



PRIME MINISTER

11 April 1997

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
ADDRESS TO THE NSW DIVISION OF THE LIBERAL PARTY
FIRST ANNIVERSARY DINNER - SYDNEY**

E&OE.....

Thank you very much Rod for those very gracious and extremely generous remarks. To Michael Osborne, the President of the Liberal Party in NSW; to my parliamentary colleagues Federal and State, and particularly I acknowledge the presence of the Leader of the NSW Opposition Peter Collins, and could I also acknowledge the presence of two other people : the recently preselected new Senator from NSW Marise Payne who is replacing Bill Heffernan (sic), and also my predecessor as leader of the Federal Parliamentary Liberal Party, John Hewson.

It is a great night of celebration, you are absolutely right there were numerous occasions Rod when I thought I'd never make it. There were numerous occasions when a lot of people in this room thought I'd never make it, and there were many of those occasions when they had good reason to believe that I would never make it. And it is one of those occasions when all of us are entitled to take a deal of quiet satisfaction in what has been achieved over the last year. To be out of office for 13 years between 1983 and 1996 and given the pace of modern life is the equivalent I guess of having been out of office between 1949 and 1972. And as the first few years rolled into five or six years and then ultimately doubled into a decade or more, there must have been many people in this room who wondered whether they would ever live to see the election of another federal Liberal Government and I do want to say first and foremost to all of you and my heartfelt thanks for the tremendous loyalty and support that you have demonstrated over the years in very difficult and often trying and challenging and frustrating circumstances to the Liberal Party cause.

I think it is very important on an occasion like this that those of us who are lucky enough to hold elected office, and I do regard it as a privilege and I do regard it as the greatest privilege that could come the way of any Australian to be Prime Minister of this magnificent country. It is an occasion, an occasion like tonight to acknowledge on behalf of all of my colleagues, the tremendous support that you have given. And I also want to thank those in the room who have worked so hard over the years to raise resources for the Liberal Party. I've always been very sensitive to their problems. I

can understand how hard it must have been to raise a dollar for the Liberal Party over the last few years and there must have been occasions where you wondered whether it was really worth it. I've always tried to sort of synchronise my own efforts with those, and although there are limits that one has to draw, I've had on several occasions to tell Liberal Party fundraisers, that I can't sell any nights in either the Fraser or Whitlam bedrooms at the Lodge, but I can nonetheless say that a close conjunction between the Parliamentary party and the organisation is tremendously important.

But tonight most importantly of all is an occasion to reflect on some of the things that we have been able to do together over the last year. And I emphasise the word together because it has been a team effort. I've operated on the principle that a Prime Minister is nothing more than a first amongst equals and I want to thank all of my cabinet and Parliamentary colleagues. There's one person I will single out for special mention and that is the Deputy Prime Minister and Leader of the National Party, Tim Fischer. Tim Fischer is a remarkably loyal and decent deputy. He stood up for some very difficult decisions of the government and I have particularly in mind the decision we took about uniform gun laws, often in the face of some very difficult circumstances within his own immediate constituency and I particularly wanted tonight as he wings his way to Goondiwindi for the National Party conference in QLD, I particularly wanted to acknowledge the magnificent contribution that Tim has made to the stability and strength of our government and also the magnificent job that Tim has done as the Minister for Trade and Deputy Prime Minister.

There were a number of key things that we talked about in the lead up to the election campaign and what we've tried to do in the twelve or more months that we have been in office. I think if you reflect on those weeks and months leading up to the election, you will remember that we placed a great deal of emphasis on industrial relations reform. I guess of all things that I've argued for over the last ten or fifteen years, none has been more prominent than my belief that this country needs a fundamentally different industrial relations system, and although it is true that because we didn't have control of the Senate, we weren't able to get through in its entirety all that we would have wanted in the area of industrial relations and I don't dissemble about that and I don't pretend. We were able nonetheless to achieve the fundamental changes that we wanted to make and I believe that over time those changes, particularly in the small business area, will deliver a different and fundamentally changed industrial relations system. We've not only got rid of those very silly unfair dismissal laws that were the bane of the existence of so many men and women in business for so many years under the former government, but we have finally got rid at a federal level of the last vestiges of compulsory unionism. We have brought back the rule of law in the area of secondary boycotts to the ordinary courts of Australia. We have entrenched into the industrial relations law of Australia the notion that the best arrangement between an employer and an employee is the arrangement voluntarily forged at the workplace level based upon their common interest in the enterprise being successful. We have begun to entrench that in the industrial relations laws of Australia. And as I look back over the last 13 months I can feel very well satisfied, not complacent, not smug, but satisfied that we have achieved that essential objective. I talked a lot, also during the election campaign, about the importance of the family unit in our society, not in any moralising or sanctimonious sense - families come in different forms and different shapes. Not all families are happy, not all families are successful, but that doesn't gainsay the fact that

it remains the most important and the most cohesive institution within our society, and it remains the role of governments, not in a hectoring or moralising sense, but in a positive sense, to implement policies that support families and most particularly support families in the choices that they make. And I'm very proud of the fact that we delivered on time to the very last dollar without any qualification the family tax initiative that I promised during the election campaign.

