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PM refuses public debate with Beazley on AWAs

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JOHN Howard has ridiculed **Kim Beazley's** pledge that no worker will be worse off under Labor's **workplace** relations changes, as the nation's most senior Catholic expressed concerns about the Government's IR laws.

The Prime Minister yesterday intensified his attack against Labor's plans to scrap individual work contracts, claiming hundreds of thousands of workers would be worse off as they were forced back onto collective agreements.

But Mr Beazley hit back, challenging Mr Howard to debate the fairness of Australian **Workplace** Agreements in the carpark of the retail outlet Spotlight, which has been at the centre of Labor's parliamentary attack. Mr Howard declined.

Mr Beazley has come under fire from peak business groups -- and some unnamed Labor MPs -- after his bold announcement eight days ago that AWAs would go under a Labor government.

But the Labor leader senses he is on a political winner and claims most businesspeople believe the Government's **workplace** changes have gone too far.

Catholic primate, Sydney Archbishop George Pell, added his voice to the debate, saying he had serious concerns about the Government's Work Choices package. "I don't particularly like the new IR laws because I'm frightened they could be used to force down minimum wages," Cardinal Pell said.

Mr Beazley raised the spectre of young people entering the workforce being powerless to stop rogue bosses from exploiting them.

"As a dad, I know my kids would have no real bargaining position with an employer who presented them with an unfair AWA," he told the Ten Network's Meet the Press.

``Just imagine that, starting your working life and your first experience is injustice."

He also accused Mr Howard of ``running away" from a debate on **workplace** reform, suggesting the carpark of the Spotlight shop in Coffs Harbour as a suitable location. Spotlight employee Annette Harris, who refused an AWA from management in the NSW coastal city, has become the face of Labor's campaign against the Government's changes.

``If he really believes that he's defending the aspirations of middle Australians, he should have the guts to front me in a decent debate before the Australian people," Mr Beazley said.

With **industrial** relations shaping as the central issue at next year's election, the Prime Minister seized on comments by **union** boss Joe de Bruyn in The Weekend Australian that Labor had overstated the size of salary cuts under the AWA system.

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