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PRIME MINISTER

5 June 1996

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
ADDRESS AT ST JOHN'S CATHEDRAL, BRISBANE**

E&OE

To Archbishop Peter Hollingworth and Mrs Hollingworth; to the Premier of Queensland Mr Rob Borbidge and Mrs Borbidge; to many distinguished guests, including my dear friend and former parliamentary colleague Sir James Killen, and as I look around this room, there are many people that I've known over a long period of time. As you know, I've been a regular visitor to the city of Brisbane during the 22 years that I have been in politics, and I have visited you in many disguises. But I can say this is the first public gathering that I have the privilege of addressing in Brisbane as Prime Minister of Australia. And I do so in these magnificent surroundings, and the comments of the Archbishop about the broad church, one has to be as tolerant as possible, both politically and ecclesiastically, and on occasions you've got to stretch the parameter of the Church a bit further politically than you thought you might have to, but if at the end of the day it achieves the objective, then it is an exercise that is well undertaken, and if by being here today I have made a small contribution to the appeal for the restoration of this beautiful Cathedral then I am very happy indeed.

I have to say to you that one of the challenges and one of the pleasures of the Prime Ministership of this country is to witness so many of the great events and anything that can make a contribution to the better observance of the centenary of the federation of Australia is an effort that is worth supporting. In the past couple of days I have begun to undertake some interviews with the media regarding the first one

hundred days of the new Government. It was Franklin Roosevelt who inaugurated this notion that has stayed with us since 1932 that you had to be checked off after the first hundred days of your government to see how well you had been going. And I've been asked by a number of people what are the emotions that I have most felt in that one hundred days and I have replied to all of them that the two emotions that I have felt most of all is firstly the emotion of exhilaration, and of equal importance the emotion of humility, because to be the Prime Minister of this country, to have the opportunity after being in opposition for 13 years - and essentially in opposition all you can really do is talk and propose, you can't do a lot in an executive Government sense - to have the opportunity finally after that period of time to do something tangible and practical of benefit to the country is an enormous exhilaration. But it is also the emotion of humility and a reminder that one holds Government in this country and this State anywhere in the world in the democratic tradition, you hold Government through the gift of people and that if you lose sight of that, if you presume that you are there because of some kind of divine right, or you are there because in some kind of elevated intellectual sense you are better than your political opponents then you have already begun to sow the seeds of your own defeat, and I've constantly said to my colleagues and I say it again today, that the most important thing that any Government can do is to retain grass roots contact with the people who elected them, and governments that don't do that will pay very very dearly in terms of lost electoral support.

When we campaigned only three months ago, we set ourselves a number of goals. We set ourselves the goal of strengthening the sense of security for Australian families, because all of my political life, I've believed, and I believe it ever more strongly as Prime Minister that the most stable and coherent force in Australian society is the resilience and strength of individual Australian families and that the goal of government policies should always be to strengthen them and to remember that they not only provide immense emotional support for individuals but they also provide the best social welfare system that any nation has ever devised.

And the other very important goal that we set ourselves was to do something about re-igniting the conditions in which small business in the Australian community operated. I have had a long commitment to the role of small business in Australia's economic firmament. I have believed all of my political life that the real key to Australia's successful economic future lies in the re-invigoration of our small business sector, and we have given ourselves a very important goal of lifting many of the restrictions that exist on small business in Australia, and in case any of you think that that is mere

rhetoric, can I just list some of the things that we have already done to meet the commitments that we made just under a hundred days ago to the Australian people in relation to the small business community.

The first and most important is that we have introduced into the Parliament our workplace relations legislation, and that bill is designed to change in a very constructive way the manner in which industrial relations is conducted in this country, and can I say to you very directly and without any qualification that that piece of legislation delivers on a programme of reform and a programme of change, that I personally and many of my colleagues have argued for over the last ten years. It does not contain any surprises. It does not contain changes that we didn't foreshadow, but what it does contain is a practical assault on the rigidity of Australia's industrial relations system. For example, it commits the Parliament, if the legislation is passed, to dismantling the ridiculous anti-employment unfair dismissal law that was introduced by the former government in 1993.

