



**THE HON SUSSAN LEY MP
LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION
FEDERAL MEMBER FOR FARRER**

TRANSCRIPT

**12TH JOHN HOWARD LECTURE - Q&A
MENZIES RESEARCH CENTRE
SHANGRI-LA HOTEL, SYDNEY**

Thursday, 13 November 2025

Topics: Boris Johnson; Migration; education; world leaders; role of the Menzies Research Centre.

E&OE.....

DAVID HUGHES: Take a seat, Mr Howard and thank you, Sussan, for delivering such a strong speech, strong enlightening speech filled with policy. You've had the biggest week of your political career, I dare say, so that makes your speech all the more impressive. I was going to moderate this discussion, but I think Mr. Howard is best in all of his unmoderated brilliance. So I won't get involved. He was in your job 30 years ago to the day, so he knows the challenges better than anyone. I will just warn you, Sussan, the last time Mr. Howard had a discussion like this following the Howard lecture, there were a few very complex, detailed questions about the Australian cricket team directed to Boris Johnson. So don't be surprised if...

JOHN HOWARD: He didn't know anything about it!

DAVID HUGHES: On that note, Mr Howard, over to you.

JOHN HOWARD: David, thank you. Just to elucidate, when Boris gave the equivalent lecture a couple of years ago, I was asked to interview him afterwards. And I said to him do you think Johnny Bairstow was out? I tell you what, he didn't have the faintest idea. But he worked out that it probably had something to do with cricket, because I had asked him the question and he bumbled his way through it very well in his great style. But Sussan, you're far more important than Boris, although let me say I like Boris. He was a funny act. Can I congratulate you on your speech? I've got to move a formal vote of thanks in a moment, but I think what you, the party, has done over the last few days is a very courageous and decisive

thing. You've had an open internal debate about an important policy. And the fact that it's been in the news, so what? That will be forgotten. What won't be forgotten is the commitment the Liberal Party has made to affordable energy and all the other things. It's essential, particularly but not only in the early months of opposition to confront the difficult policy issues, debate them in a public fashion and reach a definitive conclusion. And you've done that. And as for whether it's before or after the National Party has reached the decision, so what? I mean, I am a great coalitionist, I think the great years of our side of politics being in power has been Menzies and Fadden and McEwen and Fraser and Anthony and myself, supported by the wonderful late Tim Fischer and John Anderson. I've not met a more honourable person in public life than John Anderson and Mark Vaile. We have our differences. There are fewer differences now than there were then. There were far fewer differences, but I think you are to be congratulated and you articulated extremely well. That really provokes me to ask the first of my questions, enough of my speeches. First question, what is the next big policy issue you're going to thrash out? I'm not a journalist!

LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION: Two come to mind. One is migration, because we've been hearing a lot [APPLAUSE] from every corner of the country and every question, every presentation, every idea is different. But the common theme is migration. And that's incredibly important. And you understood that in your term of government better, I think, than almost any Prime Minister since. So I have said it needs to be lower. I've also said the problems we're facing are not the fault of any migrant or migrant community. They are failings of infrastructure. Those failings should be sheeted home to governments who have not planned, who have not implemented and who have wasted public funds. Instead of building schools, roads, hospitals, public transport that works, cycleways that make sense instead of ones that don't. There's quite a few of those in this city. They haven't done that. I think this is a conversation Australians are up for and we will do it in a respectful way and we will develop a policy that recognises it's not just about one overall number. It's about a variety of strands, whether it be the humanitarian intake, skilled visas, working holiday makers, and how that is mapped, if you like, to the needs and the aspirations of different parts of the country.

JOHN HOWARD: Sussan, when the great Robert Gordon Menzies retired as Prime Minister in his farewell press conference he was asked what were his two great achievements. And he talked about the Coalition in sort of terms that I have, because not surprisingly, I sort of watched what he did and said, and it all made a lot of sense to me. And he also said that what he had done in education. And of course, Menzies was the person who brought in state aid for Catholic and other independent schools and broke through a hundred years of discrimination against the Catholic community. And of course he did wonderful things in tertiary education. Now that's a long time ago. More than 60 odd years ago. You have talked rightly about the importance of education. Do you have ideas, some thoughts, some proposals in that area?

LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION: Education has been incredibly important for me. As a mum with a baby in a capsule, I turned up to study economics at La Trobe University in Wodonga and that changed my life. I needed to get a university education to earn some

money to support the farm but walking into the classroom, and you'll be interested that the lecturer was Tim Fischer's wife Judy.

JOHN HOWARD: Nice, lovely lady.

LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION: And my best subject was the world economy between the wars, which is a piece of trivia. Judy and I still keep in touch today and Tim Fischer until we lost him was a dear friend. Education now is dominated by concerns about artificial intelligence and what it means for our system, what it means for our kids, and what it means for the future of business and industries. So I'm very fortunate to have Julian Leeser, he's the shadow education spokesperson, and I have asked him to consider how we might best respond to those challenges. Separately from that, there is always the issue of the curriculum, because every time you look at the curriculum, you find it is filled with problems, questions, issues. Or, as I often say, what on earth is going on in this curriculum? While we don't control the curriculum, it's a product of the state education ministers coming around the table with the federal minister. The next discussions around what the next curriculum should look like will begin quite soon. So we will lean into those discussions, we will consult with parents, and we will listen to their concerns as expressed to us about the content of the curriculum because it's important. I always talk about the basics, and teachers talk about things differently. I want to say our teachers are amazing. Amazing. They have to be parents, they have to fill out paperwork, they have to do so much. But I know that what we need is an understanding of the basics and also critical thinking ability, which if we're not careful, we will lose in our kids critical thinking ability. So that no one tells you what to think, but just gives you the tools to make your own decisions. I think that message should flow through from primary to secondary to tertiary education.

JOHN HOWARD: If we could just go overseas for a moment, one of the privileges I had both as an opposition leader, but most particularly as a Prime Minister, was to meet world figures that I admired and I had the great privilege of meeting Margaret Thatcher while I was opposition leader and she gave me a lecture on how to become a Prime Minister and it helped. Did it very well. I haven't forgotten it. Who are the sort of world leaders on the stage now who you admire and think have very relevant things to say in relation to the world's contemporary challenges.

LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION: I wouldn't immediately point to any world leader for this simple reason that maybe the circumstances that a certain leader might find themselves in are so different from the Australian situation, that you can't necessarily correspond what is happening there to what is happening here. I always admire leaders who take a stand and a principled position and don't try to be all things to all people. You don't see that consistently in world leaders. But you see it in some of the decisions that they make at the time that they make them. I'm often asked this question with respect to, you know, who do I draw inspiration from? And I'll be honest, it isn't from world leaders, past or present. It's from ordinary Australians who I meet every day. Who come to me and other members of parliament because we're often the place of last resort, when you walk in the door and they have completely lost hope and in appreciating that we might be able to help them, we see

what their life has been like or is like and I often reflect that they've got more courage than I will ever have just to get out of bed in the morning. That inspires me because it makes me want to work very, very hard for them. While people might have observed that we've been talking about ourselves, I know, as you always said, that you mustn't talk about yourself because all people here is you talking about yourselves. We have to demonstrate what I know we feel and what I know motivated us all to come into politics, which is to work bloody hard for the Australian people, because right now they are counting on us. I take that responsibility very seriously and I'm incredibly proud of every single one of my team who similarly wants to fight for ordinary Australians.

JOHN HOWARD: The last question I think I might ask you relates to the history of our country and the history of our party. I've just got a copy and started to read Tony Abbott's book. Tony is a wonderful wordsmith. It's so easy to read what he writes and and I find myself not in agreement with most of it, not all of it, but you don't get two people as philosophically close as Tony and I without there being some differences of opinion. Do you think that the history of this country is both adequately understood by its citizens or properly taught in our schools and universities?

LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION: In one word? No. Absolutely not. And wasn't that a fantastic night when Tony's book was launched? For anyone who was there. It was really quite extraordinary. I have the book and I've started reading it and I recommend probably buy quite a few for Christmas presents because it's as you say, it's very readable, it's very accessible and it's very real. You know, all of you, that the school curriculum has gone right off the rails with a lot of the history of Australia. The importance, yes, of Indigenous Australians and their contribution to our land, our society and our future and our identity, but not recognising the three great strands are indigenous culture, European settlement and multicultural Australia, the migrant nation. I want that to be better explained to students. I want them to learn about that as well as civics and I want us to be able to stand up for the Australia that is demonstrated positively every day by those three great strands of humanity in this country.

