



## **PRIME MINISTER**

1 March 1997

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER |  
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP  
ADDRESS TO LIBERAL PARTY NSW STATE COUNCIL  
ST GEORGE LEAGUES CLUB, KOGARAH**

E & OE .....

Thank you very much . That's almost as good as Grand Final morning. To Michael Osborne, to my parliamentary colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.

I can think of no more appropriate venue, no more appropriate meeting and no more appropriate weekend than to celebrate what we have achieved over the last twelve months.

It was a year ago this weekend, that together, we ended thirteen years of Labor government in Australia. And I use the word together advisedly, because the victory that we won a year ago this weekend was a victory that belonged more than anything else to the rank and file members of the Liberal Party. And I remember in my acceptance speech at the Wentworth Hotel on that great Saturday night, saying that for thirteen years the Party organisation had endured many disappointments, it had been the butt of much criticism, even ridicule - people said we no longer had the professional skills to win elections, there was derision heaped upon the organisation, and all of that was flung back in the face of our critics on that great Saturday in March of last year.

So ladies and gentlemen I commence my address to the NSW State Council this morning by again thanking the organisation for the absolutely crucial role it played in electing my government twelve months ago and for the continually loyalty, fidelity and support that it has given to me and to my colleagues over the past twelve months.

As I review that twelve months I can honestly say that we have stayed true and kept faith with the essential commitments that we made to the Australian people in the lead up to the election campaign. They elected us into Government to reform Australia's industrial relations system and we have done that. They elected us into Government to give a greater emphasis in policy making to supporting Australian families and we have done that. From the first of January this year, delivered in full on time without qualification was the Coalition's Family Tax Initiative.

We were elected into Government to assist the small business sector. We have begun to do that and more will be done in a few weeks' time when I deliver the Government's response to the Bell Committee Report on Small Business.

We have swept away the unfair dismissal stupidity of Laurie Brereton, we have fairly dismissed his legislative incompetence. We have through reforming the industrial relations system, given greater flexibility to small business men and women. From the 1st July this year we will introduce the biggest taxation change to benefit small business in more than three decades. We will allow any small business man or woman in Australia to sell their existing business and invest up to \$5m of the proceeds in not just a business of the same kind but indeed into any business without incurring any liability for capital gains tax.

There are still many people in small business who are doing it tough, I know that, I recognise that and I understand that. And you won't be hearing from this Prime Minister such arrogant responses as "this is as good as it ever gets" and "if you can't stand the heat you ought to get out of the kitchen and stop being a self-employed person". Small business copped the ravages of Keating's recession like no other sector of the Australian business community, and it has inevitably taken them longer to recover and the period of recuperation has been more difficult.

We said that we would deliver the greatest ever capital investment in Australia's environmental future seen since the end of World War II and we are going to do exactly that. We have secured the support of the Senate for the one third sale of Telstra and out of that sale we will invest almost \$1.2 billion into the Natural Heritage Trust of Australia and that will go towards the long term of regeneration of Australia's environment - it won't be wasted on fancy tinsel stuff, it will go towards restoring our land it will go towards attacking salinity it will go towards cleaning up our river system, it will go towards purifying our oceans. They're the sort of long term building blocks of improving the environment the Australian community wants. And it will be one of my proudest boasts as Prime Minister of this country if I can go to the next election pointing to a programme of environment commitment and environment reform, because that was an area in earlier years where the Liberal and National Parties lagged.

And we will also be able to remind the Australian people and remind the mainstream conservation movement of Australia that it was the Labor Party and the Australian Democrats and the Australian Greens that tried to stop this record investment in Australia's environmental future. It still to my mind beggar's belief that parties that claim to be concerned about Australia's environmental future have been so indifferent and so hostile to such an imaginative programme.

I mention these things ladies and gentlemen not because they are an exhaustive list of what has been achieved over the last twelve months - there are many other achievements. We have restored the accountability of the executive to the Parliament. No longer does the Government of this country regard Question Time as a courtesy extended by the Executive to the Parliament. I go to every Question Time, not fifty per cent of them. The number of questions asked in my first twelve months is a twenty year record. We average almost twenty questions a day and Question Time has once again been restored to an institution where the Ministers can be made accountable and can be questioned as properly they should in a Westminster parliamentary democracy. And the restoration of the accountability of the Executive to Parliament is a very important element in the restoration of community esteem for the institution. Without in any way robbing Parliament of its naturally robust debating atmosphere I also believe that some of the personal vitriol which the Australian community found so distasteful has been removed from parliamentary proceedings. Australians want tough vigorous debate and powerful dissent where there are differences of view, they do not want ritualistic eye gouging for its own sake.

