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PRIME MINISTER

50/95

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

Tonight I will announce the Government's proposal for an Australian Republic. We will want to consult widely with the Australian people before finalising the proposal which will be put to the Australian electorate in a referendum in 1998 or 1999.

Mr Howard last night told the Australian people that he would stage a "people's convention" in 1997 to examine the Australian Constitution. There is every sign that this is a hollow promise.

Three facts about conventions need to be understood.

First, a convention is not the only means of consultation and quite likely it is by no means the best. Inevitably only a small number of people would be involved. Even if popularly elected, at a cost of at least \$40 million, it is not obvious why it would be any more representative of, or responsive to public opinion than the Parliament itself.

Second, whatever the merits of consultation through a convention, it will only work if there are specific proposals for discussion. Mr Howard has no specific proposals but only vague promises that anything and everything is open for discussion. He has nothing of substance to propose. Mr Howard's convention will be like Mr Howard's entire speech - a policy free zone. He is only talking about a process, but to work the process he describes requires a specific proposal. Mr Howard lacks that specific proposal.

Third, unlike the situation in the 1890s when there was no Commonwealth Parliament and the Constitutional Conventions essentially served in its place, today a convention cannot determine the questions to be put to the people in a referendum. Under our Constitution, this is the responsibility of the Parliament.

At most, a convention is therefore only a source of advisory opinion. The Government will listen to what the people have to say, but in the final analysis it is the Government's responsibility to put to the Parliament the Bills which

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will frame the questions for the referendum. Only then will true democracy prevail - when all citizens will have the opportunity to express their opinion in that referendum.

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If Mr Howard is suggesting to the Australian public that a convention can actually change the Constitution, he is wrong.

If he is suggesting to Australians that a convention can make and implement decisions, he is wrong.

If he is suggesting that an Australian republic can be approved or rejected at a convention, he is also wrong.

Mr Howard must know these things. In fact, last night he continued his ploy of laying a false trail. In fact, he is attempting to mislead Australians who want a republic, and those who are still undecided, by offering them a process without honest purpose.

Mr Howard says that he will put the "decision" of a convention to a referendum, but he reserves the right to oppose the outcome. This compounds the democratic fraud.

The fraud is, Mr Howard's suggestion that the democratic processes of Parliament and Referendum, devised and enshrined in the Australian Constitution a hundred years ago, can and should be by-passed.

The problem for Mr Howard is that he still does not believe an Australian should be our Head of State. He will do anything not to say so.

**CANBERRA
7 JUNE 1995**

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