We also talked a great deal in the election campaign about the role of small business within our community. Small business has been politically something of an obsession of mine and as a lot of you know it is because of my own background, because my father ran a very small business for a long time and worked very hard and as a result of that he gave to his four children a far more comfortable start in their lives than had been his situation many many years ago, and that is very much the story of so many men and women in Australia and we have tried very hard, without seeing the business arena as a confrontation between big and small businesses, but recognising that if you can create a climate of risk taking, if you can create an entrepreneurial climate, an atmosphere for small business, you are far more likely through invigorating them than any other approach over time to do something about dragging down our unemployment levels.

We have set about implementing all and indeed in one area more than what we promised at the time of the last election for small business. We've not only given them the provisional tax relief, the industrial relations reform, the relief from the unfair dismissal laws, but in the area of capital gains tax from the first of July this year, it will be possible for any man or woman operating a small business in Australia, either solely through a partnership, through a trust, or through shares in a company to sell that business and invest up to five million dollars of the proceeds of that business in any other kind of business, it doesn't have to be a like kind of business, without incurring any liability at all for capital gains tax. And there will be many of you in this room who will know that over time that particular reform will draw into the small business community of Australia, the investment and the commitment and the talents of increasing numbers of people who will see that particular approach to taxation as being very attractive.

We also, in the lead up to the election campaign, talked a great deal about the importance of having a balance between development and the environment. As not only a participant in Australian politics, but I hope something of an amateur political scientist and something of an observer of the political scene as well as a participant and you can in a sense be both, one of the big changes that I have seen over the last 20 years is the way in which concern for the environment has become a mainstream political issue. 20 years ago concern for the environment was still looked upon rather suspiciously by many people who supported the Liberal Party. It was regarded as a trendy issue, perhaps on occasions an issue that had been taken over by the left wing of politics and really not something that resonated with the business and free enterprise principles and commitments of the Liberal Party. But over the years that has changed and I think concern for the environment has become a mainstream issue for all generations of Australians, and that is why in the lead up to the election we determined that we would have very strong environmental credentials. We said that we would sell one third of Telstra and we would use one billion dollars of the proceeds of that sale to

establish the Natural Heritage Trust of Australia and I am very happy to say that we were able to achieve that.

The Natural Heritage Trust of Australia will be established this year, the legislation has gone through and I'll have the opportunity early next month to launch the Natural Heritage Trust of Australia appropriately enough in the Blue Mountains just west of Sydney in the electorate of Macquarie, which was one of the electorates won by the Liberal Party from the Labor Party at the last election. And what we have been able to do in this area I believe, and it is very important to the long term strength and health of the Liberal Party is that we have been able to disabuse our critics of the notion that we are disinterested in environmental protection, but we've been able to do it in a way that resonates with our business and our other obligations and trying to have a balance between the environment and business concerns is very very important to the future development of Australia.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, they are just some of the things that I recall that we talked loudly and strongly about in the lead up to the election campaign. I don't intend to weary you with a long and detailed list but they are a sample of the things that we regarded as important and examples of the things that we have remained true to in the thirteen months that we have been in government. But a government is more than just a series of promises kept or programmes delivered. A government is very much about a style and an approach and an attitude and one of the most important things that I have endeavoured to do, I don't know whether it has been entirely successful, I hope it has, but I'll continue to try and do it, and that is to try and restore a greater sense of civility in political life in Australia. I think for a long time we were going down the path of losing all civility in public life and in politics in Australia and I do have to say that nothing disillusiones the young in our community more than a sense that public life lacks any sense of civility and any sense of if you like, call it in old-fashioned words, good manners and a proper respect for the other person's point of view. And the remark that I am about to make I hope nobody thinks for a moment that after being Prime Minister for 13 months that I've gone soft or in any way lost my commitment to the cause of the Liberal Party, but one of the things that I feel pleased about that I have been able to do over the last 13 months is to preserve a capacity when it is in the national interest to do so to have a rational discussion with the Leader of the Opposition. I think it is important...(applause)... and one example that I can recall recently, we found ourselves sitting at the same table at a dinner in Melbourne to mark the 10th anniversary of the establishment of Care Australia, and it was at the height of the difficulties in Papua New Guinea and we were able to for a period of time to have a serious discussion about the problems that that particular crisis presented for Australia.

