



PRIME MINISTER

20 July 1996

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
ADDRESS TO THE 61ST ANNUAL STATE CONFERENCE OF THE
NATIONAL PARTY - QUEENSLAND**

E&OE.....

Thank you very very much David Russell for that very very warm introduction. To Rob Borbidge, the Premier of Queensland; Joan Sheldon, the Deputy Premier of Queensland; to John Paterson the Federal President of the National Party; to Don Macdonald, the former President of the Queensland National Party; to Bob Tucker, the President of the Queensland Division of the Liberal Party; to John Anderson, the Deputy Leader of the Federal Parliamentary National Party and Minister for Primary Industry and Energy; and so many of my other federal and state Parliamentary colleagues and particularly the local federal member, the newly elected local federal member for Herbert, Peter Lindsay; ladies and gentlemen.

It is for me a particular pleasure to be here today and before talking politically in any way could I say something that everybody without any exception, I'm sure not only in this room but all over Australia will endorse my saying and that is to send our warmest good luck wishes to the Australian Olympic team as the Atlanta Olympic Games open.

There's nothing that quite binds the hearts of Australians together more than a great sporting contest. I was the witness of a great an epic sporting victory by the Australian Rugby team last Saturday evening against the Springboks and it was a great victory, they played brilliantly and I think Mike Horan was there, and Tim said he was, so I think nothing quite warms the heart like an Australian sporting success and I look forward to the front pages of the newspapers and the lead first second and third items on the news

bulletins over the weeks ahead being absolutely regaled with Australian victories at Atlanta.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is the first conference of the Queensland National Party that I have addressed. It is of course the first of your State branches' conferences since the two great election victories that we shared together. The ultimate defeat of the Goss Labor Government by Rob Borbidge and Joan Sheldon and the quite remarkable win that we had on the second of March in the Federal Election.

That win on the second of March was in the State of Queensland in the House of Representatives the best outcome that either side of politics has achieved in two-party preferred terms in any State of Australia since federation. To have achieved as we also just did in 1975, 60.2% of the two-party preferred vote, was an enormous tribute to the grass roots organisation of the two parties.

It drove home an enduring political lesson in Australia and that is when the Liberal and National parties work together, they win together. And it was a great vindication. And I want to say to all of you how very proud I am to be in coalition with the National Party of Australia. On the night of the election, just by one seat, it would have been theoretically possible for the Liberal Party to have governed in its own right but it was never in my contemplation, no matter what the numbers that that would be the case. I had a pact in opposition with Tim Fischer and the National Party and I was determined that that pact would be followed forward into Government, and I am enough of a political realist to know that no matter what the outcome in individual seats may be, the most important thing about hanging onto Government in this country for our side of politics it is the absolute coalition unity of our two great political organisations.

I have all of my political life been a devoted coalitionist. I am a Liberal first, as Tim Fischer is a National Party member first, but I am a coalitionist. I share many of the values and aspirations of people who represent the rural areas of Australia. I understand the pain that is still being felt in rural Australia. I know that between 30 and 40% of the State of Queensland is still drought declared. I know the despair in many of the rural towns of this country. I know the absolute anger of many people in the bush about the way in which minority groups have disadvantaged the great export income earners of this country. And when I say that I think particularly of the way in which the industrial relations system of this country has strangled the aspirations of many of the great wealth producers of Australia - and I want to come to that in a moment.

But can I say on a personal note, that I couldn't be working with a finer Australian, I couldn't be working with a man of greater trust and greater commitment to the cause of his Party and the cause of our coalition than Tim Fischer. To many Australians Tim Fischer represents those great quintessential values of directness and authenticity which we identify with the Australian bush. He's been a fearless advocate of the cause of rural Australia and when I heard David Russell just make a passing reference to the Diesel

Fuel Rebate, it could have been Tim - but I heard what the reaction of the audience was. I heard the reaction of the audience.

I think we have in the four months that we've been in office we have accomplished a great deal. If we had control of the Senate, we'd have accomplished a lot more. We've already identified ourselves as a Government that is determined to represent the interests of the mainstream of the Australian community. One of the things that I campaigned on with that slogan 'For All of Us' was a belief that what had to be represented were the aspirations and the values of the mainstream of the Australian community. That doesn't mean you kick minorities around. It doesn't mean that you are insensitive to minority groups in the Australian community but what it means that at the end of the day you've got to take decisions that represent the aspirations and the desires of the great mainstream of the Australian community. And for too long this country had a government that was pushed and pulled in every direction by the noisiest minority that happened to be in town at the particular time.

