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# PRIME MINISTER

29 October 1996

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER  
THE HON. JOHN HOWARD MP  
SPEECH TO THE 3M - ACF FORSITE CONFERENCE  
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA**

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Thank you very much Mr Carbon and to the executives of the 3M company, to Mr Jim Downey, the Executive Director of the Australian Conservation Foundation, ladies and gentlemen. I was very happy to be able to accept this invitation this morning and take a few moments leave from the normal joint party meeting of the Coalition Parties which I will of course be joining shortly, but I wanted to be here to express a couple of thoughts on behalf of the Government, the first about the symbolism as well as the reality which is involved in the 3M company and the Australian Conservation Foundation coming together to produce today's gathering.

There is a symbolism about it. It brings together an organisation in Australia which is very broadly based and which has for a long time represented many of the broadly based environmental concerns of the Australian community - that's the Australian Conservation Foundation - an organisation which has on occasions been supportive of what the present Government has done and has on other occasions been critical, as is the right of any community organisation. Those organisations exist to articulate the views of their members. They exist to express the views of the broad spectrum of people who give it financial and other support, and provided that is the basis on which they operate, I believe organisations of that kind discharge a very important, indeed a vital function in public debate on important public policy issues. And it also brings together a company which has now very deep roots in Australia which is a highly successful international company which has displayed all of the best credentials of a responsible corporate citizen, not only in the area of environmental matters but in other matters.

So the symbolism of those two groups coming together is important and the reality of it is also important because co-operation between the different interest groups, so far as the environment is concerned is not only important symbolically, it can also be very important in reality. For example, the Greenhouse Challenge programme which has relied very largely on a voluntary code of regulation has seen since 1991 growth in greenhouse gas emissions fall from 3% per annum to around half a percent per annum without the use of inflexible regulation and without a detrimental economic impact.

Environmental issues are forever mainstream political, social and economic issues in Australia and around the world. Achieving the elusive balance between the environment and the development is a responsibility shared by governments, industry and those groups in the community particularly charged with responsibility for promoting environmental concerns. The new Coalition Government went to the last election with a very strong commitment in environmental areas, particularly the establishment of the Natural Heritage Trust of Australia which the Senate willing will receive \$1 billion from the sale of one third of Telstra use that to fund long term environmental projects, and if that can be realised, it will represent the largest capital investment of a particular kind, of a discrete kind, in Australia's environmental future ever undertaken.

Here is not the occasion to beat the drum about the desirability of the sale of one third of Telstra. My views on that are well known and I believe well understood throughout Australia, but it is to say that our commitment to that Natural Heritage Trust is a very strong one and it is a token, a very strong token, an earnest of the Government's desire to see environmental concerns and environmental issues assume mainstream significance and remain there.

Some years ago, those who studied Australian politics believed that concern about the environment was largely the preoccupation of those under 35 and of the loosely called middle classes. The passage of time has demonstrated that to be wrong. It's rather like, or perhaps it's evidenced by, the public reaction to French nuclear testing in Australia last year. The breadth and the depth and the unanimity of the rejection of that surprised many people. I came across many in the Australian community who might loosely be called on the far right of Australian politics, who railed us hard against French nuclear testing, as did people who might be regarded on the soft or even the far left of Australian politics, and I think you can find the same pattern with environmental issues and of course, many would quite directly argue that nuclear testing is the ultimate environmental issue because of the potential damage in so many ways it could do, but I mention that by way of analogy to make the point that concern about the environment is no longer a sort of a cafe society preoccupation. It's no longer something that is just picked up for a while and then put aside when things get better or get worse, and then you go back to if you want to sort of feel warm and fuzzy. I think all of that is now behind us. It may have been a phase, it is no longer a phase. People feel threatened by a deteriorating environment. They are concerned about river pollution, they are concerned about soil degradation, they are concerned about greenhouse gas effects, they are concerned about ocean outfall and all of those things which are now very mainstream concerns.

Now I don't pretend to you that every decision that this Government has taken on the environment has been applauded by everybody in this room. I know it hasn't, and I don't think life will ever be as uncomplicated as that, and I know that some of the decisions that have been taken have disappointed some of the environmental groups. Others that have been taken have pleased sections of industry, falling short of what industry may have wanted. It was once said of the late Sir John McEwen that he once remarked that the only decent decision on industry assistance was one that was attacked by everybody effected by it. I sometimes believe that in relation to some environmental issues that may not be too far from the truth. You do have, as a government, to take into account economic, job, regional, community considerations. It is one thing to have a view about an issue which, if implemented in a particular fashion, will have only a marginal impact on a community. It is another when its impact is such because of its regional location will have an absolutely devastating and debilitating effect on the economic viability of a country or a regional town, and they are the sort of balances that have to be assessed.

But what is good about this conjunction interest today is a recognition by industry, personified by the 3M Company, that there is an ongoing corporate business and industry responsibility. But it's not a question of industry sitting there and being dragged reluctantly to the centre of the road by a government which is pulling people in both directions to try and get a consensus. Now, that does have to be done with some people in the corporate sector. There are still people in the business community whose attitude towards the environment is: 'well, I'll only do something about it if I'm forced or ashamed into doing something about it.' But increasingly that is a minority view and your contribution to this conference today is a demonstration of that. And that really is the way to go because self regulation in these matters, an acceptance that everybody has a role to play, and the Government is not just to be cast in the situation of a bang together of heads, that everybody does have a role to play is a very, very important path of the whole equation.

So I want to complete my introductory remarks by saying to you that the new Government does have a very long term commitment to sustainable development. It recognises the deeply held view of the Australian community that what I might call the 'bread and butter' issues of environmental concern; air pollution, water pollution, soil degradation, things of that nature have perhaps not received the attention in the past that they should have received. And if we are to have a credible approach to environmental care and environmental concern in the years ahead, they must receive far greater attention. And it does require the cooperation of everybody. It requires a government that is prepared to keep environmental concerns at the top of the political agenda, not in a divisive flamboyant fashion, but in a fashion that builds credibly for the future. And it also needs the concern and the preoccupation of the business community. And I thank the 3M Company for demonstrating its willingness along with many others to do that. And it also requires the participation of an active, independent, articulate, environmental movement. A movement that will put its cause passionately, but a movement which also, I hope, will understand that at the end of the day decisions taken by governments have to reflect a rounded concern for the national interest and not a concern that nearly reflects one or

other passionately held point of view. We can never adopt a winner takes all approach to environmental issues. We can never adopt the attitude that if one or other point of view prevails all is doom and disaster, destruction and the end of civilisation. What we have to do is to accept that there is a lot of good faith from a lot of sources in relation to the environment, that it's not a passing fad. People across the political, economic and social spectrum want a better, cleaner, safer environment for the future and if we start from that point I think we can realise a lot more than many of the doom stayers may have suggested.

But ladies and gentlemen, I have very great pleasure in declaring this conference open - I think it had started before I arrived. I thank the 3M Company and the Australian Conservation Foundation for bringing it together and making it a reality and I hope all of you find it extraordinarily successful and productive.

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