



# PRIME MINISTER

3 June 2005

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER  
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP  
COAG PRESS CONFERENCE,  
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA**

*Subjects: COAG.*

E&OE.....

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well ladies and gentlemen, could I call this news conference to order. This has been the most productive and cooperative COAG meeting that I have attended in the nine-and-a-bit years I've been Prime Minister. We've reached agreement on a number of areas of long term importance to Australia. We have agreed to disagree on one major issue, and it won't surprise you as to what that issue was, but that has in no way detracted from the spirit of cooperation and the belief on the part of all of us that the Australian people want outcomes and solutions from their elected representatives and a minimum of blame shifting and inter-government criticism.

In the area of health, we have agreed to establish a group to report by December of this year on a number of issues where there is an interface between the Commonwealth and State responsibilities and these include the elderly, and particularly the movement from nursing homes and hospitals, the problem of the young disabled, the operation of the home and community care system, the operation of a national call system, we want to focus on improving the supply, flexibility and responsiveness of the health workforce, increase the health system's focus on prevention and health promotion and also improve the integration of the healthcare system and accelerate work on a national electronic health record system. There will be a detailed communiqué available in about a half an hour's time.

But this is an agenda that we'll be able to achieve significant improvements, consistent with the maintenance of the current responsibilities between the Commonwealth and the States which are well known to all of you. I welcome agreement on this. I think we can make solid progress. Can I say that speaking for myself and my colleagues can speak for themselves but I do not believe that the health system of Australia is in crisis, we have a very good health system by world standards to which both the public and private sectors contribute and to which both Commonwealth and State Governments contribute. So frankly there has been damage done to the public perception of this country's health system by the constant and

often vitriolic political exchanges at both a Commonwealth and the State level and I include both so it's not seen in any way partisan which I think the reputation of the health system has needlessly suffered. We do have a good health system and we can make it better and there still are a lot of flaws in it and I think this will make a contribution.

The other area we've agree on is of course in the area of apprenticeships. We have committed ourselves to developing a genuinely national system for apprenticeships and this includes amongst other things a full implementation of the principle of mutual recognition throughout our country so if you have a trade qualification obtained in one part of Australia, you should be able to work in that trade in another part of Australia without hindrance or interruption or further examination or prescription. We have a very strong commitment to seeing if we can't streamline apprenticeships and reduce their duration, that the national system should include the full opportunities for school-based apprenticeships, that there should be greater flexibility in apprenticeships and there should be a strong commitment to flexibility and choice so far as employers are concerned. The Premier of Victoria made a number of suggestions in relation to the apprenticeship and training system, there is a variety of views on those, but those can be examined as part of the group that has been established to report once again in this case by the end of the year and importantly, another issue the group has been asked to look at is that the whole question of the system of and speed with which we recognise overseas qualifications, that is an important issue and a number of the Premiers raised it.

In the area of infrastructure it is the unanimous view of the heads of Government before you that we do not believe there is a crisis in infrastructure in Australia. There are clearly areas where there will be debate but the proposition that there is an infrastructure crisis in Australia is not one we endorse or accept and I note the fact that over the past few months a number of State budgets have been brought down in which there has been very, very heavy investment in infrastructure and of course AusLink is an example of the Commonwealth's very heavy investment in infrastructure. We have adopted in principle a number of what I might call the minor recommendations of the Fisher, Moore-Wilton, Ergas Report and we've asked our officials to tell us by the end of August how that might be implemented but in relation to the proposal for what is in effect a consistent system of national regulation where we are going to ask the group that is going to review National Competition Policy to report that proposition by December of this year. We have asked a group to be chaired by my Department to look at, and to be represented by, at the Head of Government level, by the States and Territories to look at the national competition principles and what might be the new national competition agenda. We are very strongly committed to that. There are a range of views of what it might include and we are going to invite that group and they will look at the proposal for national regulation in that context.

