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25 February 1997

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER  
THE HON JOHN HOWARD, MP  
ADDRESS TO THE INNOVATIONS EXPO DINNER  
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA**

E&OE.....

Thank you very much. To my colleague Peter Reith, the Minister for Industrial Relations and also the Minister that assists me in public service matters; to David Jull; Rhonda Parker from Western Australia; Rosemary Varty; Mrs Catherine Harris, the Director of the Affirmative Action Agency; Dr Peter Shergold; our overseas guests, ladies and gentlemen.

This is the first occasion on which these awards have been presented and it does mark a very special night for all of those people involved in and committed to the notion of the highest possible quality and the most professional public service that we can devise in this country. And it's an opportunity for me as the head of the Government of Australia, as the Prime Minister of Australia, to say how much all of us in the political arm of Government respect, admire and appreciate the aggregate contribution of those who work in the public service.

Coming as I do of a private enterprise, small business background and bringing into to politics all of my deeply held views about the importance of the role and the size of the private sector, I've encountered through my political life those who make the rather outdated but automatic assumption, still in the minds of many, that there is a natural antagonism and tension between the private and public sectors in the governance of Australia. I think that is an outdated notion, it is antiquated and it does belong to an age and a time that is far behind us. Because the world in which we all live and we all operate and we all try and govern to the best of our ability our nation has changed so much over the past ten or 20 years. Globalisation of the economy in the economic environment in which we operate has altered forever the sort of pressures and the sort of circumstances in which both the private and public sectors interact with each other. It is no longer an option for any part of the governance of this country to be inefficient. It is not possible to shield oneself from competitive pressures. It is not a question of choosing whether or not the public sector is efficient or competitive. It is a question of really choosing the way in which you become efficient or competitive and indeed the pace at which you become efficient and competitive.

There are some delightful notions of the interaction between the public service and the political arms of Government. They have been, for all of us, immortalised in that magnificent English television series '*Yes Minister*' which, of course, encapsulates for so many in a humorous way those marvellous interactions. I still remember that marvellous story that was told of one of my predecessors, Malcolm Fraser, and the - we used to then call them permanent heads, we now call them departmental

secretaries - I don't know why! And it is of his departmental head or secretary, Geoffrey Yeend, may I say one of the very finest public servants that Australia has produced in the time that I've been in Australian politics. And it is said of Geoffrey Yeend and Malcolm Fraser that they indeed both watched '*Yes Minister*' - the only difference was that they laughed in different places! And in a sense that did say it all and that's the humorous side.

The Australian Public Service has changed enormously over the last 20 years. I've been in federal politics now, it'll be 23 years in May of this year. The public service that I first interacted with in 1976 when I was a very junior minister in a new government was a public service that was still very heavily influenced by, I think, the traditions of the 1950s and 60s and 70s where there was a very long pattern of very high profile public servants who stamped their own particular brand and their own particular authority and their own particular approach. They had interacted with a government between 1972 and 1975 that had done things differently from their predecessors but there was still essentially a continuity.

The public service that I now interact with and respect and endeavour to work with and, I think, successfully in a professional fashion is very different from the public service that I last remember in 1983 when the Labor Party was elected and began its very long period in office - until March of last year. When I say it's different I don't say that critically, I say that objectively because the world in which it operates is different. I think we have changed our attitudes, I think there is a greater willingness on the part of the public service without in any way sacrificing the essential thread of being apolitical there's a greater desire on the part of the public service to try and implement what are the accepted political goals and the accepted political mandate of the government of the day.

I know when I first became Prime Minister and I had a discussion with Michael Keating, who I'm happy to say is here tonight, who'd served a previous Coalition government with great loyalty and distinction and had also risen to the head of the Prime Minister's department under my predecessor Paul Keating. He made the observation to me that he thought one of the great changes that had occurred was the willingness of the public service without in any way sacrificing its essential apoliticism to try and work effectively towards the political goals of the government of the day. It's always a delicate balance. You do need to preserve a tradition of being apolitical. It is important to have a great reservoir of people within the public service, no matter what their own individual political beliefs may be, they have a professional capacity when a change of government occurs to serve the new government, even if they may personally have not welcomed the change of government, and serve it in a professional way. And I think it is possible to separate out those people and I think that tradition is worth nurturing and I would hate to see that traditional disappear all together. But consistent with the world in which we live it is natural and desirable that the political aims of a new government not be seen as antagonistic to professionalism within the public service, but perhaps imposing upon that professional public service an even greater obligation and discipline to provide objective advice about both the desirability and also the pitfalls of the agenda of the new government.

I think occasions like this are very important. They're an occasion, an opportunity, to say thank you to people, to honour the constant pursuit of excellence within our community and I'm so very happy that people have come from the four corners of the Earth to be amongst us to contribute their ideas on excellence in the public service. I'm delighted that there is such a representation from the State public services of our nation and I'm also delighted at the way in which the various departments of the State governments of Australia have participated, not only in the conference, but also in the award winning process.

My Government has embarked, under the very able stewardship of Peter Reith, my Government has embarked upon some major changes to workplace relations in Australia. They are changes not designed in any way to reinforce notions of division between them and us in the workplace. We have

quietly discarded the expression industrial relations in favour of the more contemporary and I think more beckoning expression, workplace relations. The world of enterprise bargaining is the world of the future. The world of the future will be very different in the workplace from what it was years ago. Many of the old modalities of workplace relations were built upon the notion that most of the work force, in fact almost all of it, was male. A large section of it was in the manufacturing industry. Most people worked for large organisations and answered to the foreman. Most of the congregated in one spot in large numbers. All of those modalities have changed in varying degrees and some of them completely. The workplaces of the future will be smaller units. An increasing number of people will work from home. The old idea of congregating in large numbers in one spot and answering to a foreman is almost a thing in the distant past. And we do need a new workplace relations culture and we've delivered a new workplace relations act. That new culture will promote trade unions that are successful in promoting their members. The idea that efficient, effective trade unions have no role at all in the workplace relations scheme of the future is quite wrong. But survival and success will go to those that are best able to represent their members.

The workplaces of the future, of course as we all know, will involve a far greater number of women than they did in the not so distant past. And that impact alone will profoundly alter the character of work and the circumstances under which it is carried out. So we do need a modern approach, a different approach, to workplace relations and I believe that the reforms that my Government has taken through the parliament and which will now spread through the public service will be reforms that will be enormously to the benefit of the future of Australia. They will respect the professionalism of men and women in the public service as they will in the private sector. They will not revive old-fashioned antiquated antagonisms between the two sectors. I believe in an expanding private sector, I believe in a strong private sector. I also believe that there are a core of responsibilities within our community which can only ever be discharged for the benefit of our community by a dedicated, competitive and professional public service. A public service that works in harmony and cooperation and in an atmosphere of mutual respect in respect of those in the private sector. There is no enduring antagonism, there should only be an enduring partnership for the better governance of our nation.

So tonight, ladies and gentlemen, I'm honoured indeed to be in the presence of such a large gathering of professional men and women in the public service our nation and in the public service of many other nations. I congratulate all of you for the contribution you are making to the quality of government in Australia. I particularly congratulate the winners and those that have taken out the awards. I thank those that have organised tonight's gathering on my behalf. I think it's an excellent occasion and I hope it is the first of many such occasions in which the Prime Minister of the day and the government of the day can honour the contribution to the better quality of government of Australia by those who work and spend their lives in the professional public sector of Australia. Thank you.