

Election Announcement: John Howard, Prime Minister (LP)

Press Conference, Parliament House, Canberra, Sunday, 14 October 2007

“Good morning ladies and gentlemen. As you know earlier today I called on His Excellency the Governor-General and he has granted on my advice a dissolution of the House of Representatives. There’ll be an election held on the 24th of November for the House of Representatives and for half of the Senate. The Parliament will be prorogued at 12 noon tomorrow, the House of Representatives will be dissolved at 12 noon on Wednesday. The writs will issue on the 17th of October, the rolls will close on the 22nd of October, the nominations will close on the 1st of November and the election will be held on the 24th of November.

Ladies and gentlemen, by common agreement, Australia is enjoying a remarkable level of national prosperity at the present time, but I believe very passionately that this country’s best years can lie ahead of us, in the years immediately ahead. But that won’t happen automatically and in order for that to happen this country does not need new leadership, it does not need old leadership, it needs the right leadership and the right leadership is the leadership that delivers the team that knows how to do the job.

The right leadership is the leadership that has the experience to further expand the prosperity of the Australian economy and to ensure that everybody gets a fair share of it. The right leadership is the leadership that’s willing to take unpopular decisions in the short term that have a long term benefit for the Australian community. The right leadership is a group of men and women who will govern for all Australians and who will not be beholden to a narrow section of the Australian community. The right leadership is the leadership that tells the Australian people where it stands on issues and what it believes in. Can I say, love me or loathe me, the Australian people know where I stand on all the major issues of importance to their future.

People must decide in the weeks ahead who is better able, to not only preserve the prosperity that we now have, but also to build it further and to make sure that it is fairly shared throughout the Australian community. They’ve also got to decide who’s better able to promote Australia’s national security and to stand up for Australia’s interests abroad. Is it a Government with a proven track record in those areas or is it an inexperienced group of men and women, 70 per cent of whom are former trade union officials? Is it a Government that is offering stability in its key personnel or is it an alternative that doesn’t and let me remind you that after the Prime Minister, the two great offices of state in our government are the Treasury and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and I can tell you that if I am re-elected as Prime Minister, Mr Costello will be my Treasurer and Mr Downer will be my Minister for Foreign Affairs. By contrast we all know that Mr Rudd didn’t really want to commit himself to Mr Swan as treasurer, he was no doubt forced by circumstances to do so and you all know that if Mr Rudd were to win, Mr McClelland will not be his minister for foreign affairs.

In the weeks that lie ahead I’ll be unveiling many plans about Australia’s future. One very important commitment I make is that to full employment. We now have a 33-

year low in unemployment and that 33-year low can go even lower with the right policies. If Labor is elected with its anti-small business policies, unemployment will rise. There is no reason why the current unemployment rate in Australia should not be markedly lower than it is and certainly with a 'three' in front of it and our policies that I will unveil in the weeks ahead will demonstrate how that can be achieved. We'll also be unveiling policies that will lift living standards and address pressures felt by sections of the Australian community because I acknowledge and recognise that although the general level of prosperity in this country is remarkably high, there are some people who are feeling pressure and there are some people who are missing out and it is the responsibility of the Government as well as the alternative government to outline plans to ensure that people do get included and that people don't miss out. I'll outline plans to give communities a greater say in the running of their own hospitals. I'll outline plans to reinforce Australia's national security and I'll also be detailing plans that will provide a balanced approach to the great challenges of climate change and water security.

And finally and very importantly throughout this campaign I will emphasise something that I have believed in all of my political life and something that I gave voice to in a speech I delivered in Sydney a few days ago; and that is my passionate belief that the things that unite us as Australians is greater and more enduring than the things that divide us and that I've always been a passionate believer in one Australia. In an Australia where we are governed by the one body of laws, we share a common loyalty, a common citizenship and that we are entitled as individuals to an equal dispensation of justice from the operation of those laws. The plans that I will unveil in detail in the weeks of the campaign will reward hard work. They will create jobs and they will provide even more incentive for working Australians.

Can I say one other thing. Last week in my speech to the Sydney Institute I also spoke about balance. How balance in our public life was an important as balance in our personal lives. If we end up on the 24th of November with a Federal Labor government, we will have a Labor government in power at every level in Australian for the first time since Federation. There is nothing balanced about that.

