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## **PRIME MINISTER**

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP  
ADDRESS TO THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN NURSES FEDERATION  
PERTH, 10 OCTOBER 1995**

**\*\*\* CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY \*\*\***

It is a great pleasure to be here today: it is one of the privileges of this job of mine to meet people who do the essential things in our society. In your case, people who help to make this a compassionate society, - and therefore a good society.

If societies are truly compassionate they are also more efficient - the goals are not opposed.

It is important to make care more efficient - it is a poor kind of care which is not efficient.

But the fundamentals of care are not negotiable in the market place - the core of education and health and human services resides in the public sphere. They are the responsibility of communities and governments.

And it follows that governments have a responsibility to look after those who provide the care.

I said it is a privilege to speak to people like yourselves on whom we all depend. It is also one of my privileges as the leader of a Labor government to be in a position to support you.

That is what I want to assure you of today. I want to assure you that the Federal Government supports your claims for wage justice and will provide you with whatever protection we can.

Some people are saying that we are engaged in a scare campaign about what Federal Coalition government would do with Australians' wages and conditions of employment.

But we are not talking about phantoms. We are not talking about maybes. We are talking about an approach to industrial relations, an approach to lower paid workers, which you are actually experiencing.

In fact, in Western Australia we are seeing the prototype of what would be a national regime if the Coalition were elected. You don't have to take my word for it - read the transcript of Mr Howard's remarks last night. No one could mistake the meaning of them - he cannot conceive of capitalism without low wages and less security at the bottom end.

He remains what he has always been - a believer in primitive capitalism, capitalism moderated not by consensus about common social goals, not by an Accord between workers and governments, not by a social safety net to protect the weak and a social wage to support the families of the lower paid, but by what he calls an "ethic", by a sense of responsibility - to the business community.

Well I'm all in favour of a sense of responsibility: but I do not believe the welfare of Australian wage earners should depend on it. I think we are a bit more sophisticated than that.

Now, the nurses and teachers of Western Australia are in centre of this d debate. What has happened to you, under the direction of Mr Keirath, is being watched by Australian workers and their families everywhere:

I can tell you today that what they will see is Federal government support for you.

While WA nurses are on a Federal award their access to the safety net is at the discretion of the WA government.

But the WA government has resisted the two \$8 a week safety net adjustments

This has meant that the real purchasing power of the wages of WA nurses is falling.

The case is now going to the Industrial Relations Commission. We have supported it going to the Commission and we will support you in the Commission.

We supported it going there through the Accord.

I might say this about the Accord.

The Accord has delivered to Australia low inflation, high economic growth, high employment growth, a record low in industrial disputes, an industrial environment of consensus and cooperation, vastly increased flexibility in workplace arrangements and a broad sophisticated social safety net for the low paid and disadvantaged

There is a lie being put around about the Accord just now.

The lie is that the Accord has not helped Australian workers and Australian families,

Part of the lie is the claim that Australian workers have suffered real wage cuts in the past decade. This is an attempt to give birth to a myth.

The fact - as opposed to the lie - is that wages have increased, not fallen: over the twelve years since 1983 there has been a 7.2% increase in real wages.

And a twenty per cent increase in per capita incomes - after the tax and social security changes.

The lie about wages and incomes is compounded by hypocrisy - not just by the curious fact that John Howard has opposed every wage increase bar one since 1978.

It's compounded by what has been done in Western Australia by a Liberal Government - particularly by what has been done to the nurses of WA - and what will be done nationally by a Federal Liberal government.

When we talk about nurses, of course - we talk about more than nurses.

We talk about parents. We talk about the children they have to support. We talk about families.

The same can be said about teachers - teachers who in this state have been similarly abused.

The fact is that every time we talk about workers - blue collar or white - we talk about Australians who fulfil a range of essential roles and responsibilities.

The next time the Coalition talks about families ask them about wages - including youth wages. In WA they are offering \$4.00 per hour for youth wages.

Nothing supports a family more effectively than a decent wage.

