

INTERVIEW WITH MIKE PETERSEN  
CHANNEL SEVEN

Question:

Why has it taken you five days to refute the allegations in the Bulletin?

Prime Minister:

In substance, the allegations were refuted by Eric Robinson and by myself, in the Parliament and I think also outside it, but the discussions that are referred to took place amongst Ministers, part of it at least in a Ministerial meeting and I place a very great deal of importance on the essential confidence of discussions between Ministers and it's only with extreme reluctance that I break that confidentiality down. Now because the matter had obviously built up into a matter of some degree of media concern that just during the weekend I started to have discussions with the Deputy Prime Minister and also with Eric Robinson as to whether or not, in this particular circumstance, that principle confidentiality shouldn't be breached.

Question:

Given the fact that the Parliament was sitting until Thursday night, and you had a meeting at the Lodge of senior ministers then, might you not have been better to have put this statement out on Thursday night and therefore saved a lot of damage?

Prime Minister:

I think with the wisdom of hindsight, that's a very easy (inaudible) wisdom to have. It might well have been better to make the decision that all right, a statement of this kind when the matter was first raised, but I think you underestimate the importance I attach to confidentiality. It is very important. Confidentiality of discussions between Ministers is quite essential to the good and proper operations of Government. All right, in view of everything that's gone on, that's been broken on this occasion.

Question:

Having broken it, you say in a written statement this afternoon: "I asked Mr. Robinson if he was sure of his recollection to write me a note". Now since the transcript of the Royal Commission was available to everyone, why did you need a note?

Prime Minister:

Because he had said something to Ministers, in front of Ministers, which made it perfectly plain that it was in his then recollection, the fact of the phone conversation and not the details, the substance, the contents of that conversation that had been related to me. Now one of the things which, if you like, in a sense has puzzled me, how Eric Robinson can have a very

Prime Minister (continued):

clear recollection of the reporting of that conversation while I had none. Now if a Minister comes into my office and says I've been speaking with my Permanent Head, that is thoroughly unremarkable. It can only be the substance and the nature of the conversation that start to make it remarkable. It wasn't only the substance of this conversation, it was the purpose which Mr. Justice McGregor attached to it that really made it remarkable and that came out obviously many many months later with the Report of the Royal Commission. If I could just take that one stage further. If a Minister came into my office and said I haven't had a conversation with my Permanent Head for three months, I would also find that remarkable. Now, if it was only the fact of the conversation and nothing else, that might well have offered an explanation as to why it was in Eric Robinson's recollection but in no part of mine whatsoever. Now, that's not the way it fell out, as the statement indicates.

Question:

Did not Mr. Robinson, before the Royal Commissioner, say that he was quite certain that Senator Withers had mentioned a name change about talking to Mr. Pearson?

Prime Minister:

I think it would be a good idea to read the totality of this evidence. There are a number of questions on this particular point. At another point for example, Mr. Robinson says that he was only aware of the substance and detail of the conversation when Mr. Pearson gave his evidence before the Royal Commission.

Question:

I'm sure you won't mind if I go back to the question of, however, why you asked Mr. Robinson, to write you a note.

Prime Minister:

Because it would explain to me why he remembered the incident and why I didn't. If it was as, he'd related to Ministers at that time but now, again let me make the point, it was suggested he should check the transcript. But he did.

Question:

Why then, would a busy man write the note first and then check the transcript. Which you say...

Prime Minister:

I don't find that unremarkable.

Question:

I'm afraid I do Prime Minister. If you asked him for a note, surely he would go away and check first, before writing the note to you?

Prime Minister:

The note was never sent. It was never signed. I didn't see it before today.

Question:

I appreciate that. But why would a busy Minister of State write a note and then go away and check.

Prime Minister:

Well, that's just the way it fell out.

Question:

Are we able to talk to Mr. Robinson about this?

Prime Minister:

I think you can talk to whoever you like but the fact remains the note was never sent and also, it's worth noting I think that the note itself, or the draft, because that's all it ever was, confirms the substance of what I'm saying to you in very precise detail.

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