That bill was introduced in the name of giving fairness in the workplace. What it has done is not only to cripple the capacity of a person running a business to manage that business in the way in which a person who has invested their effort and their funds and their resources ought to have the right to do, but it has actually acted as a deterrent against the employment of people particularly in small business, and that is why we committed ourselves very strongly to its repeal. So when that legislation finally comes to be voted on in the Senate some time in August or September of this year, one of the things that those who are minded to vote against it might contemplate is that they will be voting to retain a piece of legislation which is actually working against the employment of Australians in small businesses around this country.

That legislation also contains our strong commitment to voluntary unionism. It restores the effectiveness of the secondary boycott provisions of the Trade Practices Act. It gives to Australian employers and employees the right at the workplace level to make agreements governing their relationship without the intervention of a trade union. But it does give those people the right and the choice, if they want a trade union to be involved, to have that union involved to the full. What our legislation does, unlike the existing law, is to give people an effective choice. We are not, and I want to make this point very clearly to you, we are in no way committed to changing the law to take away the right of people to bargain collectively if that is their wish. We do not want to take away the right of people to have a trade union, a shop steward, or indeed anybody else to negotiate on his or her behalf, but what we do

want to change is the existing law that forces you to have your arrangement taken over by a trade union even in those circumstances where you don't want a trade union involved. Now, it is a very very simple principle. It is a very simple Australian principle of giving people effective choice.

I regard the change to the industrial relations system as in long term, the most important economic reform that this country needs. We have inherited as a new Government an Australian economy that I described the other day as a little better than the 'Curate's Egg'. There are some great strengths in the Australian economy at present. It is growing fairly well, although that growth is uneven and I know for a combination of reasons it has not been as strong in Queensland in recent years as was the situation a few years ago. But overall the level of growth throughout Australia is holding up well compared with the rest of the world. We have a low level of inflation, we have a highly skilled workforce and of course we have a very stable political system. On the other hand we have inherited an economy that does have some weaknesses. The greatest weakness that we have is that we are still chronically in debt to the rest of the world, as a result over a long period of time of running very high monthly current account imbalances and because as a community we don't save very much we've had to borrow from foreigners to pay over those months for the surplus of imports over exports and that is why we owe the rest of the world so much money. And one of the big challenges that the new government has, is to rebuild the level of savings both public and privately in Australia. As people we don't save as much as we used to in the 1950s and 1960s. The level of household savings in Australia has fallen steadily over a long period of time and we have to do something to reverse that. And one of the commitments we made in the last election was to provide a modest tax incentive to do that. But we also have to rebuild our savings by reducing our budget deficit, and that is why we are working towards the aim of putting that budget into underlying balance in two years' time, and the decisions that we have to take in relation to that will not be universally popular, but could I say a couple of things about them. I believe when they come out they will be seen as fair and just, and I ask you to bear in mind that if we can over the next year or so successfully tackle our budget deficit problem and thus remove it as a constraint, then we might be able to look forward to a very steady period of economic stability and economic growth. There are some positive signs around the world economically. I had the chance earlier this week to address the international monetary conference in Sydney which brought together the biggest collection of senior bankers I've seen in Australia, and in discussions I had with them the message was very clear and that is that on the world scene, Japan is recovering from a fairly recessed period; the United

States' economy is still very strong; the European economies are a mixture with the German one causing a little more worry than others, but overall the world picture is quite positive and the message out of all of that is that if we can successfully tackle the weak spots we may give ourselves the foundations for a fairly long period of growth and a long period of economic stability, and that of course will give us the best possible capacity to tackle the social dimension of economic weakness and it is always important that that be borne in mind and that is the very high level of unemployment particularly amongst young people in this country. And that was the third thing of which I spoke a great deal during the election campaign and it hasn't passed out of my mind over the last one hundred days.

