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PRIME MINISTER

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP ADDRESS TO YOUTH FUTURES CONFERENCE

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Well thank you very much John Button, to my former parliamentary colleague and continuing friend, to D... the vice chancellor of Macquarie University, to archbishop Hollingworth, other distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I don't want to occupy the podium today in lecture mode for very long. I do want to share very quickly with you some thoughts of mine about those areas of the future of the country and most particularly your futures which I hope are both relevant to you as young men and women but also relevant to all of us as Australians and then I would do my level best to respond to the questions and the comments that you might like to deliver.

And I thank the Commission for the Future for inviting me along today. I guess if one thinks about the future, you think about it around three areas - three epicentres. The first of course is your future as people, as individuals, the level of personal security you achieve, the sort of relationships you have, the ethical standards or values that will guide your lives and the way in which you see yourself personally as making a contribution to Australian society and to the broader world.

I guess the second area is the nakedly economic material one, and I don't say that in any derisory way, I don't dismiss materialism or economic security, because it is important and all of the surveys indicate that it bulks very large in the concern of young people and can I say that it is no surprise that it bulks very largely in the concerns of young people a generation ago, and a generation before that. One of, I guess, the interesting phenomena about examining the attitudes and the anxieties of younger people today compared with a generation ago is that some of the sense of economic insecurity has remained constant, although I guess the level of apprehension

about employment is higher now than what it was a generation ago, but other concerns that existed a generation ago, such as perhaps the fear of nuclear annihilation, or a generation further behind that - the possibility of world war, and the generation behind that of course once again the possibility of world war, those things have receded into the background.

So, in one sense, you are a remarkably lucky generation, but in another sense you have been born into a period of social and technological change and economic change and economic evolution that perhaps a person of my age - I was born in 1939 - and I grew up in the 1950s. I turned 21 which was then the sort of benchmark in 1960, and it was a very different world. It was better in some respects and it was worse in many other respects. I don't think Australia then was as outward looking and as sophisticated as it is now, I don't think Australia was perhaps as welcoming then as it is now to different influences and different attitudes. But on the other hand perhaps we had a sharper more defined, albeit narrower view of what Australia stood for and what it ought to stand for in the future. All of that is very interesting but it is not of course particularly relevant except as a historical guide to the kind of society that you contemplate both in an idealistic sense and what you accept is probably going to be your lot in a realistic sense.

So material security is a very important component, and I guess the third area is how Australia and all of us irrespective of our age (inaudible) how we relate to the rest of the world and how we see Australia fitting in. What sort of role, what sort of economic role, what sort of regional role, what sort of ethical role we see for our country, the sort of things that Australians ought to be recognised as standing for as supporting or opposing.

And if I could just take those three things in the reverse order, the obvious almost cliché ridden thing for us to say about Australia's future is that our future lies within the Asian-Pacific region, because it is the region in which we are geographically located, it is the region which has the fastest economic growth in the world. It is the region which brings together a remarkable congregation of races and religions and values and different approaches to life and it is of course a region which offers enormous opportunities for Australia. And I say that it is almost cliché ridden to make that comment because it is the automatic response that people give. And certainly I want to say to you today that the government I now lead has all of the enthusiasm of previous Australian governments on both sides of politics for engagement, involvement and interaction with the region for all of the reasons that I've stated. But I think we should remember that if we are to have any kind of special influence in the region in which we are located, then we should see the other connections that we have with the rest of the world and they are obvious.

We of course have very profound historical connections with Britain and other nations of Europe. We have a very deep cultural and democratic affinity with the United States. The fact that we speak English gives us a bond and a linkage all around the world, and so far from seeing those associations as being liabilities in our interaction with our region, I would argue that they give us advantages and they give us opportunities, and if we are to have any kind of special role it will be the synthesis role,

the role of bringing together the associations that we bring in from Europe and North America and using them to more effectively interact with the nations of our region.

