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ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS  
MEMBER FOR MARIBYRNONG**

**NATIONAL JOBS AND SKILLS SUMMIT  
CANBERRA**

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**\*\*\*CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY\*\*\***

Good morning everyone

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, I pay my respects to elders past and present.

I acknowledge our hosts, the Canberra Institute of Technology, particularly – but not exclusively - the apprentices who are providing the catering today.

Thank you all for joining our National Jobs and Skills Summit.

As business leaders, as educators, as employers, as union representatives, you're busy people, you don't have a lot of time.

And for you to give up some of your time, to pursue better policy for the nation, I thank you very much for that.

I'm fortunate to be joined by many members of my fantastic, united team here today:

Led, of course, Tanya Plibersek, our Shadow Minister for Education

And our Shadow Ministers for: TAFE and Vocational Education, Kate Ellis, Employment, Brendan O'Connor, Skills and Apprenticeships, Doug Cameron, Immigration, Shayne Neumann and our Shadow Minister for the Future of Work, Ed Husic

We're also lucky to have our two Canberra MPs, our Shadow Assistant Treasurer, Andrew Leigh and Gai Brodtmann.

My team are here because we're interested in the same things you are.

And if we form a government after the next election, this agenda we are discussing today will be one of our mainstream, key priorities.

At the beginning of this year, I said this would be a year of preparation.

A year when we prepare an economic and social program to present to the people of Australia at the next election.

Before the next election, I want Australians to know what a Labor government would do in its first 100 days, if given the privilege of forming government.

But also what we want to see this country look like in the next ten years.

Regardless of one's political affiliation, the nation is crying out for long-term vision.

Not policy announcements on a Thursday designed to pump-up a Newspoll on the Saturday, but a long-term vision for the nation.

Bringing people here, together, is part of our fundamental values.

It's not just a process – we see it as an end in itself.

The way this nation will move forward is when we bring people to the table.

We don't expect in the course of today's deliberations that everyone is going to agree with everyone else. If we did, there would be something wrong.

But what we do think is the people of this nation deserve to have the experts, the people with the lived experience, the people on the frontline together in the same room – agreeing on what the common problems are and agreeing what the solutions are.

There's a lot of talk about the Hawke-Keating era and consensus.

The truth of the Hawke-Keating era is that the Labor administration of that time had a view that the process of consensus wasn't about waiting for everyone to agree.

It was about ensuring all views were heard and that there was a direction which all could sign up to.

Not that all would necessarily agree with every aspect, but that we have a commonly agreed destination for this nation.

That's why I say today isn't just a process, it's about values.

Because we think this nation works best when we work together.

And of course, we've just recently done this very process with a health summit and now we're doing it with skills.

We're not interested in holding these gatherings for every topic under the sun but judge us by the topics which we do bring people together on: health, and now skills and jobs.

We're seeking your help today on three key objectives.

One, lifelong learning.

Ensuring all Australians have access through their working life to the education, skills and training they need for decent jobs, supporting a good standard of living

Two. We want your help preparing for the jobs of the future.

Making sure the Australian workforce is more responsive to the evolving skill needs of our economy.

And three. Working together.

Lifelong learning, preparing for the jobs of the future, working together.

Business and the private sector are the principal drivers of economic activity in this nation.

We want big and small business engaged in the challenge of skills and apprenticeships. And we absolutely believe in the role of unions to be part of working out our future direction.

When I say working together, we need to also understand that training and skills is not just something the government does.

It has to be something we encourage business to do.

Government can put incentives in place, we can make things easier. But training and skills is not just a taxpayer responsibility, it is also a business responsibility.

Why are we focused on lifelong learning, preparing for the jobs of the future and working together?

Because the Australian people are out ahead of the political debate in this country.

They know there's no such thing as a job for life anymore.

My grandfather was a printer, my great uncle worked on the railways at Spotswood.

They pretty much had one job, the skills changed and the technology changed, but they had one job for life in essence.

That just doesn't happen anymore.

We see this in the disruptive impact of automation.

This will disproportionately affect low-income earners – and middle income jobs.

It's no longer just blue-collar jobs that get replaced by machines or sent overseas.

