



Howard urges action on 'unfinished' IR reform

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Former prime minister John Howard, speaking at a dinner attended by senior government ministers, has called on the Turnbull government to take action on workplace reform and resist the steady re-regulation of the labour market.

Mr Howard told a closed event celebrating the centenary of the Australian Mines and Metals Association last Wednesday that the country had gone backwards on industrial relations and that the Turnbull government was not doing enough to fix it.

While he "saluted" the Coalition's restoration of the Australian Building and Construction Commission, he warned that "many of the other changes brought in by the [Rudd and Gillard] Labor government have not been addressed".

"It's almost as if the collective political community in this country is now scared to talk about industrial relations reform," he said. "But there will be a time when this country will have to turn to the industrial relations agenda."

"There will be a time when much of the re-regulation we've seen over the last few years will begin to grate."

"There will be a time when we will have to resist the attempts of many in the community to impose still further regulation and strangle the activities of our entrepreneurs."

The Melbourne dinner was attended by Attorney-General Christian Porter, Minister for Financial Services Kelly O'Dwyer and Minister for Resources Matt Canavan, as well as Liberal backbenchers Tim Wilson and former industrial relations minister Eric Abetz.

Victorian unions protested against the event at the time, erecting giant inflatables including a cigar-chomping,

moneybag-clutching "Fat Cat".

The speech comes as Labor and the ACTU are pushing an ambitious industrial relations agenda before the next federal election and unions are calling for a return to industry-wide bargaining.

However, the Turnbull government has so far laid low on workplace reform outside of confronting the militant con-

struction union and regulating internal union activities.

Mr Howard told the dinner that by the time he was defeated in 2007, his government had created the economic climate for low strike levels, 3.9 per cent unemployment and steady real wage growth "in part because of our commitment to industrial relations reform".

He said the economy had now achieved "a trade-off between subdued real wage rises against higher unemployment" but warned that could not continue for long.

"The reality is if wage rises remain subdued or non-existent you do produce what can only be called a very grumpy and discontented, irritable middle-class who see the value of their wages remain subdued and although their job security may be higher, that is in a sense taken for granted."

The speech praised the waterfront reforms achieved in the Patrick dispute with the maritime union in 1998. Mr Howard said they were the result of a government that had "the courage to bring about reform" and an employer who was "willing to put his hand in the flame".

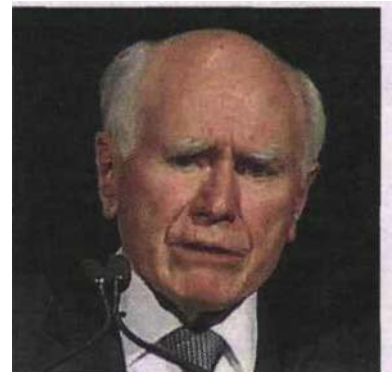
He said the country needed a "a freer, more open industrial relations system" and that "reforming our workplace system is always unfinished business".

"Unfortunately there is a lot more to be done now because of the re-regulation that has undertaken by a number of governments, particularly the Rudd government and the Gillard government," he said.

"It's rather like being engaged in a never-ending foot race – you never get to the finishing line but you know if you stop running your competitors are going to surge past you."

**[Workplace reform]
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a never-ending race.**

John Howard, former PM



John Howard called for a "freer system".

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