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MEDIA RELEASE

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HOWARD FAILS 'BATTLERS'

Major workplace changes announced today by the Prime Minister will not benefit families, small business and taxpayers in the long term.

Mr Howard has put his ideological prejudice ahead of the long-term interests of the 'battlers' who have put their faith in him.

Last week I tried to establish an investigation into whether or not penalty rates (overtime and shift allowances) were achieving their original purpose – to enable workers to balance work, family and community obligations.

The reason I want this inquiry is because penalty rates no longer discourage employers from employing people for long, or during anti-social, hours.

Today penalty rates are just another overhead.

Those employers who can afford to pay do. But those employers, such as family businesses, who cannot afford to pay either work longer hours themselves or do not operate when they would like to.

Some employers use guaranteed overtime to compensate for low wages.

The Government voted against my proposal for an inquiry.

Today, Mr Howard has said employees will not lose their existing entitlements.

While this is good for existing employees, it is not a long-term solution for workers who have to work overtime just to get a decent income.

What happens to their overtime and their shift allowances when they change jobs?
Will this be a disincentive to change jobs?

Nor is it a long-term solution for employers who must consider the effect on morale if workers doing the same job have different wages and conditions.

How does Mr Howard's proposal address the problem of breadwinners having to work excessive hours?

This might be a short-term political solution to get the Coalition past the next election, but in the long run Australian families and small businesses will be the losers because of Mr Howard's failure to use this opportunity to find long-term solutions to problems.

Mr Howard's proposal to give farmers and those small businesses which have not set up as companies five years to do so is another short-term, political solution to a long-term problem.

This is a problem of Mr Howard's making, which would not exist if he were not so determined to adopt a 'scorched earth' policy towards the Industrial Relations Commission.

Mr Howard is forcing farmers and small businesses to form themselves into companies. The fact they now have five years to do it does not alter this reality.

Somebody will have to foot the bill – either farmers and small businesses or the taxpayer. And judging from comments by the farmers' union, the National Farmers Federation, Mr Howard has promised it will not be the farmers.

Mr Howard must assure small businesses that they will not have to pay the price for his ideological prejudice and must come clean now with how much the taxpayer will have to fork out.

To let it go five years when the Prime Minister will probably be long gone has the smell of being mean and tricky.

Mr Howard's statement that workers will have the choice between an individual agreement, collective agreement or an award also looks mean and tricky.

Employers can force new employees to sign individual contracts and Mr Howard is not going to do anything about it.

It is all very well to say that people do not have to take the job.

But for most workers, particularly the unskilled, people over 50 or those whose skills are not in demand, life is not that simple.

There are changes which must be made to the industrial relations system.

But the Government should not use these changes to avoid facing up to the hard issues which must be addressed or to impose changes which are unnecessary and of little or no value.

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