ADDRESS TO THE
NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

BY
ANDREW ROBB

FEDERAL DIRECTOR
LIBERAL PARTY OF AUSTRALIA

13 MARCH 1996
The last time I had the pleasure of addressing the National Press Club it was April Fool's Day 1993, two and a half weeks after the last election. This sure beats that experience.

Eleven days ago, on the afternoon of election day, I flew home from our Melbourne based Campaign Headquarters and went to vote for Gary Nairn, who was up against Labor's Jim Snow, in the marginal New South Wales seat of Eden-Monaro. I fronted to the polling booth in our local country hall at Wamboin and was met by two fellows, barely in their twenties, enthusiastically handing out Liberal how-to-vote cards.

I thought it a good omen, and it was.

For despite movement to the Coalition across nearly all demographic groups the remarkable feature of the 2 March election result was the direct shift to the Coalition of a significant segment of Labor's traditional male base, including blue collar workers.

In fact, in the large exit poll we conducted across the 52 most marginal seats, the 25 to 34 year old male vote for the Coalition increased by 12% to 47%, a 7.5 lead over Labor. The 35 to 49 year old male vote increased by nearly 8% to 49%, a 13 point lead over Labor.

Historically, women have been far more inclined than men to switch their vote between the parties. They have constituted a much larger swing group than men.

However, despite the overall female primary vote jumping 4% for the Coalition to 48%, for the first time we have seen a male gender gap open up for the Coalition with a total primary vote among males across these 52 marginal seats of 50.5%, a jump of nearly 6 per cent.

This movement among men eats at the foundations of Labor's traditional base.

This shift has significantly broadened the Coalition's voting base within middle Australia.
And this movement overwhelmingly comes from workers and their families - Howard's "battlers".

For example, Labor's vote among blue collar workers fell from nearly 50% in 1993 to 39% in 1996. The Coalition blue collar vote jumped 5 points to 47.5%, a lead of 8 1/2 points.

Labor's vote among Catholics followed a very similar pattern with the Coalition turning an 8 point deficit in 1993 into a 10 point lead in 1996, 47% to 37%.

Labor has become increasingly irrelevant to many families in middle Australia.

Many of the 600,000 voters who deserted Labor this time were from middle Australia.

This shift is not an overnight development. It owes much to Labor's attempts over 15 years or more to chase the votes of the socially progressive, often highly educated, affluent end of middle class Australia.

However, along the way Paul Keating and his colleagues came to reflect far more closely the values and priorities of this narrow, affluent, middle class group.

So much so that in many ways Labor's Parliamentary Party had come to be a mirror image of this group in society, or as the political commentator Alan Ramsey aptly put it some time ago most of Labor's caucus are, and I quote, "raucous, hustling young clones in suits".

In the process Labor increasingly lost touch with their more traditional supporters. In a country with Australia's potential, as a Government you can't go on rationalising away 200,000 of our young people who want a job and can't get a job. It is eating at the fabric and future of our society.

Labor ended up governing for a few, and not for all of us.

There are now deep contradictions within the Labor Party in regard to what they stand for and who they represent.

Add to this the great breach of trust contained in the Federal Budget just five months after the 1993 election and the broad strategic parameters for the 1996 election campaign were set.
The broken promises associated with the huge tax hike in the 1993 Budget confirmed for millions of Australian workers and their families the deeply held suspicion that the Labor Party was not the Party it used to be.

As well, the imperial style of behaviour coming from Paul Keating and his team reminded people almost daily that Labor had simply stopped listening, at least to the average man and woman in the street.

In a strategic sense, as far as the Keating government was concerned, our job was clear - we had to constantly remind the electorate of the consequences for them personally of the style, behaviour and priorities of the Labor Party.

The message in regard to Labor that drove our campaign was that 13 years of false dawns and unfulfilled promises meant that Labor had been taking you for granted before this election, only seem to care about you now because of the election and will most certainly forget about you again after the election ...... and yet they expect to get away with it again.

In this vein as I observed in this forum three years ago "we had to be an effective Opposition, before we could be an effective Government".

In addition, as far as the Liberal Party was concerned, we had various strategic priorities to address in the aftermath of the 1993 election loss.

