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28 February 1997

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD, MP
ADDRESS TO THE YOUTH SUICIDE SEMINAR
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA**

E&OE.....

Thank you Peter Slipper; to my Ministerial colleagues Senator Amanda Vanstone and Senator John Herron; Mr Speaker; to my other parliamentary colleagues, ladies and gentlemen. I want to congratulate the Standing Committee on its initiative in organising today's seminar and I am particularly pleased that the seminar takes place against a completely bipartisan background and involving, as it does, people from the Australian community who in different ways, and some in a very sad and tragic way, have been touched by youth suicide.

I've been a member of parliament now for almost 23 years and I've interviewed thousands of constituents about literally hundreds, if not thousands, of different problems. And all the interviews I've had one that has lived with me for years, and I think always will, was an interview with a mother and a father of a young man who'd taken his life in my electorate in Gladesville. The sense of bewilderment and sadness and despair and questioning of the parenting skills and the way in which that young man had been brought up and the desire on the part of those two very devoted parents who according to all the criteria as they understood it, and I must say on their explanation to me as I understood it, they'd done the right thing by their child but despite all of that he'd taken his life. And it was certainly one of the most difficult and yet the most revealing interviews that I've conducted as a member of parliament and I, as I say, I've remembered it. And it brought home to me as directly as it could as a local member of parliament the tremendous social problem and the tremendous failure, I guess, that the high rate of youth suicide in Australia represents. Now I don't pretend as leader of the Government that we have all the magical solutions and I'm not coming here to say that what's been tried in the past was completely wrong and what we're going to try is completely right - it's not one of those issues and I'm sure that the Committee and its treatment of it will understand that everybody, Government and Opposition members alike, approach this with a positive sense and a sense of commitment and goodwill.

We have undertaken a number of commitments as Peter mentioned. We've allocated some additional resources. We have put additional resources into a youth homelessness pilot project which seeks to address some of the problems of youth homelessness. We have different strategies in the area of youth unemployment. We have, of course, committed ourselves to an 18 to \$19 million programme over a period of three years. And on top of that we've put some additional resources into parenting education and we have also tried to address in different ways the problems and challenges of domestic violence.

There are many tributaries, I suppose, to the problem - family breakdown is obviously a huge part of it. If people feel that the environment in which they live has failed, that sense of failure can infect them. Mental health is clearly a key element in youth suicide. Youth unemployment is clearly a key element. I think access in the past to too easy access to firearms has made it easier for some people in a desperate state of mind to take their lives. But there have to be a whole number of explanations as to why we should have, to our great shame, such a high youth suicide rate, particularly amongst young men. It really is quite extraordinary that a country which in so many other ways can say we are doing better than many others, but in this area we are really demonstrably doing much worse.

The kind of approach that will be required to bring about an improvement, I think we have to be realistic in setting the goals, the goal can be to bring about an improvement - we're not going to get rid of it all together, we're never going to be that successful. But it does involve pooling the resources of people. It involves pooling the resources of the great private welfare sector of Australia and those organisations that are represented here today. It means pooling the experience of members of parliament from all parties who've dealt at a personal level. It means drawing on the experience of the medical profession, academics who've studied the patterns and the behaviour. It also means, of course, drawing on the very sad experiences of parents and siblings and friends and associates who've lost loved ones through their own hands.

This is one of those social challenges that really is outside the normal constraints of government so far as the bottom line is concerned. That doesn't mean, of course, that in any area is there an unlimited source of money but it is one of those things which marks the kind of society we are. If we have such a high youth suicide rate there must be something fundamentally wrong that we have to try and put right. And if this seminar can make a contribution towards it, and I believe it can, the people on the Standing Committee represent all parts of Australia. They represent people who understand in different areas of society the difficulties that are faced by these sorts of social problems. I know that all of them bring a sense of very strong personal commitment and a very, very strong sense of goodwill towards the Committee's task.

Youth suicide is very much about the failure of our society to offer young people sufficient hope because it is a sense of helplessness and a sense that there is little hope and a sense of despair and a sense that you're not useful and you feel alienated and you feel unwanted. I don't pretend to be anything other than an amateur psychologist. I don't pretend for a moment that I have anything other than an everyday understanding of human nature. But it does seem to me, and I leave this thought with you, that it is that sort of sense of hopelessness and a feeling of no self worth which perhaps more

than anything brings about the conditions of mind that leads a person to take their life. It is incomprehensible that in a society which has so many young people who display such tremendous optimism and enthusiasm and hope about the future it seems, to all of us, quite incomprehensible that side by side with those people who look forward to the years ahead with boundless enthusiasm, a capacity almost to solve and conquer any problem or belief that the generation that have gone before them have forgotten more, that they have forgotten more than they've ever learnt. And that tremendous self confidence that we encounter in so many of the young people in Australia which is so endearing and attractive it does seem almost incomprehensible that side by side there should also be people who feel so out of it and so ignored and so deprived of a participation in the life of the community that they should feel the pressure to take their own life.

Now I hope today's seminar makes a contribution towards addressing some of those problems and I want to say on behalf of the Government that we do regard this as a very important issue. It's an issue that we will treat in a completely non-political, a completely bipartisan fashion. It's one of those issues that ought to sit astride party political differences, I know it has in the past and I know that members of both the Government and the Opposition here today are determined that that will be the case now and into the future.

I want to join Peter Slipper in welcoming all of those people from the community who are here to share their experiences, to pool their information with others. I hope out of this seminar comes some very useful advice. I'm here today to demonstrate my personal interest in this issue, the personal support I have for it, the commitment of the Government and I'll be very interested to hear what comes out of it and I can promise you that it will be very conscientiously and very intensively addressed. I have great pleasure in declaring the seminar open. I'm sorry I can't stay any longer I have one or two other things to do today, including going back to Sydney for a few things. I do wish the seminar well and thank you very much for inviting me and I hope out of it comes a number of important initiatives which will, in a practical way, address a distressing mark against the good name and the compassion and the decency of the Australian society.

Thank you.