We had an agenda to bring about certain change. But we also had an agenda to reassert some of the fundamental values and verities of the Australian way of life. I campaigned very strongly on restoring the role of the family unit as the most influential cohering unit in the Australian community. I believe that Australian families not only provide the greatest source of emotional and spiritual comfort to Australian individuals but beyond that a functioning united coherent family is the most effective social welfare system that any nation has ever seen.

And the widening gap between rich and poor, much of the social disintegration of this country and much of the unemployment of this country can be traced to the disintegration of family life.

And whilst governments can never turn back the tide of change of human behaviour and human failings they can shift the incentives, they can have an influence, they can nail their colours to the mast of commitment to stabilising the Australian family, and one of the important goals will be to do that. And I made certain commitments about family tax relief in the campaign and I want to tell you that that commitment is going to be honoured in full when the federal budget is brought down on the 20th of August.

It is also worth reflecting ladies and gentlemen of course on the other great victory that was secured in Queensland, and that was the change of Government. And can I say to you that the relationship that I have developed with your new Premier, with Rob Borbidge, has been a relationship of trust, of confidence, of friendship, of reliance, and of shared values and shared objectives. He's a man that I like and admire a lot. He's a man that I can work with easily. If we have a disagreement over something, that disagreement is expressed in a calm and logical fashion and I look forward to years of cooperation between a federal Coalition Government led by me and a Queensland Coalition Government led by Rob Borbidge.

We have a lot of policy things in common. Both of us are concerned about the need to bring about changes to the Native Title Act to make that Act more workable. I have no quarrel with the decision of the High Court in the Mabo case, but I have a lot of quarrel with the legislation that was passed by the former Labor Government against our Opposition and with the support of the Australian democrats. That legislation has created unnecessary delay in development in this country. We have seen the stultifying effect of the uncertainty surrounding Native Title issues in relation to the Century Zinc project and it must be abundantly clear to any observers of that particular issue and any observers of resource development in this country, that failure of that project to get off the ground has in no way been the fault of either the Queensland Government or the Federal Coalition Government. We indicated a willingness to facilitate to through legislation any agreement reached between the Aboriginal communities and the company. We want that project to go ahead and I suspect that many many members of the Aboriginal community and their children also want that project to go ahead. It's the sort of project that is in the interests of everybody because it provides export income to this country and it provides jobs for Australians whether they are of Aboriginal descent or not and it sends a signal to the rest of the world if it were to go ahead that this is a very safe, predictable, and reliable country in which to invest. And it must be a matter of great frustration to many people that that project has so far not got off the ground.

Just as it was a matter of great frustration to many people that the seemingly acceptable Port Hinchinbrook development was for no valid reason frustrated by the former federal Labor Government. And as you are aware in recent weeks, Robert Hill, the Minister for the Environment has indicated the disposition of the Federal Coalition Government to allow that project to go ahead. I mention these things my friends because one of the moods I found as I went around Australia during the election campaign was this growing feeling that you couldn't do anything in the place any more. That every time you put a project up for approval, somebody had a reason why it couldn't go ahead. And the net effect of that was that Australians particularly young Australians and most especially Australians in the non-metropolitan areas of Australia were denied job opportunities and denied a future. And one of the goals of my government and I know it is a goal of Rob Borbidge's government is to cut away the obstacles to many of these projects and many of these developments going ahead.

Two of the other areas that we identified in the election campaign of course were the importance of industrial relations reforms to which David Russell has already referred, and also the important role played by small business within our community. All of you know how strongly committed I have been on a personal level to securing fundamental industrial relations reform in this country. There is nothing more important to the long term economic strength of Australia than to change our arthritic out of date industrial relations system. There is no economic reform objective to which I am more strenuously committed and the members of my government - Tim Fischer, John Anderson, Peter Reith - all of them, and there is nothing more utterly unites the non-Labor governments of this country than a commitment to fundamental industrial relations reform. We need to absolutely get rid of any vestige of compulsory unionism in Australia. We need to restore

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the effective secondary boycott laws. They were so effective that the Labor Party tried for 13 years to get rid of them and they finally succeeded in persuading the Australian Democrats after the 1993 election to destroy them. And one of the important elements of our legislation is to bring back those effective secondary boycott laws.

