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PRIME MINISTER

30 September 1996

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON. JOHN HOWARD MP
OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE SECOND INTERNATIONAL
LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AND TECHNOLOGY AUSTRALIA
(LETA) EVENT AND EXPO**

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Mr Chairman, to Dean Brown the Premier of South Australia thank you very much for those warm words of welcome. To Robert Lucas the Education Minister for South Australia, ladies and gentlemen.

It is probably the most natural thing in the world that a conference of this type should be held here in Adelaide, and more broadly, here in Australia. One of the I think occasionally unremarked characteristics of Australians through the years, and certainly current experience is proving the point quite dramatically, has been the fascination that Australians have always had with new technology. And one of our great characteristics has been, not only in the area of information technology, but also in so many other areas. One of our great capacities as people and one of our trades, our characters, as people has been our disposition to very rapidly devour new technology.

And I don't need to tell an audience such as this the rate at which all of the predictions made about the number of mobile telephones, the number of personal computers and so forth, the predictions made a few years ago about the penetration levels have of course not only been exceeded but the predictions that were subsequently made have also been exceeded and so the process has gone on. So it is a very natural thing that a conference like this should take place in Australia and it is also, as the Premier said, a particularly appropriate circumstance that it should take place here in Adelaide because over the years, and most particularly in the last few years, the Governments of this State have set out with a great deal of success to make this State something of a technological centre. Throughout the nation the resources that have been put in to training and education are testament to that and the high profile that the current Government of South Australia has given to technology and the link between technology and education and technology and business is also testament to that.

As I got on the plane in Sydney this morning I flicked through the newspapers and one of them referred to me as a commuter style Prime Minister and I think he was drawing attention to the fact that unlike some of my predecessors I've made a decision that the

Federal Government of this country should not, or the members of it, should not spend all of their waking hours in Canberra. And I don't say that disrespectfully to the national capital, it's a very beautiful city and there are some large numbers of very dedicated Australians working in the national public service there to make this a better country. But it has been a desire of mine to travel around this country as much as possible and it's been a desire of mine at a personal level to spend perhaps a little more time in Sydney where my family home has always been and perhaps some of my predecessors.

We're also in the business of taking Cabinet meetings around Australia and I'm going on to Perth after having some further meetings here, after opening this conference and we'll be having a Cabinet meeting in Perth tomorrow and we'll be having Cabinet meetings here in Adelaide during the term of this Government. That's rather a long winded way of getting to the point of that newspaper article. What, of course, that newspaper article failed to mention, but I suppose it was implicit, is that because of technological advances it is much easier now for Governments to move around. It is much easier for the personnel in Governments to move around and to maintain easy contact and easy channels of communication.

I always think when I'm asked to speak at something like this that how inadequate it is to list all of the individual pieces of technology that have come on the scene, particularly in the area of communications, of how inadequate it is to try and surprise an audience like this with some comment about some remarkable new technological development and I certainly don't intend to try and do that this morning. Better than any audience, this audience will know just how extraordinary has been the explosion of technological capacity, how extraordinary has been the communications explosion and the way in which it in particular is almost on a weekly basis rewriting many of the rules and rewriting many of the text books and methodologies of learning and the methodologies of doing business.

Now I'm pleased to say, of course, that there are certain Australian institutions such as grand finals in any code of football that they're not remaking, although the communications developments of recent years have made it possible for millions more to enjoy those games and to participate in some of the great national festivals that those games represent. But the way in which technology has transformed, teaching and learning in this country is, of course, something I suppose in which we've only begun in recent years to scratch the surface. The extraordinary difference between the classroom of the 1950s and the 1960s of which so many in this room, perhaps not too many but certainly a significant number, would have been very familiar and the classroom of today, the access that is available and it is particularly important to people living in more remote areas of Australia the way in which the internet, the way in which communication facilities generally have demolished distances and difference not only within our own society but around the world has been quite remarkable.

As the Premier said, it's very important when you talk about technology and the enormous opportunities that it opens up, particularly in the education of the young, it is important not to neglect the basic building blocks of a good education system. And that means the maintenance of support for a diverse education system and also, of course, as part of that the maintenance of support for a strong public education system.

I'm very happy to say that despite the fact that there were some expenditure reductions in other areas of federal government responsibility, one of those areas effectively quarantined from any expenditure reduction were the capital and recurrent expenditures directed towards public and independent schools education in Australia. And that was a very deliberate decision because of the enormous priority that is attached by the federal government and I believe all state governments around Australia, irrespective of their political complexion, to the role of public and private education within our society.