DAVID HUGHES: Thank you, Sussan, and thank you, Mr Howard. We're truly blessed to have Mr Howard continuing to contribute to our events at the Menzies Research Centre, but more importantly our nation is blessed to have Mr Howard continuing to contribute to and enrich national debates that we're having. So we thank you for that, Mr Howard. The reason that you set up the Menzies Research Centre or worked to establish the Menzies Research Centre some 30 years ago is so that we could contribute to policy work, detailed policy work in opposition where we find ourselves now. We're really encouraged to hear from Sussan all of the meaty policy issues that you have the courage to embark upon. So we stand ready at the Menzies Research Centre to help you with those key debates around tax reform, we'll work with your Shadow Treasurer who's here tonight, Ted O'Brien, on a plan to lower taxes. We'll be working on industrial relations reform with you as well. And one way that you can help us contribute to that policy work is by supporting our work at the Menzies Research Centre. Sussan, I want to leave you with a copy of *The Forgotten People*. A book that we

produced I think under Nick's role as executive director some years ago. It was written seventy five years ago, but so much of it is still relevant today. It's a guidebook for understanding Australian liberalism and how it should be applied in a political context, but it's also a guidebook to understanding the hopes, needs and desires of the Australian people. So this will serve you well in the very important job that you have. So thank you, Sussan, and to Mr Howard. Please join me in thanking them.

JOHN HOWARD: Can I just congratulate the Menzies Research Centre on and you and your chairman Brian for the tremendous work you do in maintaining, should I say the rage? No, the faith. I did spend a whole day in Canberra on Tuesday and was almost submerged by the lovefest. And I admired Gough Whitlam's talents as a parliamentarian, but gee, he didn't run a very successful government. And I know that the person we've heard from tonight, when she gets the opportunity, which will be at the next election, she will run a very successful government. And many of the people who've come with her tonight will be ministers in that government. The deputy leader of the Federal Parliamentary Liberal Party, Senator Jess Collins and anyway, I'll get myself into trouble. My wife always says to me, you should never do those sort of things without a script in front of you because you will leave somebody out. And I've no doubt left out a few people and they'll run around saying, that means Howard will say I'm not worthy of being a minister. Now, I don't want to do that but I do want to say something very special about some former members who've come tonight, and very particularly my dear friend Michael Bowen. Michael just keeps adding years to his age and it makes it very difficult for me to catch up. But he's a wonderful friend and a great supporter of the Liberal Party and anybody who's got the energy that he's got well over the age of ninety to travel to events from Camden is to be admired. So to all of you thank you. And to you, Sussan, one thing that really warmed me, many things about your speech tonight was the tribute you pay to small business. I came from a small business family. My father, as many of you know, had a petrol service station or garage as he called it, near Dulwich Hill station in Sydney. He worked in it for years and years and years. And he had no love of the local Labor dominated Marrickville Council, I can tell you that. They actually at one stage said that he should take his petrol pumps and put them inside. Off the curb. I mean, how can you run a petrol service station without having petrol pumps on the curb? That was never adequately explained, but anyway, I digress. I just want to say that small business is the heart and soul. It meant everything to my family. It meant enormous things to my dear mother and it meant enormous things to my three older brothers and myself. And Dad worked his insides out, having fought for his country in the terrible trenches of World War One, he then worked his insides out through the years of the Depression. Making enough money to support a family, and that's a pretty meritorious thing. And something that I admired and have never forgotten, and I could tell from the way in which she dwelt on the subject, Sussan understands so well, and it will connect her with millions of Australians who believe in the individual initiative involved in running your own business. Sussan, you have our support, our affection. I congratulate you on resolving that very difficult policy. The fact that you had a bit of an argument about it doesn't matter. We all have arguments about things that matter. It's easy to resolve a policy where there's no difference of opinion. There aren't too many of those I can tell you. But congratulations and good luck with the next one. If you follow the

example of debating differences, acknowledging them, but coming together in a consensus, you will not only do well, you'll do spectacularly well. Thank you.

DAVID HUGHES: Thank you.

[ENDS]