



LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

**SPEECH BY THE LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION
THE HON SIMON CREAN MP
TO THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN PRESS CLUB
THURSDAY 1 MAY 2003**

SAVING MEDICARE – SAVING OUR RIVERS

Over the last twenty years Australians have made enormous sacrifices to modernise our economy. They were prepared to make those sacrifices to make the country a better place for themselves and future generations.

They expected something in return for that. That was the contract. Labor honoured that contract.

We not only delivered tax cuts, we gave the Australian people something in return for the taxes they paid: things like saving the Franklin River, superannuation and affordable education, childcare, and, of course, Medicare.

It was a contract between the government and the people – a contract that the Howard Government has ripped up and thrown away.

The Howard Government is the highest taxing government in Australia's history.

But in return, they've given nothing back.

Only cuts. Cuts to childcare, cuts to universities and cuts to Medicare. And they've done nothing to save our environment from destruction.

A government led by me will renew the contract between the Australian Government and its people. We will give back the things all Australians have worked hard to create.

Today I want to concentrate on the need to save two of our greatest national icons – Medicare, which will be killed off by the changes John Howard announced on Monday; and the Murray River, which is slowly dying as a result of decades of government inaction.

If they are to be saved, we must act now.

John Howard's is the Highest Taxing Government Ever

Every one of Peter Costello's seven Budgets has taken more in tax out of the Australian economy than any previous Government.

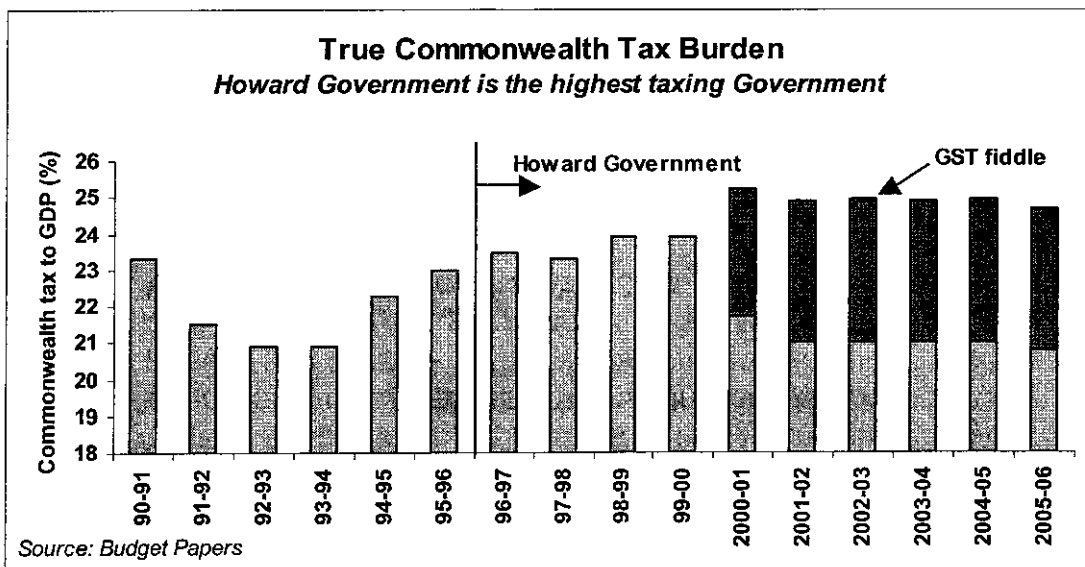
This month's Budget will be no different.

Only once in seven years has John Howard given workers a tax cut – and that came at the same time as Australians were slugged with the GST.

Even then the GST tax cuts disappeared within just one year.

Today an Australian household pays almost \$5,000 more in income tax than when John Howard came to Government.

Labor, by contrast, delivered seven tax cuts in thirteen years and returned more than bracket creep. We are the party of tax reform.



Australians are working harder than ever before, yet they are being unfairly slugged with record taxes, higher tax rates through bracket creep, high family tax debts, the GST and more and more hidden taxes – including three new taxes since the GST.

But what are they getting in return?

Labor will restore bulk billing to save Medicare

Certainly not a better health system.

Over the last 3 decades, Labor Governments have built universal access to quality health care.

Medicare is part of the contract between the people and their government. It ensures the health of all Australians on the basis of medical need, not income.

I believe that all Australians should have the right to visit the doctor or attend a well-funded public hospital without charge.

I won't say *for free*, because it's not free. Australians have already paid for this right through their Medicare Levy and their taxes. They have earned it.