It's professions and occupations that were once regarded as immune from that, some of the white collar jobs.

We've seen in the last ten years, 75,000 net manufacturing jobs go.

That's not a statement that we won't have manufacturing in this country or that we shouldn't have manufacturing – but there has been massive change.

But on the positive side, we've also seen 485,000 jobs increased healthcare and social services.

So there are jobs emerging.

But the question is, are we preparing our people to take the opportunities that present.

Along with automation, there is the challenge of off-shoring.

I should say, on off-shoring that I don't see that as an inevitable consequence.

I don't see that all off-shoring has to stay off-shore and that simple alternative is always off-shoring jobs.

We also see the nature of employment relationships changing.

Put another way, insecure work is on the rise.

Insecure work and casualisation, on the rise.

Yesterday, we got the monthly employment statistics.

Whilst unemployment went up from 5.7 per cent to 5.9 per cent, a number which in many ways is just as troubling, is that we have now set a new Australian record.

We have more Australians than ever who are under-employed.

I understand the Greens have said we need to work less hours.

There's a problem though that we have 1.13 million Australians who are working fewer hours than they want.

When you add that to nearly 750,000 people who are unemployed.

When you add that to the number of people on the disability pension, many of whom would like the opportunity to participate.

We've got north of 2.5 million of our fellow Australians not able to find the amount of work they want.

This is a major challenge for our workforce.

And this is all happening at a time when Asia rises and the world's centre of economic gravity moves.

By 2030, our region will be home to nearly 5 billion people – and 6 of the world's 20 largest economies.

The reason I mention the rise of Asia is not just the economic opportunity.

It also shows we're not going to have the biggest workforce in the region, not by a country mile.

But we can have the best workforce in the region.

Simply the best, you know, as the song goes.

There's nothing wrong with us aiming high.

We can have the most productive, the most competitive, the most adaptable and resilient workforce.

This begins with building the world's best education, skills and training system.

I don't think that is too ambitious, I don't think it's too much to hope for.

We shouldn't be a nation which sets our sights low.

There's a quote by Reg Ansett, you may think he's an unusual fellow for a Labor person to quote.

At the end of the 1960s he brought in the Boeing 727 jets to Australia.

He said this was the world's best technology – so it's only just good enough for Australia.

I like the thinking which says we can be the best.

Having the best training system doesn't require having more tanks and guns, it doesn't require having more people.

It requires collective effort, it requires a decision to be in that game.

And when we've aimed at being the best in the world, we've accomplished it.

We have amongst the best retirement savings systems in the world.

We have amongst the best healthcare systems in the world.

We are, with the National Disability Insurance Scheme, aiming for the best systems in the world when it comes to the treatment of people with disability.

We have one of the highest minimum wages, I'm proud we have one of the best safety nets in the world.

There's always been a uniqueness about Australia which says we'll borrow ideas from the rest of the world but we're not constrained by the thinking of the rest of the world.

It's no accident that the Kangaroo and the Emu are on our coat of arms, uniquely Australian animals.

When Australia decides to be the best in the world, there is an Australian exceptionalism which shows we can accomplish it.

Now those are lofty propositions, but they bring us back to what we are talking about today.

When we understand where we want to be, that helps guide the decisions we make in the short and medium term.

We have got challenges in front of us: a rapidly casualising workforce, all those massive changes I mentioned.

So it's not that the sun is shining, I understand we can do better.

We need to look at the challenges we face in skills and training.

It is a fact that when Labor left office in 2013, Australia had about 420,000 apprentices.

Now it's about 280,000.

How did we go backwards when our population has grown?

We have seen cuts to TAFE and training in the order of \$2.5 billion.

We've seen an explosion in the private provision of training. And while the very best are very good, we've seen some shocking, shocking examples of rorts and mismanagement.

And we do overly rely on temporary work visas as a skills substitute for training our own people.

I do not want to see Australia stranded as an unskilled enclave in Asia.

Youth unemployment is rising, inflicting generational disadvantage.

If we keep importing our tradies, our hairdressers, if we keep importing our welders, our diesel mechanics and plenty of other occupations, then we will be meeting again in three years' time with an even worse prognosis than we have now.