Such a state of affairs would rob this country of the necessary checks and balances that a federal system inevitably provides. Add to that a Federal Government, 70 per cent of whose members would be former trade union officials and we would have a distinct lack of balance.

I look forward to the journey of the next six weeks, doing what I enjoy most of all about public life and that is meeting and interacting with our fellow Australians. I have always found that a source of nourishment, a source of being re-energised and an opportunity to continue a dialogue with them which I have found profoundly rewarding over the past 11-and-a-half years and which I seek to continue. Thank you."

JOURNALIST: Mr Howard, six weeks is a touch longer than the required minimum. Do you feel you need a bit of extra time given the depths that you're going into this campaign with?

PRIME MINISTER: I think the issues are so important that six weeks is the appropriate time. I mean why should we, in any way, in a great democracy not be

willing to debate the great issues of the time over a period of six weeks. And I can assure you Phil it will go very quickly.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, I am not sure if you mentioned interest rates, but you certainly didn't give it much of a mention. What's changed in three years?

PRIME MINISTER: Well I'll tell you what hasn't changed. Interest rates will always be lower under a Coalition Government than under a Labor Government.

JOURNALIST: On the issue of interest rates, the Liberal Party website is claiming that if a Labor Government is elected, families will pay \$3000 more for their mortgages, groceries will go up. How can you substantiate those claims?

PRIME MINISTER: Well if you look at the level of interest rates over the time that we have been in office and you compare it with the level of interest rates under Labor, it's very easy to make that claim.

JOURNALIST: Mr Howard, you said this is not about old leadership, or new leadership but right leadership.

PRIME MINISTER: The right leadership, yes.

JOURNALIST: Can you tell us a little more about your handover to Mr Costello and that as part of the right leadership team?

PRIME MINISTER: Oh very easily. What I have said is that well into my next term, if I am elected, there will be a leadership transition. And that leadership transition will be from me to the next most experienced person in Australian politics, Mr Costello. And what we are offering in relation to the Prime Ministership, a clear and sensible transition path from the most experienced; whether you like me or don't like me, you know, you might argue I've had a little bit of experience, to the next most experienced person. That's Peter Costello. If I am re-elected, Peter is the Treasurer, Alexander Downer is the Foreign Minister. We know by contrast Mr Rudd didn't want Mr Swan and he certainly won't appoint Mr McClelland. So you have in relation to those two great offices of state, you have personnel instability on the Labor Party side and you have openness, clarity and predictability on our side.

JOURNALIST: Will the entire Cabinet stay the same if you're re-elected?

PRIME MINISTER: No, not the entire Cabinet no.

JOURNALIST: You've made much of the issue of it's dangerous and it wouldn't be balanced to have wall to wall Labor Governments, given Kevin Rudd's arguments about the blame game and the constant bickering between Tony Abbott and the Health Ministers, do you think that argument could backfire on you?

PRIME MINISTER: No I don't because when Mr Rudd talks about the blame game, he's ignoring the fact that the real blame game in Australian politics is his unwillingness ever to accept responsibility for anything that goes wrong on his own side. I mean I was willing last week to admit that there were aspects of my handling of indigenous affairs that have been less than perfect and I have had occasion to reproach myself over that in recent years. I am quite open about that. I didn't run around saying it was all the fault of the Aboriginal leaders or it was all the fault of the state premiers, but you've seen again and again with Mr Rudd, if something goes wrong it's always his staff's fault, it's the media's fault, it's the editor's fault, it's somebody else's fault. It's never his own fault. Now I mean that is not the right leadership. That is just not the right leadership.

JOURNALIST: That was a very different position from the one that you put for the last 10 years or so.

PRIME MINISTER: What's that?

JOURNALIST: Well your position on reconciliation. As you yourself would admit, it was a different position than the one you put in the past 10 years, yet you say should the voters then be concerned about knowing where you stand, because that does seem to be a significant change?