We have also agreed to have a joint Commonwealth working party to look at areas where we might jointly make further progress on the subject of climate change - particularly in relation to energy and adaptation and technology and energy efficiency. We have noted our disagreement in relation to carbon trading, the Commonwealth has a different view on an emissions trading system from the States, that's noted but that won't impede us from going ahead with examining these issues and amongst other things we will look at renewables which is an issue which includes a number of areas that are important to a number of the Government's represented around the table. But they represent a large number of very substantial items. I think it is fair to say that there was a great spirit of cooperation. Everybody wanted to get agreement on things that we could reach agreement on and we spent the minimum time on areas where we disagreed.

We noted the progress made on indigenous policy and particularly the emphasis on local solutions and there are a number of other items that I won't at this stage weary you with the detail.

I want to finish and invite each of my colleagues to say something by again thanking the Premiers and Chief Ministers of the States and Territories. I welcome Paul Lennon to his first COAG meeting as Premier of Tasmania and Paul Bell, the new President of the Local Government Association of Australia, Clare Martin who's not here because the Government of the Northern Territory is in caretaker mode but I do want to thank my colleagues. I think we have worked hard for the interests of the people of Australia today and I think the agenda, particularly in areas of health and skills and training that have been laid down, will be of long term value to the Australian economy and therefore to the Australian people. Mr Carr.

**PREMIER CARR:**

Thank you Prime Minister. Well the people you see here today disagree on politics but we came here to get things done for Australia and I think we've succeeded and this is very encouraging for those of us working within a federal system to see that Australia keeps going forward. I am very pleased with the agreement we've got on health, getting younger people out of nursing homes, but getting older people out of hospital beds and into nursing home beds is a big gain for the efficiency of a health system and it means by freeing up dollars, we can do more in the hospital systems across Australia. I agree with Prime Minister Howard that the health system in Australia is fundamentally good. It's a sound system. But faced with the pressures of an ageing population and the numbers presenting at hospitals, we can do better. We can drive it to work better and this agreement is a great advance. The agreement encompasses the notion of better integration in health, integration, and to me that would involve looking at the interface between GP services and emergency departments. Again, driving our health system to get better care through more efficiencies.

I welcome the progress on skills. Skills are vital to Australia's future, lifting our skills base is the way to keep lifting Australian living standards and now you've got an agreement on the way forward. I think it's very important that a tradesperson can walk... I think it's very important a tradesperson can leave one state or territory, go to another, and have the skills certificate recognised – good for employers and good for workers who are trying to better themselves. You know that reflects national vision, as does the commitment to having a national standard for apprenticeships in Australia.

I conclude, because I don't want to cover everything, by saying there are a couple of areas where we simply, wisely acknowledge we have got to agree to disagree. The big one is industrial relations and nothing we would say would alter John Howard's view and nothing John Howard would say would alter my view about industrial relations. We acknowledge that the States and Territories are committed to emissions trading as part of our action on climate change. The Commonwealth is not, but that doesn't preclude work towards more effective responses on climate change across Australia. This meeting shows that States and Commonwealth regardless of political divisions can get on with the job of making Australia more productive and lifting the living standards of Australian families.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Mr Bracks.

## **PREMIER BRACKS:**

Thank you Prime Minister. Could I add to the comments of the Prime Minister and the Premier of New South Wales and indicate that in the five and half years that I have been Premier, this is the most productive, the most cooperative COAG meeting that I have attended and significantly it addressed issues for the future, the future of Australia. In particular of course, what has been set out in the COAG agenda for the future is a new reform agenda. Just as we have had for the last ten years, a significant reform agenda under the National Competition Policy so we have committed with the head of Prime Minister and Cabinet, the head of Premiers, the head of the Chief Minister's offices to progress and work on a new reform agenda for the future and to make sure that reform agenda covers as many aspects of productivity reform, of productivity improvements as possible. Now I think that's a great advance. And within that of course COAG has addressed critical issues such as infrastructure and skills – infrastructure in recognising that we need to have a constant watch at COAG of what is undertaken whilst recognising, and I agree with the Prime Minister on this, and the report that we commissioned backed up the Fisher report of the Commonwealth Government, that there is no crisis in infrastructure but we do need to address impending issues to make sure that we remain competitive in the future. And that's exactly what COAG has committed to and support that. And on skills, a national skills agenda, that can be a block to opening up the economy, to further improvements in the economy, to further growth in Australia. We've addressed that head on, importantly, by ensuring that we have a better national approach in cooperation with the States in relation to skills.

