

Policy Launch Speech: Kim Beazley, Opposition Leader (ALP) Sydney, October 31 2001

“Men and women of Australia: Today I offer myself as Prime Minister of this great country. I want the job. I'm committed, I'm qualified, and I'm here for the long haul.

I have a plan to deliver a fair share, and a secure future, for all Australians.

I stand for the best possible education for all, not just the rich. I stand for a health system where your Medicare Card is more important than your credit card.

I will put the care back into aged care. I stand for making the GST simpler and fairer, for relieving the burden on small business, and on families.

I want to ensure Telstra remains in the hands of the majority shareholders the Australian people, so Telstra can continue its essential nation-building role.

And I want to get this country working again with quality jobs for all our people, whether they live in the city or the regions.

While I have a plan for the future, my political opponent only has a plan for retirement. John Howard says this election is about leadership but he won't commit to a full term. He will stand, but he won't deliver. He'll stand but he won't stay.

Time and again in this campaign John Howard has been asked to commit to a full term. Time and again he has refused. Let's get it straight. If John Howard wins this election, Peter Costello will be Prime Minister at the next.

And let's get another thing straight. My pledge is to be around for as long as it takes to bring in Labor's plan for the future of this nation. I will go the distance.

We in the Australian Labor Party have always planned for the future, by drawing on the lessons of the past.

In Parliament more than 50 years ago Ben Chifley said this: 'I believe that the best incentive that can be given to workers is a sense of security — security of employment and security against sickness, unemployment, and the disabilities of old age.' Those Labor values of Ben Chifley are values I share, values we all share, priorities we all share Jobs, Health and Education. Jobs, health and education and a secure future for this country and for all those who live here.

My fellow Australians. our pledge for a secure future for this country means security both at home and abroad. The terrorist attacks on the United States have struck horror into all of us, and changed our world. We believe this threat must be resisted, pursued, destroyed. There is no difference between the parties on this. Under my leadership we will continue to work in the international coalition, with President Bush and Prime Minister Blair and others, to find the terrorists and bring them to justice.

We're proud we have such well-trained and well-equipped men and women to send on this difficult mission. They go with our blessing, and our heartfelt appreciation of their courage and commitment, and that of their families.

Our security also requires that we protect Australia's borders. People smugglers are criminals who must be hounded out of business. It's why we plan to introduce a proper Coast Guard a cop on the beat 52 weeks of the year.

We need to work harder at finding diplomatic solutions with our neighbours to take the boats back, or stop them before they leave. The fight against terrorism and the protection of our borders are common ground in this election.

But on the issue of security at home, we are poles apart. The public schools and hospitals used by average Australian families have been sadly neglected. Our aged care system is in crisis. The rich are getting richer and the poor poorer. Those in the middle average Australian families are getting more and more squeezed.

My opponent has no plan for jobs, no plan for schools, no plan for hospitals, no vision for the future.

Well, Australians know this: without decent schools and hospitals, without a clear plan for the future, we are never going to meet the challenges of the new century.

That's why Labor has a plan to help struggling families, and those in financial difficulties. Only Labor has a plan to invest in the most priceless assets in the modern world our brains, our skills, our knowledge.

We have already announced an affordable range of carefully crafted policies designed to help Australians deal with the problems they face. We'll increase funds for our public hospitals through a Medicare Alliance, to cut waiting times, and employ more nurses and doctors. We'll introduce Medicare After Hours so families can get 24 hour a day expert medical advice. We'll restore the dental health scheme for low-income earners - the scheme John Howard scrapped in 1996.

We'll establish Education Priority Zones so we can fund schools and students on the basis of need not privilege. We'll invest in more Early Learning Centres for 3- and 4-year-olds, and will help new parents with our Headstart for Families plan.

Labor will fix our aged care system by putting more funds in, and taking Bronwyn Bishop out. We will also establish a national scheme to guarantee one hundred percent of entitlements for all workers, not just the lucky few.

Labor will also introduce a Social Charter for banks, so that they start working for their customers, instead of the other way round. And we'll make the GST simpler and fairer, to ease the burden on small business, and on families under pressure.

John Howard promised the GST would be simple, and we'd all be better off. Of course, that was after he promised that he'd never, ever introduce a GST!

And John Howard also promised the GST would be good for the economy, and wouldn't hurt jobs. But more than 66,000 people have lost their jobs since the GST was introduced, and many more people are not getting the work they need to make ends meet.

The GST has made the Howard Government the highest taxing government in Australian history. Bankruptcies have increased by 30 percent since the GST came in, and economic growth has more than halved. There wouldn't be a small business in Australia that genuinely thinks the GST is simple. Well, with Labor's plans to simplify the GST we are going to replace hours and hours of work with one simple calculation.