Ladies and gentleman that is in a sense a very quick snapshot of what has been achieved over the last twelve months. But it is by no means the whole story. There are many things that we have done outside the immediate economic and industrial area that are very important to Australia's long term future. The tragic events of April 28th produced a great response in the area of national gun control laws. And the achievement of those laws, may I say quite openly in co-operation with all the state governments and also with the co-operation of the Australian Labor Party and the Australian Democrats. Those laws have made Australia a safer country and those laws have delivered a greater sense of security, particularly to women in our community, and I regard the achievement of those laws as being one of the great social achievements of my Government over the last twelve months.

We've also kept faith with our promise to allow a proper process for debate about Australia's constitutional future. I said before the election where I stood on the question of Australia's current constitution - I've never disguised my own view but I've always recognised that there are many in this party and elsewhere that have another view and ours is not an authoritarian party ours is a liberal open party.

We are going to have a constitutional convention, we are going to elect half of the delegates and we're going to appoint the other half just as I promised, and we'll see what comes out of it. My only goal is that if Australia is or were to decide to change the constitutional structure the it ought to occur in circumstances that unites and not divides the Australian community.

It is also necessary that we grapple in a sensitive way with one of the great and more complicated challenges that I think any government could have and that is to frame an appropriate response in the area of native title to the decision of the High Court in the Wik case. That issue requires an understanding, requires a patience and it requires a spirit of give and take and compromise by all concerned if an agreed outcome is to be achieved. I'm trying to achieve such an outcome. I have no illusions about how difficult it is. There is a great difference of approach and opinion between the different parties at present and I'm currently engaged in a process of discussion both private and public with all of the interested parties and I hope that by Easter to either know if it's possible to have an agreed outcome or if not to be in a position to recommend a course of action to the Cabinet and therefore to the government parties.

I want to make it plain to all of you that all of the parties are being included in those discussions. My goal is to deliver an outcome that delivers justice and security to all of those concerned. The Wik decision was a surprise to me and here let me say something briefly about the respective roles of the High Court of Australia and the Executive and the Legislative branch of government in our system of government. I am a strong believer as any believer in the parliamentary democratic system ought to be, I'm a strong believer in the separation of powers. There is a division of powers and responsibilities between the judiciary, the executive and the legislature. It is the role of the judiciary in a properly independent way to interpret both the common law and the statute law of Australia and one of the great strengths of Australian democracy is that we have always had an independent judiciary and we have always had a judiciary of great integrity. And that remains the case today because although like any other Australian citizen, a point incidentally acknowledged as recently as yesterday by the current Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia, like any other citizen I have a right to criticise a decision of the courts, I nonetheless recognise and respect both the independence and the integrity of those who hold judicial office in this country. I do not support any change to the method of appointing High Court judges in Australia. I deplore any suggestion that this country should go down the American path of electing

judges. I oppose completely.....there are many things about the United States of America that I love and admire, but I do not believe we will profit this country by emulating the American judicial system.

So, ladies and gentlemen, it is important that in the current debate about the role of the court that we don't confuse ourselves and we don't get confused about respective roles. There is nothing wrong in anybody disagreeing with a court decision or criticising that court decision. It has gone on for time immemorial and it will go on again in the future. And the final word I would say is that in a true separation of powers it is the ultimate role and prerogative of the parliament of this country to alter any law as currently interpreted or determined by the courts which it regards to be contrary to the national interest of Australia.

One of the things that has been an essential ingredient in the successes that we have achieved over the last year has been the determination and the capacity of the government to stay in touch with the views and the aspirations and the hopes of the Australian people. There's a column inch or two in the papers this morning about the last twelve months and I notice the theme that's coming through is that some people don't like the fact that I actually listen to what the Australian public says. I thought one of the roles of a national leader was to listen and to take notice, to empathise, to understand, to feel the joy and also to feel the pain and to feel the various degrees of the emotions that the people of the country he or she feels. And can I say to those who believe that I listen too much - that they're wrong. I listen because I think that's an important part of my role and while ever I hold this job I will go on listening to the Australian people.

