

Training to blame for skills shortage: PM

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Prime Minister John Howard says the Australian education and training system needs to be reformed to address national skills shortages.

Transcript

TONY MORRIS: Employers bearing the brunt of worker shortage are being told that the answer to their problems may lie within. Signalling a subtle shift in official thinking on the labour shortage, the PM says improving the skills of around 3.5 million existing workers should become a priority for reform. From Canberra, Greg Jennett reports.

GREG JENNETT: He refuses to call it a skills crisis, but John Howard acknowledges that all is not well in the ever growing economy.

JOHN HOWARD: Australia does face a number of major skills challenges.

GREG JENNETT: He sees existing workers as the biggest of them. 3.5 million aged between 25 and 64 don't have year 12 level qualifications. He says that finding new ways to train them is a priority.

JOHN HOWARD: We've got to get away from this idea that skills preparation and skills training is all about what happens at the beginning of your working life, and get to a situation where it includes what happens halfway through your working life.

GREG JENNETT: The focus on existing workers is one the Australian Industry Group has also been pushing.

HEATHER RIDOUT: We simple have to focus on the jewel in the crown; the people who are there and who are going to constitute our workforce in 20 years time.

GREG JENNETT: The business lobby thinks it could take up to \$1 billion to do it.

HEATHER RIDOUT: We need trainers training differently to accommodate them, and that's exactly what the bulk of the skills fund money would be used for.

JOHN HOWARD: Obviously, like so many of these things, it does call for the

expenditure of more Government money. But it's an issue that the Government and the business community have to work together in solving.

KIM BEAZLEY: It's too late now for him to be saying that he is part of the solution. John Howard, on skills, is the problem. The solution lies with changing the Government.

GREG JENNETT: Kim Beazley and his front bench spent the day pressing their credentials to tackle the skills shortage in a private meeting with business leaders. It's the type of forum he says Labor would continue with the corporate world if he wins next year's election.

KIM BEAZLEY: We want to take the widest possible advice on effectively managing the economy.

GREG JENNETT: On Labor's promise to rip up the Government's workplace laws, some in the business community are only too happy to give advice.

MITCH HOOKE: We are worried. We are concerned about any changes to industrial relations or workplace relationships that create a platform for confrontation and divisiveness.

HEATHER RIDOUT: These things are creating huge uncertainties.

GREG JENNETT: If they don't like Kim Beazley's industrial relations package, employers are threatening to oppose it vigorously. Greg Jennett, Lateline.