



PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP

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Thank you for the invitation to open your Annual Congress. I very much appreciate the opportunity to address a major meeting of representatives of the community welfare sector.

The theme of this Congress is 'Social justice in Australia - the way forward', and that is what I want to talk about today.

How we go forward. How we continue to raise the level of social justice in Australia.

And I can say "continue". Our plans for the next decade, build on the last one - the one in which we transformed social policy in Australia.

I'm talking about social security, health, housing, child care, aged care, education, training - the areas critical to Australians' quality of life and opportunities.

Of course there is more to do - and each year we do more.

As I have said more than once this year, the final measure of how successful a nation we are will always be how well we care for each other.

I think we can say with some pride that we have done well over the decade of Labor.

And I think we can say with confidence that you will see the progress continue.

You will see more programs and better delivery, more building blocks of improvement. You will see the social net made more secure, and the realm of opportunity extended.

Social justice remains at the centre of our approach to the business and task of governing.

Of course we say there is a role for Government - and we reckon it's a very strange philosophy to think that the art of government is to find, not the means of engagement, but the means of withdrawal from the life of the nation.

We think that is quite perverse.

I have always believed that Labor Governments should keep their shoulder to the door. We should always be pushing. If you want to be the government of Australia, you have to want to build things. And know how to build them.

The first principle, we say, is taking the people with you. We learnt that in the eighties.

We consult with people and interest groups, such as those represented here today. We act in partnership.

For a decade now this Government has used the principle of consensus to achieve change, and to ease the passage of change.

But it has been consensus with purpose and direction. The Government has seen what has had to be done and worked with people to bring this about.

It has worked. Consensus does not slow reform - it facilitates it. It exposes the Government to wider views, helps us see the way through. It alerts us to the complexities inherent in all social situations.

We get better programs as a result.

The Labor Government believes that social policy and economic policy are inextricably linked. The point of economic policy is to lift people up, not to push them down.

When this Government introduced a market economy, when it opened us up to the world, implemented programs of microeconomic reform - every step we took towards a more competitive Australia was a step towards a fairer Australia.

We have made hard economic decisions through the last decade. No one would say that we have never put a foot wrong - but the essential changes, the ones that will guarantee us a chance in the contemporary world, and especially in this region have been made.

They are the same changes, of course, that in the long run will give our young people a future, and the rest of us security in work and in retirement.

They are the changes which gave us the growth in national wealth and the job growth of 1.5 million. Without those changes a lot of the social policy we have implemented and a lot of the programs we now contemplate would simply not be feasible.

What we have done on the economic front, we've done for a social purpose. For us, economic policy will always be the servant of a greater goal - greater opportunity, greater care, greater social justice.

This is the recipe for successful countries.

The successful countries of today are the social democracies. Not the centrally planned economies. Not the monetarist experiments.

The successful countries are those which recognise the complexities of modern society and the clear, though subtle and often difficult, role for government in helping to make them work in the interests of the people.

The proper object is to find the right mix - to create an efficient economy and a comprehensive social policy. The proper starting point is the realisation that the two are inextricably connected. Quite simply you can't have one without the other.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The great aim for all governments now is employment and economic growth. You can't have one without the other of those either.

We recognise our responsibilities to those who have borne great hardship in the recession and in the process of economic reform. It is wrong that they should bear the burden of change alone.

Care, support and re-training for these people are integral parts of economic change, and the greatest challenge to the advancement of social justice in Australia.

My first priorities as Prime Minister have been to assist the unemployed and generate jobs and growth.

We began with One Nation. The One Nation Statement included funding for major capital works to create jobs and projects of permanent benefit to the nation. We increased income support for families and expanded labour market programs to assist the unemployed.

Following consultations with young people, community organisations, business and unions, we extended our efforts with the National Employment and Training Plan for Young People.

And I would like to acknowledge now my appreciation of the discussions we had with organisations like ACOSS, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, the Catholic Social Welfare Commission and the Australian Youth Policy and Action Coalition, all of which contributed to the development of the Government's initiatives for young people.

Assisting the unemployed was also the cornerstone of this year's Budget. The Budget provided an additional \$1.2 billion over four years for training, jobs and investment.

We introduced a new local infrastructure program, providing employment and beneficial community projects for regions hardest hit by unemployment. We improved and increased our labour market programs.

A number of groups, including ACOSS, have supported linking training programs with wage subsidies to improve job seekers' chances of finding work.

