



PRIME MINISTER

19 July 1996

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP ADDRESS AT THE HERBERT ELECTORATE DINNER

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Thank you very much Peter, to Ian Macdonald; to Ian Weller, Frank Tanti; Bob Tucker, other distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, and David Jull, my Ministerial colleagues who has just joined us.

It is quite a pleasure to be here tonight - I almost feel I'm back in the election campaign. The last time I was in North Queensland was during the election campaign. Last time I was here I visited a part of this district, the Lavarack Barracks, which of course has been touched by great sadness and tragedy in recent times and an event that touched the hearts of Australians all around the country.

But I'm very happy to be here because this electorate, as much and in some respects more than any other electorate around Australia symbolises what we were able to achieve on the second of March and although four months have now gone by since the election and inevitably one talks about the present and projects into the future. I shouldn't allow tonight's gathering go by without thanking you for what you achieved here in the electorate of Herbert and particularly to thank Peter Lindsay for the 9.9% swing that he achieved in the election. Do you know Peter that there are 36 Coalition seats more marginal than the seat of Herbert, and could I also tell you that he is already one of those members that never lets you go by him in the corridor without saying something about what you ought to do, and how what you are doing could be done a lot better. And we took a decision in relation to a development at Port Hinchinbrook a couple of weeks ago, a decision that quite frankly....(applause). And if that project reaches its full fruition, that will do more to generate jobs for young North Queenslanders and will do more to

help invigorate the small business community in the immediately surrounding area than any other kind of bureaucratic government intervention. Because what the development of this country is about and what the development of the non-metropolitan areas of this country is very much about, is encouraging risk taking in private sector development.

Now, I've got to say to you Peter, never let the opportunity to go by to remind me of the importance of that project and to remind Robert Hill of the importance of that project to North Queensland and particularly to his electorate. But we did achieve a great thing on the second of March, and I want to thank all of you who kept the faith through those thirteen years that we were in opposition. They were terrible. I mean, I hate being in opposition. I never intend to go back to opposition. And I think what we were able to achieve was a remarkable result and it was achieved in Coalition with our friends in the National Party and I say to you as I will say to the National Party conference tomorrow, that the most important thing about our side of politics is the continuing Coalition between our two parties.

Whenever the Liberal and National Parties work together, we win together. And whenever we lose sight of that simple lesson we start to run into difficulty. And I also take the opportunity of saying to you that no Prime Minister of this country could have a more effective, a more dedicated, a more loyal and a more decent deputy than I have in Tim Fischer.

Ladies and Gentlemen, there were many things that I promised the Australian people before the last election. One of the most important if not the most important thing that I promised the Australian people, and it was captured in that slogan of ours - For All of Us - I promised them that a Coalition Government would be a Government that governed for the mainstream of the Australian community. It would be a Government that was not brow beaten and intimidated by vocal minority groups. It would be a Government that took its cue from the desire of the mainstream of the Australian community to see policies implemented that were truly in the national interest. In saying that I don't in any way denigrate the importance of listening to minorities in our community. We are a complex society and there are sections of our community that are less fortunate than the mainstream, and those people deserve a hearing and they deserve a sympathetic response.

But at the end of the day, good government in this country is about representing the aspirations and the hopes and the values of the mainstream of the Australian community, and if you go through many of the decisions that we have already taken, you will see us keeping faith with that commitment. The commitment that we have to build a safer Australian community through having effective national gun laws is a commitment to the security of the mainstream of the Australian community. Our commitment to have strong effective industrial relations reform, is a commitment to the mainstream of the Australian community. It is not that industrial relations legislation, it is not born out of enduring hostility to the trade union movement, but it is legislation that seeks to say to every individual worker and employer in Australia that if you want to sit down and make your own workplace arrangements and you don't want to take union involved, and you don't

want the industrial relations commission involved, then you ought to have the right and the opportunity to give effect to that desire.

Our commitments in relation to small business and can I say that of all the sectors of the Australia economy that I talked to during the election campaign, and of all the sectors of the Australian economy with which I feel I suppose most tribally comfortable if I can put it that way it is the small business sector of the Australian community. My own background, my own family background was of a small business kind and I've always believed that this country is essentially about encouraging people to start with nothing and to build something over a period of their working lives and to leave something more behind than they had when they started life's journey. So much of the success of this country has been built up with small business. I said during the election campaign that there were many burdens that small business was carrying that I wanted to do something about. The most obvious burden it was carrying were those ridiculous unfair dismissal laws that Laurie Brereton gave us without warning in 1993.