It's always difficult when you're the Opposition.

How much do you say is going well and how much do you say is going poorly?

The path which we take is just being straight about it.

We think the potential for success is there, we don't think everything that's gone before us has been a total disaster.

But unless there is a focus on skills and training at the centre of the political debate, the prognosis is going to get worse.

When we talk about skills and training and jobs of the future, let me be really clear.

We do not see the jobs of the future being created by cutting the pay rates of Australians right now.

You do not raise productivity by lowering living standards.

You don't grow confidence in the economy by shrinking people's incomes.

There are no winners in a race to the bottom on pay and conditions.

Our challenge is how we move up the value chain, how we are able to premium-price what we do through the combination of: capital investment, great business leadership and a highly-productive and skilled workforce in safe and meaningful work.

There will always be countries in our region that can do things for less than us - we can't win that competition.

We need to go the high road, another path altogether.

Competitive, confident businesses.

A skilled, adaptive and productive workforce

And tapping into the growing demand for the things Australia should do best.

We can do advanced manufacturing, we can do healthcare, we can do tourism.

We can do the value-add which has been all-too-often lacking in government policy.

This means changing our national mindset.

We want our universities to be accessible to all on the basis of merit.

But not every Australian wants to study at university and for some Australians university isn't the logical path to take.

I was very fortunate. I was raised in a household where my Dad was a tradesman and my Mum worked at universities - so we held the debates.

And my twin brother and I were sat down in year 9 and in year 10, and told if we wanted to go to university, you had to get the marks, that they would support us, and if we wanted to do a trade they would support us in doing that too.

So I was raised in a family where it wasn't a view that doing an apprenticeship was a second class option, or the easy way to go.

I remember Dad used to take me to the workshop bench in the garage and he said for a metalworker, I'd make a great lawyer.

It's never occurred to me that there is a second-class nature of one over the other, but a lot of our public commentary, perhaps, has encouraged younger people to look at university as the sole path towards success.

That generational assumption that high-level qualifications equal job success is being tested at the moment.

We see graduates from both vocational education and university finding it difficult to get a start.

We need to rethink our views on the skills curriculum and our understanding of the way we mark it.

The reality is, that more and more employers I talk to, they're looking when they hire people for those transferable skills: problem solving, collaboration & creativity, the ability to learn and adapt, motivation.

And we need to ensure that vocational education, whether it's an apprenticeship in the traditional trades at TAFE, qualifications in new industries, is the first choice, is the first preference.



Part of our legacy as a nation, and I'm grateful for Doug Cameron for giving me this statistic, is that we're actually a tradie nation.

1.6 million Australians hold trade qualifications, and not just in traditional trades or the traditional stereotype of male-dominated industries like construction, but in diverse and growing sectors: health, disability, aged care.

I think that we need to have an honest conversation today also on how do we attract more women into the trades, how do we also encourage more Indigenous Australians to utilise the benefits of vocational education.

Our TAFE sector, and I did some reading of the history of our TAFE sector in preparation for today, has always been an integral link towards the economic leaps that this nation has made.

From the earliest forms in the mechanics institutes and the schools of arts in the early and mid-19th Century, right through to the First and Second World Wars, TAFE has been a rudder in terms of shifting the direction of the training of our workforce to meet the growing needs of our nation.

And of course we saw the Tech schools of the later 20th Century and TAFE in itself coming into a proper identity in the mid-70s.

TAFE and its predecessors have always fulfilled two objectives: they've given working class and middle class people an opportunity for an education they might not have otherwise had.

And again, that point I was making just before, it has helped mobilise national needs.

Skilling the nation in war time and retraining demobilising soldiers.

One wonders, whilst we wouldn't use the war analogy, when else have we seen such massive disruption happening in existing work?

It perhaps does require us taking that sense of national need, a national plan to recognise we need more than just the day-to-day effort to help retrain Australians dislocated by the disruptive nature of rapid economic change.

TAFE has been often about giving young people a second chance, and we know it can be transformative.

One of the things which you identify when you visit regional communities is where there is a TAFE, that regional community has more life and more health and more vibrancy.