So I think this has been a very good COAG agenda, a very productive one, I'm very pleased that we're able to reach agreement on a range of issues. Of course we were never going to reach agreement on industrial relations. We have a different view. Whilst we don't have a system in Victoria, I have a common view of my colleagues at a State and Territory level and we didn't spend an undue amount of time on that issue because we understood there would be disagreements. But importantly on issues of skills, infrastructure, reform of the health system and further improvements on a new reform agenda for Australia we have reached agreement and I think that is of great benefit for the country.

And could I reiterate this? That I frankly think that Australians are fed up and sick of the blame game which has been going on for some years in Australia. Now States blaming the Federal Government, the Federal Government blaming the State Government and I think they want us to just get on with the job of delivering, identify the problems, find the solutions and get on with it and that's why this COAG meeting we had today was so important.

## **PRIME MINISTER:**

Thanks very much. Mr Beattie.

## **PREMIER BEATTIE:**

Prime Minister, thank you. What today shows is that cooperative federalism is alive and well. I've been coming here for seven years and this is the best COAG meeting I've been to. Now you've heard that before which gives you some indication that it's actually true. I'm also delighted that we're actually facing up to the issues that matter, because frankly the States are sick of the argument too, we want outcomes. The two big issues that came out of today are actually dealing with the skills crisis and dealing with health. The biggest two issues confronting Australia today – skills shortage is going to undermine our growth unless we deal with it and dealing with mutual recognition around Australia for skills, reducing the

period of time, which we put to the Commonwealth about reducing the period of time for apprenticeship training from four down to three years, when someone's got the qualification and that's acknowledged in some way, some system, then they should be able to use those skills anywhere in Australia. Now that's the essential part of it.

In terms of skills, the working party is also going to look at something absolutely fundamental – that is establishing where the skills shortages are, in which industries, and then make sure that the Commonwealth and State money actually goes into developing those skills for those industries - hence you get the jobs where you need them. And that includes not just the industries but that also includes the regions of Australia. So all I can say in terms of skills hallelujah, we've actually got agreement between the Commonwealth and the States to actually do something about the biggest problem confronting Australian industry and that is skills shortages.

In terms of health, many of you know that we have some issues in my State about health at the moment. What we've agreed to do here in terms of health in the long term will solve those problems. If you look at the productivity working or issues paper that we were provided with, it highlights essential problems – that is in our major cities we have just around 66 per cent of people living there, but 75 per cent of the doctors. So our Australian doctors to some extent are in the wrong places, at least in part. So they're the sort of issues that we can look at – some fundamental changes in health and the Prime Minister's made the point that of course the money has to follow the services which we agree with, we agree with. What we want is a better health outcome.

Now the final thing I want to mention, because I've given my colleagues a go, in the area of climate change, pursued vigorously by my mate here from South Australia, I'm pleased to see that ethanol has been included in one of the areas that we'll look at in terms of renewables.

Finally, can I simply say this: You could not get a more cooperative arrangement than what happened today. You also see in a very clear way that Labor Premiers can work with a Liberal Prime Minister and we've done that in the interests of Australia. Yes, we didn't agree in relation to IR and that'll disappoint some of you today but that's a fact of life. But what we did was focus on what we could agree on and that's a great thing, for not just my State but for Australia.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Thanks Peter. Mr Rann.

**PREMIER RANN:**

Thank you very much Prime Minister. Certainly all Australians are sick and tired of bickering and this, I thought, was a terrific outcome today. On skills, it doesn't make any sense that a carpenter in one state can't be licensed as a carpenter in another, so getting rid of some of those impediments to progress and dealing with a serious skills shortage in Australia is important. Equally dealing with the issue of mutual recognition in a proper but speedy way of overseas qualifications as well, and we're certainly vigorously pursuing immigration and working well with Amanda Vanstone on that in terms of tradespeople to move to South Australia.

Just on other issues, on health. The issue of aged care places – there are 500 beds in South Australia in our metropolitan hospitals and in our country hospitals, but predominately in the

country, which really should be nursing home beds - those elderly people are in our public hospitals. So this has been a key issue that has been complained about for many, many years, decades, and I'm pleased it's about to be addressed.