For many senior members within both the Parliamentary and Organisational wings of the Liberal Party there was an almost unspoken understanding that three of the most critical years of the Party's history lay ahead of us. To fail in 1996 would have had the severest of consequences for the Party.

Many displayed a necessary resolve and ruthlessness not normally associated with the Party.

Candidate selection and support, including the promotion of women candidates, marginal seat preparations, mobilisation of our supporters, changes to Federal powers, networking with community groups, procedures for policy development, relations with the National Party and Coalition State Governments, our research program, our work in regional areas, staff training, all the way through to the smooth transition to John Howard and the subsequent discipline and focus under his leadership were matters dealt with more effectively than many could remember.
The Parliamentary and organisational members of the Party responded admirably to the political blow torch.

The presence now of 25 women in the Liberal Party room, and 26 in the Joint Party room, will change forever the nature of the Coalition Parliamentary Party. These women are there in significant numbers and their backgrounds reflect the diverse interests and priorities of women in the broader Australian community. They will have a profound impact on the decisions taken by our Parliamentary Party. It is potentially the most significant development from our success two Saturdays ago.

While Labor were busy creating another false dawn about increasing the number of Labor women in Parliament, the Liberal success was in no small part achieved through the efforts of the Liberal Women’s forum established in 1994 to actively promote the election of more Liberal women to Parliament without the need to resort to quotas.

In addition we had to position ourselves to be a powerful voice for regional Australia. Labor had forgotten regional Australia.

As anticipated a significant part of the battleground for the 1996 election was to be in regional Australia.

Sixteen of the 32 seats won from Labor were in regional Australia, 13 won by the Liberal Party, 3 by the National Party.

The swing across regional seats was 5.72% to the Coalition, compared with the Australia wide swing of 4.9%. Labor now holds only 5 of the 56 seats that are regional or have a large regional component.

A major factor which had held us back in these areas in the 1993 election was the opening up of too many fronts on which to fight and it provided our opponents with too many opportunities to exploit the deep seated anxiety and uncertainty prevailing in the community.

Labor’s scare campaign in 1993 left a legacy of lingering negative perceptions about us on various issues such as health and the community safety net which needed to be effectively addressed before the 1996 campaign began. This was a major strategic imperative and by the time the election was called John Howard and his colleagues had effectively corrected these false perceptions.

For the last three years I have had scribbled in the back of my diary six lessons as campaign director that were seared into my brain after the 1993 experience.
For me, the 1993 campaign drove home the importance of being able to influence the momentum of a campaign, the need for instant rebuttal and counterattack, the damaging effect of overblown expectations, the importance of the level of activity of the Leader, the need to really effectively target your message by driving national themes through local issues and the importance of flexibility in your advertising, your Leader's program and your placement of people and funds.

The decision of John Howard and his leadership group to withhold the details of initiatives until the campaign was a critical factor in our subsequent success, for three reasons.

Firstly, it ensured that maximum focus was kept on the performance of the Keating Government in the lead up to the election. Secondly, it provided some real capacity to influence the momentum of the campaign and thirdly, it helped, during the campaign, to shine a light on the priorities of a prospective Howard Government at a time when many were making up their mind about which way to vote.

As a bonus the strategy also served to demonstrate when the pressure really came on to release policies before Christmas that John Howard was not about to blink every time Paul Keating clicked his fingers.

The campaign mobilised our grass-root support base more effectively than we had been able to for many campaigns. They combined with our growing professional team to neutralise and, in many cases, outdo Labor's union apparatchiks on the ground. This was a decisive factor in the two party preferred swing of 5.1% in the 52 marginal seats under 5% compared with a swing of around 4.7% in the remaining 97 seats. John Howard's strong pro-small business program also assisted us greatly in this regard.

In my view the five week campaign served to reinforce the voting disposition that already existed within the community.

If you look back at public polls, there was a steady 6 to 7 point two party preferred lead virtually from June 1995 until the election was called. This was consistent with our private polling across marginal seats, as long as the undecideds broke our way. The seven point gap was also the final result on 2 March.

