



PRIME MINISTER

9 May 1996

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
LAUNCH OF PAPER: "ETHICAL STANDARDS AND VALUES
IN THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE"
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA**

E&OE.....

Thank you very much, Dr Keating, Ladies and Gentlemen. I would like to thank Michael Keating for inviting me to launch this document. In some respects, I'm a little surprised to find myself launching a document of this kind, being a person who normally eschews the notion that you write down, in a detailed descriptive way, codes of behaviour. For example, I've always regarded myself in the ongoing debate about the need for a Bill of Rights in the Australian Constitution as something of a common law man, who thinks the strengths of the institution, rather than the detail of the written word, is the greater guarantee of liberty, and the greater guarantee of freedom. But having been shown a draft of this document, I thought it put in such a commonsense coherent fashion a reasonable, understandable statement of the ethical values and principles of the Australian Public Service, that I readily agreed, not only with the publication of the document, but also to come here today to launch it.

It's not in any sense trite of me to say that the Australian public is very fortunate that over the years, it's had a federal public service that has been distinguished by two characteristics. The first of those characteristics is an extremely high degree of integrity and honesty. One of the really remarkable things about public life in Australia has been the very low incidence of any sustainable allegations of corruption or impropriety on behalf of the federal bureaucracy. Indeed, the entire federal sphere of political endeavour in Australia, both politically and also bureaucratically, has by and

large in the ninety-five odd years of Federation, been free of corruption, although the same cannot be said with equal passion and equal detail about other levels of government. Now, that is not the word of a complacent individual, but it does record a fact, and the reputation for integrity that the federal public service has enjoyed is one of its hallmarks. The other characteristic of course, is a very high degree of professionalism, and a willingness over the years - irrespective of the political complexion of Government - to give comprehensive and, on most occasions, pretty zealous technical advice.

Now the Australian Public Service has, like the rest of Australian society, changed a lot over the ninety-five years of its existence. I've noticed a difference between the public service that I now work with, and the public service that I worked with before 1983. I'm happy to say that most of the changes that have occurred over that period of time have been beneficial changes. For example there is, I think, a more comfortable balance between the need to preserve a capacity to give fearless independent technical advice, but equally the need to implement - and to understand the reasons for - the political decisions of the government of the day. I think there's an easier relationship now between private office staff and the senior branches of the public service than used to obtain perhaps fifteen or twenty years ago.

There's a greater understanding by the public service that political parties exist to implement policies and philosophies and attitudes, and they have a perfect right, having won a mandate from the people, to implement those, and even though those who give independent public service advice may on many occasions not share those values or principles, it's nonetheless the proper working-out of the process that those decisions should be implemented. I don't find some of the uneasiness between senior bureaucrats and senior private office staff that I encountered on earlier occasions. I don't find the same degree of that now, and I think that has been a very beneficial change.

Along with the rest of the work force, the Commonwealth public service has of course entered an era of much greater flexibility. There's probably a higher degree of turnover, and some of the mobility of the work force, which has become a characteristic of the Australian labour market, of course has affected the public service.

I think this document will prove to be two things. I think it will represent a very clear and simple statement of the values of a professional public service. It will not purport to cover every situation, and at the end of the day, every individual is the ultimate judge of his or her own propriety, and no document, no Minister, no senior bureaucrat, no adviser can really, at the end of the day, define what is right and what is wrong in any given situation and it is always at the end of the day a matter of individual conscience and a matter of individual judgement as to what is the direct and proper thing to do.

There is little doubt that the public attitudes towards the public service has changed a lot over the last couple of generations. The public now is more demanding, they're more demanding of service, they're more demanding of explanation, they are more articulate, they are more persistent, they are more readily mobilised into lobby groups, they know the capacity of the media to harass and to bring about change because of

exposure and harassment and they understand how the system of exerting public pressure works now, far better than they did a generation or so ago. That requires of the public service an understanding that it is not good enough simply to deliver decisions, to deliver judgements, it is also necessary to explain the reason for it. And the willingness of senior bureaucrats, and I think particularly (if) people who are always in the public consciousness, like for example the taxation office - something that touches all of us - the willingness of the Commissioner of Taxation of today in a very effective fashion to go public to explain the reasons behind many taxation office decisions, the more public friendly approach that has been taken by agencies such as that, I think they represent extremely healthy development.

