



11 February 1997

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON. JOHN HOWARD MP
SPEECH TO THE 1997 AUSTRALIA PRIZE PRESENTATION
DINNER, PARLIAMENT HOUSE**

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Sir Arvi and Lady Parbo, to Mr Tim Fischer, the Deputy Prime Minister of Australia, Mr Peter McGauran the Minister for Science and Technology, Dr John Stocker, the Chief Scientist, many other very distinguished people here tonight, ladies and gentlemen. It really is a great privilege to be invited to say a few words tonight and to present to the three winners of the 1997 Australia Prize the acknowledgment of the great achievement that each of them has enjoyed and may I say on a personal note how appropriate it is that tonight's proceedings should be presided over by Arvi Parbo.

Arvi Parbo has made an immense contribution to Australian industry and an immense contribution to the understanding of the role of science and technology in Australia. He really is one of those great post-war Australian treasures. He came to this country without being able to speak a word of English. He hurled himself into the future of post-war Australia and I can't think of anybody of that generation that has made a greater contribution to the reality of modern Australia.

We inevitably, as we come towards the end of this century and of this millennium, we inevitably look towards the Year 2001 and to the new millennium and I can't imagine a discipline or a sphere of understanding or an area of experience which is more appropriate as we look to the future than the area of telecommunications. Such impeccable timing! I am used to interjections but not.. most of the interjections I receive are not of the telecommunicating kind.. but when you think of the future and particularly when you think of the future in Australia, you really can't go past the overwhelming relevance of telecommunications. One of the great things about Australia, one of the great things about Australians is that we've always had an incredible appetite for new technology. We are voracious devourers of new technology and of new devices. It goes right back to things that, heavens above, we take for granted now like pop up toasters and vacuum cleaners and all the sort of

things that years and years ago were regarded as great sort of household agents but now of course you regard as very much part of past history. The way in which Australians took to video recorders, the way in which we took to mobile telephones, the fact that there I think are about 2.6 million Internet connections in Australia at the present time, and I am told that we are going to have about 4 million by the end of this year which is an extraordinary, when you've got a nation of only 18 million people, it is quite an extraordinary thing. 22 percent of Australians are registered mobile telephone users.

I remember the American President telling me on three occasions when he was here how absolutely transfixed he was by the sight of people with, as he put it, mobile telephones fixed to their ears as he drove down Oxford Street coming in from the airport in Sydney. So in so many ways Australia is, of all the advanced industrial nations of the world, has an immense appetite for new technology and for things technological and I am so delighted that tonight's gathering brings together such an elite cross section of the scientific community here in Australia.

I won't endeavour to identify all of the people who are here tonight. Suffice it for me to say that it really is a full parade of so many of the great Australian names in science and technology over the last ten years and that is how it should be. We are never reluctant as a community and as a nation to honour the immense contribution of our great men and women of sport. Last Friday night I had the opportunity of awarding the Sports Awards of the Year for the Confederation of Australian Sport in Melbourne and that is perhaps something that over years has attracted more publicity and more popular interests than prizes and honours of the type that we recognise tonight but as the years have gone by I think there is a new maturity in the Australian community about the importance of science and technology as there is a new maturity about the role of the arts in our society. It is not a new maturity that in any way diminishes the importance in our national psyche of sport and the extent to which a love of sport provides a great national cement, that it is a recognition that Australia is a very diverse community and any community that lauds excellence must have at the top of the list of the people it honours those that have made a massive contribution to science and technology.

And so tonight we honour three outstanding Australian contributors in the area of science and technology. We honour Professor Allan Snyder, Professor Rodney Tucker and Dr Gottfried Ungerboeck, all of whom, as displayed by the video, have made an enormous contribution in the area of telecommunications. They have helped make communications absolutely indispensable and invaluable to the future not only of Australia but of the entire world and in their different ways each have made a unique contribution, and you do have to be a special kind of person, a special man or woman to achieve what each of these have achieved tonight. And I am delighted that my friend, although political adversary, Barry Jones, the person who inaugurated the Australia Prize is here tonight because respect for the role of scientists and respect for the role of science and technology and the importance of it in the light of our country is something that transcends political division. It is something that all Australians who care about the future of this country now recognise quite instinctively and having said that I want to thank Peter McGauran for the work that he's done as my Minister in my Government responsible for matters relating to science and

technology. He's brought very great energy to it and he has in his very enthusiastic way and very committed way lifted the profile of the science community and the importance of science and technology in the eyes of all members of the Government.

The telecommunications market all around the world is expanding at an exponential rate and nowhere more dramatically of course than here in Australia. Telecommunications will break down economic but also very importantly it will break down social barriers. The way in which telecommunications will bring people together, not only people from all around the world but people who are isolated and alienated within the communities of our own nation should never be underestimated. The way in which links between people living in what they still regard as their new country and their relatives in their old countries, wherever those countries may be in other parts of the world, the way in which modern and cheaper telecommunications have diminished those barriers is one of the things that should never go unremarked at an occasion like this because one of the great things about modern telecommunications is the way in which it has really aided people in coming together, the way in which it has diminished distance, the way it has broken down barriers and helped to forge friendships and almost daily now we learn of these marvellous stories of romances being forged through the Internet. I mean, it's not one sort of instinctive sense of the romance of person meeting person but in time it's making a very, very massive contribution.

So it is absolutely not only part of our present but it is a fundamental part of our future, telecommunications and the information and technological explosion that is bound up in it. So I want to congratulate the three winners. I want to say on behalf of my Government how very strongly committed we are to the central role of science and technology in the future of Australia and the contribution that scientists and engineers make to our nation is something that will never go unremarked and will never be ignored so far as my Government is concerned and I think I can speak confidently in that context on behalf of all political representation here tonight.

But on a personal note, to the three gentlemen that are receiving and sharing in the great Australia Prize tonight, can I congratulate each of you unreservedly on the personal commitment and dedication that you have brought to your disciplines and to your professions. It is a unique accolade to be honoured with the nation's most prestigious science award. It is a unique accolade that your peers should have recognised your special contribution. It is a unique accolade that all those years of toil and dedication and commitment and that creative genius that people who can reach heights like this must obviously have. That also is a unique accolade and on behalf of a very respectful and a very grateful nation that is proud to acknowledge the contribution that you are making to the discipline of science, may I congratulate you and wish you well and thank you for your contribution to science and through it the contribution to the great human family to which all of us belong.

Thank you.

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