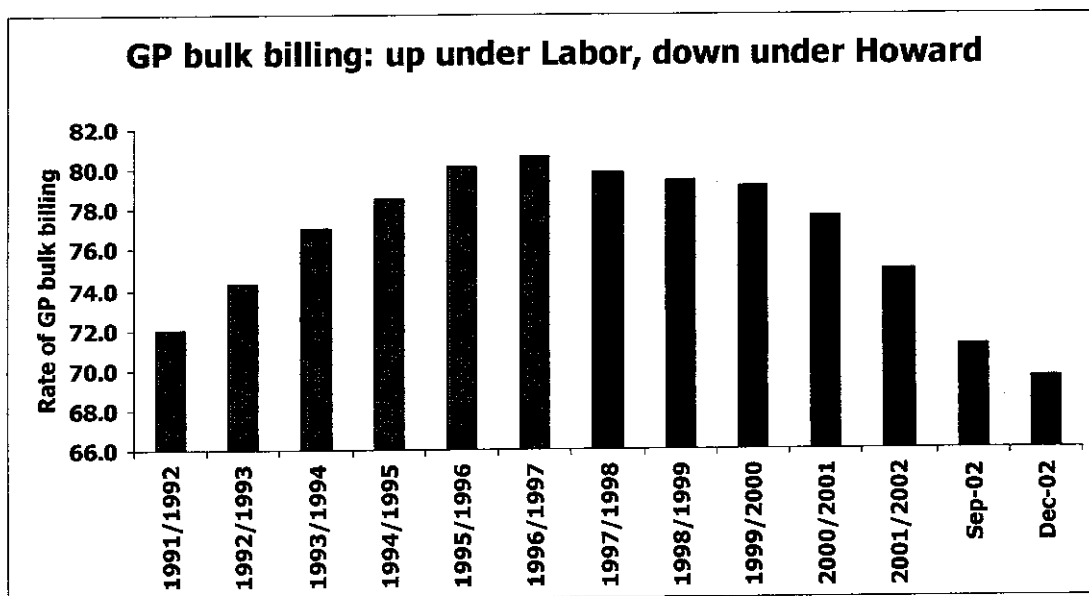
But John Howard has never believed in Medicare.

The facts speak for themselves.

While rates of bulk billing increased every year under Labor governments, it has been in decline ever since the Howard Government was elected in 1996.

Bulk billing by GPs has fallen by a total of 11% since the Howard Government came to office.

Since 2001 that downward trend has become a free fall and has now fallen below 70 percent for the first time since 1989.



That's the difference between a government committed to Medicare and a government that doesn't believe in it. A government that wants families to pay more and more for health and get less and less back.

You pay the Medicare levy, you pay private health insurance and then you have to pay to go to the doctor.

So under John Howard you now have to pay three times for the same health service. Where's Allan Fels when you need him?

Now with this latest package families with two children that earns over the cut off point for a healthcare card – \$32,300 – will pay even more to visit a doctor.

No family that earns \$32,300 per year is wealthy. They struggle to make ends meet.

This is more proof that John Howard is out of touch. He doesn't have a clue about how most Australians live.

Families can't afford it. So what do they do if they can't find a doctor who bulk bills? They turn up at the hospital casualty department.

As a result of the decline in bulk billing, people are visiting their GP less than before.

Last year, Australians visited their GPs 1.75 million fewer times than in the previous year.

But public hospitals have seen dramatic rises in the number of patients presenting who could be seen by a GP – if only they could find one out of hours or afford one.

John Howard's latest package will only place more pressure on the public hospital system. Yet the Howard Government is now offering the States and Territories less funding under a take-it-or-leave-it approach to the new Health Care Agreements.

John Howard has Australia marching directly down the road to an Americanised, user-pays, two-tiered health care system where your credit card is worth more than your Medicare card.

He's determined to reduce Medicare to a second-class safety net for the poor and the elderly. He sees private health insurance as the safety net – a safety net that is only available to those who can afford it.

He is unable to offer any guarantee that his proposals will increase rates of bulk billing. Nor can he ensure that doctors will not increase their fees for patients who are not bulk billed.

Well I'll give the guarantee to stop the decline in bulk billing. But I'm going further – I'm committing to restore bulk billing to save Medicare.

A government committed to Medicare can and will do it, and I will be showing you how in the coming weeks.

We have the world's best health system.

Why would you destroy it?

Labor built Medicare. Only Labor believes in Medicare. Only Labor will save Medicare.

This is a fight for what the people of Australia want. It's theirs. Let's keep it.

By working together it's a fight we can win.

The choice is simple. John Howard and the Liberals will destroy Medicare. Simon Crean and Labor will save Medicare.

If you want to save Medicare, you have to vote Labor.

Saving the Murray

I've talked today about the health of Australians. Now I want to talk about the health of Australia.

We must build a sustainable future – and that includes a sustainable environment.

In the early 1990s, as Primary Industries Minister in the Hawke Government, I learnt first hand the beauty and fragility of our environment and the importance of building a sustainable future for our industries.