Doing something to reduce unemployment particularly amongst the young is the most important social challenge that we have and in the process, I hope that we might do something to redress the drift which has been going on in Australia for 20 or more years whereby the gap between the rich and the poor has continued to widen. If you were to ask me what is the thing that has changed most in this country over the last 30 years, I would have to say to you that we have lost the essential middle classness that we had economically speaking of thirty or forty years ago. It used to be possible to say of this country that give or take a small number of people, it was a very egalitarian society. I'm sorry to say that through a combination of circumstances that has changed over the last 20 years. Unemployment has had something to do with it, also a huge contributing factor has been the fragmentation of family life and the much higher level of family disintegration. There is a stark correlation between poverty and single parent families. And if you look at the profile of the less well-off people in the Australian community there is a very heavy concentration of sole parent families in that group. So therefore any policies which are designed to stabilise families, that are designed to create employment opportunities in small business, not only have a huge economic dimension but they also have a very considerable social dimension.

I know as Prime Minister, and I knew it as Leader of the Opposition as well as anybody, that there is always a tension in politics between meeting commitments and also delivering outcomes that in the long term are the responsible outcomes to deliver.

I was very conscious of the commitments that I made at the last election and I want to say to you today that there is nothing that I place a higher store on in Government than keeping faith with the Australian people. I place a very great store on the commitments that I made in relation to the family taxation system, to the private health insurance rebate, and the Capital Gains Tax changes of benefit to small

business and there will be many decisions announced in the Budget, but I want to make it very clear to you that the Budget in August will deliver on the commitments that we have made in relation to families, health insurance and small business. We regard them as being at the core of the programme that we took to the Australian people just under 100 days ago.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Archbishop in introducing me had something to say about the events that surrounded those tragic happenings in Tasmania on the afternoon of the 28th of April, and I thank the Archbishop for the kind remarks that he made. It would be no exaggeration of me to say that in the 22 years I've been in politics, nothing that I have seen in this country has quite touched the soul of the Australian people as that particular event. And it did produce a very strong reaction from my Government. May I also say that it produced a very strong reaction and a very helpful reaction from the Government led by the Premier of Queensland Rob Borbidge.

And I want to say that this is not an easy issue. There is clear and overwhelming support throughout the Australian community for the measures that have been proposed by the various Governments of Australia. There is no doubt about that, and if you are looking for the voice of mainstream Australia, the voice of mainstream Australia is loud in support of what the Governments of the country have done. But I do recognise, as I have from the very beginning, that there are many people, particularly in rural areas of Australia, whose way of life has involved the regular but safe and responsible use of weapons, and to them there is the nagging worry that in some way their character is impugned, that their motives are suspected and that they are being asked to carry an unreasonable burden.

I understand that, and as I have done before, I again today, I apologise to those tens of thousands of law abiding Australians particularly in the country areas of Australia here in Queensland and in the other States, I apologise for the inconvenience that is involved in the new laws that are being proposed.

The introduction of those laws does not represent a negative moral judgment in any way on their behaviour, and I regret the fact that in some way, tens of thousands of decent law-abiding farmers throughout this country, have in the minds of some of our citizens been identified with the rather irresponsible comments of a very small minority of people who have used extremely provocative and colourful language.

I know, you know that those rather strident voices are not the voices of rural Australia.

Can I say to those people in rural Australia that I do understand their concern. I will guarantee to them that we will have a fair and just system of compensation. I intend myself in the next few weeks to visit a number of rural areas in Australia, to directly address gatherings and to explain personally and very directly and in detail the reasons behind the Government's decision. In doing that I am not foreshadowing in any way any change to our position. I want to make it very clear that there is no case for changing the agreement that was reached at the Police Ministers' Conference. That agreement does not involve, as some people have alleged, the disarming of the Australian community, a rather extraordinary proposition. It does not involve taking away many of the weapons that people currently have. What it does involve is a comprehensive ban on automatic and semi automatic weapons throughout this country, subject to a number of limited exemptions which in the case of low powered, semi automatic weapons, involves a capacity on the part of primary producers where a demonstrable need can be demonstrated to the licensing authorities.

