



# PRIME MINISTER

27 June 1996

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER  
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP  
ADDRESS TO THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY**

I have been to many, I have been to many universities over the years, and if you think that a little chorus like that is going to change my view then you are very sadly mistaken.

Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to share with you some of my perspectives on Australia's democratic institutions. Can I say that again, can I say that again for the benefit of people who may possibly have come here with a moderately open mind, that I've come here with a moderately open mind, that I've come here tonight to say a few things about the shaping of Australia's democratic institutions and sustaining our democratic institutions, and sustaining democracy in Australia is the responsibility of all members of the Australian community and not least the political leadership of the Australian community.

And I welcome very much the opportunity tonight of inaugurating the first of the series of shaping our institutions and could I perhaps strike a bargain with those who, could I strike a bargain with those who do not appreciate my presence here tonight. And I'll tell you what, I guarantee that at the end.... now, it's very interesting, you're not even prepared to hear the alternative that I'm going to put.

What I am prepared to do, ladies and gentlemen, I am prepared at the end of my address, I am prepared to answer questions for 30 minutes on the subject of higher education if you will allow me to deliver the lecture. Are you prepared to have that deal or not?

(Applause)

Now, can we have a deal? I have said, now I understand that there are many people here and there are a lot of other people who are concerned about higher education. Now, I know you don't like listening to a reasonable proposition, but you ought to listen to a reasonable proposition, and I am prepared, I am prepared at the end of this

lecture tonight, I am prepared to answer questions from anybody, anybody in this hall on the subject of higher education, but the condition is that you allow the people who came here tonight to hear what I have to say about the future of our institutions, to hear what I have to say.

Now, is that a deal or is it not? It's not a deal? I see, it's not a deal. So, in other words you are not interested in the democratic process, you are only interested in the triumph of noise over reason, and I don't think that does very great credit to your argument.

But ladies and gentlemen, at a time of economic and social transformation it is natural and healthy to question established institutions and attitudes. It is natural to ask that if things can be better, and if so how, there is a temptation to accept uncritically grand visions for social engineering and constitutional change. Now, I say that in politics I have never underestimated the power of ideals and the power of vision in Australian politics.

However, grand visions ring very hollow indeed unless they are firmly grounded in community values and aspirations and most importantly if they deliver practical results which include the condition of life for all Australians. And can I say that if there is one thing that distinguishes the Coalition's approach to government it is our..... well, listen, I will keep going because I was endowed by my parents with a very strong pair of lungs.

The Coalition's approach to government is our emphasis on practical reforms which deliver better economic and social outcomes. I, Mr Chairman, have always taken a Burkian view towards our national institutions. I have always argued that where they have served the nation well, changed for change's sake alone is entirely inappropriate. However, where national institutions have fallen behind the needs and the aspirations of Australian society, they clearly require modernising.

And Mr Chairman, our democratic institutions do not exist in a vacuum, they are shaped and they take shape by our national goals and our national values. And our democratic institutions ladies and gentlemen are integral to promoting freedom and diversity above compulsion and centralism. They are designed to strengthen the decentralised networks of family, workplaces and communities, as more effective guarantors of choice and freedom than the centralisation of political powers. They support equal opportunity for self-development and equality before the law as the most effective buffers to monopolistic powers. They broaden the opportunities for personal achievement, they reaffirm the proper role of Government in upholding its social responsibilities and they uphold the checks and balances, for example the separation of powers, the encouragement of diversity and competition in the provision of goods and services.

I have always believed ladies and gentlemen that there are four great pillars of Australian democracy. The first of those is our great unique Australian historic tradition and inheritance of anti-authoritarianism and rugged individualism. It is one of the great traditions of the Australian character. Our second great pillars, our

parliamentary system, our third is an independent judiciary and last and most importantly is a fiercely independent free media and free press.