On the issue of climate change which I wanted placed on the agenda, my view is in the long term, that there is no greater threat to Australia than global warming and climate change. It's in the long term more serious threat than even terrorism, as serious as that is. And already of course we're probably one of the countries and a continent that is most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change—in terms of our bio-diversity but also in terms of our shortage of water. So I think that it's important that whilst we recognise that there are differences between our position on emissions trading, and on Kyoto and with the Commonwealth, but in fact that should not prevent us from actually embracing a national policy on climate change. It doesn't make sense for a country as vulnerable as Australia not to have a national policy on climate change and I'm delighted that we have reached agreement to set up a working party in the same way that we initiated the process that ended years of bickering over the River Murray and started the rescue. So I'm delighted with the outcome of today's COAG for South Australia, I commend the Prime Minister and my colleagues.

### **PREMIER GALLOP:**

I think when the people of Australia look to their political leaders, they expect them to deal with issues in a very principled way, and I think in respect of the matters that we've addressed today, where there is a clear philosophical difference between the Labor side of politics and the Prime Minister's side of politics, we've agreed to disagree. We've agreed to disagree on the Industrial Relation question, we've agreed to disagree on the question of land clearing—where we believe very strongly that's a matter for the State Governments and that's a matter that we have pursued very vigorously on behalf of the environment throughout the various States and Territories and thirdly we've agreed to disagree on emissions trading. They will be matters that will be determined in the political process and elections will be held and decisions will be made about those issues. So I think people expect us as leaders to stand up for what we believe in and I think today the Labor side here, has had the ability to do that, in respect of those questions.

However in relation to other issues, where there is clearly a national interest in the two sides getting together, I think we've made very good progress today. Only two COAG's ago, the State Premiers and Territory Leaders, protested in respect of health and I think we've seen real progress on the part of the Commonwealth in respect of that issue. Issues related to aged care, nursing homes, disability services, GPs—how they're impacting upon state hospitals and how we need to get together and work out solutions has been recognised by the Prime Minister. I think we've made a tremendous step forward in relation to health. In terms of skills, I mean my State is growing very rapidly, we're investing a huge amount of money into that and we're keen to work with the Commonwealth to bring about that proper mutual recognition across the State boundaries to make sure we've got the apprenticeship system working in a flexible way, integrating skills and industry, integrating technical system and the school system and I think that's a very, very important step forward.

On climate change, and despite that philosophical difference that we have, we've agreed to work together in the areas that we agree upon.

So I think this has been a very good meeting. I feel that I've been able to put forward my philosophical objection and political objection to the Prime Minister's policies in respect of Industrial Relations and we will do that with vigour as Labor Parties all around the nation.

But on those issues where the national interest says, we ought to get together to bring about positive change—we've done that. So I think the people expect us to stand up for what we believe in on the one side, they also expect us to cooperate where it's in the national interest, and I think we've seen both of those here today at COAG.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Mr Lennon.

**PREMIER LENNON:**

Thank you. I note for the record that people are talking about new cooperative federalism today. I don't know whether it's got anything to do with the fact that this is my first meeting. I'm happy for that to be noted for the record, after all strange things did happen in the depths of Tasmania's forests about a month ago when an historic agreement was signed.

The most important thing for me today is that the national agreements and understandings that have been reached, particularly on skills and health, can be translated into real benefits for people in the regions in Australia I believe very much. And it's important that we understand that Australia extends beyond the big cities into the regions, and Tasmania is the most decentralised population in Australia, and therefore we have different needs, very much different needs in these areas. Currently we are a very fast growing economy, and therefore the pressures on us in the areas of skills are at flashpoint. And the ten-point plan that we've agreed on today will enable us to meet very quickly the emerging needs that we have in this very important area of matching job vacancies to the skills available in our community, both from available labour around Australia that's miss-matched elsewhere, as well as getting it from outside the country where necessary.

