

Policy Launch Speech: Kim Beazley, Opposition Leader (ALP)

Brisbane, Wednesday 23 September 1998

“Nearly 100 years ago, our forebears created a new nation on this continent - a land to which people from all over the world could come to make a contribution. As we enter a new century, we face again the same challenge that confronted our nation's founders. Can we come together, and put petty rivalries and differences aside, and build a new nation for a new century?”

We're here in an election campaign that will decide how Australia enters that century - our second century as a nation.

But above all, we're here to launch a claim for the Australian people. We launch their claim for jobs, for decent health care, for an education, for security and opportunity in their lives. We launch their claim for the better Australia that they deserve.

The Labor Party has listened to the millions in our community who feel betrayed by a Government that has divided Australian against Australian, boss against worker, 'haves' against 'have-nots'. We have listened to those voices, and we have learned.

Our opponents have not listened. In this election campaign, as they have for 2 1/2 years in Government, they wrap old prejudice in the guise of reform:

As they pursue a flawed and unfair GST, they confuse stubbornness with courage; and as they pursue the sale of Telstra - a policy John Howard announced in this very place - they tell the Australian people they will only sell another 16%, while telling those in the know that they will sell it all.

Our opponents like to call themselves good economic managers. It is just as well they think so, because no-one else would, with annual economic growth down by 1% on average, a \$30 billion increase in foreign debt, and job creation in their first 30 months running at less than half the level achieved in Labor's last 30.

In this election, we stand at a fork in the road to the future. The two roads that lie before us will produce two very different Australias in the coming Century. Both Australias are countries of great natural beauty, abundant natural resources, and populated by a creative and courageous people.

But only one of those Australias will have a Government committed to finding jobs for all Australians who want to work. Only one of those Australias will have a Government which will invest in the skills of its people. Only one will be there to reward the work and effort of ordinary Australians. In short, only one will have a Government that sees itself as a partner in the lives of the Australian people.

That Australia will be the one with a Labor Government. Historians 50 or 100 years from now will write of this last election of the 20th Century as a contest between a vision for the whole nation, and a plan for a tax.

Those same historians would scoff at the absurdity of a Coalition proposing a new \$30 billion tax on Australian families, with economic crisis looming offshore, unemployment stuck above 8%, and widespread insecurity in Australian society.

That tax is John Howard's only answer to all the problems which beset us: a new 10% GST on everything from baby food and clothes to schoolbooks, a 10% GST on jobs, on holidays, retirement units, funeral services. A tax from cradle to grave.

And a tax that will snake down every suburban street, every day: into the mailbox in the envelope with the telephone bill, into the shopping bag every week on the supermarket docket, through the coin slot at the railway station, at the turnstile at the football or the cricket.

John Howard's GST will be there when the sink gets blocked and you need to call out a plumber. It will be there when you need a removalist to move house. And it will be there on every child's birthday, and every Christmas time.

This is a tax Australia should never, ever have. And which we could never, ever get rid of. We put at the centre of this election campaign a plan for our nation, not just a plan for a tax.

And that is the plan I release to you today. Too few campaign launches in recent years have done what campaign launches used to do - what Ben Chifley, and even Bob Menzies, used to do - and that is launch comprehensive, detailed plans for the nation. Today, Labor releases that plan - in 263 pages of detail - a plan for jobs, security and opportunity for all our people.

Our last 21/2 years have had one strong theme, and that theme is our belief that Australians deserve security and opportunity in their lives, and that this belief must drive a Government programme as broad and as comprehensive as Australian life.

There is no one magic source for that security and opportunity. It is not good enough to mouth assurances that they will somehow magically trickle down from on high, or emerge out of some soulless economic machine. If a tax looks like it is going to hurt, that is because it will. Governments cause pain frequently enough, even when they don't mean to, and there is no mystical virtue in accepting pain for pain's sake.

I say why don't we put security and opportunity first? I see an Australia where Government values and cares about its citizens.

We must have a Government that believes in the security that comes from a strong universal health care system - the security that comes from knowing that your health is more important to the system than a dollar.

Real security is knowing that when your child falls ill - seriously ill - in the middle of the night, there is a public hospital and the best medical care modern science can provide, and that you can get that care no matter how much money you have.

This is why Labor is restoring and increasing funding for public hospitals. It is why we will inject an additional \$2 billion into public hospitals over the course of the current Medicare agreement.

It is also why we are abolishing the Howard Government's harsh new fees for nursing homes. We say that Australians who need nursing home care today have a bargain with our generation. They saved this country in wartime, and made it safe for us to live here. We must not repay our debt to them by making them sell their family homes to get into a nursing home, in their moment of greatest vulnerability.