The Premier also mentioned the importance of training and the relationship between training and the workplace in the Budget. We announced a modern apprenticeship and training system which is designed to replace the current rather complicated apprenticeship and training system with one that is more directly attuned to the needs of the workplace and to the needs of young people entering the work force and is more likely to deliver as the end result of the training process, real jobs which are directly related to the needs of the individual employers and the aspirations of the young people that they employ.

Whenever I talk to any kind of business gathering I take the opportunity to remind them of how the basic elements of the information revolution of recent years, the personal computer, the facsimile machine and the mobile telephone, of how those basic elements have absolutely transformed the dynamics within our economy and within our community between large and small businesses. I often talk about the importance of small firms within our society and I don't think many or sufficient numbers of people fully understand the real significance to small firms and businesses of that information revolution. The way in which it has given to people the capacity to access markets world wide, the degree to use one of those very modern expressions, the extent to which has empowered small businesses, not only here in Australia but all around the world, to do things that were simply not possible in the absence of those technologies, or more particularly, the absence of their relative accessibility to most people in small business.

Conversely of course, the globalisation of the economy and the spread of that technology is having dramatic consequences for large transnational firms. It is now far easier for a firm that operates in more than one nation and that is increasingly the case with large firms if they are to survive and we are very conscious of that here in Australia, hoping as we do hope to build on our early success in getting a share of the Asia Pacific region which is the fastest growing economic region in the world. But information technology has meant that transnational firms have a capacity to relocate activities and therefore relocate jobs in a much more dramatic way than was the case in the past, and all of us are conscious of this and those particular realities add a competitive pressure to the doing of business as well as in the case of small firms adding a competitive opportunity.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is an opportunity to do a number of things, a conference of this type. It is an opportunity to learn the latest technologies that are available, it is an opportunity for Adelaide to showcase its particular expertise and its particular capacities and skills and it's also an opportunity for Australia as a nation to remind the

world of the importance of our nation in the world of technology. But I think more importantly that it is an opportunity to remind ourselves of the enormous force for good the technological progress has brought about.

Whenever I'm asked in a radio or television interview to try and reflect upon some of the ways in which society has gone both forward in some areas and backwards in others I always put at the top of my list the way in which technological advances, and particularly in the area of medical science, have given to people hope and an enjoyment of life and equality of life which was beyond the expectations of only a few decades ago. And an occasion such as this with the linkages between education and technology an occasion to remind ourselves of the great aid to education the technological advances and technological sophistication represents. It's also an opportunity to remind ourselves of the enormous force for good, the enormous force for progress and the enormous force for the greater enjoyment of human life and the greater benefit of mankind that technological advances and technological achievements represent.

There are some in our society who fear technological progress. It is true that to many aged cohorts, particularly in the middle and older ages, some of the technological advances are dazzling even to some a little unsettling. I think it's important, if I can coin an expression, that the practitioners of technological change both understand, that in relation to middle aged and older people but also perhaps be conscious of a trend that was picked up in a survey conducted in connection with the Commission for the Future's examination of the hopes and fears and aspirations and beliefs of young Australians, that surprisingly enough to me, I must say, that survey also indicated a certain trepidation amongst the young that the pace of technological change was proving unsettling to some of them. I think it's a reminder to all of us that the pace of change and the way in which those changes are explained, the way in which they are incorporated into daily life, the way in which they are seen as aid to progress and an aid to a more harmonious human existence always remains very important.

Ladies and gentlemen, I was delighted to have received this invitation today. I'm delighted to be with you to congratulate those who put this symposium and this expo together. I particularly want to acclaim the partnership and the cooperation between the federal government, the state government and the private sector. This is yet another example of the importance of cooperation between all arms of government and the private business sector. I thank those who've come to exhibit, I congratulate the contribution that they are making and I also applaud the emphasis that the Premier placed, and I know his government places, on the link between technology and schools education, in particular, here in South Australia.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have very great pleasure in declaring LETA open. I have very great pleasure in again welcoming all of you who've come overseas to Australia and I wish all exhibitors great success and I congratulate the organisers for the practical contribution that they are making through the holding of this symposium and expo to those important linkages between technological advance, science and our daily working lives and the process of learning and education. Thank you very much.