We face in the years ahead enormous challenges to consolidate some very fortuitous economic circumstances. There are signs and I believe they are gathering pace, that the Australian economy is beginning to grow again more strongly than it did in 1996. Business investment is surging ahead very strongly. We have historically low housing interest rates and I would like there to be more competition in the banking system so that the historically low housing interest rates can be replicated in the small business sector with equally low rates.

Companies like Aussie Home Loans, RAMS, and all those other small new players in the housing loans area have done great things. We want some of those in the small business sector. And what they have done is a tremendous demonstration to all of us of the value of competition. If you every hear somebody say: ah - all of this competition, that all of this deregulation is a lot of nonsense", throw back to them the experience of Australian home buyers over the last 12 months. We have the lowest interest rates, as Peter Costello said, since man first walked on the moon, for the very simple reason that we've now got more competition in the housing interest rate area. That's why you've

got low housing interest rates. You've got more competition. You haven't got it because of Government intervention, you've got it because of plain old competition - something that we should never lose our faith in. Never, ever, as Liberals because it really lies at the heart of a vibrant capitalist, free-enterprise society.

There's a bit of a debate around at the present time about how far you should go in deregulating, or freeing, the economy. Now, of course, the pace of change is important and, of course, you have to take account of the impact of things like tariff changes on particular parts of the country.

But, ladies and gentlemen, let us, as we approach our second year in office, let us with the opportunity of really consolidating a great economic recovery - not lose any faith at all in the cause of greater competition and freer approaches to the regulation of markets because they do ultimately lie behind the prosperity and the economic future of Australia.

I think if we can consolidate the circumstances we now have and that will involve a further reduction in the budget deficit in the Budget of May of this year. It won't be of the magnitude required last year but there will still need to be further fiscal tightening.

We need to bed down the industrial relations changes, many of which only come into operation on 12 March. We need to proceed with waterfront reform. We need to respond quickly and effectively to the report of the Wallis Inquiry into Australia's financial system when it is delivered. We need to implement, without any interruption, the commitments we've made to provide tax incentives for private health insurance.

May I say that I register great disappointment with the comments made by the Vice-President of the Australian Medical Association about private health insurance. Of course, private health insurance is not what everybody would like. One of the reasons is that the number of people privately insured in Australia is much less than what it was when we were last in Government. When the Fraser Government was defeated in March of 1983 sixty one percent of Australians, sixty one percent, had private health insurance. That figure is now thirty four percent. And Graham Richardson - at least like myself, he was a follower of St George - Graham Richardson said, as Health Minister in the Labor Government in 1993, that if you allow private health insurance to fall below 40 percent you begin to put intolerable strains on the system. And despite those warnings, year after year, Labor in Government neglected it. If they had, five years ago, done what we are proposing to do in July we would not now have the problems that we have. And even Bob Carr belatedly recognises it when he said the problem is that people are dropping out of private health insurance and putting a strain on the public hospital system. So, if we do have problems in that area, it's because for 13 years they set about

systematically dismantling the underpinning of private health insurance in this country - because of an ideological objection to it. They were driven by it and despite the warnings of people like Richardson - Keating, Beazley and Lawrence and all the other crowd that had responsibility in those areas, followed policies that did immense damage to Australia's health insurance system.

So, that represents a very considerable challenge. We have major challenges on the foreign policy front. At Easter I will visit Singapore and China. Australia's relationship with China is an important one to us. Under my Government it will be a relationship which is built upon the expectation of mutual respect. Australia and China are vastly different societies and countries. Ours is an open liberal democracy. Theirs is a closed authoritarian country. Yet, China has vast potential for the future. The most populist nation in the world whose economy is growing at a very rapid rate. It is clear that it is in the mutual national self interest of both of us to build a productive relationship. It may surprise you to know that China invests more money in Australia than any other country with the exception of the investments that mainland China makes in Hong Kong. And it is a very important relationship and it is an important relationship that I will certainly do my best to improve and build on when I go there at Easter.