The public service is a lot more conscious now of the need to explain, the need to justify the need to defend. I think it's also important for the political arm of government to, from time to time, focus on the relationship between the bureaucracy and the political side of government and as a still very new Prime Minister, I've been very conscious of that.

I respect the still essentially non-political tradition of the Australian Public Service. There will always be debates between political parties about the level of politicisation of the public service. There will always be different views of the notion of a non-political or an apolitical public service in no way precludes the fact that like every other Australian, individual members of the federal public service can have fiercely held and are entitled to have fiercely held, partisan political views. It's a measure of their professionalism that we can have a public service where they have those views, but are able to continue irrespective of those views to give dispassionate, clear and articulate professional advice.

The proper relationship is for the public service to give the fearless advice; to give it professionally, to give it cogently, and to give it accurately for it to be properly considered and not summarily dismissed by the government of the day. But that decision having been taken, I think desirably if it is contrary to the advice tendered with some explanation as to why the decision has been taken, then for the decision to be carried out by the public service without further questioning or hindrance. Now in my experience, that has by and large been the approach that has been adopted by the public service.

I'm very happy to say, and would like to in this context, say something of Michael Keating's contribution to the Australian Public Service, because this will be, I think, one of the last, if not the last public occasion that he and I will appear together as Prime Minister and a Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. He has personified in many ways the apolitical character of the modern public service. I first encountered him when he was a senior officer in the Prime Minister's Department when the Fraser government was in office. He worked very hard for that government. He gave it a lot of good quality advice, some of it was accepted, some of it wasn't. He'll probably ponder privately to himself that perhaps the things that were accepted shouldn't have been, and those that weren't accepted should have been, but that was the nature of the public service activity. He then served with very considerable distinction, both to Hawke and Keating Governments, serving as a Departmental Secretary and then ultimately as the Head of the Prime Minister's Department. I want

to say that he has assisted me greatly in the transition process over the last two months or more. He was available in the proper traditions of the public service to give me some advice, some of it proved very interesting the day after the election. And I have appreciated over the last ten weeks the way in which he has gone about his job in a very professional manner. I think he has served the Commonwealth public service extremely well. He has served both sides of politics extremely well as befits a professional public servant, and I wish him well in his future activities.

I don't believe his services are going to be entirely lost to the Commonwealth. He has a great store of knowledge and a great store of understanding of how the service works, and I want on behalf of the present government, I know that I can presume to speak for my two predecessors, Mr Keating and Mr Hawke, and also their predecessor Malcolm Fraser, to record the collective thanks of governments of the past twenty years for the contribution that Michael Keating has made to the processes of government, and to developing a proper relationship between the political arm of government and the bureaucratic arm of government.

Ladies and gentlemen, I know that at the present time there is a lot of debate in the community, particularly here in Canberra, about the impact of certain decisions of the new government on the size and the composition of the public service. I want to reiterate something that I said in parliament yesterday that in no way, are the decisions that we are taking now, part of any kind of punitive exercise against the public sector. I am as I think you all know, a passionate believer in the role of the private sector in our society, particularly in the small business sector, but I've long preached to my own party and I do it again today, the importance of not seeing support for the private sector as necessarily requiring some kind of prejudiced or discriminatory attitude towards the public sector. There will always be a need in our society for a strong, professional, highly intelligent and well organised public sector. There will always be important public sector functions, there will always be roles of government that must be performed by full time public servants. And whilst the size of those functions, their relationship to other activities in society are going to change as governments change, and whilst there will be impacts and some of them in an individual sense perhaps painful, just as decisions taken in the private sector regarding the size of workforces can be painful in the interest of achieving a longer term benefit, that in no way diminishes the respect that I have and the respect that my government will have for the professionalism of the public service, in the interests of the individuals within that service and the welfare of the families and those who they support.

Ladies and gentlemen, I commend this document to you. I think it will be a valuable addition to the public understanding of the Australian Public Service. It succinctly sets out I think a good statement of principles and values, and I think it will aid a public respect for and a public understanding of the traditions of the Australian Public Service.

Thank you very much.