We are committed to giving people effective choice of work place agreements. We are committed to allowing those Australians who want to join trade unions to join the union of their choice and so the list goes on.

In the area of small business we have already implemented our promise to reduce the provisional tax uplift factor from 8% down to 6%. I've established a committee under the chairmanship, the Managing Director of Macdonald's - there seems to be a lot of them in the conversation today, to carry out an inquiry into how you reduce by 50% in our first three years of Government the red tape that operates to prevent the free movement and the free dealings of small business in Australia and I'll have that report by November or December of this year and of course there is no element of the industrial relations law that is more important than the provision in that legislation that will strike down Laurie Brereton's ridiculous unfair dismissal law.

Because that unfair dismissal law, incidentally, we weren't told anything about it in the 1993 election campaign. There's a funny double standard operating here ladies and gentlemen. The Labor Party in 1993 said nothing about the industrial relations reforms they were going to implement and they got through the Senate. In 1996 we said everything about the industrial relations reforms we were going to implement and they are still stuck in the Senate. It says a very very interesting thing about some of the double standards that are operating in Australian politics at the present time, but I don't want anybody to leave this gathering today to be in any doubt that we remain absolutely committed to our goals of industrial relations reform.

Now, Mr President, I'd now like to turn to the issue that you mentioned in your speech and that is the issue of gun control legislation and I want to say at the outset that this is a difficult issue and I know that as an urban Liberal my culture, my perspective on this as David quite correctly intoned in his introductory remarks is perhaps a little different from many in this audience. I understand that, and the last thing that I am going to do today is deliver any sermons or any lectures or any moralising scriptures about the issue. It's not something for that, it is something for sensible debate and discussion. It is an emotional issue and I don't think when I accepted the verdict of the Australian electorate on the night of the second of March it would have been in my contemplation or indeed in the contemplation of anybody in this room that one of the issues that we'd have to grapple with as Coalition partners was the issue of gun control legislation. I know that there are many people who find the laws that I support so strongly, inconvenient. Some even find those laws quite unacceptable. I know that. I respect their strength of feeling. I don't brand sporting shooters as criminals or Rambo's - I've never done that. You can search the record and you will find no abusive language from me. I understand that it is difficult for many of those people. I understand that on this particular occasion I'm supporting a

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set of laws that is asking people to give up part of a recreational pursuit and also to give up part of other activities that they have followed all their life. I also know, and I'd just like to quietly remind you that in the course of working through these proposals and reaching the situation where we are now, a number of changes have been made to recognise in particular the situation of many people in primary production.

The introduction of the first Police Ministers' Conference of the exemption in demonstrated need circumstances of Category C weapons, in other words, the less powerful semi-automatic weapons. The introduction specifically in response to representations put to us by the Queensland Government, by Russell Cooper and Rob Borbidge, put to us in relation to Category D weapons and then the acceptance last Wednesday of the proposal in relation to those involved in Olympic national and other international sporting disciplines.

So it is not as if in the process have been blindly insensitive to many of the concerns that have been expressed. And I do accept that some people will be inconvenienced. I know that. I ask that it be accepted by you that the rationale that I have adopted and the rationale that my Government has adopted and I believe the view taken by the overwhelming majority of Australians including I know very large numbers of people in rural and non-metropolitan Australia is that on this occasion the overall common good is such that it is an inconvenience that the majority of the population believes should be accepted. Now, that's not easy and I know that, and it is the sort of thing that happens on occasions and it is the sort of thing that doesn't give me any pleasure because I am in the business of working through things with my friends in the National Party. And I am sensitive to the difficulties that some of my colleagues have had in relation to this issue and the Party organisation. But it is ultimately my responsibility and the responsibility of my colleagues to take a stance that delivers on the expectations of the great bulk of the Australian community, that delivers on the aspirations and the expectations of the mainstream of the Australian community, and I think throughout the country and the city areas of Australia, there is a passionate desire to achieve something here which would have been thought unachievable a short time ago.

There is a deep feeling within the Australian community that we have an historic opportunity to ensure that this nation does not go down the American path and we have an opportunity to deliver on that hope and that aspiration and that expectation and that is what has driven me and what has influenced me, not a desire to score any kind of argumentative or debated point, but I believe that there are occasions when leaders of Governments and I want to express to all the Premiers of Australia, and particularly here today to Rob Borbidge my thanks and gratification for the cooperation and the understanding of a difficult issue.