The Government has taken up this idea, first with the offer of accredited training and wage subsidies for all long term unemployed young people, and then in the Budget with a program linking training and wage subsidies for adults.

The JOBSKILLS program which has been so successful was also expanded. Overall, expenditure on labour market programs has been increased in real terms by 86 per cent this year compared with 1991-92.

But a government's responsibilities go well beyond responding to urgent situations.

A lot of government is, or should be, about quietly running things - making the changes which improve the quality of people's lives. Government is often about good housekeeping - and nurturing.

This is one of the satisfying things in governing for the long haul - you get to see government programs not just established but developed and improved. You get to build on the blocks you have laid.

A good example of what I'm talking about can be seen in the development of the Family Allowance Supplement or FAS program.

I'm convinced that FAS is one of the most successful income support programs in the world for low income families. It offers high levels of payment, additional support for those in private rental accommodation and subsidised health care.

Since we have been in government, payments for low income families have increased in real terms by 43 per cent for families with two children under 13 years, and 87 per cent for those with two children aged 13-15 years.

FAS is a program to be proud of.

But from January next year we will improve it even more.

Family Allowance Supplement, additional pension/benefit for children and family allowance will be integrated.

This low-key change will make the system simpler and easier for families to understand. It will give about 37,000 families additional income. It will reduce poverty traps. The payments will also be paid to the main carer of the children, who is usually the mother.

These are not headline-grabbing changes. They are good housekeeping changes which will make the lives of a great many Australians better.

The FAS changes illustrate that often the way forward in social justice is, as I said, by quietly building on the successes of the past.

Sometimes, also, the way forward comes about through addressing problems that, ironically, have only surfaced because of the successes of past policies.

An example of this is the Child Support Agency.

I strongly supported the establishment of the Child Support Agency. It redressed a major wrong - that the burden of family breakdown was being overwhelmingly borne by the custodial parent, usually the mother.

Before the Agency was set up in 1988 only 24 per cent of custodial parents received child support. The average level of maintenance was \$26 per child per week.

The Child Support Agency is currently collecting 70 per cent of the amount on its books. And under the child support formula, the average level per child is now \$48 a week.

But with all this success came a problem - that is, there is an initial eight week delay in the Agency making the first child support payments.

There are some very good reasons for the delay, including the fairly lengthy process of determining the level of payment and finding the non-custodial parent. But understandably for parents dependent on the money, any delay is very difficult.

It is interesting that the pressure to improve the system comes mainly from parents who would not have experienced the old maintenance system.

For parents who suffered under the old system, the Child Support Agency can seem like a miracle. The other day I heard that the Child Support Agency has caught up with a father who had not paid support for his children for eight years. For custodial parents in cases like this, the Agency is more successful than they could have ever hoped.

But it is no good telling parents who are now facing a delay in receiving their first payment, that in the days before the Child Support Agency they would have been lucky to get the most paltry amount on an irregular basis.

They just want a system that works. And this is what we have to keep working to deliver - the best.

I'm pleased to say that in this year's Budget the Government announced that it would change the arrangements so that custodial parents will receive their first child support payment two to three weeks earlier. And we will continue to work to improve the program.

So successes can lead to new problems and new solutions to them. This is one way the social justice agenda moves forward.

The work we have done this year on vocational education, which will continue over the next few years, is another example of this point.

Education has been one of our successes as a government. When we came to office, only 36 per cent of kids finished school. Today, 70 per cent do. A revolution in a decade.

We helped this revolution along with AUSTUDY and ABSTUDY which provide financial assistance for senior secondary students in low income families. We have increased this assistance and 50 per cent more secondary school students receive it now than in 1987.

Again success has lead to other problems. Having stayed to the end of high school, these kids now want a tertiary education. But the system is not yet fully equipped to take them the next education step, despite the 50 per cent increase in Commonwealth funding for higher education places between 1983 and 1994.

We now need to tackle our vocational education and training systems to prepare young people for a life of skilled and interesting work, a world of work which requires training and retraining over a working life.

The new Australian National Training Authority is a major step forward in creating a genuinely national system to deliver high quality training programs that better meet the needs and priorities of both students and industry.

But we don't just respond to problems.

We review policy regularly. We want to be sure we are up to date, responsive, responsible.

Since coming to office in 1983, we have done just this.