The campaign was to be critical in either locking in or dissipating this voting disposition. It was critical in reminding the electorate of the record and style of government under Labor, it was critical in establishing whether the Coalition had a policy program which addressed the priorities of the electorate and would stand up to vigorous campaign scrutiny and it was critical in demonstrating whether John Howard could match it as alternative Prime Minister.
In 1993, the undecided voters broke 58/42 Labor’s way. In 1996 the undecided voters broke 60/40 the Coalition’s way.

I attribute a good part of this advantage among undecided voters, and certainly the size of the Coalition’s ultimate victory, to the strength of the last week of the campaign, and in particular John Howard’s performance in the last debate.

The largest jump in our nightly campaign polling occurred on the Monday night of the last week where we saw a 5 point increase in response to the debate. John Howard never looked back.

In combination with the strength of John Howard’s final week, the 29 different ads around Australia which sought to rightfully tag local Labor members with Paul Keating and the Government’s appalling record of broken promises proved effective in marginal seats.

I see now the beginnings of the inevitable attempt by the Labor Party to dump responsibility for their loss solely on Paul Keating.

The fact of the matter is they were all in it together. Every Labor Member of Parliament walked in step behind Paul Keating. Every one of them, including Kim Beazley, put up their hand to vote for new taxes, to vote for a raft of tax increases, to vote for medicare levy increases, to vote for the sale of Qantas, the sale of the Commonwealth Bank, the sale of Australian Airlines. They are all responsible for neglecting the appalling levels of youth unemployment, they are all responsible for increasing the pressures on families and small business.

Kim Beazley either agreed with Paul Keating on these appalling decisions - which is a real worry; or he didn’t have the "ticker", the heart to stand up to Paul Keating - which is just as big a worry.

You might recall that when Kim was given the job of Deputy Prime Minister he was allocated the task of going to the outlying States to be the Labor Government’s face, to carry the Labor Government’s message, to turn around their fortunes. He travelled extensively in Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia.

Well, the Coalition received a two party preferred vote of 60.6% in Queensland, 57.48% in South Australia and 54.82% in Western Australia.
In fact, Labor's primary vote in Queensland was the worst since Federation.

You can fool some of the people some of the time.

And last night we saw Kim Beazley, the former Deputy Prime Minister and former Minister for Finance, saying he hadn't been told by the Department that his Budget was $8,000,000,000 off track. I've got to say it defies belief.

With this form I think Simon and Gareth will be breathing heavily down Kim's neck.

As a Coalition on the 2nd March we were given the trust, and I think the goodwill of all Australians.

Australians also showed that they will punish severely in electoral terms those who stop listening, those who break their trust.

I see in John Howard someone who is driven by a desire to restore community trust in the institution of Parliament, in politicians. To tackle the issues that are important to all Australians. To restore hope for our young people and certainty for families.

The victory eleven days ago gives John and his colleagues that wonderful opportunity.

At an organisational level we need to use the momentum of this win to further strengthen our political operation.

We need to look further at the powers and structure of the Federal organisation, we need to consolidate our financial situation across Australia, our training and career paths can be further developed, we have a large body of new Members of Parliament who we must immediately assist in becoming strong local Members, the highly successful first year of the Menzies Research Centre must be taken to the next stage where it can be a powerful and continuing source of policy ideas for the Coalition Government.

As well, I am keen to find an effective way of introducing comprehensive and relevant information about the philosophy and role of our major political parties into our secondary schools.

I think political parties have a responsibility to inform our next generation about the philosophy and approach to government of their respective parties.
For my part I would like to conclude by thanking John Howard for his leadership and trust, Tony Staley for his organisational leadership, his friendship and support, Ron Walker for his wonderful efforts, my team at the Federal Secretariat and Campaign Headquarters, and especially my very able and tireless Deputy, Lynton Crosby, the Leader's strong staff contingent, our advertising team, our talented team of State Directors and their staff and campaign committees, our Members, Senators, candidates and their staff and the thousands of supporters who responded to the call.

The campaign was a huge team effort. This must be nurtured.

As an organisation we must further build on the considerable professionalism that has grown within our ranks. The culture of the Party has responded and shown a capacity to change to the needs of a modern political party. We must take it further and lock it in.

I feel an optimism in the air following the events of the 2nd of March. I am certain that John Howard and his team can convert that optimism into a new era of confidence, energy and certainty for all Australians.