



PRIME MINISTER

8 July 1996

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON. JOHN HOWARD MP
ADDRESS TO THE AUSTRALIAN LIBERAL STUDENTS'
FEDERATION, SYDNEY UNIVERSITY**

E & OE.....

Thank you very much the President of the ALSF. It will be a particular pleasure to open the first conference, annual Federal Council Meeting of the Australian Liberal Students' Federation as the Prime Minister.

As your President has said I have attended many meetings of the ALSF during the wilderness years in opposition. I have been a strong supporter of the activities of Liberal students on university and college campuses all around Australia and it is therefore a special bonus to have the opportunity to speak to you as the Head of a recently elected Government, a Government that commands an almost unprecedentedly large majority in the House of Representatives. And I take the opportunity of thanking many Liberal students around Australia who played a role in the election of the Coalition Government on the 2nd of March this year.

It is an occasion to reflect for a moment on the magnitude of that win, it's geographical spread is quite unparalleled in the post-war experience of the Liberal Party of Australia. And provided the responsibilities and the opportunities of office are used wisely, the Liberal Party has an unparalleled opportunity to politically shape the future of this country into the next millennium.

Over the years that we were in Opposition one of the things that characterised Liberal students was their willingness to engage in the battle of ideas on campuses around Australia. Theirs was not simply an attitude that saw politics as a transient preoccupation sometimes to be indulged in, but rather as it is, an ongoing battle of ideas, a battle for legitimacy, a battle for the ownership of your own interpretation of the history of this country and a battle to ensure that one's political opponents did not through the authority of the office they then had write outwardly the history of this country, the contribution of the Liberal conservative psychologists.

In the first Thomas Playford Memorial Lecture that I delivered in Adelaide on Friday night, I drew attention to the quite insidious disposition of the former Government and my immediate predecessor as Prime Minister, to reinterpret Australian history according to his version of what was the correct and perceived understanding of that history. And one of the great challenges, now that the Liberal Party is in office, and now that our side of politics electorally is in the ascendancy, one of our great responsibilities is to roll back that misinterpretation of history - not to replace it with a distorted version of our own - but to replace it with a reflective, objective assessment of what has gone before us. And to walk away from the excessively negative view of Australia's past, a view that was sometimes encapsulated in Opposition of the history of Australia, really started in 1972 with the election of the Liberal Government and all that had gone before it was rather mindless and conservative drifted indifference. Any profound understanding of Australian history knows how completely wrong that composition is.

But it is very important that as political warriors so to speak, on campuses of Australia, it is very important that all of you understand that winning back of ideas, that winning back of history is tremendously important. And over the years different politicians have used their own interpretations of the history of their country and indeed the history of the world, those of who've establish a particular view of political legitimacy. And it's our responsibility to ensure that Australians of future generations have a comprehensive, factually based, objective view of the history of this country, not coloured unduly by one or other interpretation, but reflecting an emphatically positive view of what this country has achieved and particularly since the Federation in 1901.

There are many things of course that students campaigned for over the last 13 years, none of course was more persistent, more incisive and more determined than your campaign for voluntary student unions. And as somebody who has been a strong supporter of all forms of voluntary unions, let me congratulate the Australian Liberal Students' Federation for the incessant and incisive fight in this way for individual liberty of the campuses of Australia.

It is important as we reflect on what has happened in the almost, in the four months that have gone by since the election of the Coalition Government in March, it is important to recall some of the major propositions that I took to the Australian people. Of all the things that I have argued for and advocated over the last 10 years, none has been more important than my commitment to altering Australia's industrial relations system, my view of the most important economic reform this country needs is the deregulation of its labour markets, my view that until employer and employees at the workplace level are able to make agreements to suit particular circumstances of individual workplaces, then the true potential of those workplaces will not be achieved. My view that so far as possible the ordinary courts of Australia should govern the conduct between individuals, my view that any form of compulsory unionism ought to be repudiated and my view that individual men and women in the workplace should have a free choice as to whether a union is involved in the conduct of their affairs or not. I have advocated a reform program along those lines without interruption over the

last decade. And that policy and that approach has been enshrined in the Government's Workplace Relations Bill.

That Workplace Relations Bill also gets rid of the rather mindless and job destroying unfair dismissal law that was introduced by the former Labor Government without warning, without mandate and without merit in 1993. It is very interesting if I may digress on the question of mandates. We, if ever anybody has ever got a mandate on anything, the Coalition's got a mandate to introduce industrial relations reform out of the last election. And that is apparently being delayed in the Senate yet the former Government went to the 1993 election not mentioning anything about changing the industrial relations law. Immediately after it is elected as a pay back for the support it received from the trade union movement in that campaign it introduces major changes to which it had no mandate, to which it made no reference in the 1993 election campaign, and extraordinarily enough those changes go through the Federal Parliament, they go through the Senate with the support of a minor party.