He has put his position very strongly and very directly to me. I want to express my thanks to all of my Liberal and National Party colleagues for their cooperation and understanding and also may I say in the proper spirit I hope of generosity on this occasion, the support and understanding that has come from other political parties that

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don't normally extend any support or any understanding to us on any issue at all. And I think that is part of what is within the expectation of the Australian community and I do hope that you understand those motivations. I do hope that you understand that in taking the attitude I have, and my government taking the attitude that it has that we believe that we are giving expression to a very deeply held view within the Australian community. And the proposals that we have put forward are based upon the principle of proper and fair compensation. We are not proposing the complete removal of firearms from the Australian community. We are not proposing a regime that is nearly as strict as some of those who have sought to misrepresent it, would have you and to have us believe.

We are proposing a regime that we believe over a period of time will lead to a substantial and lasting reduction in the number of firearms in the Australian community. It will deliver in our view a safer community. I don't pretend for a moment that it is going to deliver a community that will never again see a gun massacre. I won't say that - I can't say that. Anybody who says that is both foolish and irresponsible. But given what has occurred and given the evident and persistent commitment I have found across the political divide in city and in country, in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas alike - given all of that, I believe that we do have a special responsibility at this time in our country's experience to take the action that we have. I know it is difficult for some, I do understand that.

And I want to say in relation to that that a Coalition is always a question of some give and take. There will be occasions when the National Party supporters and members of the Coalition will think it is the one-way Liberal traffic. I understand that. But can I also say to you there will be other occasions, and I ask you to take the long view and not just look at the last two or three months or this particular issue, take the long view and understand that there will be occasions when people do see government decisions that are particularly in the interests of the National Party side of the bargain.

I am not unconscious of the importance in a Coalition of making sure that everybody gets a fair crack of the whip, that's very important, and Tim is particularly vigilant to ensure that that occurs. And I think if you see a number of the decisions emerge over the next few months your faith in the durability and the fairness of the Coalition will be well and truly vindicated.

So ladies and gentlemen, I wanted to say those things directly and frankly. There is never any point in a valuable political partnership which is intended to last for a very very long time, there is never any point on occasions in avoiding plain speaking or pretending that some differences don't exist or imagining that there aren't some hurt feelings along the way. I understand that and I'm very respectful of it, but I ask you to understand equally the reasons why I have the view that I do, and the reason why I believe that the view that I have put to you and I have maintained is in the best interests of Australia and of secondary, but nonetheless great importance, it is also in the long-term best interests of the political situation of both our parties, of the unity of them, and it is in the long term

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interests of our capacity to deal with difficult political issues and to resolve them in a way that rebounds very much to our credit.

Finally, can I say to you as I have to the several State conferences of the Liberal Party that I have addressed since the election, that I would never have been leader of the Opposition. I would never have been a member of Parliament, I would never have been a Minister and most certainly I would never have been Prime Minister if it hadn't been for the grass roots members of my Party and by extension, the grass roots members of the National Party of Australia. I came out of the Liberal Party organisation in New South Wales. I've always believed in dialogue between the organisation and the Parliamentary Party and I think David's allusion, operatic allusion was really succinctly summed up by saying you know, don't get too carried away with yourself!! And can I say I was intrigued at the way he said it. I mean, this is new rural diplomacy - it is absolutely terrific. But ladies and gentlemen, I won't get carried away with myself, the Greeks called it hubris. Australians have some blunter ways of describing it but I'll spare those from you today and I won't get carried away with myself. I am here as Prime Minister because of your work and through the gift of the Australian people and I'll always remember that and if I always remember that I've a rough opportunity of staying here for quite a while. If I forget it, I'll get chucked out pretty quickly and I don't want to do that. I've waited a long time and my colleagues waited a long time. They are enjoying it, they are doing a good job. I watched Bruce Scott do the Townsville RSL last night - it was tour de force! And John Anderson's I think delivered a very good outcome for regional Australia in relation to a sensible resolution in the woodchip industry in particular. I think it was a very very sound decision that balanced both the desire for the environment and the desires of development.

So ladies and gentlemen, again my heartfelt thanks for the support that you gave us on the second of March. My heartfelt thanks for the sterling support and loyalty through the wilderness years in Opposition. They were rotten years, I don't want to revisit them and I don't think any man or woman in this room wants to revisit them either. Remember when we work together, we win together.

Thank you.