



2

PRIME MINISTER

40/95

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP

"HONEST JOHN" AND THE GST

Today Mr Howard has said that the GST is no longer Coalition policy and will not be "at any time in the future". Yesterday he said that there was "no way" the Coalition could have it as their policy for the next election, but "as to what happens some years in the future, I don't want to.. you know, I don't know".

Today Mr Howard said that the GST is "completely off" the political agenda. Off the agenda but not off his mind. Mr Howard said yesterday that "there's nothing wrong" with the GST. And it wasn't the first time. In March this year he said it was "a shame" that they couldn't have a GST - but they wouldn't be "having a GST or anything remotely resembling it for the next election". He wants it off the political agenda because he knows Australians won't vote for it - but he wants to do by stealth what John Hewson failed to do by fanatical advocacy.

In fact, Mr Howard is trying to get to the election without anything "remotely resembling" a policy at all. He is trying to make himself a very small target. That is why anything which "remotely resembles" a policy is poison to Mr Howard. The same goes for anything which "remotely resembles" leadership.

We have seen it with his role in the push polling and Hindmarsh Island affairs. Mr Howard will not take a position of policy or principle until he is forced to - then, as he has always done, he dithers and dissembles. As with the republic, so with the GST - "as to what happens some years in the future, I don't want to...you know, I don't know".

Three months have passed since Mr Howard promised "headland speeches" which he said would define his position "with greater clarity." But the only thing which has become clearer is that John Howard has not changed a bit. Watch the polls and adjust the rhetoric and make "people feel comfortable", to use his own words. This is the attempt at a new electorally acceptable John Howard, but all the time he's playing footsie with his old reactionary friends - and the GST.

"I don't want to..you know, I don't know", he says. He doesn't want to talk about it. He doesn't want the Australian people to know what he thinks. He doesn't want anyone to know what he intends.

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