



## **PRIME MINISTER**

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP  
PRESENTATION OF THE PRIME MINISTER'S EMPLOYER OF THE  
YEAR AWARD, PARLIAMENT HOUSE CANBERRA, 19 OCTOBER  
1994.**

I welcome the opportunity to be with you today, for the presentation of the Prime Minister's Employer of the Year Awards.

These awards help all of us communicate a very important message to the Australian community.

That message is about the economic and social benefits of employing people with a disability. It is simple and uncontroversial, but we have to repeat it often because it is often ignored. It goes like this:

To grow, as an economy and as a nation, we have to make the most of all our resources, and this includes the talents and energies of people with disabilities. We must ensure that everyone has an opportunity to contribute and share in Australia's growth.

This message underpins our broad commitments on social justice and access and equity. It also meshes with the "Working Nation" agenda, outlined in the White Paper on Employment released in May this year.

Through the Employer of the Year Awards we help to turn the message into reality by acknowledging and supporting Australian employers who lead the way in encouraging and assisting people with a disability to join the workforce. We also recognise and demonstrate, practically, the significant contributions people with disabilities make.

People with a disability have shown that they are willing and able to take up the challenge of working in mainstream employment.

People with a disability have proven they do bring special attributes to the workplace, in terms of dedication to the job, low levels of absenteeism and staff turnover.

In the right job, with the right training and support, they offer as much as any worker.

People with a disability want, and have the right to, a fair go to compete in the open labour market and employers need a skilled and reliable workforce.

The Employer of the Year Awards recognise that once barriers to equal employment opportunity are overcome, everyone - employers, employees and the community - stands to benefit.

Over 300 employers around Australia have been nominated for this year's awards. This is a record number of nominations and shows the real advances being made in human resource management practices by Australian businesses. It also shows our message is being received.

The Awards have been part of the Government's wider process of reform in disability policy over the last ten years.

By changing existing supports, and introducing new services, our reforms have helped people with a disability to have many of the same opportunities to participate in the life and work of the community as anyone else. These are opportunities which many without a disability take for granted.

The Disability Services Act of 1986 went a long way to address long-standing barriers faced by Australians with disabilities.

The Disability Reform Package brought fundamental improvements to assistance provided for people with a disability. This included the development of further measures to assist open and supported employment for people with a disability. A key feature is the linking of income support for people with disabilities, with education, training and work opportunities.

Many of you will know of a more recent development, the Supported Wage system, which involves wages based on skills and productive capacity and income supplementation through the Social Security system. This will allow employers to employ people with a disability on a pro rata award wage, where necessary, and will greatly increase job opportunities for people with more severe disabilities.

The Disability Discrimination Act, which came into effect in 1993, makes discrimination on the grounds of disability unlawful, including in employment situations.

Now, through work in developing an Australian Disability Strategy, we are embarking on a comprehensive and systematic effort to address barriers to access, equality and participation for people with a disability.

The Strategy will provide a plan of action across Government programs to comply with our own Disability Discrimination Act and the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities.

Under the Strategy equal opportunity goals for people with a disability will be set out and we will define ways to achieve them over the next ten years. A plan of action has been developed covering Federal programs and responsibilities. We are also working with State and Territory Governments to develop a national Australian Disability Strategy for the next ten years.

My colleague, Carmen Lawrence, as the Minister for Human Services, has recently announced the formation of the Australian Disability Consultative Council, to advise the Government on the development and implementation of the Strategy.

In the Employment White Paper, we expanded the employment assistance available to people with a disability through:

- better access to labour market programs through the Job Compact;

- greater emphasis on individual case management with relevant case managers having a lighter case load and greater resources;
- more employment assistance through additional places in the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service and Disability Services Program; and
- ongoing funding for specialist psychiatric pilot units.

Before I hand back to Dr Lawrence, I want to thank everyone who has helped with these awards.

I would like to thank the ACTU, and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, for their support. You are key players in this work.

Finally, I would like to thank and congratulate all those employers present, and the Awards finalists in particular, for their outstanding effort to ensure that people with a disability have the rights, choices and opportunities that most Australians take for granted.

Your efforts and these awards demonstrate the benefits of harnessing the skills and abilities of people with a disability.

In this way we are all contributing to building a fairer and better Australia.