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PRIME MINISTER

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

HOWARD'S POLICY VACUUM

Mr Howard's declaration after the Liberal Party's federal executive meeting on Friday that he would not release any policies before the next election campaign was a declaration of contempt for the Australian electorate.

He will not tell Australians what he thinks or intends to do, or what if anything he stands for. He tries to deny them by arguing that he will not respond to my agenda - a lame excuse for having no agenda himself.

This is the same tactic adopted by his most immediate predecessor, Mr Downer. It did not wash for Mr Downer, and it won't wash for Mr Howard.

The Australian people may now conclude that Mr Howard has no policies. Alternatively, they may suspect that Mr Howard is attempting to invoke a policy "fifth amendment" - he will not say what he will do on the grounds that it might incriminate him. His recent GST slip made this clear.

His call over the weekend for an inquiry into the Hindmarsh Island bridge controversy further illustrates his cynicism. This is nothing more than a transparent attempt to rehabilitate Ian McLachlan, when the unalterable truth is that McLachlan had to resign because he misled the Australian people and the Parliament. Whether the confidential parcel contained sacred documents, or somebody's gas bill - the fact remains it was not his property, and he should not have tampered with it and tried to misuse it in Parliament. In the circumstances, John Howard's call for an inquiry is merely the latest refuge of a policy flake.

In the meantime, the Coalition last week made more explicit how the it intends to camouflage its giant policy hole. Apparently, they think it is clever to campaign principally on a "get rid of Keating" platform.

What they are trying to do is assume legitimacy for a campaign of personality politics with no policy content at all. In other words, to the incessant talking down of the economy, the Coalition will add the abandonment of policy.

The Liberal Party believes that from now until the next election they can survive on a hate campaign. This means that after 12 years in Opposition, they are not only bereft of policies for Australia, they have learned nothing about the political values of Australians.

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