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## **PM cleans up Minchin IR slip**

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Prime Minister John Howard has promised that the coalition will not take any major workplace reforms to the next election, following a gaffe by Finance Minister Nick Minchin.

In a private speech last Friday to the conservative HR Nicholls Society, Senator Minchin pledged a new wave of industrial changes after the next election. Yet he conceded that the Work Choices reforms passed in December did not have majority support and that he was nervous about the High Court challenge by the states and unions.

The High Court is holding a directions hearing on the case today.

Sensing a voter backlash against further reform, Mr Howard last night in India ruled out another round of industrial relations changes. He said the reforms the government had implemented were significant rather than radical, and denied he was embarrassed by his minister's comments.

"We won't be taking further major proposals in that area to the next election," Mr Howard said.

Senator Minchin's speech admitted most people "violently disagree" with the IR changes.

"Poll after poll demonstrated that the Australian people don't agree at all with anything we're doing on this," he said. "We have minority support for what we're doing."

Yet he urged the government to go further and plan another wave of industrial relations changes.

In the speech, recorded by a journalist from the Workplace Express online news service and broadcast by ABC radio yesterday, Senator Minchin said many changes were still required to IR laws.

"This is evolution, not revolution, and there is still a long way to go . . . awards, the IR Commission, all the rest of it," he said.

He told the society there would be no further reforms before the next election, but said the government should mount the case for change.

"We do need to seek a mandate from the Australian people at the next election for another wave of industrial relations reform," he said.

Senator Minchin refused to add to his comments yesterday, but a spokesman said his statements represented his personal view, not government policy.

A spokesman for Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews said the government had no intention of taking an expanded set of industrial relations policies to the next election.

Labor's industrial relations spokesman Stephen Smith said Senator Minchin had "let the cat out of the bag".

"Whatever they say, we know they want to go further," he said.

**ACTU** secretary **Greg Combet** told a union rally in Melbourne Senator Minchin's speech signalled the "death knell" for the award system, for minimum pay and conditions and collective agreements.

Senator Minchin expressed concern about the consequences for the commonwealth of taking over the state industrial relations systems, and was nervous about the outcome of a High Court challenge to the Work Choices legislation being mounted by unions and the states.

The unintended consequences of assuming control of the state systems were "mind boggling" and Mr Andrews was taking new issues to be resolved to every cabinet meeting.

Senator Minchin was worried the High Court, which included several conservative judges appointed by the Howard government, could take a cautious approach to the use of the corporations power of the constitution to override state IR laws.

The NSW government is a party to the High Court action, and a spokesman for NSW Industrial Relations Minister John Della Bosca said Senator Minchin was right to be worried.

#### KEY POINTS

- Nick Minchin says many changes are still required to IR laws.
- Prime Minister John Howard, in India, denies the comments have embarrassed him.

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