



PRIME MINISTER

18 October 1996

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON. JOHN HOWARD, MP
ADDRESS TO THE NATIONAL LIBERAL WOMEN'S CONFERENCE
BLACKJACKS ROOM, WREST POINT HOTEL CASINO
HOBART, TASMANIA**

F&O:.....

Chris McDiven, Margaret Guilfoyle, other distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. It is a great delight to address this conference as part of the first Federal Council meeting of the new era of Liberal government. I remember the day of the launch of our women's policy, remember very well, and what a successful policy it was and what a great success we had in securing the election of a record number of women to the national Parliament.

If ever a political party demonstrated in relation to something that action speaks louder than rhetoric, the Liberal Party demonstrated it with female representation. As it has been in so many other areas, ethnic representation, many other areas of representation, so it has been in relation to female representation in the national Parliament. We don't believe in the patronising symbolism of quotas, we believe in the practical reality of treating women on their merits and inevitably, increasingly large numbers of them will be elected as Liberal members of the national Parliament. And just before I came here I spoke on the phone to one of those women who was swept into office on the 2nd of March and one who is very much in our thoughts at the present time. And if ever a member of the Liberal Party, if ever a candidate for office is in our thoughts, and if ever a candidate deserves that great Australian commodity of a fair go, it's Jackie Kelly. And if tomorrow the people of Lindsay fix on a choice between somebody new, somebody vigorous, somebody active and somebody who represents the future and discards somebody who's part of the failed past, then they will indeed vote for Jackie and vote for her directly tomorrow.

Ladies and gentlemen I'd like, at the commencement of my address, to congratulate Cluis McDiven on her re-election as Chairman of the Federal Women's Committee. And I want to thank all of you for the great work that you have done over the last year. The way in which so many of you - and I know my former cabinet colleague, Margaret Guilfoyle, has played a major role in this, the way in which you have encouraged an increasing number of women in the community to not only join the Liberal Party, but to become our candidates. And if there's a simple message that I would like to send from this gathering, and I'd like to send to the women of Australia out of this first Federal Council of the new Liberal era, that simply is, come and join us. Come and share the new directions that the Liberal Party has for the women of Australia as well as for all the people of Australia.

It's natural, when there's a change of government, for people to ask questions about the direction of the new government. And I want to say a couple of things about our general directions in the areas of great concern to women. We are a new government, we are a different government, and we won't be doing things the same way as the government we replaced. But that doesn't mean to say that we'll be turning back the clock. The world has changed forever so far as the women, not only of Australia, but women all around the world are concerned. And when I talk about taking a different direction, I don't talk about turning back the clock, I don't talk about reviving notions that may have been relevant to women generally of earlier generations, I talk about doing things differently in the future but doing them in an equally progressive way, and in a way that matches the aspirations of women of all ages as we move towards the next millennium.

You have chosen as a theme of this particular conference, the economic independence of women. Something incidentally that was in the spotlight earlier this week when we had the rather ridiculous notion put forward by some of our political opponents that there was something odd about women independently having assets when their husbands happen to be in politics. It passes very strange, you know, that parties that speak the loudest and are noisiest in the rhetoric about independence when it comes to making a cheap political point, they grab the rhetoric of earlier generations and it is very typical of the Labor Party of the 1990s.

But when we talk about women's policy for the future, we aren't talking about turning back the clock. There are new realities that have been with us for a very long time and they will, in turn, of course be replaced as the generations go by, by other new realities. But the new realities involve the maximum emphasis on freedom of individual choice. The new realities involve us, providing to the women of Australia, the maximum choice in organising the different responsibilities and aspirations and hopes within their lives. As with men, women will always have a special place in their lives for their family and their other relationships. The idea that pursuing a career, pursuing the achievement of individual goals and playing out to the limit the individual talents that women have, the idea that those sit uneasily with family responsibilities and the natural desire of people to nurture families and to raise children, has always struck me as a rather curious notion. And we shouldn't be in the business of making judgements about this or that way in which somebody lives

out his or her life. Our goal ought to be to create to the maximum extent that governments can do, a range of real choices, not nominal choices, not unachievable choices. A choice doesn't exist if you can't afford to aspire to it, it's merely a piece of empty rhetoric and we have to increasingly provide people with choice.

I can remember talking to a seminar in Parliament House in the middle of last year organised by Judi Moylan, one of quite a number of the members of my Ministry. And in that seminar I thought I could best encapsulate the change that had come over Australian society by telling it that when I attended the Sydney University Law School between 1957 - heaven's above - and 1961, there were, I think, 10 women out of 180 in the first year. When my daughter entered the first year of a combined law/economics course at Sydney University in 1993, 51 per cent of the students in that first year were women. And in that space of what, 34, 35 years, 34 years, it had changed to that extent. And so it is in so many other areas of life.