The other very important thing I think that's happened to today, to borrow an industrial term in this day when no-one's talking about industrial relations, is that, to my way of thinking, today is about dealing with some demarcation issues as well; about recognition across state boundaries, for example, of trade qualifications; about ending some demarcation issues within the health system through the matters already been raised. So, today is about us doing our job that we're elected to do, that is, to represent the people who elect us both, nationally and at a State level. So, to me it's been a, well a welcome change from what I heard these meetings were all about and an advance on the cooperation we've already established at a State and Federal level over the past twelve months, so I look forward to the reports that will come back in these important areas over the next six months or so and translating those recommendations into real improvements in living standards and quality of life for the people of Tasmania.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Thanks Paul. Mr Stanhope.

**CHIEF MINISTER STANHOPE:**

Thank you Prime Minister. Prime Minister, I concur with everything that my colleagues have said. I acknowledge the importance of all the issues. I think it was a very encouraging meeting today. I was particularly encouraged by it and look forward to the significant levels of cooperation and progress that I believe are now possible in relation to all of those

significant areas that do affect all Australians – the areas that have been spoken about by you and each of my colleagues, and I won't go into them.

The only issue that I would add, and I do it for the sake of the record, that it is a fact that Indigenous affairs are a standing item on COAG agendas. It's something that we don't report on very frequently at these press conferences post COAG. There was a discussion today around Indigenous affairs, as there is at COAG meetings.

I did, and I say this with due respect to your position on this Prime Minister, advise for the record of my continuing disagreement with the abolition of ATSIC and some other of the proposals that the Commonwealth has implemented in relation to the new area of Indigenous affairs. Having said that, I acknowledge that this was a very, very productive meeting; certainly a meeting conducted in a spirit of cooperation and genuine determination to move that nation ahead, and I applaud that. I applaud your chairing and leadership of the meeting, and look forward to the progress that I believe we all expect we will be achieved out of today's meeting.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Thank you. A brief word from Paul Bell, the Chairman of the Australian Local Government Association.

**COUNCILLOR BELL:**

Thank you Prime Minister. Can I just say on behalf of the Australian Local Government Association and the communities who we represent – the 650 local governments across Australia. I just want to congratulate the Prime Minister and the State premiers on the cooperation that we have seen today across the three spheres of government in Australia. I particularly want to say that for many years our association has been pressing for the access to health practitioners into rural and regional Australia, and I think we went a long way today towards making that further from an ambition, but moving towards a reality, as many of our communities are having difficulty in having those professionals serving in their communities. But the approach to the health issues today certainly will move that forward. And the issue of growth in our sea change communities – the coastal metros, the capital cities – that's being affected by skills shortages in Australia, has also been addressed in a way where we, I think, will see many of those issues now being able to be tackled in a very practical manner through the cooperation between the Australian Government and the States, and certainly I applaud the ambitions of that issue as well. And on behalf of the 230 cities that have signed for the cities working against climate change, I think that their motivation to work towards better energy efficiency, water efficiency, and taking their communities towards ensuring a sustainable future for our communities and our young people and our environment and our industries has also been... that cause has been taken forward and progressed by the work that's been undertaken by COAG today, and I congratulate all involved. Thank you.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Some very brief questions.

**JOURNALIST:**

Prime Minister, was (inaudible) because there wasn't much discussion about money?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

No.

**JOURNALIST:**

Mr Carr, you sought more fundamental reform of the health system, you put health on the COAG agenda, as I understand it, and yet today's discussions have been on relatively minor areas of health, why are you not more disappointed that this forum has not dealt with more fundamental reform?

**PREMIER CARR:**

The two issues I referred to most frequently when I discussed health, you'd recall, would be the big presentations at emergency departments and how that puts extra pressure on hospital systems. Well that's addressed under that part of the agreement that says we're committed to work on better integration of health systems so if we get better integration of GP services and hospitals we relieve the pressure on emergency departments. The second point I make is, I've been campaigning about the very large number of older people being forced to languish in expensive hospital beds when they really need aged care beds and that's part of this agreement. Now they're the two biggest pressures that I've been talking about, they're addressed in this agreement. But so too is the workforce issue. I've been talking about doctor and nursing numbers, that's here, workforce issues, the supply, flexibility and responsiveness of the health workforce. The other matter... I mean they're really the agenda matters I've been canvassing when I've been seeking health reform.

