meaningful way and to have a rewarding life.

And so when I hear Andrew Peacock claim that he could create a more egalitarian society - he actually made that claim in Parliament recently! - I know that is a nonsense.

You know it too. And most importantly, the people know it. They know that in the schools the kids are finishing their studies - they're not dropping out like they used to when Peacock and his colleagues were last in office.

That is egalitarianism. That is social justice. That is Labor in action, building a better society for Australians.

Let me give you another example: youth unemployment.

By themselves, the statistics tell a straightforward story. When we came to office, unemployment among young Australians aged 15 to 19 was nearly 30 per cent - 28.8 per cent, to be exact. Now after six years, we have virtually halved it. Nationally, it's 14.8 per cent and in NSW 14 per cent.

But that is a dry way of presenting an achievement that, for those individuals who have found work as a result of my Government's policies, is of massive dimensions.

Throughout Australia, in shopfronts and community centres, there is springing up a new and very special kind of organisation called SkillShare.

SkillShare is a unique joint venture between the Federal Government and community groups designed to provide job training to people who have been unemployed for long periods, or who face special disadvantages in getting back to work.

Courses are offered in, for example, computing or office skills or hospitality skills or metal work and instead of this being just textbook training, it is practical training relevant to the needs of the community.

So not only does the individual gain in acquiring better job skills but the community benefits in harnessing that person's talents for the duration of the course and then, ultimately, as a permanent member of the workforce.

I have visited SkillShare projects all over Australia - including, recently, at the Randwick Employment Access Centre in Jeanette McHugh's electorate. I presented certificates to a recent group of graduates from the SkillShare courses.

In the Cabinet room we design programs and we allocate funds in a way which we hope will deliver real benefits to people, and solve real problems.

So when I come to see such a centre in action, and meet the students and the staff there, I get the satisfaction of knowing that our endeavour has succeeded. I put faces to the statistics about declining youth unemployment, and I see the proof that young unemployed people are getting the edge they need for a decent start in life.

And it's the same throughout New South Wales, across the whole spectrum of government policy embracing every section of the community.

In March, I visited a nursing home in Strathfield - and saw at first hand the care and respect being shown our elderly citizens thanks to the commitment of dedicated staff backed by Government funds.

In April, I launched our Womens' Health Policy at Westmead Hospital in Parramatta - a policy based on a massive process of consultation with women around the nation about their most fundamental needs and concerns.

At ethnic clubs and balls throughout Australia - such as the Cypriot Club in Stanmore that I visited in March - and at citizenship ceremonies like one in Tamworth on Australia Day, I heard the concerns of ethnic Australia and witnessed the decision of hundreds of people born overseas to declare their commitment to their new homeland.

At the BHP Rod Mill in Newcastle, I heard managers and workers tell me about the revival of the steel industry - an industry critical to Australia's future but which, in the early 1980s, looked like being shut down. Had that been allowed to happen, steel cities like Newcastle and Wollongong would have lost their lifeblood. So under the Government's Steel Plan, agreed to with employers and unions, we have seen a massive \$1.8 billion investment that will provide jobs and exports for years to come.

And next Wednesday I'll be opening a new child care centre in Marrickville. Throughout Australia, a steadily increasing number of child care places is being funded by the Commonwealth, providing working parents with the confidence that their children can be safely cared for while they work.

Child care is a vital test of a Government's commitment to the living standards and the quality of life of working Australian families. And our record is proud: by 1992, this Government will have created 98,000 new child care places - a trebling of places since we took office.

So take it all together and see what Labor in action means:

- It means real Australian people, breadwinners in real Australian families, finding real work in real jobs - nearly 1.5 million of them in jobs we have created since we came to office.
- It means real dollars being spent to help real Australian families in genuine need - including the unprecedented assistance provided by the Family Allowance Supplement, and other payments to low income families, which is lifting 500,000 Australian families out of poverty. This Government is each year spending nearly \$9 billion more in real terms on social justice programs than was being spent under the conservatives.
- And Labor in action means not just directly helping those members of our community who are particularly disadvantaged, but also, and even more fundamentally, restructuring the entire economy, so as to remedy the conditions that determine the prosperity of the community as a whole.

Under Labor, we are achieving the most far reaching changes ever seen in the Australian workplace, through the historic process of award restructuring. This will lead to more productivity, better career paths and not least, better remuneration to Australian workers.

Under Labor, we have, through hard work and tough decisions, created a budget surplus for two successive years - the first in 35 years, and a surplus that has funded real, permanent, tax cuts of unparalleled magnitude.

I stress the word 'permanent'. I know interest rates are hurting some people paying off their homes. But it is necessary to keep them high for as long as it takes to slow down the economy - because otherwise we would face an economic disaster in which the dollar would fall and interest rates would skyrocket. So interest rates are lower now than they could otherwise be.

Unlike high interest rates, the tax cuts - as well as the increased family payments - are permanent and will mean enduring increases in the disposable income of families long after high interest rates have become a bad memory.

Delegates,

Forty one years ago almost to the day, Ben Chifley delivered to this Conference one of the great political testaments of our Party.

On 12 June 1948, in a speech called 'These Things Are Really Worth Fighting For', Prime Minister Ben Chifley defined for this Conference - and for history - what he felt the Labor Movement was on about.

It couldn't have been more simple.

"The problem (the Labor movement) has set out to right," he said, "is in seeing that all the community are in a position to have a decent standard of living. That is the ultimate goal of the Labor movement whatever the reversals in that long long road."

He went on: "I think it is tragic, in the world in which there has been so much scientific development, that men and women in a community cannot individually be assured of a reasonable standard of living when unemployment, due to uncontrollable causes, or sickness, or needs, or attention to their family, overtakes them, and that they cannot be assured of security for their own future when they grow old and security for their children."

"These things," he declared, "are really worth fighting for."

Today, what are the things we think are worth fighting for?

Is it not the same goal, so simply expressed here 41 years ago - the goal of seeing that all members of the community have a decent standard of living?

That is the goal we are working towards. It's a goal that is considerably closer to attainment for the nearly 1.5 million more Australians in jobs - for the parents using child care services - for the kids completing their studies - for the families receiving the benefits of tax cuts and higher family payments announced in the April Statement - for the two million Australians sheltering under the umbrella of Medicare who would otherwise not have the security of health insurance.

That is what we are fighting for. And they are the people for whom we fight.

Could these Australians have any confidence, under a Liberal Government, that their interests were being safeguarded or their standards of living protected?

Of course not. Andrew Peacock had his chance to stand up for these people - and he failed them. He was a member of a failed Government, and then he was the failed Leader of a failed Opposition.

So he has already run his race.

It's up to Labor to govern.

Delegates,

When the founders of our great Party envisaged a more just society, they, rightly, saw Government as the proper instrument to achieve that goal.

Today the public sector - the Federal Commonwealth - plays as compassionate, as creative, as catalytic a role in the achievement of social justice as any of our founders could realistically have wished.

And through the Accord with the trade union movement we have created as effective a partnership between the political and industrial wings of our movement as has ever existed - a partnership yielding real and lasting benefits to all Australians.

Of course we haven't created the perfect society.

Of course hardships and needs persist.

As Chifley predicted, there are reversals as we travel the 'long long road'.

But that only makes it more important, for the good of all Australians, that Labor travel that road and attain its goal.

It is the goal that Labor must attain.

Because only Labor can attain it.

With your help, we will attain it.
