

INTERVIEW WITH PETER HARVEY - 21 AUGUST 1978

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QUESTION

How did it suddenly emerge?

PRIME MINISTER

The draft - the shorthand notes of it, I think had always been in existence, well obviously they had, because during the discussions in Sydney Eric Robinson did dictate a draft and I didn't see it - I didn't see it until today. I had been aware of its existence, I had been advised actual copies had been destroyed. A request was made for the notes to be retyped today, and they were.

QUESTION

Why have you waited so long before producing it?

PRIME MINISTER

For a very good reason. There is a question of confidentiality of discussions between Ministers, especially when those conversations are in either a Cabinet meeting or a full Ministerial meeting, and indeed it is very important for the operations of government. The substance of The Bulletin charges, as I believe, as other Ministers have believed, amongst whom I have discussed this matter - they had been answered last week by Eric, and by myself, without going into the detail. Quite plainly, as things continued, and as media interest continued, not content with those denials of the substance, it was necessary to lay the whole matter bare, and yesterday in discussions with Doug Anthony in discussion with Eric Robinson and in discussions today we agreed that this course should be taken and so it was.

QUESTION

Let's look at some of the things he says in the draft note to you. He says that he couldn't recall any specific detail of the conversation, yet in the evidence, as you are well aware, on page 1685 on the 6th June, he says that he became aware precisely of what Senator Withers had done. How do you explain this sort of contradiction?

PRIME MINISTER

I think you have got to read the evidence as a whole because in other parts of the evidence it says that he only became aware of the full extent and nature of the discussions when Mr Pearson gave his evidence before the Royal Commission - so you have got to look at the evidence as a whole. The thing that had interested me was when he raised the matter and indicated that it was the fact of the conversation and not the substance that had been related in my office, was that, well, all right, this maybe gives an explanation of why he has got a clear recollection of it and I haven't.

Because if a Minister comes into my office and says he has been talking with his permanent head, that is not remarkable. If he says he hasn't spoken with his permanent head for some time it would be remarkable. In terms of a particular phone conversation, it had to be the nature, the purpose, the substance, the motive of a phone conversation that made this a remarkable one. Some parts of that, as denoted for example, was only revealed, I believe, when Mr Justice McGregor made his findings in his Report. If it had been the fact of the conversation, there is no particular reason why it would stay in my memory. Now all along I said I haven't - I don't question the Minister's recollection of the 17th January. I only say that I have got no awareness of that incident until April when Senator Durack, as Attorney-General, came to me with a report of a particular conversation which caused him concern - and if the Attorney-General was concerned, I was obviously going to be concerned about it.

#### QUESTION

Why then the need for the note at all?

#### PRIME MINISTER

Because it would have clarified the point for me, and at the most it could have led to one or two additional sentences going into the Parliamentary statement. But the Minister was advised to check the evidence before the Royal Commission - I concurred with that, as did other Ministers who were present - and even though a draft was dictated, and it ought to be kept in that perspective, it was never signed, it was never sent, and there was never any pressure to have it sent.

ENDS