Labor is putting back the money the Howard Government took out - and then some - and we are doing so as a statement of principle. Nursing homes are the same as public

hospitals - end of story. We do not charge up-front fees for public hospitals, we will not do so for nursing homes.

Labor also believes that the great opportunities for our nation in this coming century must be opportunities shared by all Australians.

We are a nation of just 18 million in a region where many nations grow by our entire population every year. There is no future for our nation and our people without a skilled and united population - none.

I see a future where every generation of Australians is more skilled than the last, where education helps our people to secure employment throughout their lives, and where Australia's opportunities in the global economy are always pushed forward by the skills of our people.

I say to the parents of Australia that Labor shares with them their most natural desire in the world - the desire for their children to have a better life than they themselves have had.

This is why we will not play favourites with Australian children in their schools on the basis of ability to pay. Decent governments do not allow disadvantage to entrench itself in the school system. We will not. Our Australian schools need better funding, and Labor will provide an extra \$964 million to give it to them.

We must also make post-secondary education a path to better jobs for young Australians. This is what Labor's investment in the vocational education sector is all about. Where our opponents see vocational education as an opportunity to economise, we see it as opportunity which must be writ large for young Australians. Labor is restoring \$120 million in growth funding to this sector.

I want Australia to be a nation where all children who can benefit from a university education, get that opportunity - because they deserve it, and because we need them to get it. If we truly wish to take our place among the 21st Century's most creative nations, we must invest now in the citizens who will put us there.

John Howard has not launched an education policy in this campaign, instead, he will launch into more education cuts if he wins. Another 3 years of Mr Howard and Dr Kemp, and we will have \$100,000 fees as standard practice. That is why this election is the last chance Australian parents have to rescue equal access to university for their children. Labor will provide an extra \$217 million for Australian universities to set them up for a brighter future, not set them up for a fall.

Which brings me to the one issue in this campaign which has become a byword for security in our population. I am talking about jobs.

As Prime Minister, I want to look after Australians, but I know nothing is as good as giving people a chance to look after themselves. A job is the heart of family life. A wage supports a family, builds a home, and a decent retirement income. Anything, which undermines that, undermines our society. I refuse to accept an Australia where those who want to work cannot find work.

John Howard, on the other hand, seems relaxed and comfortable about it. 21/2 years of John Howard's Australia have produced not falling unemployment, but almost exactly the same number of unemployed Australians as there were in 1996, and worse: youth unemployment up to 28.2%, over 50,000 more long-term unemployed, and 194,000 people who have given up on ever finding work - the only reason the

unemployment rate is not actually higher than when this Government came into office.

The only thing that makes John Howard uncomfortable about unemployment is my unemployment target. He attacks it because he desperately, desperately wants me to drop it. He invites me to drop it because he wants both of us to agree to do nothing about unemployment. I refuse his invitation.

Today I announce that my Labor Government will set itself a target of reducing unemployment to 5% in our first two terms of office, and I will not stop working until we achieve it.

We can reach that target, even if the impact of the international economic crisis on our growth rate is greater than the Government will concede - as we believe it will be. We set that unemployment target, because we have the policies to reach it. And we have the economic policies to grow the Australian economy faster than the Coalition can, and to create more jobs.

Once elected, we will hit the ground running with that plan for jobs:

Labor has \$1.5 billion for Australian industry - to increase business investment, boost research and development effort, strengthen existing industries and develop new ones.

Labor has \$584 million to help build Australia's infrastructure and develop our regions - the roads, the railways, the ports and storage facilities which give businesses and jobseekers all around Australia a better chance than ever.

Labor has a \$1.4 billion boost for education to give our people - particularly young Australians - the skills that will get them a job, and secure employment for them through their lives.

Labor has earmarked 35% of the Government's dividend from Telstra, to make that money go to work for all Australians - funding regional infrastructure and science and technology programmes.

Labor has tax reform plans - without a job-destroying GST - worth up to \$58 a week extra for ordinary Australians and their families. Labor's Tax Credits are a truly new idea for Australia - the first time anyone has produced such substantial tax cuts targeted to middle Australia, and done so in a way which provides a powerful and direct incentive for people to move from welfare into work.

And today I announce the centrepiece of Labor's plan for jobs:

Up to \$300 million a year to create 18,000 full-time jobs, particularly for older unemployed Australians, jobs that will build and repair community services and facilities which have been neglected for too long;

A \$100 million annual boost that will turn the "Work for the Dole" scheme into a genuine jobs programme for 25,000 young unemployed Australians, giving them training and job skills to give them a future in a real career.