I for one am very proud of the achievements of Australian democracy and I believe there is a broad spectrum of opinion across the political divide in this country that uniquely Australia has made her own contribution to the practice of democratic values and democratic traditions around the world. We are one of the few nations that has maintained democratic traditions consistently throughout the economic and social changes of the twentieth century. We have a record of innovation in democratic practices and that record has been sustained by the historic traditions that I mentioned earlier of anti-authoritarianism and individuals. All of these elements of modern Australia are among the staunchest defenders of Australian democracy and all help to set clear limits, not only to the role of government in people's lives but also to the extent to which people's lives should be left to market forces alone.

In other words Australian democracy is protected not just by our national institutions but by the people ourselves. Our record of practising democracy and respecting civil and political life has made me particularly and I emphasise this, particularly sceptical of codifying our traditions in say, a bill of rights. I remain staunchly a supporter of the common law approach to Australian society. The common law is organic and constantly evolving. It is the accumulation of centuries of precedence built up through the practical application of the law to changing economic and social circumstances.

Black-letter law can never be as flexible or subtle as common law, in seeking to define rights we can end up restricting them unnecessarily. Let me also add however that the judicial interpretation of the law, while sometimes necessarily creative as in the case of the Mabo decision must never become a cloak for quasi-legislative change. Judicial activism is not a substitute for parliamentary processes in which the peoples representatives canvass the pros and cons of policy proposals and changes.

Without the consent of the governed, no policy change will ever be fully successful. Nowhere is this more true than for example in the republican debate. Forcing such a major constitutional change from the top is doomed to failure. As all of you are aware, I am not a republican. I recognise however the diversity of views on this topic within the Australian community. There are many people who voted for the Liberal Party at the last election who are staunch republicans equally I dare to say, there are many probably of fewer number who voted for the Australian Labor Party who are staunch anti-republicans. Should change occur in this area, it should only occur in circumstances where it is a unifying experience for the Australian community.

The Australian people must be involved at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the process. I do not want any future change in this area to be divisive or to leave part of the Australian community feeling bruised or hurt. The commitment to a People's Convention, and that convention will take place next year, exemplifies our commitment to injecting democracy in the debate, involving people in the future of their national institutions.

The new Coalition government remains a strong supporter of co-operative federalism. One of the aspects of the recent meeting of Premiers here in Canberra that received

very little coverage was the progress made in areas of overlapping Commonwealth and State jurisdiction. I remain very optimistic that this cooperative approach will continue and further develop.

Australian governments at all levels have a responsibility to make the current system work more effectively. The Coalition deeply respects the role of State and local governments within our federal system. Where possible power should devolve to the level of government which is closest to the Australian people subject, very importantly, to the maintenance of certain minimum national standards. The Council of Australian Governments is currently engaged in the process of more clearly defining restrictive Commonwealth and State roles and responsibilities in the areas which impact significantly on the welfare of the Australian people. The Commonwealth's approach is to achieve practical improvement in service delivery in areas such as housing, health and family services. However, this cooperative approach, ladies and gentlemen, will not involve the abrogation of the Commonwealth overriding economic, financial and taxation responsibilities. And it should not mean that national leaders and law makers can never express a view in the national interest on matters which are ultimately the responsibility of the States.

I turn now, briefly, to the impact of globalisation on Australia's economic institutions and the need to adapt those institutions to the new imperative of international competition. The latter part of the 20th Century is undoubtedly witnessing an enormous expansion of competitive forces across the world. Barriers to the international flow of people, goods and services and financial capital are being torn down and rapid developments and communication and information technology are creating truly global markets. Against this background we cannot retreat behind the protectionist practises at institutions of the past. That is why, for example, I supported and championed and was followed in that support and champion by my immediate predecessor, Paul Keating, the cause of financial deregulation in the late 1970s.

The establishment of the Campbell Committee was the beginning of progressively opening up our economy and increasing competition. And the most contemporary result of that competition was demonstrated in Sydney today with the opening up of new competition in the area of domestic telephone services. Right over the past month, ladies and gentlemen, two very graphic demonstrations of how the Australian consumer will benefit from competition in the area, firstly, of housing interest rates and today in the area of local telephone charges. And those within our community, wherever they may sit, within the political spectrum who set their faces against the expansion of competition must understand that the real beneficiary at the end of the day in the area of competition is the Australian consumer and in the end it is in the public interest to have the maximum amount of competition.