As a pharmacist in my electorate said to me: "The changes you will make will give me back my weekends." And we are going to stop them being used as unpaid workers for the Tax Office.

Who in this country thinks that the GST is fair? Who, except John Howard and Peter Costello? And of course Amanda Vanstone. She even thinks it's fair to tax funerals you only die once, she says, so you may as well pay for the privilege!

We don't think the Howard Government's GST is fair and we are going to remove it from some of life's essentials- from funerals, from women's sanitary items, from charities helping people in emergencies, from children's nappies, and from the rents paid by long term caravan park residents. And with electricity bills going up by more than 14 percent since the start of the GST, we will remove it from electricity and gas bills completely.

Peter Costello has described our plan as 'peanuts'. It may be peanuts for him, but ten percent tax off electricity and gas bills is not peanuts for pensioners, or families under financial pressure. Peter Costello does not want to see us take the GST off selected items to help families. He believes there should be no exemptions! He has said so.

If my opponents are so opposed to our plans to make the GST simpler and fairer, let's have a debate about it.

You know, I really enjoy debating John Howard. And I want to do it again. I'm available any time, any place, between now and November 10. But let's face it: John Howard is avoiding another debate because he can't guarantee a secure future for this country he has no ideas to boost jobs, or fix schools or hospitals. On Sunday he promised a modest tax break for a small number of Australian families, if they can work their way through the fine print.

Walk down any street in Australia, and 90 percent of the families get absolutely nothing out of John Howard's baby bonus. Working mothers with children born before July this year will never see a cent of benefit. Of those that are eligible, 60 percent will receive only the minimum amount. With John Howard he always says one thing then does another. Just ask the over 60s who were all promised \$1000 before the last election. Forty percent got nothing!

But elect a Labor Government and every family in every street will pay less GST on essentials such as gas and electricity and nappies. Labor's GST tax relief goes to everyone, and lasts forever.

And let me just remind you: if John Howard is re-elected, nine out of ten taxpayers will get no tax relief whatsoever! John Howard isn't interested in any of Labor's long term plans to fix the GST, or to repair our education and health systems, because he won't be around long term, and he won't be accountable for any of his promises.

Well, if John Howard won't commit to three years, why should you commit to him?

We Australians are a clever and creative people. We always have been.

But under the Coalition new ideas have been smothered. Where smart countries around the world are investing in innovation and better education, the Howard Government lets our best and brightest people leave for overseas jobs.

Many Australian ideas in areas like biotechnology, and information and communications technology, have been developed overseas because they can't find a sponsor here at home. With real leadership, we can stop the brain drain and get our best people back here, employing other Australians to develop Australian ideas in the knowledge economy.

That's what we mean by the Knowledge Nation high-wage, high-skill jobs for this generation and those to come. It's about making you and your family better off.

It starts with a good education; a foundation to help people in the new world of work - a world that is changing rapidly, for everyone. Because we all know there is no such thing as a job for life any longer. The days are over when you could leave school at 15, start on the factory floor and work your way to the top, without further education.

Every job today requires education and skills a car mechanic uses computers for his business. Nurses need to operate complex medical equipment, and manage computerised records.

We have a small population, we can't afford to waste the talents of a single citizen.

But under the Howard Government there is no effort going into education and training, no interest in retaining Australian ideas, or reversing the brain drain.

If we don't change course, the next generation will look back and say to us - 'you had your chance but you didn't invest in the future! When everyone in the world was telling you knowledge is the key'.

And if we don't change tack, our children will also say, 'You made it a golden age for some, but not for all. You left society more unequal, more divided than it was - you made a mockery of the fair go'. They will remind us that the Howard Government invested millions in the privileged Category One schools, but did nothing to help the public schools attended by 70 percent of Australian children.

And why should ordinary Australians get a second-class education while the well off get first class? Why shouldn't we aim to bring every schoolboy and girl, every student, in this nation up to the same high standard! Well, Labor has a plan for this country's future, and it will start from my first day in office. It is a fully costed, fully funded plan, and even with our new proposals we will keep our Budgets in surplus.

Just let me make some points about our approach to economic management.

We go to this election with no proposals for new taxes. We also go to this election with no proposals to raise taxes. We think Australians have had enough of new taxes and higher taxes in recent years. Our plans for jobs, to rebuild our health system and repair education in this country are fully costed by independent experts.

By spending within our means, a Labor Government will keep the pressure off interest rates, and keep mortgages down.

And our plans are as affordable as they are necessary. We will be prudent economic managers. By limiting our programs to what we can afford, we will ensure interest rates are not under pressure. For Labor, sound economic management is not just an end in itself. Good economic management delivers growth. Growth, in turn, delivers jobs and will allow us to continue the urgent repair of our social institutions.

