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PRIME MINISTER

49/95

(embargo: 9pm)

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

MR HOWARD'S EMPTY HEADLAND

The Leader of the Opposition's so-called "headland" speech tonight is a hollow collection of cliches, exposing his complete paucity of policies.

Mr Howard has now been leading the Liberal Party for four months, and the best he can produce in that time in a prepared text issued tonight is a collection of lightweight truisms, which he calls "a framework for a future Coalition Government."

Far from presenting serious, detailed alternative policies, the speech confirms that Mr Howard has a bad case of policy phobia.

Along the way, he has also confirmed the cynicism of the Opposition's recent poll-driven misappropriation of the word "battlers".

Mr Howard let the cat out of the bag when he said: "...after a week of us fighting for the interests of the Australian battler". The Labor Party has been fighting for the rights and living standards of Australian workers for more than 100 years - not just the past week.

Those same Australian workers - indeed all Australians - will also see through Mr Howard's claim that they "may not want government out of their lives, but they do want it off their backs." This is Liberal Party code for cutting Government spending on welfare payments and other programs designed to increase equity in the Australian community. But you won't find any mention of spending cuts on this headland.

Nor will Australians be taken in by Mr Howard's smug reference to a "pro-family industrial relations policy". What is pro-family about ripping away award protection and attacking unions?

Mr Howard has also committed a Coalition Government to the destruction of the Commonwealth's external affairs power. Among other things, this would

see the Federal Government's role in the protection of the environment seriously impeded.

Mr Howard says that the use of the external affairs power by this Government has been "illicit". Illicit means unlawful and forbidden. What an extraordinary claim for the alternative Prime Minister to make. A claim which yet again reveals how deep and irrational is his Party's obsession with States' rights.

On Foreign Affairs, Mr Howard offered not a single specific policy towards our region, apart from saying "the next Coalition Government will continue (the) pattern" of stressing the importance of our relations with nations in the Asia-Pacific region.

On health, Mr Howard has reaffirmed his commitment to Labor's policies. Suddenly, he is a defender of Medicare and bulk billing. And, what's more, he has endorsed the Government's long-standing policy aimed at lifting the level of childhood immunisation. This year's Budget committed \$24 million over two years, in part to set up a national register to record how many children are missing out and why, and to broaden the existing education campaign. While we welcome his support for our policies, it is dishonest for him to claim them as his own.

The republic issue is a prime example of the Mr Howard's determination to follow, rather than lead. The only conclusion we can draw is that Mr Howard is afraid to state his true position on the republic - which is that he is opposed to a republic, and therefore does not want an Australian to be our head of state.

He also attacks what he terms "a few interest groups" driving the Government away from the "mainstream". Mr Howard should name the interest groups of which he speaks; the interest groups which would be deprived of access to a Coalition Government.

I have news for Mr Howard. The interest groups he so carefully avoids naming are ordinary, decent Australians.

I did not see Mr Howard deliver his speech tonight, but surely he blushed as he spoke. This was no headland; this was bluff.

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