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PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP
DOORSTOP, CENTRAL QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY, ROCKHAMPTON, QLD
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PM: I'm happy to take the odd question from you.

J: Mr Keating, there still seems to be some student anger at your recent comments?

PM: Not very much, I don't think, because they now know that I wasn't addressing an unemployed person, I was addressing a University student who didn't want to pay the HECS fee. And, I made the obvious point - if you don't want to pay your HECS fee, give your place to somebody who does. And, as a consequence, it means that the nation is investing four-fifths of the cost of every University course in a young person who can then go out in the top deciles of wage and salary earners. So they have to repay the Commonwealth for one-fifth of the cost of their education after they start work. So, it is eminently fair, and of course, we have put all that money back into University places, so roughly one-third of all the students in this campus wouldn't be here without HECS.

J: Do you regret the comment in the first place, though?

PM: Well, the comment was directed to some person who wanted us to pay for their fees exclusively, and of course that would just take us back to the old system where only the wealthy had places in universities.

J: The High Court has handed down a decision today which means that State public servants can switch to the federal award - do you feel vindicated?

PM: Well, I think we have extended - as the States have adopted obscurantist laws and policies - we have extended the Federal industrial relations jurisdiction. And, we have left it to employees and unions to decide

whether they want to be Federally registered, and of course, they have voted with their feet in seeking to be so registered. And, so, I think this decision is probably a vindication of the Commonwealth's position.

J: Mr Howard on the Noel Crichton-Browne affair - earlier this week you said that he should show some strong leadership, and today he has come out and said that you can do that with a softly-softly approach - do you feel the same way?

PM: If Mr Crichton-Browne leaves his Senate place, it will obviously have nothing to do with Mr Howard's leadership - it will just be sheer attrition. And, therefore, it proves the point that it is not thoughtfulness....I mean Mr Howard - he is a real wordsmith. He is out there now trying to say, "Well, it's thoughtful - I'm taking a thoughtful, conservative approach to this". What he has taken is a weak and indecisive approach to it, and if the Liberal Party insist that Mr Crichton-Browne give up his Senate place, it will have nought to do with Mr Howard's leadership.

J: And child care - you made that promise in 1993...?

PM: I'm not going through Budget things here. The whole of the outlay system is under review. This Government has extended child care as no other Government before - when we became the Government, there were 45,000 childcare places. We are well on our way now when we are getting to the point when all the childcare places on demand in this country will be met.

J: But will you be breaking that election promise?

PM: I just said I'm not going through outlays discussions - anything else?

J: What message do you have for the Central Queensland home-owners struggling with the interest rate hikes?

PM: I am just saying that we have still got relatively low interest rates by Australian standards - it is just that they got to be so low that they were probably unsustainable. They have now come up a bit - but only by a couple of percent - and now the Government is working flat out on the Budget, and a good Budget will make further increases to the interest rates far less likely. And, I think that's what most people are worried about - they are worried about the prospect of future interest rates, rather than what has happened. And, last week we had some national accounts data showing the economy slowing - as the Government wished it would - and which has proved that the earlier interest rate adjustments are working, and that - coupled with a good Budget - means that interest rates rising in

the future will be less likely, and that must be good news for home owners.
Thank you.

J: And just lastly - on the drought?

PM: On the drought I will give you a comment - the Government has already acknowledged the difficulties of the drought, and when I came here with Marjorie Henzell in the later part of last year, we made quite revolutionary changes to income support. And, as a consequence, we have removed the farm assets test for the receiving of Social Security support. We now have 10,000 farm families getting that support. But, nothing can support them like rain, and so we are hoping that there is now some reasonable follow up rains to the January rains. Thank you.

ends.