The first repair job must be in education - because nothing is more important to guarantee a secure future.

As Prime Minister I will lift investment in new knowledge, and education for all Australians, to the top of the government agenda.

Within a decade, if Labor is elected to office, every member of an average family will be touched by the Knowledge Nation plans that I am proud to announce today, and I want to start with universities.

Since coming to office John Howard has ripped billions from our universities, and even the head of the Vice-Chancellors' Committee has admitted they are in crisis. We simply cannot allow these important institutions to slide into genteel poverty, with ever-declining morale.

To build the Knowledge Nation we must increase the number of workers with university and technical qualifications, and increase the extent and quality of our research and innovation. That's why I announce today that Labor will spend an extra \$1 billion on our Plan for Quality Universities.

The centrepiece is a new fund of nearly \$500 million. Universities, drawing on this fund, will be able to improve the quality of teaching and research by employing more lecturers and tutors, and reducing class sizes. It will also be used to increase salaries for our best academic teachers and researchers to help end the brain drain, and to equip university libraries with new resources. By lifting funding for Australian universities in this way, we will help them get back to the high quality teaching and research of which they were once justly proud. The Labor Party has always fought for the right of all Australians, whatever their income or background, to get a good education. But with the effective doubling of HECS under the Howard Government, a university education has been put further out of the reach of more and more ordinary Australians.

I announce today that to make university education more affordable we will make HECS charges easier to repay. Labor intends progressively to raise the threshold of earnings at which HECS must be repaid. We will lift the threshold of earnings by \$10,000 over four years, bringing it close to average weekly earnings.

This will ease financial pressures on many graduates, and encourage more people, from different backgrounds, into higher education to improve their skills.

The Knowledge Nation cannot be built without better schools. And every parent knows that standards in the nation's schools must be improved. So today I am announcing a \$176 million plan for higher standards in schools. We will employ an extra 680 teachers nationwide 400 to help raise standards of literacy and numeracy, and 280 to help improve behaviour in our schools. Children who want to learn should not be distracted from the task. Currently, too many teaching professionals are tied up with behaviour problems, and getting children up to speed in basic reading, writing and maths. These new people will help our teachers to get on with teaching the subjects for which they were trained.

Over the five and a half years of the Howard Government research and development across all industries has fallen dramatically. Australia's R&D levels were among the fastest growing in the world when Labor left office, but now we are rapidly falling behind. Rupert Murdoch is not the only business leader warning that we will make ourselves irrelevant on the world stage unless we act urgently to stop this decline.

By the end of the decade our goal must be nothing less than to double our overall national investment in research and development of Australian ideas.

We have the brains and the people we should be in a leading position, not struggling to keep up with the smart countries of the world. To begin this task, I announce today

my Plan for Research and Development Leadership. Labor will introduce a new 200 percent tax concession for businesses investing in research and development at our universities, the CSIRO, and other public research institutions. This will dramatically increase the amount of private funding going into our universities for the basic research needed to boost existing industries, and to kick-start new industries.

Enormous opportunities exist for Australia to become a world leader in key industries such as biotechnology, information technology and environmental sustainability. If we invest properly in this new knowledge we can not only create thousands of new jobs, but we can also start the process of solving the big problems facing our world such as improving the quality of our air, our water and our soil.

I am also proud to announce today that over the next five years we will invest \$160 million extra in the CSIRO, our best national research institution. John Howard has squeezed this great research icon. It has lost 1100 staff since the Coalition came to power.

Well I won't stand for that — the CSIRO is at the heart of Australian national identity and achievement and no government I lead will ever let it be destroyed.

And while I'm talking to you today about great national institutions I want to state very clearly that no government I lead will ever sell another share in our national telecommunications company, Telstra. That's a rock solid guarantee.

John Howard and John Anderson have been trying to hide their plans to sell Telstra, but Peter Costello blew the whistle on them last Friday. You don't see it very often, but Peter Costello had an attack of honesty when he confirmed the sale date.

I don't know what John Anderson said to Peter Costello over the weekend, but I think you could summarise it like this: "Not happy, Peter!"

The Howard Government has put huge effort into attacking our institutions such as Telstra, Australia Post, our universities, our public hospitals, the CSIRO, and the ABC. Well I'm here to tell you Labor will restore them to their rightful nation-building role. The Coalition set out to harm the ABC, and slashed its funding. We won't stand by and see the ABC torn down, so I announce today that over our first term of government we will restore the ABC's funding to its levels before the Howard Government was elected.