I mean, we have a very very strange morality about industrial relations law in this country. Laurie Brereton said nothing about the unfair dismissal law in the 1993 election campaign and that gets passed in the Senate. We say everything about our laws in the 1996 campaign and so far they haven't been passed by the Senate. And I want to say to any of you in the audience tonight who are in small business, and I reckon there is quite a few of you in this audience tonight who are involved in small business in Townsville - I'm sorry that the unfair dismissal law hasn't been repealed yet. The legislation to give effect to it is locked in the Senate, and as soon as the Senate expresses the will of the Australian people and passes that unfair dismissal law, it can be taken off your backs. I think it was a rotten job destroying piece of legislation and I want to see it removed from the statute books of this country as soon as humanly possible. I also said that the burden of red tape was far too excessive and by the end of this year I will have a report of a committee chaired by Charlie Bell, the man who runs the McDonald's organisation throughout Australia of ways and means of reducing by 50% in our first term, the burden of regulation and red tape on small business in Australia. And I've already had an indication from the Australian bureau of statistics that is a down payment on that committee's work, it will reduce by 20% the number of forms that business has got to fill out for the federal Government. I mean, it is remarkable you know that without any real pressure you get 20% - try a bit harder and you might get a lot bigger percent and that is exactly what we have in mind. Now, I don't pretend that you can get rid of every regulation although I guess most people in this room would think that would be a damn good idea, but I do believe that every level of government, it is not only the Federal Government, State government and local government are guilty of excessive regulation as well, and I think at every level people have got to understand that the typical small business in Australia doesn't have a human resources department or a human resources manager, they don't have a chief accountant. I mean, the person who is running the business, the man or woman who is running the business is the managing director, the sales manager, the company psychologist and so forth, all wrapped up in one, and the

idea that you sort of have a department... and unfortunately many of the laws that are written for business in this country are written in the belief that every business has the resources of a BHP and it simply doesn't and of course what is wrong with the industrial relations laws of Australia is that they are laws that were essentially designed for a world that is now largely gone and that was a world where industry was manufacturing industry, where most of the people who worked in business were men and there were very few women, that you had large companies where everybody worked in the one spot and was answerable to foreman and the idea that we had industrial relations laws that related to small business units is something that the framers of those laws didn't really understand, and what we need in this country is a set of industrial relations laws that sure, look after the big companies, sure, accommodate the situations of BHP and CRA and other large companies, but are also flexible enough to allow that two, three, 10 or 15 man enterprise, the flexibility and the capacity to make arrangements that are important and relevant to the operations of that particular business.

So industrial relations reform, its relevance to small business and making changes that accommodate the small business community are very important goals and priorities of my Government. They are things that I believe in very very strongly and they are things that I believe are important to the future of this country.

I also identified another benchmark if you like of the performance by which my Government could be measured in its first term and that is what we were willing to do for Australian families. I didn't lightly talk about Australian families during the election campaign. I have all my political career believed that if we could have a Government in this country that properly gave back power and authority to Australian families we'd have a better Australian society. We took a decision that was criticised by some of the experts but I think supported by most Australians a couple of weeks ago to do something to give authority and power back to parents in Australian communities to have a bit more say about what their children watched on television. And that was a decision once again reflecting a mainstream concern. Now, I don't believe in censorship, I'm a Liberal, I'm a person who believes in a free society, but I do believe that as parents we have responsibilities and I think one of the smouldering sentiments that many Australian parents have at the present time is that they are increasingly living in a society where their role and their authority in relation to what their children do is being eroded and anything that a government can do that can have an influence in changing that is a decision and measure that I believe most Australians are willing to support.

Now we are going to bring down a budget on the 20th of August and there's a lot of speculation about it. I can't announce all of its contents to you tonight. I can tell you though that there will be a few things in it that will deliver on the commitments, the important commitments that we made when we went to the people at the last election. And some of those people who've been running around Australia suggesting that those important commitment we made in the last election campaign are going to be walked away from are going to have a lot of egg on their face. We are going to ensure that the family tax package that we committed ourselves to at the election is delivered. We are

going to maintain our commitment to keep Medicare, and we are going to deliver on our commitment in relation to tax deductibility for private health insurance, a very very important commitment that has been made.

And I can assure you that the decisions that will be taken in the Budget will represent a fair balance between the importance of keeping faith with those central commitments but equally recognising that we inherited a budget situation much worse than what we'd been told. And can I say on that subject, another law that we are going to I hope - the Senate willing pass before the next election, is a law to make certain that never again will we have this absolute charade during an election campaign where everybody wants to know the true state of the books but the Government in power won't let that true state be made available. I mean, the day after the second of March, on the third of March, I staggered up to the Commonwealth office on Phillip Street, I was feeling rather weary, I can't understand why, and I was greeted by the then secretary of the Prime Minister's department and two of his deputy secretaries and they handed over what they call the blue book, and it gives you all the information about the transition to government, you know, and all this very very interesting material. And right in the middle of it was all this interesting material about the Budget deficit. I mean, it had been prepared weeks earlier and they had two blue books, they had one for Mr Keating if he had won and they had one for me. I was very happy that mine was the one that was utilised of course. And they hand this over to me and it's got right in the middle of it in bold type, underlying budget deficit for 1996/97 and of course it was some \$7 billion or \$8 billion higher than what had been the basis of the campaign by the former government.