Now, as I say that is not an indication that the rules of politics have changed, it is not an indication that I regarded the advice that I received as being superior from the views that I had formed, but I hope it is the role always of a Prime Minister in a country such as Australia to recognise that however emphatic a victory may have been it remains the case that something between 40 - 45% of the Australian community voted for the alternative. And I think Prime Ministers and leaders who lose sight of that lose touch with the reality of life in Australian politics. They deserve the description of arrogant, they deserve the description of being out of touch, they deserve the description of

elitism which is on past occasions in relation to others and I hope not about in the future myself, or any members of the Liberal Party, those allegations that will be made.

When I reflect on the events of the past year, I reflect as I said earlier with enormous pride in the great degree of loyalty and the great degree of strength and support that I have received from my colleagues from the business community and from the Party organisation. Tonight does comprise quite understandably a very large number of men and women from the business community here in Sydney. I value the links that I have with the business community of Sydney. I value the links that I have with the business community all around Australia. We are not, as the Liberal Party, we are not unlike our opponents, we are not beholden to any one section of the Australian community. We are not owned by the trade union movement, we are not owned by the business community either large or small, we are not owned by individual pressure groups, but we do have a broad coincidence of views with the business community. The values and the priorities of the business community are similar to the values and the priorities of the Liberal Party. We won't always agree. Over the past year, some of you have had occasion to criticise us on some issues and that is how it should occur in a democracy, and it is foolish even at a gathering like this where everybody thinks in such positive terms and reflects with such gratitude on the past year, it is natural that people should be like that, nonetheless I acknowledge that there are things that over the last year we have done that you would have wished we hadn't done.

I'd be deluding myself for example if I didn't acknowledge there'd be one or two people in this room who disagreed with our decision, for example, to impose that superannuation surcharge. I'm not wrong - I understand that, and I think it is important that I acknowledge that, I think it is important that I know by the reaction that you really expected me to acknowledge it, and also for me to say that I know that decisions like that displease people. I hope you understand that in putting together last year's budget we felt that one of the measures which would give to it within the broader Australian community a feeling that the pain had been shared around equally within the community, was that particular measure. I know it is not popular, I acknowledge that, but I ask you to accept and to understand that within the broader context that I have just described that that particular decision was needed in order to convey that overall sense of fairness and that overall sense of balance.

I've spoken, ladies and gentlemen, very much of what has happened over the last year. We have before us at the present time, several issues of a degree of complexity and an order of difficulty that few governments in Australia have faced for a long time. I can't think of an issue which any government in Australia in recent years has faced which is as complicated as the difficulties thrown up by the decision of the High Court of Australia in the Wik case. If I can just say for a moment that this particular issue confronts the government and the Australian community with a need to take a choice that will respect two apparently conflicting objectives. One of those is to respect profoundly the desire I think of most Australians to see justice done to the original inhabitants of this country. I have little doubt that most Australians believe as is the case that as a group the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia remain the most underprivileged section of the Australian community - as a group. I equally have little doubt that many Australians are angry and frustrated that the very large amounts of money which have been committed towards relieving that

disadvantage appear to have achieved so little, and they have questioned the priorities and approaches which have been involved in the provision of that money. And they ask questions about whether the methodology which has been employed in the past is really the appropriate methodology to be employed in the future. And the negative symbolism of such issues as that disgraceful saga over the Hindmarsh Bridge in South Australia, where believe it or not because of a vote in the Senate only a few weeks ago, we faced the real possibility of yet another inquiry because of the requirements of the law passed by the former government. I can't estimate and I don't think any of the observers of this scene can estimate the damage that has been done within the attitude of the general Australian community to the cause of the genuine relief of the disadvantage of Australian Aborigines as such things as the Hindmarsh Bridge. It represents a disgraceful symbol of political correctness doing its worst in the area of indigenous affairs in Australia. But on the other hand, the Wik decision has presented or the pastoralists and the miners of Australia an intolerable and unacceptable level of instability and uncertainty. The notion that the occupation and ownership of land which has often been in a family for several generations, might with the stroke a pen, even of such as imminent body as the High Court of Australia be rendered uncertain and under a cloud is something that quite understandably has produced a wave of instability, concern and even anger throughout the rural community of Australia and it is the responsibility of my government and the responsibility of my Cabinet and the Parliament within the very near future to produce a response to that particular decision that respects the desire of the Australian community to do justice by the Aboriginal people of this country, but also gives to our pastoralists, to the mining industry and to other people affected, a proper measure of security and predictability, because I can think of few scenarios involving a greater nightmare than the possibility that virtually block by block over years to come, litigation will be waged over ownership of something over 50% of the land mass of Australia and that according to some views of the implications of the Wik decision is the kind of difficulty that we face. That particular decision will challenge all of the sense of justice and the sense of commitment to fair outcomes that we can as a government and as a Party muster.