The more competitive financial system since deregulation is delivering practical benefits for all Australians, for example, in the area of home mortgages. And the recently announced Wallis Inquiry provides another opportunity to consider how the financial system has developed in the last 15 years and how our regulatory institutions can be adapted to the needs of our rapidly internationalising economy. Mr Chairman, my long term commitment to industrial relations reform for which I make no apology and in relation to which I'm inordinately proud reflects a desire to update institutions

and practises to meet the contemporary needs of Australian workers and enterprises. In very many ways the current industrial relations system reflects in Australia of more than 70 years ago.

It is imperative, ladies and gentlemen, in the current circumstances to introduce genuine democracy within Australia's labour markets. The essence of democracy is the opportunity to choose for yourself. Choice is the golden thread which runs through the Government's industrial relations policy. And that is choice for individuals as to whether or not they are members of a trade union. Choice for individuals to have a say in how they work and how they are remunerated, subject to the maintenance of minimum standards. Choice for families as to how they balance their work and family responsibilities. By injecting choice and modernising our labour market institutions I seek to make our system far more relevant to the lives of Australian men and women in the 1990s and beyond. The new industrial relations legislation will serve the needs of Australians rather than workers having to fit into an antiquated and arthritic industrial relations system which is essentially a survival of a system that was put in place before World War I. We will, however ladies and gentlemen, fail to reap the full benefits of more relevant work place arrangements if we do not accelerate the pace of micro-economic reform to reduce the costs of doing business. And that means ensuring that barriers to competition are dismantled, particularly in those areas which directly impact on our international competitiveness.

Ladies and gentlemen I would now like to direct a few remarks to the role of parliament in the area of reshaping our institutions. The Australian parliamentary system has particular and special national characteristics. Although it was heavily influenced in its establishment by the British Westminster tradition and some elements of the American federal structure. It is natural that the role of the Senate should be in the public spotlight given the outcome of the last election. Next Monday, ladies and gentlemen, it will be precisely 15 years since the government of the day in this country also contemporaneously had control in its own right of the Federal Senate. This has particular significance now that the Coalition is in power federally. During much of the Menzies' era, ladies and gentlemen, a de facto Coalition existed between the then Coalition government and the Democratic Labor Party with the latter supporting most of the crucial legislative proposals and policies of the Menzies' Government. A light comment can be made of the Hawke and Keating governments and the Australian Democrats. The reality was that they enjoyed what amounted to a de facto Coalition, with the Australian Democrats supporting Labor on most crucial issues over its 13 year period of office. The Australian current legislation and the 1993 budget were notable exceptions to this proposition. The intriguing question, not only for legislators, but commentators, is whether or not the de facto Coalition between the Australian Labor Party and the Australian Democrats has in reality survived the change of government on the second of March. The early signs, I would have to say, is that it has, but it would be uncharitable of me other than to acknowledge that it is a little too early to make a final conclusion.

Many would think that an important test for the Democrats in the months ahead will be whether or not they are genuinely a balance of power party or whether they will ultimately validate Malcolm Mackerras view that they truly belong on the left hand side of the political pendulum. If that does prove to be the case, then despite its large

majority in the House of Representatives, the Coalition Government will face challenges which did not present themselves to either the Menzies or Hawke Keating Governments or indeed for five and a half years of the Fraser Government when it almost uniquely, in the post 1949 experience, controlled both Houses in its own right.

In assessing the nature of the voting patterns of a minority party one should not seek to know the number of Bills it supports or opposes, rather one should seek to know which Bill it supports or opposes. After all, in this context, some Bills are infinitely more equal than others.

Mr Chairman, can I say that I welcome very warmly the opportunity of coming here tonight. I recognise that not everybody in this gathering is enamoured of the political philosophy that I represent, but I have never run away from an advocacy confrontation. I have always championed the cause of political leaders going on to university campuses all around Australia, of listening to the views of university students, of being willing to respond to those views, of recognising healthy areas of dissent. And I am a veteran of coming on to the university campuses, and I enjoy very much the opportunity of being here tonight and I am looking forward to the half hour question time I promised you at the commencement of my speech.

Thank you very much.