If you look at the different policies that we have tried to bring down - you look at our industrial relations policy, something very, very close to my political heart. One of the great benefits of the industrial relations policy that we have brought down, and I fervently hope will pass the Senate - and the second reading debate was approved by the Senate only two days ago - one of the great benefits of that policy is that it will allow people to more effectively blend their workplace and their family responsibility. And that is not only important for women, but it's also important for men and for husbands and fathers because sharing family responsibilities and sharing the responsibilities of parenthood is something that is very, very much a commitment so far as our policies are concerned. The idea that the responsibilities of raising children are inherently greater on women than on men is a notion of an earlier generation. They are shared responsibilities, they are shared affections and they ought to be shared responsibilities.

In other areas we have sought to create a more congenial society for women. Violence of any kind against women and children in particular, but not only, against all people, is something that I know is repugnant to everybody. And I am very proud of the fact that one of the greatest achievements of the new Government in its first seven months, and I believe it is an achievement that will rebound to the credit of the Government through the years no matter how long it remains in office, is what we were able to do in the wake of that awful tragedy here in Tasmania to secure national gun laws. And don't anybody underestimate the particular support we had from the women of Australia for those laws. The number of times people, women came up to me and said, 'don't take any notice of some of the stuff in the newspapers and on the media, we're very strongly in favour of what you're doing,' and that applied to women in the rural areas of Australia. And I was reminded of that two days ago when I met a delegation of women representing the rural communities of Australia at a National Rural Women's Summit in Canberra. And amongst the many submissions they put to me was the strong expression of support for the uniform gun laws that we'd been able to bring in.

I'm very happy to say that in a budget which, in other areas contain some very significant and stringent spending decisions, we were able to make more money available for counselling in relation to domestic violence. We were able to make more money available for counselling in relation to parenting skills and we were able to make more money for marriage and relationship guidance. If prevention is better than cure in matters of straight health policy it is also better - prevention is better than cure - in areas where it's the breakdown of the relationship and its negative, hostile, violent attitudes that cause unhappiness and cause abuse.

I'm particularly proud of my Government's initiatives in the area of small business. Women in small business now comprise something like 30 to 35 per cent of the total small business sector and it's growing at a very rapid rate. The successful entry of women into the small business component of the service sector of our economy is particularly rapid. Nowhere do you see the transformation of the workforce from that old paradigm of blue-collar males employed in manufacturing, working to a foreman in one large area where most of the employees congregate, than in the area of small business with women. And the way in which in retail, in computing services, in marketing, in certain areas of manufacturing, in tourism, in trade promotion, in just so many other areas, there has been a spectacular growth of the participation of women. And our policies for the small business community of Australia are very much designed to enhance the growth of small businesses. And I look forward to the day when - I hope it's not too distant - when that industrial relations bill does pass and we will have swept away those ridiculous unfair dismissal laws.

The reality of course, ladies and gentlemen, is that as time goes by and we move into the next century there will be fewer and fewer Australians employed by big companies and there will be proportionately more and more employed by small companies. I don't think the modern community has yet understood fully the impact of the communications revolution on the role of small businesses in our society. The way in which those three tools of that revolution - the personal computer, the mobile telephone and the facsimile machine - have absolutely revolutionised the doing of business by small firms. Those three tools alone give to small firms, including in particular - and this is relevant to many women as it is to men - including a greater capacity to work out of your own home. The way in which those three tools have revolutionised the circumstances in which you do business, I don't think has been fully understood.

It used to be the case in the 1970s that big was beautiful - that unless you became bigger and bigger then you couldn't get the economies of scale, you couldn't give yourself a sufficiently strong economic base to penetrate a worldwide market, and unless you cohered with another unit to form a larger unit you weren't going to make it. But modern communications have altered so much of that, and to use the current idiom, those changes have empowered small business and are of necessity there for women in small business to a remarkable degree. But of course providing women and indeed all people with greater

opportunities for choice in areas like industrial relations and areas such as small business does not of course alter the fact that there is a particular and special networking and community role which women bring unique skills and different capacities than men, and which is of so much importance and of so much value to the Liberal Party.

Since its inception the Liberal Party has relied very heavily on the advice and the participation of the women of Australia. In different circumstances when there were fewer women in the paid workforce the life and sole and the strength of the Liberal Party organisation depended very heavily on the participation of women. And in a newer and different age such as we now live, we shouldn't be shy to acknowledge the enormous contribution of those women in an earlier generation who made that contribution in their unpaid way, and I think it's very important. I mean the properly mature and sophisticated approach to these things is to recognise that we are a Party that welcomes career women, welcomes women that blend career with their family responsibilities. We welcome women who choose to be full time homemakers, indeed we welcome women no matter what their choices are. There is room within the Liberal Party for a range of choices and for women to exercise that range of choices. The only group for which there is no room in the Liberal Party are those who displayed an intolerance towards the choice that has been taken by others.