PRIME MINISTER: No but see Michael, with respect you're wrong. In 1999 we put a referendum, which included a preamble, which included an acknowledgement that the indigenous people were the first people of this nation. So you see a continuity between what I said then and what I said the other night. So, I mean, I have always wanted to achieve reconciliation and what I believe the Northern Territory intervention has done is to provide a remarkable and fortuitous window of opportunity and I just think we ought to take advantage of it. And you can only bring this about if you can unite conservative Australia with the rest of the community. If you try and run a 51 per cent to 49 per cent operation on this it will fail and fail completely and I think we do have an opportunity and that is why I made the speech I did the other night. It's a difficult area, but you have got to unite not only conservative and non-conservative Australia, you've got to unite the symbolic with the practical. And in that way I believe we can make further advances. We still have a long way to go and I am not in any way downplaying the importance of closing the gap in relation to life expectancy and all of those other things which measure the continuing disadvantage of Aboriginal Australians. But I think we have an opportunity, because of the Northern Territory intervention to break out of the straight-jacket of the last 20 or 30 years where essentially we've followed the wrong policies. They've been policies really of separate development and I think they have

been wrong and I think we have a new mood in the community and I think we have to take advantage of it.

JOURNALIST: If Labor gets re-elected you've said that unemployment will go up. Is the corollary true, or are you giving an iron-clad commitment that if you get elected unemployment will go down?

PRIME MINISTER: I believe if we get re-elected unemployment will continue to fall. I said that and I see unemployment under a future Coalition government as having a three in front of it. Now let me tell you why I think unemployment will go up under Labor, their anti-small business policies, bringing back the unfair dismissal laws, will drive up unemployment. They never talk about unemployment now, it's a description that dare not speak its name. It's a state that dare not be mentioned because they know deep down that they will with their policies drive up unemployment.

JOURNALIST: Will you as Prime Minister see the referendum through?

PRIME MINISTER: That would be my goal, yes.

JOURNALIST: On the Forum this week...

PRIME MINISTER: I beg your pardon?

JOURNALIST: You were due to go to the Pacific Islands Forum this week. Will you go or will you send someone else?

PRIME MINISTER: No, I will ask somebody to go on my behalf. I do not think it's appropriate now that the election campaign has started that I go. I will ask somebody to go on my behalf.

JOURNALIST: Is it likely to be Mr Downer?

PRIME MINISTER: No, no, somebody who hasn't had a question. Mr Lester?

JOURNALIST: Mr Howard, on the indigenous affairs question, Mal Brough now says that he only learned of your referendum plans the day before we learnt them, that you announced them and he has some concerns about the public impact of them. What's that say about your leadership style and about how well that plan was considered?

PRIME MINISTER: Well the plan was considered very, very well.

JOURNALIST: (inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER: No, it's something that I gave a lot of thought to over a period of time and I discussed it with Mr Brough, he doesn't have any reservations about it.

JOURNALIST: Mr Howard you start this campaign with the latest opinion poll showing you 18 points behind, not an ideal position to start from, how do you characterise this fight compared with previous fights you've faced?

PRIME MINISTER: Karen, we're going to have the real thing in six weeks time and I have no intention of spending even a nanosecond between now and election day in commenting on opinion polls.

JOURNALIST: Just further to Kieran Gilbert's point about interest rates, at the last election you did promise to keep them at record lows, there has been five rate rises since, prospect of another one in November, how much responsibility do you take for those increases?

PRIME MINISTER: I take responsibility for everything that adversely happens under my watch and I am made accountable for those things when an election is held. And I am facing my day of accountability, as is the Leader of the Opposition. I mean that is the nature of the democratic process. Of course in politics when things go wrong you have to accept responsibility. There are varying degrees of responsibility depending on the issues. But I'm not afraid to accept responsibility. My opponent blames somebody else.

JOURNALIST: Mr Howard, you mentioned unpopular short term decisions for long term gains, do you include WorkChoices within that, you didn't mention WorkChoices within your opening comments and what....

PRIME MINISTER: Well I did mention WorkChoices in the context of unemployment. I mean one of the great things about WorkChoices was, of course, the abolition of the unfair dismissal laws and the thing more than anything else that would drive unemployment up again would be a repeal of those....or bringing back rather of those unfair dismissal laws.

JOURNALIST: Will the Iraq war cost your Government votes?