But, one thing that we have done and I think we have done very valuably in the area of foreign policy over the last twelve months is that we have demonstrated the proposition I have made time and time again - that Australia does not have to choose between our history and our geography in our foreign relations. Of course, we want and we will deliver ever closer relations between Australia and the nations of the Asia Pacific region. They are our friends, they are our partners, they are our economic future and it is the fastest growing economic region in the world. Yet, we have, as all of you know, deep and abiding links with other parts of the world and our historic, and our cultural, and our political, and our liberal democratic shared inheritance and shared values with the nations of Europe, the United Kingdom and others, and with the United States are an important part of our history.

And there is no incompatibility. You can have both. You don't have to make a choice. And it was one of the foreign policy failures of my predecessor that he gave the impression, intended or not, that somehow or another we had to make a choice. Well, we don't. We can have both and the links that we have with both can contribute to the mutual benefit of the overall relationship.

I suppose the only other thing I might briefly touch upon, of course, are our opponents. I mean it would be uncharitable not to say anything about them. But, I'm a bit shy, so I'll content myself with saying about them what they have said about themselves. I mean, we could try George Campbell. He's going into the Senate next year for New South Wales and he said this: "I don't think

the Party knows or has a clear perception of what it stands for, or more importantly what it wants to achieve in terms of development of our society". Not bad. That was 24 February 1997.

And then, of course, you have relevance deprecation syndrome Gareth. When he was asked about branch stacking, he said: "I don't particularly like this terminology of branch stacking, I prefer to think of it in terms of exuberant democracy at work".

I suppose, in a sense, it's natural at a gathering like this that you should say the odd thing about your political opponents and you should endeavour to crack the odd joke. I guess it is part of the approach and I think it is fair to say that the Labor Party is still trying very hard to come to grips with the reality of being out of office after having been in power for such a long period time.

But, can I say to all of you, don't underestimate, ever, our opponents. I think one of the great mistakes the Labor Party made was to underestimate us and that is the reason that we won with such a big majority - one of the reasons. Don't underestimate them. They loved being in office. And they would love to be back in office. They do regard themselves as the natural party of Government in Australia. One of the reasons that they lost touch as we worked up to the last election was they couldn't really believe that the Australian people would actually vote them out. They kept getting the negative responses. They kept looking at their research. They kept looking at the polls. They kept realising that they had been in power for a long time. But deep down they said to themselves, but, we are the Labor Party. We are the modern Labor Party. I notice part of them now call themselves the New Labor Party. And despite that, they just somehow, all the indications to the contrary, they couldn't believe that the Australian public were going to vote them out. They really had begun to think they were natural party of Government. What an extraordinary turn around. They used to say that about us. They used to say we had a born-to-rule mentality. Well, I'll tell you what - nothing belts a born-to-rule mentality out of you more than 13 years in Opposition.

But, I don't think anybody should ever forget that. I mean, never forget the difficult parts of the journey in politics. And if you don't forget the difficult parts of the journey you will always remember that ultimately you're not there because you are some kind of group of divinely inspired geniuses, you are there because of the gift of the Australian people. We are there because they thought we better represented their aspiration. We are there because they thought we could better lead them into the next millennium. We are there because they think we understand their concerns, and their hopes, and their fears and their aspirations.

So my message to you on our first birthday celebration as a new Government is, of course, again my thanks from the bottom of my heart for all that you have



done to help me. To the section of the Party organisation to which I've devoted so much of my own life and in which I find so many life long friends, I thank you for that personal support. I thank you for the tremendous support that you have given to all of my colleagues and could I say to you remember that power in politics is a gift from the people. It is not there as a bribe. Remember to keep in touch. Never be arrogant towards the people who voted you into office. And always remember the great capacity of the Australian people to level those within our community who get beyond their station in life and imagine that they have some automatic right to hang on to an office. If we do that we can celebrate many more birthdays into the future.

## Q&amp;A's

## Question:

The question's about defence. Prime Minister, the decision you made last year in isolating the defence budget from cuts was one that I personally and a lot of others associated with the defence forces was very much appreciated. The morale of our defence forces is something vital to us and this party, I know, is anxious to see that morale high. Can you tell us whether that same sort of quarantine from cuts will be evident in the current budget, or indeed, will you be able to maintain it for the term of this Government?

Prime Minister: Yes.