Obviously job security, the prospect of gaining employment is something that is very significant to any group of people of your age, and it is unrealistic to have any kind of discussion like this without acknowledging that youth unemployment remains the biggest single social economic challenge that this country has. And the world has changed quite dramatically on that front in the last 20 -30 years. Technology has played a very big role in it, a very big role indeed. There are many unskilled jobs that have gone forever and there are attitudes towards other forms of employment that have changed forever.

25 years ago the idea that recreation would be major dollar earner for Australia was something quite unthinkable. In fact people thought there was something strange about Australians being involved in the recreation industry and being involved in running the tourist industry, being involved in the hotel business. It was something almost un-Australian, peculiar, something that Australians didn't embrace. Now, that has changed quite dramatically and it is a sign that the process of change in relation to employment prospects is something that is going to go on and continue. And I can understand that it is the biggest single material immediate preoccupation of your age cohort. And I can't say to you today if I'm to be candid and honest and I've wanted to be so, I can't say to you today that there is one single set of solutions to the problem of job generation. It's obviously got an enormous amount to do with the overall economic health of our country. In my view it has also got a lot to do with the regulatory framework that effects our workplace relations.

It's got a lot to do with the role of trade unions in our society and I don't say that in an automatically negative sense as some of you may think because of some of the views I hold on the role of unions in our community. It's also got a lot to do with the capacity of our education system, both at a primary, secondary and at tertiary level, and certainly not in the space of a short speech I don't bring you all of those answers but I say to you as the Prime Minister that I do believe offering young people hope and the maximum degree of reassurance that can be offered on the question of employment is the single most important obligation that any Government of this country has to Australians of your generation.

And the first area that I mentioned is how we see ourselves as people, the values we have, the associations we form. I'll have to say to you that of course, as with past generations the most important things in your lives will be the personal relationships you make, the way in which you relate to your families, the way you relate to your friends, the way you relate - in other associations - the way you relate as members of the community.

I think there is a sense in Australia that we have lost that feeling of community and that feeling of having a group of people around us to support us in times of adversity. I think one of the things that tugs at the heartstrings of Australians and John Button mentioned it - when we think of the decline in the economic strengths and the depopulation of rural areas of Australia, we think we are losing something which has been indelibly Australian for as long as we have thought of ourselves as Australians

and that is the sense of community and mateship and looking after each other in adversity, which you find in rural Australia.

Several years ago when Sydney was struck by the tremendously destructive bush fires, there was an outpouring of community cooperation and there was a willingness of people all around Australia to help and to put aside differences and difficulties and to come from holidays because they thought their fellow Australians were under siege and needed help, and it sort of evoked in people a warmth and a nostalgia about a characteristic of this country that many of us had thought had been lost, and that is a sense of mateship and community. And I thought that was a rather reassuring thing that so many Australians saw that as still a very very important component of our society.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, they are unstructured, random thoughts. I don't think one can come to a gathering like this particularly if one is in the business of listening as well as talking. I don't think it is realistic to attempt anything further. Can I just conclude by saying that you are in many respects a more fortunate generation than some before you. You are certainly a more fortunate generation than those who were born in many countries at the turn of the century and who - a goodly percentage of whom perished in a very destructive war between 1914 and 1918, who are more fortunate than generations that were born a little later.

In other respects you've been born into a period of social change, where the constants and the verities of the past are gone, many of them are gone, and life is a lot less predictable and technology is underwriting all of that unpredictability. But as always with those kind of conflicting pressures there are tremendous opportunities that are opened up for you and there is a sense of challenge and a sense of hope and a sense of excitement. And my very profound view is that the generation represented overwhelmingly in this room offers enormous encouragement and hope and inspiration to the rest of us and I don't address a gathering like this with anything other than enormous hope and optimism myself. I know all of you - I did at the same age - have a mixture of pessimism and optimism but I think overwhelmingly speaking as somebody at the age of 56, I feel an enormous sense - not only of pride - but also an enormous sense of hope and optimism about the contribution that you will make as citizens of this country and collectively all of us as citizens of the world.