I have found the advice and the counsel of women throughout my political career as absolutely indispensable. I not only refer to the advice and counsel that I receive from my own wife and my daughter but also the counsel and advice that I have received from my many women friends that I've made over the years in the Liberal Party, and of course most recently from the members of my staff and I think I'm the first Prime Minister of Australia to have a female Chief of Staff and also from the female members of my Cabinet and my Ministry. It can be said without any question that we have a large number of women of great talent and great ability in our ranks.

We have made the Labor Party look foolish because we have put deeds before words and we've put action before rhetoric. We haven't patronised women by establishing quotas that are going to create fascinating traffic jams on the road to gender equality in the early years of the next century. I mean it is going to be fascinating watching some of those preselections in the Labor Party as they strive to get towards that 35% by about the year 2002.

I mean, if ever a political Party has demonstrated the truth of the old Augustinian injunction of 'Lord, make me pure - but not just yet' as far as the quota is concerned it is the Labor Party in relation to their 35% quota. We all remember the noise and the bells and whistles and the dancing in the aisles just over the road here when that resolution was passed a couple of years ago. Well, that was the myth, that was the fiction, the reality was on the 2nd March. But we ought not be complacent about that, and we ought to work very hard. We need a lot more women in federal Parliament, we need a lot more women

in State Parliament. We ought never to sell ourselves short though in relation to past achievements. We should remember the significant milestones as far as the enjoyment of equal achievement and equal opportunity by women that have been put down by the Liberal Party.

We remember of course the great contribution that Margaret Guilfoyle made as a senior member of the Fraser Government. Remember like Dame Enid Lyons, we remember many others, the Tangney's, Buttfields and so the list goes on. And just as the Liberal Party was the first Party in Australia to have an Aborigine as one of its members, we were the first Party in Australia to have a non-English speaking person of overseas birth as a member of federal Parliament in the person of Misha Lajovic.

So many of these areas when you actually turn back the pages of history, you find that we were there first and yet somehow or other over the years our political opponents have been able to create the notion that we've been dragging the chain and that we've been followers rather than leaders in so many of these areas. I don't think they've been able to do that since the 2nd March, because nothing can deny the force of that, I think, great flood of female talent and ability that came into federal parliament on the 2nd March, and it is something of which I am immensely proud and I know that all of my Parliamentary colleagues are immensely proud. And it is important that women in the Liberal Party speak in a very direct fashion to issues that are relevant to them, but most particularly to the community of which they are full and active and participating members.

Ladies and gentlemen, we all have our ideals of the way society ought to be. My ideal of an Australian society includes and very much involves the notion of women having the opportunity to live out their choices to the fullest extent as I hope would always be the case of all citizens of our society, providing their unique capacity and talent to provide the nurturing role and that special compassion and stability and affection that they can bring to relationships and their responsibilities along with men as parents. Finding a society where a proper balance can be reached for those who want both career satisfaction and also to fulfil to the maximum their responsibilities if they choose as parents to be parents, but also recognising that there will be some who will want to make their entire commitment in the home or some that will want to make their entire commitment in the paid workforce. There is not a hierarchy of virtue when it comes to the choices that women make. The only thing that is important and the only virtue that is important is that they should have the maximum freedom of choice that we can give them.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, let me conclude by thanking you for your participation in this conference. I want to thank you for the work that you've done. I want to thank the Federal Women's Committee, I want to thank Chris McIlhven and all of her colleagues for the help that they gave to me. I want to thank Jenny Higgs in my own office who's been particularly valuable as an adviser on women's issues to me. All of you have played a very very significant role in bringing us to the very happy circumstance where we meet for the first time in thirteen years as members of the governing Party of Australia.



As we look back over the last year, we think of the enormous achievement of the result on 2nd March. We also remember with particular affection our departed friend Dame Patie Menzies who played such a monumental role in the life of the Liberal Party of Australia, who was a great friend, companion and partner for life of the founder of the Liberal Party and who embodied so many of the great qualities of our Party and we think of the contribution of all of the women of the Liberal Party to our victory on 2nd March.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you and I do hope that in the years to come the contribution of the Federal Women's Committee will continue to grow and remain as it is today, a very important, integral part of the mechanism of providing policy advice and organisational support and counsel to the broader Party.

Thank you indeed.