Ladies and gentlemen on a personal note, of course tonight is a night of personal celebration and personal satisfaction but it is a night that does very much belong to people other than to me. I would never have been leader of the Liberal Party and I certainly would never have been Prime Minister of Australia had it not been for the Liberal Party organisation. It is common when you get elected to a position like Prime Minister of Australia for people to say nice things about you and you appreciate them, for them to compliment you on what you've done. It's common for people to speak of the qualities that you may or may not have. But as somebody who has committed all of his adult life to the Liberal Party cause through thick and thin, somebody who has spent many years in the Liberal Party organisation, I do owe an enormous debt of gratitude to a very large number of people who are in this room. People who in a sense they represent who helped me on earlier occasions. And the sense of comradeship and the sense of teamwork that I have always found in the Liberal Party, even in its more difficult times and even when there have been occasions when perhaps I thought it hasn't made the right decisions in relation to both policy and personnel, has been one of the sustaining things of my adult life.

It has been an enormous privilege to lead the Liberal Party and even more so over the last thirteen months to be the Prime Minister of Australia. There are many happy recollections I have of the last 13 months, but I think probably the one that I have found the most enduring is the fact that when Janette and I and our family again journeyed to Hawks Nest at the beginning of this year, determined to repeat an annual pattern of the last fifteen or sixteen years, and I went walking along the beach early in the morning and I seem to see the same faces and I seem to receive most of the same greetings that I had received on earlier occasions - and they were very friendly greetings, most of them. But I am pleased to report that one or two of them were most unfriendly and it was that sort of sense of reality and a reminder that there's something about this country which enables that sort of interrelation between people and Prime Minister that you simply wouldn't receive in any other society.

I said when I was interviewed for an ABC programme before the election when I was asked the question "How did I want Australia to be in the Year 2000?" and I coined a phrase which like other politicians has hung around my neck. Ben Chifley had 'the light on the hill'; Howard McMillan had 'the winds of change', and 'you have never had it so good'; Malcolm Fraser had 'life was not meant to be easy'; and I coined the expression that I wanted Australians to feel 'relaxed and comfortable' about themselves. I really did mean it, and what I meant by that was very much that I think this is a country that ought to be relaxed and comfortable in the sense that what it has achieved since its existence began has been immense by comparison with other nations. The degree of social justice in this country. The degree of egalitarianism still, although it is not as great sadly as it once used to be, and the respect in which the country is held in other parts of the world and that was driven home to me very strongly during my recent visit to China, when I realised what immense advantages Australia brought in a relationship with a country of that size. We bring with us the gifts of being part of western civilisation which we clearly are, but we don't bring as others might, some of the disadvantages of a previous history which has not been as positive in our relations with China as other countries and that experience of only a week or ten days ago, was a reminder again of the tremendous potential and the tremendous opportunities that this country has.

So when I talk about being relaxed and comfortable, I talk about a country that can feel proud of what it has achieved although recognising that there were and remain blemishes. A country which is confident of its current identity, and a country which is also positive that whatever formal shape that identity may take in the future and that in our appropriate style we can debate those issues as we will increasingly as we draw towards the constitutional convention and we'll debate them in a tolerant harmonious respectful fashion. We'll recognise that there are many amongst us who believe that the current constitutional arrangements remain very effective and very relevant. There will also be many amongst us who have another view and one of the great strengths of the Liberal Party over the last year in government is that it has been able to manage some of these issues and encompass within our ranks people who have different views on issues of that kind without those differences becoming matters of public discord and matters of public division.

So they were the sort of things that I had in mind when I spoke 14 months ago of Australians feeling relaxed and comfortable. It wasn't the clarion call of a complacent

person. It was rather somebody who was endeavouring to describe in his own language what he sees as some of the enduring and distinctive characteristics of being and Australian.

Ladies and gentlemen, can I again thank all of you for tonight. Can I thank all of you for the tremendous financial and other support that you have given to our Party over a long period of time. Can I especially thank my wife Janette who is with me tonight and all of the other people who have played such a very important and close personal role in my life over the last year. It has been a year of tremendous achievement, a year of great satisfaction but most importantly and I am grateful for Rod having said it, most importantly we have endeavoured to conduct it in a way that we have laid a solid foundation for I hope to be many years into the future. We waited long years in opposition, they were very frustrating, they were very demanding, they were very debilitating and it made the achievement of office all the greater and all the better and all the more to be savoured and all the more to be used for the greater betterment and for the good of all of the Australian people. I thank all of you very much for your support, your loyalty, your understanding and your commitment to our common future.

Thank you.