## Question:

As one of the rank and file members of the party, congratulations on your first year of government and I'm sure I speak for everybody else on the floor by hoping that there will be many more of them. But that's not my question. My question relates to one of the first lines that you said in your speech where you talked about environmental reform and I ask that the question with that background, why was Airservices - the people commissioned by the Federal Government to do the utilisation, the greater utilisation of Mascot airport - not required to produce for the eastern area, modes 8 and 9, an environmental impact study? And I ask that against the background that the No Aircraft Noise are lobbying very hard in the eastern area, protest meetings have already been held, more are expected in the future and as Vice President of Wentworth Conference it concerns me with a five per cent majority, or just as importantly....the seat of Vacluse is effected by Bligh and Coogee, now why was not the requirement....why was special dispensation given so that no environmental impact statement in regard to the jets going over the eastern area?

Prime Minister: The reason for that from recollection is that the advice we had at the time, which was shortly after the change of government, was that a new EIS was not required under the law, and as you know in all of these things, EIS's do take a very long period of time. We were elected on a commitment to share the noise around. I know that, I know that some areas of Sydney are now getting noise that previously they didn't get, I know that. But I also have to say to you that the previous arrangements imposed a quite intolerable burden on a small section of the Sydney community, including many people who live in strong Labor seats. And some of the greatest beneficiaries of the changes we have made have been people who live in the inner suburbs. I mean I don't know how people have lived in areas like Stanmore and St Peters and Marrickville all these years, I mean I travel through them - I mean you go over and watch any sporting event in some of those areas, I mean it's an absolute

miracle that anybody can hear. I mean I think those people have suffered a lot, and what we've tried to do is to spread it around, I mean my electorate was badly affected, it is still worse affected than others, it is less affected now than it was. I don't disguise that fact, they have rights. The people who live in my electorate shouldn't lose their rights, because people might say it's unreasonable that anything is every done to help people who live in the Prime Minister's electorate, but I think what we've done is we've spread it around more fairly. Now .... I think we have..... I mean that's what we've tried to do. Nobody every welcomes a change that slightly disadvantages them, but I think if you face a choice between on the one hand having a small number of people copping it all, that's great for everybody else, but it's a bit unfair on that small number of people, and that was the philosophy that drove what we did.

Question:

Mr Prime Minister I preface my question by congratulating you on your sensitive handling of the relationships with the judiciary over last twenty four, thirty six hours, but this is on perhaps a similar question, and it's on the role of the Governor General, and I'd like your opinion on this Sir. I've noted that the previous two holders of this office have made a number of public statements which I didn't think were in the tradition of the head of state being apolitical and simply....

Prime Minister: When you say the previous two....

.....No, the present one and the previous one, and I refer particularly to the present Governor General's statements as to what should be the timetable for Aboriginal reconciliation. Now I know that's something to which you're fully committed, but I'm concerned that statements by a Governor General might be perceived as an expression of Government policy and if circumstances prevent you adhering from that you will be regarded as not sticking to your previous promises. What has been the position of the Governors General - do they make private statements, or are they expressers of government policy? ..... In a Constitutional Monarchy, the Monarchist is very very careful not to give private opinions.

Prime Minister: Well, Bob the situation, the convention as I've always read it is that the defacto Head of State, and that really is who the Governor General is in our modern constitutional evolution, he is the defacto Head of State of Australia, and in that position, he or she ought not to take sides politically, and he or she should observe considerations of sensitivity in statements that are made. It doesn't mean, and it would be unnatural for it to mean, that the person who holds that office can never every express an opinion on anything. I think that is to impose an unreal restriction and I have to say that the present occupant of the office, who was appointed by the previous government, is a person for whom I have considerable personal respect. He's a person of

integrity and he carries out his duties very conscientiously and I really don't have anything further to say.

Question:

First of all Mr Prime Minister, I would like to congratulate you on behalf of my people of Fairfield for completing your term, your first term of office as the Prime Minister. Now thirteen years of labor rule brought massive unemployment burden for payments or loans to the financial institutions like (inaudible) Bank and huge number of house breakups and family breakups, and I understand that your reform packages started on March 2nd last year is getting tremendous support, I wish you success for at least two decades. My question is if I say that, if Labor Party want to dream about the decision making process, they have to sit and eat humble Australian pies for at least two decades. My question is, anyway from Canberra to address the Premier of (inaudible).

Prime Minister: What I understand your question is, is there any way we can ensure that the NSW Government restores dignity to the office of NSW Governor. Well change the NSW Government.