**JOURNALIST:**

...Premiers are now broadly supportive of the findings of the taskforce on infrastructure, particularly the idea that the ACCC should take over...

**PREMIER BEATTIE:**

No.. what we've said is that the working party will look at a range of issues in relation to infrastructure. As the Prime Minister said we don't believe that there are major problems, we think our infrastructure is very sound, that's one of the issues that the working party will be looking at but we don't agree with that, no, but they will look at what the report has provided. I mean the important thing is that we do have some of the most successful and efficient ports in the world but we could benefit from having a national system of regulation. That doesn't mean on regulator, but it means a national system of regulation so there is consistency. Now we all agreed, when you see the communiqué you will see this, we are committing to a national system of regulation.

**JOURNALIST:**

...directing Commonwealth and State funding towards areas of particular skills shortage doesn't sound like it's particularly rocket science. How is it that we haven't done that in Australia before and that this is a new idea?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

You asking me this?

**JOURNALIST:**

All of you.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well I think it's just a product, I guess, of different levels of government and a product of the nation growing unexpectedly in different parts and contracting sometimes not so unexpectedly in other parts. But I think one of the great things out of today is that all of the practical challenges in the area of skills and apprenticeships have been put on the table and we've put aside the more esoteric arguments and it's been a very practical COAG and that's one of its great virtues.

**JOURNALIST:**

In this spirit of putting your differences aside on industrial relations, does this mean that the Premiers are going to back off any threat of challenging the Government's legislation?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

You use the wrong language Michelle. We've agreed to disagree.

**PREMIER CARR:**

The most recent peeling back of the legal advice encourages me to think there's more in it than I initially thought when it comes to a constitutional challenge to...

**JOURNALIST:**

More in the legal advice? More chance you mean?

**PREMIER CARR:**

Yeah, yeah, when it comes to the prospects of a constitutional challenge to what the Prime Minister's doing on industrial relations, there's no backing off from that at all.

**JOURNALIST:**

Have the silks already been briefed?

**PREMIER CARR:**

No, it hasn't gone that far, we're talking to our trade union colleagues about it. I want to consult my colleagues from the other States and Territories and we haven't seen the legislation yet, when we've seen the legislation we'll coordinate a response.

**JOURNALIST:**

The rough...

**PREMIER CARR:**

Very much on the run I think it's got more legs now than it might have had on first blush.

**JOURNALIST:**

Premier Carr, on the grants commission I haven't heard that mentioned today...

**PREMIER CARR:**

Because it hasn't come up, it's not the appropriate forum, it hasn't come up.

**PREMIER BEATTIE:**

And we're very happy about that too.

**PREMIER CARR:**

Yeah, you would be, you would be.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

This is a matter quintessentially for my colleagues.

**JOURNALIST:**

Prime Minister...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

This is the last question because we've got to go.

**JOURNALIST:**

Given the air of cooperation on health, is it implicit in this, that the Federal Government is foreshadowing they'll be giving more money towards the health system?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

No, we haven't made any commitments about increases in money, nor we have we required any commitments from the States, nor we have been critical of the State expenditure on health. And it's fair to note that in the public hospital area there's been a significant increase in funding by the States under the new healthcare agreement, as there has been a significant increase in funding by the Commonwealth to Medicare through the safety net, 100 per cent Medicare, the increases in the entitlements under health insurance. So there's been a huge increase in funding at both levels. I think this is not often accepted and it's the foundation of the remark I made that this is a better health system than we give it credit for and I'm frankly sick of the denigration of the Australian health system and it happens too often and I've often said if you're going to get ill it's better to get ill in Bankstown or Broadmeadows than the Bronx or Brixton because we have a much better health system. We have agreed as a matter of principle that if there are some rearrangements of responsibilities following this examination the funding will follow the function. Obviously if the States were to see some

things they're doing done in future by the Commonwealth and there'd have to be funding adjustment and vice versa, that's just a matter of common sense. But I finish where I began, we have a good health system, it's got a lot of weaknesses, it's got flaws, it can always be made better but I think the time has come for us to focus on its strengths and its virtues rather than constantly harp on its weaknesses, and that's a view I hold very strongly and I think I can speak for all of my colleagues in saying that they also hold that view.

Thank you.

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