As Shadow Treasurer, I changed the Labor Party's economic platform away from one just referring to economic growth to one focussed on *sustainable* growth.

Sustainability is a starting point, it is not a trade-off.

I view the environment as critical to our economic future – an opportunity not an obstacle.

We can repair our environment and create more jobs and opportunities for more Australians. It's the ultimate 'win, win'.

We can and will save the Murray

This morning I visited the mouth of the Murray River.

What I saw saddened me.

It saddens all Australians who see it.

Its mouth is all but closed. Barely a trickle is flowing to the sea. In some places it's now flowing *backwards!*

- Native fish are dying.
- The Murray is becoming choked with exotic species and algal blooms.

- The magnificent river red gums on our flood plains are dying of thirst because no floodwaters nourish them.
- Dryland salinity now threatens to affect around 6 million hectares of the Murray Darling Basin by 2050.
- Undrinkable water is a vision we have of underdeveloped countries. Not Australia. Yet within just 20 years Adelaide's water will be undrinkable two days out of five.

In short, the Murray is dying.

What saddens me most is that we have watched this disaster unfold knowing fully both the problem and the solution.

We are simply taking too much water out of that great river.

If you want evidence that engineering solutions ultimately can't beat nature, all you need to do is go and look at the pathetic image I saw this morning of the Murray reduced to a trickle. The mouth of the Murray is now barely the length of a cricket pitch and the water only knee deep.

As soon as the dredges take the silt and sand out, nature washes it all back in again.

We have to work with nature, not against it.

That means increasing the river flow. Letting nature wash through the river, to cleanse it and bring it back to life.

The Mighty Murray is one of the greatest river systems in the world.

It's the Australian Amazon. Our Nile.

Try to imagine for a moment the Amazon not flowing. Or the Nile not flowing. It wouldn't be just those rivers stopping; their nations would stop as well.

The Murray River is just as critical to our nation's future.

If we don't change what we're doing – here, now, today – things will get worse.

My commitment is to save the Murray. It can be done.

We must open the river mouth and get it flowing to the sea again.

The Wentworth Group has identified that a minimum additional 450 gigalitres of environmental flows is needed each year to keep the mouth of the Murray River open.

This must be delivered as a priority.

In the longer term, scientists tell us that the rivers of the Murray Darling Basin will have a moderate chance of survival if we deliver an additional 1500 gigalitres of water, and even less chance if we don't.

These enormous amounts of water are difficult to visualise, but think of it this way: 1500 gigalitres represents three times the amount of water in Sydney Harbour.

Increasing the flow by that amount means taking out about 20 percent less water than we do now.

The CSIRO predicts that greenhouse gas induced climate change will cause more frequent and more severe droughts in Australia in the years ahead. That means even less water available in our rivers.

Its time for action – not passing the buck.

I want to announce here today three pledges that will help save the Murray River from a slow death:

- A commitment to restore 450 gigalitres of environmental flows within the first term of a Crean Labor Government – enough to keep open the Murray's mouth;
- Deliver 1500 gigalitres in environmental flows within 10 years – the minimum required to restore the health of the river; and
- The immediate ratification of the Kyoto Protocol – as the first step to an effective global response to climate change.

Land Clearing

But repair of our environment cannot end with the Murray. There is more we must do.

Land clearing has serious implications for water quality by increasing rates of salinity and land degradation.

Past land clearing practice is a major cause of current salinity problems. Unless we control clearing now, we will face even greater devastation and loss of productive land in the future.

In consultation with the States, I will establish a target to reverse the current decline in the quality and extent of native vegetation across Australia.

Under my leadership Labor will halt land clearing.

Investing in the Future of our Environment

Saving the Murray and restoring our land is a great national challenge. It is not a simple task. It will require a significant long-term investment.

But when Australians are determined, we are unstoppable.

We built this nation under harsh conditions. We can surely repair it with the same determination.

All those Australians need to be involved.

My Government will work cooperatively with regional communities, state and local governments, farmers and environmentalists to achieve water efficiency savings, improve infrastructure and move towards more sustainable land and water use.

Another Labor Leader, Bob Hawke, saved the Franklin.

I'm committing today to save the Murray.

In the coming weeks I will provide further detail as to how a Clean Labor Government will contribute to these important goals – a way to enable all Australians to invest in saving our rivers, while creating environmentally sustainable economic growth and jobs.

Conclusion

The health of Australia's land and rivers and the health of Australians themselves are two issues I am passionate about.

Both are vital to sustain our nation and its lifeblood – our rivers – our families.

Australian families have worked hard. They pay more than their fair share of tax.

They have kept their part of the contract between the government and the people, and now it's time for the government to do likewise.

Medicare and the Murray are dying.

We must act now to defend these important national icons.

Only Labor will save Medicare.

And only Labor will save the Murray.

With the highest taxing Government in our nation's history, there is simply no excuse for not doing so.