So what we are going to do is we are going to pass a law saying that when the writs are issued for the next election, the federal Treasury will automatically be required to publish updated calculations of the Budget situation. And they will be published, they will be published, and can I say as Prime Minister and I'm sure Peter Costello if he were here tonight would echo my sentiment. There's a marvellous discipline on more efforts because what it means is that that the true state of the books is going to be revealed whether you like it or not when the campaign starts and I think that is a very very important discipline.

It's the sort of discipline that a company is subjected to if it goes into the market. I mean, you'd be in a lot of trouble if you issue a false prospectus and so you ought to, and I think it is equally the case that governments ought to be required to issue a reasonably accurate given the margins of error that inevitably are there given the shifting economic parameters I think that is a totally reasonable thing to do. Ladies and gentlemen, after 13 years in opposition, we have the opportunity as a Coalition government to take Australia through to the end of this century to preside over the celebration of the centenary of federation and to lay the foundations for the prosperity and the future of this country into the next millennium. I think it is very important that any Government having to confer with all the Australian people as its greatest priority, should be a government that focusses of those things that bind Australian people together rather than those things that push them apart.

I haven't made a particular habit of talking too much about my predecessor since I became Prime Minister and I don't intend tonight to particularly depart from that practice. But I do want to say that one of the things that worried me, particularly over the last two or three years of the former Government, was that we seemed to spend an enormous amount of time focussing on things that divided the Australian community. We had thrust down our throats a version of Australian history that tried to divide Australians into more or less patriotic Australians according to which particular view they took about certain issues. We had a preoccupation with arguing a particular point of view about our history which encouraged division rather than encouraging unity. Well, I don't pretend for a moment that there oughtn't to be and there always will be and there should be because it is essential to democracy, there ought to be very vigorous debate in this country about political issues and things that people feel very strongly about. And I think one of the roles of the Government no matter what its complexion is, one of the roles of the Government should be to focus on things that bind us together. And I sensed as I went around the country last year in the lead up to the election, that there was a great desire on the part of the Australian people to sort of have an outbreaking of finding common ground on certain issues rather than wasting effort and energy on those things that they could never find agreement on. I coined a phrase during an election campaign that some people poked a bit of fun at but I didn't mind it at all, I was a view I had about Australia and I said I wanted Australians to feel comfortable and relaxed about their past, comfortable and relaxed about their present and comfortable and relaxed about their future.

Some people thought I was joking when I said that. I wasn't really, I think it is very important that we feel confident and relaxed and we feel a sense of pride and sense of satisfaction about what this country has achieved. That doesn't mean we shouldn't feel ashamed about some things in our past. Any nation that reflects on itself honestly must feel a sense of shame about certain things. It doesn't mean to say that we've been perfect but it does mean to say that over the last hundred years in particular since federation, this country has achieved an enormous amount. And I last year as Leader of the Opposition and even more so now as Prime Minister, I sense that there are many Australians who were tired of the self-denigration that is sometimes engaged in by some in our midst, and they want a period not of triumphalism, but they want a period in which we take a quiet pride in what has been achieved, and we work together to tackle the problems that we have.

And we have a number of economic problems, but we also have an enormous going for us. We have relatively strong economic growth. We have a culturally diverse workforce which is of great benefit to us. We live cheek by jowl to the fastest growing economic region in the world, the Asian-Pacific region and it is the strong commitment of my government to maintain the involvement of this country in the Asian-Pacific region, and any suggestion that now that you've got a Coalition Government in power we are going to be slackening on that is completely wrong.

We are forever part of this region, that doesn't mean to say we don't have associations with other parts of the world but our economic future is very bound up in it, and areas such as North Queensland I think are even more conscious of that than some other parts of Australia. SO we do have a lot going for us, and I have a very deep feeling that if we can over the next two or three years get on top of our budget problem, things such as our industrial relations system, and our chronically arthritic waterfront, and bring about some of those other micro-economic reforms that are so necessary, then I think we can enter a period of very great stability and a period of very great prosperity. Finally ladies and gentlemen can I say to all of you that one of the great responsibilities that I have as federal Parliamentary leader, as leader of the Federal Coalition Government and as Prime Minister, one of the great responsibilities I have is to maintain a very strong contact with the grass roots of the Liberal Party. I came through the grass roots of the Liberal Party. I've spent all of my adult life working for the cause of the Liberal Party and the values in which the Liberal Party believes. And I value the opinions of the people in the grass roots of the Liberal Party and my responsibility is to continue to maintain contact with you, to maintain contact with the Australian community. The most dangerous disease of any political leader is that the Ancient Greeks coined, hubris, to lose contact with those people who elect you, to lose contact with those people who support you and to lose contact with those people who fought for you and kept faith in you is the biggest mistake that any political leader can make.

I finish my remarks by saying that I will do my level best to maintain the faith that you've put in me, to maintain the faith that the Australian people have put in me. I won't always get everything right, I won't always do everything that you want me to do and I'm sure that between now and the next election I will annoy on occasions quite a number of you. And that's the nature of political life, but I can promise you that we will take decision in good faith, that are in our view in the best interests of all of the Australian people and that they will be decisions that will reflect the mainstream values of the overwhelming majority of the Australian community.

Thank you very much indeed.