Question:

Prime Minister, can I say how pleased most people are that you have refused to buckle under pressure from the homosexual lobby and endorse tonight's gay mardi gras. And on the question of family values, can I ask you how your Family Tax package is being perceived around the country?

Prime Minister: Well I think it is being received very well around the country. We delivered everything that we promised. We have delivered a little more choice for parents as to their child care arrangements. It's not the role of governments to say to parents how many of them should be in the workforce when their children are young. That's their business, and it's arrogant of governments to sort of lay down some kind of paradigm. But the former system made it very difficult for people who wanted, particularly when their kids were young, to have either the mother or father out of the workforce for a period. Now I'm not saying that the changes we've made have sort of provided huge financial incentives for greater choice, but at least they have recognised and made a contribution towards greater choice. And that's very, very important indeed, very, very important. I think it has been seen as a well targeted initiative. It's been widely supported and it's been seen by organisations such as ACOSS as being fair to very low income families, so I'm very well pleased with the reaction it's received.

Question:

Prime Minister: How are you? Haven't seen you for ages.

...I'm still here

Prime Minister: Good on you.

...Mr Prime Minister, first of all let me congratulate you on obtaining the high office of Prime Minister of Australia. If there was every an Australian citizen that deserves such a high office it is the present holder of that situation. As you know, Mr Prime Minister, I had never any doubts that you were going to achieve this high office, and having achieved it you've added dignity, both internally and externally for this nation. Having said so, let me put a very simple question to you. What initiatives has the government in hand to initiate further policies in overcoming the crippling overseas debt?

Prime Minister: Well a number of things, the first thing is that we have reduced the budget deficit and therefore reduced the core of the government sector on the savings of Australians to pay for government expenditure. We have also, through reforming the labour market, we have set about making Australia more competitive. There are two things that you need to do to reduce Australia's monthly trading and balance of payments deficit, which of course is the cause of our overseas debt. The money we owe to foreigners is the money we have constantly borrowed from foreigners to buy the surplus of imports over exports. The two things you need to do, the first is you need to increase savings in the Australian community so we don't have to borrow so much from foreigners, and the second thing you've got to do is to make the Australian economy more competitive so that we can sell more overseas and our local industries are more competitive against imports. Now we've set about addressing the first by cutting the budget deficit and thereby building national savings, and we've set about tackling the second by reforming the labour market, we're going to tackle waterfront import reform this year. We've got major telecommunications reform which will come into operation on the first of July. We are pressing ahead with national competition policy, all of which is bound to make Australia more competitive country. There has been some improvement in Australia's balance of payments situation over the past several years. It has been slow, but is not as acute as it was some years ago. There is still a long way to go - it is very much like turning round an ocean liner double the size of the biggest one that's afloat at present - it takes a very long time but at least we have begun apply the policies that will start to turn that ocean liner around. And they're being applied in those two areas.

**Question:**

And if I might say Mr Prime Minister, congratulations, we are in delight - if we have one big thing to win if I might say, we've got to win Manly back, which was one of the strongest Liberal branches in Australia, though I hope that that will be able to be said after the next state elections. But that is not my question. My question is about the Constitution of Australia which is, I believe, personally one of the greatest constitutions of the world. And we are talking about having a referendum or even discussions about a change, republic or constitution monarchy which has served us so well over the years. My problem is that in Australia, less than twelve per cent of the people in Australia have never seen, let alone read the constitution of this country, of which there is no litigation virtually about. If you go to the United States, litigation is continuous, and what concerns me is in this talk of change that we might get something like the United States constitution, which all I can see will keep lawyers, and I excuse all lawyers here, but will keep them in jobs forever. How can we have any proper vote when people do not know what is in this marvellous constitution that was written one hundred years ago?