I don't pretend for a moment that the changes won't result in some people having to give up weapons that they've had for a long period of time and it is very much a case of inconveniencing a small but significant number of people who have done nothing wrong in the interests of the overall national good. We have had in the wake of that awful tragedy an opportunity rarely that comes the way of any country and that is in a single act to change a culture. I do not want, and I don't think anybody in this room wants Australia to go down the American path so far as weapons are concerned. You have a situation in the United States where it is impossible now for anybody in a position of authority to do anything effective about weapon control. The National Rifle Association in the United State is so powerful and has been so used to getting its own way and successfully intimidating both Democrat and Republican politicians that despite overwhelming evidence of the direct link between the proliferation of firearms possession and the murder rate...Just ponder for a moment. The murder rate in the United States is 14 per hundred thousand. It is a little over two in Australia. It is less than half that in England and Wales where the possession of guns is far less widespread than it is in Australia and of course manifestly less widespread than it is in the United States.

So there is a clear link and people who pretend there isn't are trivialising a very important issue. So ladies and gentlemen, I have taken a moment to explain the basis of the Government's decision. I say again how much I have appreciated the support that has been given by the Queensland Government. I recognise in a state which has more electorates comprising rural and provincial areas than any other state in Australia it has not been as easy and there have been more local political difficulties for Members of Parliament on my side of politics in Queensland, in both Nationals and Liberals than in some other states. It's easier for an urban Liberal and an urban Labor member to put up his or her hand for strict gun control legislation than it has been for some rural representatives for any of the three major parties, and for that reason I have particularly appreciated the courage displayed by Rob Borbidge and Russell Cooper in relation to this particular issue.

The last thing that I want to say, ladies and gentlemen, and I say it very deliberately in the presence of Peter Hollingworth who for a long period of time, both before and since becoming Archbishop of Brisbane, has been at the forefront of campaigning for social justice for Australians in all walks of life. I can think of few Australian clerics who has made a more effective, a more articulate and a more reasonable contribution to debate on social welfare issues in Australia than has Peter Hollingworth. He is so often the voice of intelligent, relevant reason from the church and I say to this gathering that we have some very important economic objectives. We are committed to a significantly lower Budget deficit but we also have important social goals and important social objectives. It has never been my personal political credo that economic efficiency should trample upon social justice. It has never been the credo of the party that I lead or the Government and the Coalition that I lead that the interests of the genuinely needy in the Australian community should be ignored.

Before the last election I made a very detailed speech to the Australian Council of Social Services regarding the welfare priorities of the new Government if it was successful in the election and those commitments remain as strongly now as they were when I made that speech to the Australian Council of Social Services. That is not to say that we won't in some areas do things differently. That is not to say that we won't have some disagreements over some social issues with our predecessors and with other people in the Australian community. We have for example drawn some criticism from some of the decisions that have been taken in relation to Aboriginal affairs and I make it very clear to you today that I don't retreat from any of those decisions. I have no argument with those who espouse the cause of reconciliation between Aboriginals and other Australians. I do however have a very strong argument with those in the community who would assert that anything at all raised in the name of assisting Aborigines must be immediately supported otherwise one is guilty of prejudice or intolerance and I think there is a feeling in the community that it ought to be possible to debate issues surrounding relations between different races in Australia without the smear of racism or prejudice being raised.

Ladies and gentlemen can I conclude by saying that it has been a privilege to be here today. I wish the appeal well. Can I on a frankly partisan note thank the people of Queensland for the magnificent commonsense they displayed on the 2nd of March. That vast sea of Queensland Liberal and National Party faces that I see when I look around from the dispatch box warms my heart. There's only two of the others left from Queensland. I know this is an ecumenical gathering but you'll forgive me a little bit at the end, but there's only two left and I think it gives an enormous new balance to the Government to have so many people from Queensland inside the Government ranks. In geographic and proportionate terms it really is a remarkable outcome and the quality of the people that have been sent from Brisbane and other Queensland seats is absolutely terrific. So I am delighted to be here today to thank Peter Hollingworth for the invitation, to wish the appeal well, to thank the people of Queensland for the support they gave to the Government parties on the 2nd of March, but most importantly of all, to finish where I began and say that to be Prime Minister of this country is undoubtedly the greatest privilege that can come anybody's way.

It is something that I treat with a great deal of humility and I am determined as I said on the night of my election, to do the best I humanly can to govern for all of the Australian people and to deliver outcomes that will be to the long term benefit of the country we treasure so much.

Thank you.