It seems that if you don't mention something before the election you're more likely to get support from the minor parties in the Senate than if you do mention it. So it's a very, very interesting turning on its head of the assumed view in Australian politics, that if you actually are going to the people you seek support for something, if you win the election you then have some hope of getting that programme through. And it is very interesting that in this very area of industrial relations the Labor Party said nothing about, I mean we weren't told in 1993 that they were going to change the unfair dismissal law to make it virtually impossible for the average small businessman to take on staff, safe in the knowledge that if the person is manifestly unsuited then that person could be let go - we were not told that, we were not given any warning of that. That was kept in the drawer, that was kept under wraps and yet that law was able to get through the Senate - yet a law that is explained in great detail and great openness and great honesty and great candour and frankness to the Australian people - it's apparently going to suffer a different fate. Although I am told that it's all going to be OK, well I shall wait and see and live in hope that the Senate does finally pass the industrial relations legislation.

But I don't think anybody should underestimate the importance that the new Government attaches to industrial relations reform. And philosophically industrial relations reform is all about the most important political commodity of all and that is personal freedom or individual liberty. The industrial relations reform proposals that we have are more than a prescription for greater economic productivity, they are more than a prescription for enhancing the competitiveness of the Australian economy. They above all of those things, the industrial relations laws are really a proposal to enhance individual freedom and personal liberty in the workplace. What we are saying through that law is that subject to the observance of a proper guaranteed, minimum standard of conditions, what we are saying through that law is that subject to that, every person in the workplace has a right to feel he or she chooses to make the deal or the bargain that that person wants in the relation to their own labour and their own time and their own commitment.

We are not saying that people cannot employ the trade union to represent them. What we are saying is they should not have to employ a trade union to represent them if they

do not want the trade union to represent them. It is a question of free choice of individual liberty. And over the weeks ahead if you hear people say, we are trying to stop unions operating in the workplace don't believe it because it's not true. All we are doing is trying to stop unions being forced into the workplace in cases where they are unwanted by both the employer and the employee. And we went to the election with a very, very specific programme in this area and we are carrying it out to the letter. We said that any person going into a workplace agreement could do so without fear of losing the take home value of the Award that that person would leave by going into that workplace agreement. That was the rock solid guarantee that I gave and that is the guarantee that I intend to keep. It is not the guarantee that you are sometimes told I gave by the Labor Party, by the trade union movement and some commentators who deliberately distort what we represent. What I said in that campaign and what is enshrined in the legislation that Peter Reith has introduced into the Parliament is it's very similar to Opposition. That if somebody decides to leave the Award stream or go into an Australian Workplace Agreement that person has a guarantee that in take home pay terms he or she must proceed with the value of the Award and anything over and above that will become a matter of negotiation and a matter of determination between the employer and the employee and it will be one of the things that will condition whether or not the person decides to go into the Agreement.

Now I've dwelt for a moment, ladies and gentlemen, on the industrial relations law because the industrial relations issue is central to the plans that we have for economic reform in this country, but it is also central to what the philosophical divide between us and our political opponents is still about in the 1990s. People will argue that since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union and the collapse of communism, save for one or two exceptions around the world, that we are living in the post-ideological era. That ideology is no longer important in politics. It is true that since the end of the Cold War the nature of the political divide around the world has changed. It is true that there were profound teaching consequences as a result of the end of the Cold War. It is true that one can no longer look at the world in quite the bold bi-polar terms that one did prior to the early 1990s.

But it would be a mistake for people to believe that we are now living in a completely non-ideological era. It would be a mistake for people to believe that there are no longer any philosophical differences between us and our political opponents. And industrial relations reform neatly imports one of the great philosophical divides between ourselves and the Labor Party and that is on the question of individual liberty. Because when it comes to the crunch, what the Labor Party and the trade union movement argues for in industrial relations is a collectivist or corporatist approach to the management of the affairs of this country. They really argue that individuals, when it comes to the crunch, don't have a right to have the complete mastery over their own affairs. What they are really saying is that no man or woman in Australia is really bright enough, when it comes to the crunch, to make a decision ultimately about the full gambit of his or her workplace arrangements and workplace understandings, that the success of the group or the power centre in the industrial relations scene is more important than individual liberty. And when you go through our differences in this area you see again and again that the Liberal Party and those who agree with the Liberal Party on these issues are very much in favour of the maximum amount of individual liberty and personal freedom.