PRIME MINISTER: Look there are a lot of people in the community who disagree with me on Iraq but my position has not altered, I do not believe it's in Australia's interests for us to pull out prematurely and we have a very clear position. By contrast Mr Rudd seems to want to have it both ways, you see he's against our military involvement, but he's not so against it that he's going to pull all our forces out. I mean he's going to pull out the Battle Group, but he's going to leave some of the other forces there and he's going to leave forces there beyond the Security Detachment that is legitimately needed to protect the personnel in our Embassy. So I have a clear position. He's really trying to walk both sides of the street and if you analyse very carefully what Mr Rudd says on Iraq he's got two-bob each way. I mean he's giving the impression that he's totally against it to the Australian public but he's not really because if he were totally against it why wouldn't he argue that you pull all the forces out? See there's a double standard, you're walking both sides of the street. But look my position is clear and I know a lot of people don't agree with me, but I do not think it is in Australia's national interest to participate in a premature withdrawal from Iraq which would be perceived as a Western defeat. If America is defeated in Iraq, then that will be bad for the Middle East, it will be an enormous boost for terrorism and that would be bad for us, not only in the Middle East, but particularly bad for us in our own region. That fundamentally is why I hold the position I hold. I think as time goes by our forces will transition to a greater...having a greater training role. I think that is an inevitable corollary of the improving security position in the southern part of Iraq.

JOURNALIST: ...you said you had plans to reward hard work, do you think that there are people who are not getting enough of a reward from the current prosperity, do you think that that leaves perhaps tax reform might be one way to achieve that?

PRIME MINISTER: Oh look I'm not going to speculate on particular things. But we have got a number of policies that we'll be unveiling which will address that issue. The point I want to make David is that there is a very strong level of generic prosperity, but there are some people who miss out and you should never rest on your laurels when it comes to incentives, you should always be looking for new ways of providing people with incentive to work harder, and to invest and to take risks because the prosperity we have now is a result of really a very steady transition of this society from an earlier stage to being very much an opportunity state. And I think it's very important that we take every opportunity to further build on that process.

JOURNALIST: Which are the sections of the community that might be missing out on the prosperity?

PRIME MINISTER: Oh look I mean there are sections of the community, I mean obviously indigenous people are as a group the most disadvantaged, of course they are, and that's one of the reasons why we have endeavoured in a whole variety of ways to tackle that issue. But there are individuals and groups of individuals in various sections of society who miss out.

JOURNALIST: PM, apart from Aborigines and other disadvantaged sectors, there is a broad and general feeling among ordinary households that they're missing out through high petrol prices, because of the high cost of real estate, how will you address that during the campaign?

PRIME MINISTER: Well there'll be various policies that we're going to announce Malcolm, I've indicated broadly which...what I should do. But I mean plainly the most effective way of helping people who are in that situation is to maintain growth in our economy because if people feel they might be missing out now, they will miss out even more if growth slows. I mean if we reverse our pattern of growth, then unemployment will rise, and we will reverse of pattern of growth if we start reversing economic reforms. And I think it's very, very important that we understand fundamentally that running a strong and growing economy is still the greatest thing that any government can do to help the average citizen, because unless you have growth you don't have job security and job opportunities, and if you don't have job security then the whole sense of well-being of working families is threatened.

JOURNALIST: What about the issue of childcare, is there more you can do there, are you ruling out tax deductibility, is there areas you can help families or with women.....

PRIME MINISTER: Well more than 80 per cent of Australians now who need childcare have the benefit of the...effectively of tax deductibility because the rebate is 30 per cent and as Peter Costello has pointed out, if you introduced its simplicity, you would in fact make some parents worse off. But we've got a few issues that we'll be addressing in relation to childcare and I didn't intend at this news conference to announce everything that we intend to deal with during the campaign. I think I'll take one more question and then....

JOURNALIST: Can you rule out using the six-week campaign to announce some long or short term targets for emission reductions?

PRIME MINISTER: Well what I can rule in is the policy that I enunciated during the Federal Council Meeting and that is that we've got an emissions trading system established, and we're getting advice on what is the appropriate target and we're going to announce that next year and that is the sensible thing you do. You've got to know what these things mean before you commit yourself to it. One more question?

JOURNALIST: Mr Howard Queensland's been the bedrock of your 11 years in office, you've got a challenger from Queensland who's talking up the prospects of Brisbane, what's your message to people from that State who might be tempted to go with the local candidate?

PRIME MINISTER: Well my message to them is the same as my message to all of my fellow Australians. I don't think this country will benefit from a government, 70 per cent of whose members are former trade union officials. The right leadership for Australia in 2007 is a group of men and women who will govern for all Australians and not a group of men and women who are beholden to a narrow section of the Australian community –and I note incidentally that the elected replacement for the former premier of Queensland, in the Queensland Parliament as you're talking about Queensland, is what, Mr Grace, the former head of the TUC in Queensland. Thank you.

Source: Liberal Party of Australia official transcript.