We have undertaken major reviews of aged care; social security; retirement income; programs of support for people with disabilities; and, more recently, health and housing and the major review of government policies in response to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

Such reviews can lead to fundamental changes to programs. For example:

- . the shift to support for elderly people to stay at home through the introduction of the Home and Community Care Program
- . the transformation of the unemployment benefit system into an active program of assistance
- . and the creation of a new community housing program.

These reviews also provide an excellent vehicle to consult with groups such as yourselves.

The recent National Health Strategy is a good example of this process. The Government introduced Medicare in 1984 in response to the previous Government's policies which left nearly 2 million people without health insurance.

Medicare provides a universal, equitable and efficient system of health care for all Australians.

It is difficult to understand why the Opposition would want to replace such a system with a policy which would force people to take out private insurance such as in the United States.

The Opposition policy would greatly increase the cost of health care. It would hand over responsibility for setting health costs to the AMA: to quote their own words - "Basically, our policy requires doctors to set their own fees".

The Opposition's health policies would increase the total cost of health care in Australia by over \$2 billion a year. The overall impact on household health bills would be an increase of 23 per cent - or \$1000 a year for a family with two children.

The Government's approach through the National Health Strategy is to build on the strengths of Medicare and ensure it is in good shape to take us into the next century. Medicare will become more than just a health financing system; it will become a comprehensive health care system.

The Government has an agenda of reform to cover Australia's health needs, including improved access to public hospitals; better integration of the health and aged care networks; and implementation of a National Mental Health Policy.

I have talked today about different ways of taking the social justice agenda further.

We respond to the urgent problems like unemployment. But we don't just wait for emergencies to act, we also look for opportunities to make our programs stronger and better.

And we don't rest on our laurels; we respond to the challenges that our successes can give rise to.

Finally, we do not shun open and constructive fundamental review of our programs, to ensure they are right to meet the changing demographic, social and economic landscape of Australia.

We have taken the view that social justice is at the core of governing, and we have governed for the long haul. The rewards come steadily and it is to those who most need and deserve them that they flow.

It is not an approach predicated on the belief that there is no role for government except to clear the way for the market. It is not a residualist approach which believes social justice is about giving cold charity to the poor.

Dr Hewson's approach is dramatically different.

Dr Hewson does not talk about building on the strengths of the Family Allowance Supplement. He talks about using the social security system to compensate people for the introduction of a highly regressive goods and services tax.

Dr Hewson does not talk about tackling the challenges of the success of the Child Support Agency. He talks about privatising it, removing the one thing that ensures the very success of the agency: its location in the Tax Office.

Dr Hewson does not talk about advancing the social justice agenda. He talks about getting out of the business of governing for social change, selling off public housing, tearing down the public health system. Reducing. Limiting. Privatising. Wrecking.

The Hewson model of government is to get out of the business of government. In his own words, it is about less government.

Integral to this approach is the division of society into the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving'; into those who can legitimately claim government assistance and those who will be shunned.

Two Nations instead of our One Nation.

Dr Hewson says he is all about giving Australians choice, all about the government getting out of the way and leaving people to it.

But can we call choice, abolishing unemployment benefit for people after nine months and throwing them to the wolves?

Can we call choice, forcing sole parents into the workforce when their youngest child reaches 12?

Can we call choice, giving young people a voucher for training and telling them to get their own training course?

Can we call choice, selling off public housing and leaving the elderly, Aboriginals and people with disabilities to find their own way in the private rental market?

Dr Hewson doesn't understand about choice.

Real choice is not about stripping back support and abandoning people to their own devices. Choice is about people being able to take advantage of opportunities. At times this will mean assisting people to the starting line; at times it will be about running the race alongside, helping out; and at times it will mean intervening when the race is being run unfairly.

This is what governing for social justice is about - it is about being in partnership with people throughout their lives and providing the support necessary to enable them to make the choices and take advantage of the opportunities.

With this approach to government, we are committed to a comprehensive social security system and to maintaining the level of payments through indexation.

We are committed to expanding the provision of quality, affordable child care for parents at home and in the workforce.

We are committed to a fair and equitable health system and to tackling the problem of waiting lists in public hospitals.

We are committed to continuing to expand opportunities for women, in education, in employment, in every area of our national life.

We are committed to better housing options for people, and to moving to more effective assistance for people in private rental.

We are committed to giving older people opportunities for an independent and dignified life.

We are committed to building a truly national vocational education and training system.

We are committed to advancing social justice for Australians.

I think we should be very proud of our achievements. But we know the process of reform is never over.

We go forward by adding one achievement to the next. We do not dwell on the past, but strive to understand and influence the future.