**Prime Minister:** I think that's right, we have failed lamentably over the years to properly teach our children the basic features of our structure of government. This, what's the correct expression, this sort of episode, or issues treatment of Australian history, which has been, become the vogue in recent times has destroyed any sort of chronological understanding that people under the age of about forty have all the steps taken to build.... how many children....how many Australians under the age of thirty five or forty were properly instructed about the federation debates, about people such as Parkes and Barton and Deakin and all of those people - it just doesn't happen anymore. You've had plenty of sort of issues studies, but people, unless you have a chronological understanding of a nation's history, you have no sort of structure to refer back to. Anyway, I shouldn't go down that path too much. But you're right. People don't know much about the Constitution, and there's a lot of people, of course, who are not particularly keen to get into too much of the detail about it either. They essentially regard it as a fairly dry subject, but one of the things that we are going to do in the lead up to the convention is that we're going to prepare and have published a document to which we will seek, probably seek, input and contributions from people in the community who have different views, stating some of the bare facts about how our system, our present system of government works, describing the present system of government, describing its strengths and there will also be people who will argue in the same document about its weaknesses, and I hope that that document which will be very widely distributed, I've even got it mind perhaps it appearing as a supplement in all of the major newspapers in Australia, so and in a relatively attractive form, so that people can - and now a lot of people will actually read material like that if it's presented in a proper form. I mean, you can't force people to read the constitution. We're a democracy, no matter how much you distribute a lot of

people just won't read it and you just have to accept that fact. But I do think if we had a bit of a better understanding about how the system works we can have a more intelligent debate. Now, I agree with you I think our constitution has worked very well, I think the present system of government is a very good system of government. I don't believe that a republican system of government would be more liberal or more open or more democratic, but it's not just about debate, it's - I've said it before and I'll say it again - that I don't think anyone's unhappy with the present system of government. I think some people that some of the symbolism associated with the present system of government is no longer as contemporary as it might be, now that's not necessarily my view, but it is the view of a lot of people, it's the view of a lot of people in this room, I think we have to recognise that and we have to be willing to talk about it, but I don't think we should change something unless we're satisfied that what we're changing to is as good or better. And that's a pretty hard ask, but we shouldn't be frightened to talk about it and but we should talk about it against the background of being well informed and also talk .... but I think the way we handle that will give people a lot more information.

**Question:**

Prime Minister, could I begin by congratulating you for your opening speech yesterday for the Youth Suicide Forum which was held in Canberra, it's quite obvious that you have an excellent understanding of what is an horrific problem and indeed a tragedy which faces Australia's youth. But my question is in lieu of yesterday's discussions, what plan does the Government have to co-ordinate a national strategy to address this problem?

Prime Minister: Well we have done a number of things, we have looked at the problems of youth homelessness in a more systematic fashion, and there is some link between dysfunctional family situations and suicide. There are a lot of as I said yesterday, there are a lot of tributaries, and that's one of them. We have got out pilot programmes on youth homelessness and you may remember that was an initiative I announced before the election - they are now well underway and I believe they will help in that area. We have put about \$19m into a three-year programme which is a mixture of approaches. It's a very hard problem and you were at the seminar and you have an understanding of it. It's a product of family breakdown, of high unemployment, it is bound up with our attitude to the treatment of mental health disorders, it's part of the wider debate in the community about how soon people who have mental disorders are pushed back into the broader community and that's a very lively debate as you know, and some of the personal examples that I as a local member have come into touch with, and I mentioned one of them yesterday, are very much bound up with that. It's about the availability of services which provide young people in particular with a point of contact when they feel completely shut off from the rest of society, I think one of the greatest social innovations in social policy so simply devised when you think about it that I've seen in my life was the

launching of the original Lifeline programme in the early 1960s by Alan Walker's mission here in Sydney which provided the very simple device of there being a telephone, and those kids helpline services, the number of suicides that have been avoided because of that service has been absolutely magnificent - it's very simple it's very effective. It's not just a question of money, but money's important, it's a question of mobilising community services in a completely non-political non-combative way, and you would have seen there were Labor members present as well as Coalition members. And so it's trying to do all the things that are going to bring about a change. And in a sense you say we've got a co-ordinated strategy, well sometimes a co-ordinated strategy doesn't look very co-ordinated, because you're drawing upon the voluntary efforts of a lot of people and I still believe very strongly the involvement of the volunteer sector in areas like this is enormously important. I mean I am constantly in awe of those men and women who spend hours and hours often during the long lonely parts of the night sitting at the end of the telephone, waiting for someone who's about to take their life to ring them up in the hope that they may be able to persuade that there's a bit more hope in life than what they at the moment think. And I think those people do a tremendous job. You can never pay those people, all you can do is thank them, and all you can do is create a society which makes that kind of work respected and ennobled because it's a very, very important part of our society, and without that volunteer glue a lot of the glue that holds us together and keeps people feeling wanted and cared for is going to disappear.