So it's very much the fabric of successful regional Australia.

TAFE can help to close the gender pay gap in the non-traditional areas, and of course, fundamentally it can empower mature-age workers seeking to retrain.

All of us in public life visit our communities and one of the nicest experiences any of us ever have, and my colleagues frequently have reported the same feeling, is when we go and talk at TAFE and meet mature-age apprentices.

It takes a bit of guts and courage to take a dip in your income, because the older you are, we all find our own level when it comes to managing our standard of living, basically you spend what you earn.

And of course, when you do that mature-age apprenticeship, that's a gutsy call, because it means that you've got to take on a bit of financial stress yourself, because you've got a vision of yourself, and you've got a vision of what you can do in the future.

So I've got no doubt that from women, to the regions, to mature-age apprentices, I see TAFE fulfilling the bridging role in a disrupted economy which is transforming very rapidly.

But we know that our current VET and TAFE sector are under pressure.

It has been subject to poor policy development, including competition policy ripped from a textbook without an understanding of the consequences of how it plays out.

We've seen the privatisation and funding issues.

There's been a frustrating fragmentation of standards and governance.

The closure of campuses, particularly in regions, has a knock-on effect that has been underestimated.

And there has been some reputational damage done by some institutes which advertise on the back of a bus and give you the iPad but don't fulfil the confidence which the people who enrol are hoping from it.

And for VET teachers, there's been a decline in their status and visibility over the generation which is not warranted by the contribution they make to our community.

So we understand there has to be better cooperation - Commonwealth, State, employers, unions, TAFE and the university sector.

I always like to see what the Germans are doing in this area. I think they have an effective vocational education system. We'll look at their model of co-operation and the return that delivers.

Rebuilding TAFE is fundamental, but on its own that's insufficient.

No-one can claim to have a plan for jobs if they don't have a plan for apprenticeships.

One of the things that an incoming Labor government could do is sit down with

business to talk about how we can make it that bit easier to give apprentices a go.

We also understand we have to work with small business in particular, to see what annoying paperwork and red tape we can eliminate which allows them to be able to grab the opportunities to back in the young person, much as many of the people who run these small businesses were once given that opportunity themselves.

When we talk about vocational education and skills and training and universities, we recognise it starts back in the early years with childcare and the early years of learning.

We must deliver school funding, based on need.

And of course, our universities must be accessible, quality and affordable.

I'm sure that there's more than enough common ground here for us to come out with a really good platform.

Our party's been doing good work.

We took a strong policy to the last election - it's not a matter of junking everything that's happened before. We don't think that today happens on a blank page.

But as you must pick up from the energy of our representatives here, the seniority of the people we've brought, we are serious.

I've learnt from my first term in opposition - and I don't intend to have a third term in opposition - I've learnt from the first term that you have an opportunity as an opposition to take the time to prepare your policies.

Once you're in government, as the current government is finding, it's a bit late to work out what it is you want to do.

The people of Australia liked us at the last election but said you've still got a bit more time to go.

We want to get this policy right and what we've learnt in opposition, and also I've learnt as leader is you can't talk about everything and do everything, but you can make some things your priorities.

You can make choices in the issues you talk about, reflecting your values.

Skills & training, TAFE, education, universities, the early years - it is a priority for us.

We are taking to the Australian people a priority on skills and training – on lifelong learning, access to education, access to quality TAFE and vocational education.

We think that's a priority which Australians will look at next election and say that's what we want for the next ten years.

Many of you are parents. You know as parents you can't always make your kids happy every day, but what you know you can prepare them for life.

I don't hold government exactly to that proposition, but what I do understand as a government, is if we can give individuals a fair go, the politics starts to take a step back, a backseat and we get to what's really important.

If a Labor government can make sure that all Australians get the chance to empower themselves and have access to lifelong learning then we give individuals control over their own lives.

So I've gone a bit bigger picture here - I know now you've got to deep dive into the propositions and there's lots of you with lots to say, but please take it from me and my team, we think that this is one of the big issues.

This is one of the issues we will talk about now until the next election and we want to do it with the best contribution and ideas possible.

So thank you very much for your role in making Australia a better place today.

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