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PRIME MINISTER

2 December 1996

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
ADDRESS AT 1996 NATIONAL AWARDS FOR RETAIL EXCELLENCE
THE REGENT HOTEL, SYDNEY**

E&OE _____

Thank you very much Frank Lowy and to your wife Shirley, and to everyone else. Janette and I are really delighted to be here tonight.

I feel very privileged to share a platform with Kieren Perkins. I guess along with millions of other Australians, I held my breath that Saturday morning in July. And his magnificent win that morning, along with Susie O'Neill, seemed to turn the whole thing around. And it was a magnificent demonstration of the thing that makes all of us the proudest people imaginable and that is Australian determination and Australian success and Australian quality and Australian excellence. That's what tonight is all about. It is about honouring the excellence and the achievements of men and women in the retail industry.

Can I say at the beginning of my remarks to you Frank Lowy; you are a great Australian. You're a person who has demonstrated an extraordinary flair and capacity in business; you're philanthropic; you're a person who gives a lot back to the community and you are, in many respects, the personification of the story of post world war to Australia, a nation that receives millions of people from around the world. Yourself coming originally from Europe, from very sad and unhappy circumstances, building a new life in this country, pouring so much into it and becoming so much a part of Sydney and so much a part of Australia. And I'd like to say what a pleasure it is for Janette and I to be your guests and Shirley's guests here tonight.

Tonight is about remarking on and honouring excellence and achievement. And it is appropriate that one of the greatest sportsman Australia has produced should be the first speaker tonight. And excellence is something that ought to run firmly through all aspects of Australian life. Achievement on the sporting field or in the swimming pool is something that Australians have always honoured with enormous enthusiasm, they

always will and so they should. But excellence in the school room, excellence at university, excellence in a profession, excellence in business, excellence on the shopfloor, excellence at the retail level, is also something that we should unhesitatingly honour. And particularly those people who commit themselves in the small and medium size business sector.

Many of you know I do have something of a passion for small business. One of the reasons, I guess, is that I grew up in a small business environment. My father had a small garage - they used to call them, or service station - at Dulwich Hill, an inner suburb of Sydney. And I was taught as a young bloke that the most important thing you could do in life was to start with nothing and work your heart out and hopefully pass on a bit more to your children than you yourself have. It was a pretty good ideal and it's a very important ideal for Australia in the 1990s.

I know that retailing is about the most competitive thing anybody can be in at the present time. I know it's tough. I know there's a lot of cut-throat competition. It's always been an unprotected industry. You've never had any government handouts. You've never had any protection. You've always been on your own and without much sympathy if you fell over.

And I know that retailing patterns and consumer habits have changed. I often say to people that the last recession in Australia left Australia's consumers permanently hardened in favour of driving tough bargains. And I think we as a community changed a lot in that last recession. But we've always had amongst our national characteristic a tremendous capacity to innovate and to change and to adapt to new circumstances. One of the stunning things about Australians is their willingness to embrace new ideas and new technology. We are, as many of the people in one section of retailing will tell you, as a society we probably voraciously devour new technology, new gadgets and so forth, more rapidly than any other country in the world. The way in which Australians have taken the mobile telephone to their heart, or should I say to their ears, so enthusiastically is a very good demonstration of that.

And I want to say to all of the retailers of Australia, and particularly those of you who operate on a small scale, I want to say that my Government will do everything it can to create good circumstances to make retailing strong and prosperous. We want to have and preserve the low inflation that we have at the present time. A high dollar is a pain in the neck for some people, but for other people it's a good thing. Now, we don't control the dollar, the world market forces control. And I want to say to you that the days of thinking that any government could control the exchange rate, those days are gone forever. But a high dollar can bring benefits in lower inflation. It can help, therefore, to feed into lower interest rates and therefore provide a very, very sound business base.

And we've acted very quickly to bring in many of the reforms we promised to help small business. From the 1st of January the ridiculous unfair dismissal law that we now have will be swept away and replaced by a far more intelligent one.

Our other industrial relations reforms, which have now all gone through Parliament, will come, most of them, into operation on the 1st of January and they will make direct

bargaining a lot easier. We've implemented our commitments in relation to the provisional tax uplift factor and we've legislated to introduce our capital gains tax rollover relief. And I notice that Charlie Bell, the Managing Director of McDonalds, is here tonight. Charlie has chaired a committee which has given a whole raft of recommendations to me about how we can reduce the paperwork burden on small business by 50 per cent in our first three years in Government. And I promise Charlie - and I repeat the promise tonight in front of everybody so you can all hold me to it - that we'll give him a comprehensive and, I think, very positive response to those recommendations by the middle of February in 1997.

Now we are very, very keen indeed to make conditions as good as we possibly can for small business in Australia. But, there is of course, so much a government can do. The rest is up, of course, to the entrepreneurial spirit and the flair and the innovation and the hard work of men and women in business all around Australia.

I always get a tremendous personal delight out of being at an evening like this because it's one of those occasions where you can really feel tremendously proud to be Prime Minister of a country that has produced so many people who've tried and so many who've succeeded. So many people who've started with nothing, have come to Australia with nothing and have built great and successful enterprises. They've employed people, they've generated wealth, they've made a lot of people happy and they've made a contribution to this society. And business is not, in the eyes of many of its critics, just a question of a hard edged approach to making profit, it's also about building a happy and united community. And the shopping centres that Frank Lowy's Westfield Corporation have produced are now part of the community life in this country. They've helped change for the better the way in which people shop, our shopping habits and our whole attitude to shopping and retailing has been transformed over the last 10 or 20 years. And the Westfield Company and many other people here tonight have made a massive contribution to that.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for having me as your guest. I want to congratulate in advance all of those who will receive award tonight. I want to thank Frank Lowy and his great company for the massive contribution that it has made to Australia. And I want to thank all of you for the investment that you are making in the future of our country, the risks that you are taking not only for yourselves, but the risk that you are taking to build a better, more prosperous and more contented Australian community.

Thank you.