As well, Labor will establish a \$140 million National Connectivity Scheme to ensure more equitable delivery of telecommunications services, including voice, mobile phone, dial-up Internet and broadband services, and increased television and radio coverage to local communities, particularly in outer metropolitan, rural and regional Australia.

And we will provide \$140 million over five years to create a new nationwide program called IT Kickstart to train Australians how to use the Internet and understand modern information and communications technology. Just think what a boon it will be to those trying to increase their skills to get good employment, or set up new businesses using new technology. If we can get almost every Australian proficient in the use of these new technologies we will become one of the world IT and communications leaders.

We have announced we will create 100,000 on-line university places through the University of Australia Online. It will cost students only half the current HECS rate, and will help thousands of Australians particularly those in remote areas, to get the

training and re-training that they need through their home computers, or through public libraries. Labor will also provide \$77 million over five years to boost the number of postgraduate nurses available to work in our public hospitals. This will enable nurses to train in high demand specialist areas including emergency, intensive care and aged care.

And we have also pledged to double the number of research fellowships in universities, and create a new category of prestige fellowships, to reward our best minds and keep them in this country. As well, we will fund a regional universities package to double the amount they get to subsidise their communications services, and we will create 400 new regional postgraduate research places.

And to boost employment in regional Australia, I recently announced a comprehensive plan for improving Australia's infrastructure, investing in regional development and jobs for the future. We will fund this scheme by re-investing funds that once built one of our greatest national projects, the Snowy Mountains Scheme.

People often ask me to explain in one sentence what the Knowledge Nation is all about. I'm going to go one better than that, and explain the Knowledge Nation in one word. That word is jobs.

That's why Labor's Employment and Training policies are at the centre of the plan I launch today. Those policies are about investing in everyone's skills. So I pledge \$105 million over five years for 35,000 Knowledge Nation apprenticeships, to give young people a start in a professional career, particularly in industries that are experiencing a grave shortage of skilled workers.

Our policies are about getting in early to stop people becoming unemployed. The Howard Government blames the unemployed for their plight, labelling them 'job snobs'. Well, we want to help people at risk of unemployment, or unable to get the training they need for new jobs. We will make a \$75 million investment over five years to help young Australians move from school to work offering them help through the most crucial transition of their working lives.

And our policies are about being a fair government to those doing it tough. And that is why we are investing \$41 million over five years in putting real training into Work for the Dole, giving its participants a chance to graduate with an apprenticeship, rather than just a certificate. It's why we will invest \$8 million in establishing a new level of assistance to mature-age jobseekers under the Job Network some of the people most disadvantaged by the Coalition's uncaring policies. And it's why we will invest \$60 million over five years in allowing long-term unemployed people to use their unemployment benefits as a wage subsidy to find a job.

Never be in any doubt: I will never tolerate a situation in which my fellow Australians live in the economic shadowlands, drifting in and out of unemployment and low wage jobs without a helping hand. That is not the Australian way! Our thinkers, our creators, our inventors, our scientists and technologists: these are just some of the people crucial to Australia's future.

We need writers and filmmakers, artists and musicians, architects and engineers, medical researchers and doctors, teachers and nurses, tradespeople and workers from all walks of life. What we need are Australian ideas invented here, and developed here. And that means we have to encourage investment here in Australia, investment in our future as a people.

Only Labor has a plan for that sort of future for this country. A plan for schools to give every child a chance. A plan to end the crisis in our public hospitals. A plan to take the tax off some of life's essentials. A plan to guarantee that Telstra stays in public hands. A plan that is costed down to the last cent.

We will act to guarantee workers' entitlements and better job security. And to provide more nursing home beds so that elderly Australians get the treatment they deserve.

We will protect our environment, signing up to the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change, and tackling salinity, and other threats to our fragile water systems, and to soil and air quality. And we must and will aim to provide good living standards with basic services for all Australians, whether they live in the cities or the regions.

The choice on November 10 is clear: Labor is offering a long-term plan that will put schools, hospitals and families first. Our opponents are offering short term fixes from a short term Liberal leader.

I believe we can build a prosperous, secure Australia - a country in which everyone gets a share in our prosperity. A nation united because it is fair. And strong because the government is on the side of the people it represents. A nation at peace with itself because we turn to each other, not against each other. A tolerant nation, reconciled with its indigenous peoples. A creative, clever Australia, confident of its place in the world. A nation in which new knowledge and high skills are prized, and all can aspire to them.

I want the job of Prime Minister, and I am applying for it, because I want to carry out this Labor vision for our country's future. A secure future, a fair share - for all Australians. That's what I stand for!"

Source: Compiled from The Age, November 1 2001, p. 8 and The Australian Financial Review.