We will invest \$78 million to create 50,000 apprenticeships and traineeships over 3 years to give our young Australians a start in the world of work; and

We will spend \$20 million a year for a Job Security Fund to help those whose jobs are under threat from industry restructuring and workforce changes.

We have these policies because we understand that the free market does many things well, but not all the things that communities need done.

Like many Australians, I have looked at the level of unemployment in this country and asked why our local communities still have broken facilities and potholed roads? Why are there so many unemployed, when there is so much work to do? Labor will do something about it.

We have looked at the way John Howard has increased youth unemployment and asked why there are 5,000 fewer traditional apprenticeships than there were 21/2 years ago? Why is there no training in this Government's Work for the Dole programme? Labor will do something about it.

And we have looked at the number of Australians losing jobs they have held for decades, in places like Burnie and Newcastle, and asked why couldn't Government have helped these people before this happened? Labor will do something about it.

We have a set of policies, because we know there is no one solution to unemployment - and no quick fix. But there must be a quick start, and all policies must work together. They must all be aligned with the ultimate task of job creation.

We need now a nation brought together to fight unemployment, and this is what my plan will do from day one. The measures contained in this plan will start us out towards our unemployment target. On their own, they will directly create 105,000 jobs in our first term in Government.

We can also say that we have funded all these policies, and funded them responsibly.

The plan I launch today is the product of hard decisions and careful thought. We know there has been a lot of pain caused in the community by this Government's cuts. We believe that some of the surplus built on those cuts should rightfully be returned to the Australian people who paid for it. But we have focused our efforts on what will produce jobs, security and opportunity - and what will be deliverable in the difficult economic circumstances that lie ahead.

Today the Australian people have before them two Parties who will produce two vastly different Australias next century. Labor's plan is for an Australia where children get the best education we can give them, and the best opportunities to get the skills they need to enjoy secure employment. For life. John Howard has a plan to tax textbooks.

Labor has a plan to make our health system stronger and look after all Australians when they are sick, no matter how wealthy or poor. John Howard has a plan to tax Aspirin.

Labor has a plan to re-invest the profits of our most successful public asset, Telstra, in building a stronger nation for the future. John Howard just wants to sell it.

Labor has a plan to deliver tax relief directly to those who need it, and reward them for hard work. John Howard may have a plan to cut business taxes, but he's going to make families pay for it.

And Labor's plan will deliver jobs for Australians without work, and greater job security for those in work. John Howard has a plan to tax employment services.

Australians can vote for a plan for a nation, and a plan for jobs, or they can vote for a plan for a tax. But more importantly, they are voting for the set of values they believe in.

I am standing for the position of your next Prime Minister, but I stand for much more than that.

I stand for the values Australians want from their Government. Because when Australians elect a Government, they do so on trust. They have to. They have to trust how their Government will handle the thousands of tiny decisions that go on in the daily business of governing. They have to be able to trust their elected Government to have what they really value at heart, and never, ever, to think of dividing one group of Australians against another.

John Howard's Government has no comprehension of the day-to-day marginal decisions capable of producing such awesome life-changing effects: the elderly Australian who asks can I stay out of a nursing home just one moment longer, because my house is all I have to leave my grandchildren? Or the person who asks how can I stay in the workforce when in reality, childcare and lower family allowance cost me more than I am paid to work?

These are the things the Australian Labor Party was born to fight for.

After 1996, people expected us to be frozen by defeat. We were not. We did what our traditions demand - we got out there and we listened. We listened and we learned. And what we have learned we now put before the Australian people. We greet this election as a renewed force in Australian politics.

My pride in my Party is inexpressible. My pride to stand at the helm of a Party I have loved all my life is unfathomable. That pride is a pride in a Party that has not once broken stride since March 1996. It would be tempting to spend this moment in proud reflection on ourselves, but we may not.

Because this moment is not about the Australian Labor Party, or about the Coalition. This moment is about a nation of people with a tough decision on their hands. Australians who have been disappointed. Australians who have been hurt by Government decisions before. Australians who know that a new Century demands new politics.

These Australians ask themselves if they can vote out a Government that has disappointed them so badly, and hurt them so much, after only 21/2 years.

But my fellow Australians, when this Government is gone, ask yourselves who will mourn it? It has been bad for this country - harsh, chaotic, and incompetent. It promises 3 more years of the same. I call on Australians to be just as sentimental about it, as it has been about them. A better alternative waits in the wings - a Party with ideas and the ability to implement them, but above all, one with values - good Australian values, and an understanding of Australian lives.

That alternative is what we are here to launch today - an alternative for an Australia that deserves so much better. Thank you."

Source: Original Australian Labor Party transcript.