And after the decent wage comes employment security.

Under the current arrangements nurses are all covered by the Federal Awards. This protects some of the basic conditions of nurses' pay - penalty rates, overtime pay, holiday leave.

You know what penalty rates and overtime are worth to you. You know the effect if you lose them.

During a normal year, most nurses work on weekends. Most work night shift. You all get holiday leave loadings. And out of this work you support yourselves - and very often your families.

Under a Coalition government, as we have seen under Mr Keirath, these protections and supplements are not guaranteed - even though they may account for more than 25 per cent of an individual's income.

Let me give you an example:

Take away the penalty rates, and nurses who work just weekends lose 38% of their annual pay.

Or take the example of full time registered nurses who work some weekends and some nightshifts throughout the year - if they work the same hours without the penalty and overtime rates they will lose 22% of their income.

About \$100 a week.

Now the Opposition says that this won't happen because only those who *want* to go off the Award system *will* go off.

But this is not how labour market operates!

In 1994 1.73 million Australians faced a new employer.

39,400 nurses were among them.

Many have just graduated. A large proportion are returning to work after having children. Some are people who have recently moved - from the country to the city, from one state another.

The Opposition says they will have a choice. But they won't.

What choice will these people have if the employer says the job doesn't come with penalties and overtime?

Say a nurse's husband's job obliges him to move to Albany, or your wife wants to move east to be with her parents, say you want a change of climate, or you want to have a child - you need to leave, and in leaving you leave the present Award.

Under a Federal Coalition government thousands of nurses will not be able to change jobs without losing pay - a lot of pay.

Someone told me the other day of a friend of theirs - a librarian in Victoria who is earning \$35,000 a year. She wanted to work closer to home and she saw an advertisement for a position which was identical to the one she presently holds - identical in all respects bar one, the salary. Leaving the job meant leaving the benefits she had inherited from the award, and negotiating a whole new deal. The whole new deal in her case meant a salary of \$19,000 - a little more than half of what she was earning.

So she had to stay where she was.

The Coalition calls this choice.

But she had **no** choice - **no** choice, but to stay.

You can think of this as a scare campaign if you like, but what I am really about is warning Australians that the Opposition's attitude to the labour market is one of the big differences between us.

The Coalition's position on industrial relations reflects a view of the world in which employers have a pool of working poor to call on in an ultra competitive market place.

It reflects deep seated beliefs and prejudices - prejudices against trade unions, prejudices in favour of that 19th century philosophy which boils down to every man for himself and every woman for herself - prejudice against the idea of an egalitarian and inclusive Australian ethic and ideal.

The next time you hear the Coalition talking about "battlers" I think you should recognise it for the rampant hypocrisy it is - these are the battlers whose wages will be cut and whose security will be undermined in the interests of cutting costs for business.

The media are saying that industrial relations will be a major election issue. In this case, the media are right.

But I suspect what is generally understood by industrial relations is too narrow.

Industrial relations go to the heart of the basic social relationship - the relationship between workers and their employers.

It goes to the heart of economic competitiveness and efficiency - objectives, I might say, Labor has pursued like no other government.

But what goes under the name "industrial relations", goes much further than this.

It goes to the fundamental tenets of what Australians have always meant by a good society - that is a fair society, a society in which the effort is always made to extend the realm of opportunity and bring into it those who have drifted onto the margins.

Our industrial relations, determined not just our efficiency but our ability to meet these traditional social goals. They determine our whole social fabric - including the strength of our families and the opportunities we can extend to our children.

Our industrial relations are a measure of how much we actually believe in the ties that bind us all as Australians, or how much we merely pay lip service to them.

So when people say that industrial relations will be a major issue in the next election campaign, in fact they understate the case - because what we think about industrial relations defines our ideas about Australia, about what sort of people we are, what sort of society we should become.

The way you are treated here in Western Australia impinges directly on these questions. The Commonwealth Government will support you because you deserve support, and because it is in the interests of Australia that you receive justice.

ends.