But it is important when we reflect on those philosophical divides to understand that our Party, the Liberal Party of Australia, is not so much a Party of ideology but it is a Party of ideas and a Party of ideals. And the things that will shape us as a Government in the years ahead, the things that will determine the extent to which we remain in power, are the extent to which the ideas that we generate for the future development of this country and the ideals to which we adhere in Government - the extent to which they are in tune with the needs and the aspirations and the hopes of the Australian people.

And any party which seeks to have a long period in government, any party that seeks to maintain its relevance to the Australian community will always be a party both of ideas and ideals. Ideas are very much the stuff of political battle, whether it's at a university, in a workplace or in the broader community. Unless parties are constantly generating ideas about the future of the country, about how to tackle contemporary problems and to respond to contemporary difficulties they lose relevance. But those ideas must have some kind of frame of reference and that frame of reference must of course be the ideals by which a political party lives. A political party that is value neutral, a political party that does not give pride of place to ideals and values is a political party that will very quickly lose not only its soul but also its sense of direction. And it is important as time goes by and we spend a longer period in Federal Government it is very important that we maintain the basic ideals on which our Party was founded.

Those ideals of course are very much a strong commitment to individual liberty, they're a strong belief in the importance of the family unit within our society and our community. A very strong belief that individual, economic effort and enterprise, particularly the small business sector of the Australian economy is tremendously important - not only to the employment of Australians, most especially young Australians, but also to the economic future of this country. But governments exist to represent the values and aspirations of the mainstream of the Australian community. Not in a way that is insensitive or indifferent to minority groups in the community but in a way that ultimately gives expression to the aspirations and the hopes of the mainstream of the Australian community. And they are some of the ideals and some of the values that remain very important to the Liberal Party of Australia.

Can I just say one other thing. It is of a greatly partisan political character and that is that there were occasions over the last 13 years when not only our political opponents, but also on occasions some of those who sympathised with us must have despaired at our prospects of returning to government. It would have been people who said that our campaign techniques were out of date, that our professional skills as political campaigners were almost non-existent, that the Labor Party had become the natural party of government. And might I interpolate there by saying that some of the behaviour of the Labor Party since it lost power in March of this year indicates that it somehow or other regards what happened on the 2nd of March as an electoral aberration and something that will be automatically corrected the next time there is an election.

Can I say that that is a sadly mistaken view, there is no such thing as a natural party of government and as I watch some of the former ministers on the Front Bench of the House of Representatives, I get the impression that they haven't quite adjusted yet to the fact that they are now in Opposition. But somehow or other they believe that this is a rather rude, untimely uncharitable and wholly misguided interruption in the natural order of events. And they do give me the impression, and isn't it ironic, given the charge that was levelled against us for so many years by our critics that we had a born to rule mentality, can I say that mentality as far as I'm concerned never existed, it doesn't exist now and it won't exist in the future. The Liberal Party exists as the Government of this country at the present time because it articulated the hopes of the Australian people on the 2nd of March. We'll remain the Government of this country only for so long as we continue to articulate those hopes.

I continue to take the view that we were given an enormous privilege on the 2nd of March and any member of the Government and any supporter of the Government who lapses into any kind of belief that somehow or other the natural order of affairs has been restored, is badly misreading the mood of the Australian people and badly misunderstands the nature of Australian politics. And if our opponents imagine for a moment that what has happened to them is some kind of temporary interruption to the natural order of events well they face the prospect of a very, very long period in Opposition.

But ladies and gentlemen returning to the theme, there were times when many of you must have despaired about our prospects of winning and I want to say to all of you who continue to support us and to all of those people around Australia, particularly on university campuses who played such a major role in turning around attitudes, turning around moods and turning around votes of allegiance, I want to express my profound gratitude and my profound thanks. And you did demonstrate a resilience and a tenacity and an ability to come back which I'm delighted to say surprised our most strident and persistent groups.

And lastly and most importantly can I congratulate and thank the Australian Liberal Students' Federation, the individual bodies that make up this organisation, for carrying the torch, for carrying on the battle of ideas, of ideals, for carrying forth the philosophical battle, often against very great odds and often in the face of great hostility and cynicism on university campuses all around Australia. You have all played an invaluable role in keeping the strength of our type of politics going here in the 13 years that we were in Opposition and therefore played a very important role in the great victory that we won on the 2nd of March. And I therefore have very great pleasure in declaring open this 49th Federal Council Meeting of the Australian Liberal Students' Federation.

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