

PRIME MINISTER'S INTERVIEW WITH DUNCAN FAIRWEATHER, ABC,
21 AUGUST 1978

PRIME MINISTER

I didn't issue it last week because I had regarded the substance of The Bulletin article allegations as being answered by the statements of Eric Robinson and myself in the Parliament. The matter referred to - things that have been discussed between Ministers - and at one point, in part at least, in a Ministerial meeting. I place a great deal of importance on confidentiality in discussions between Ministers within the Cabinet - within the Ministry - that is important to good government.

As the matter continued to obviously as public interest, as there were others that did not regard those denials as completely categoric denials as I had, and as Eric Robinson, the matter was reassessed over the weekend. Therefore, in discussions with the Deputy Prime Minister and Eric Robinson and other Ministers I came to the view that the statement that has been issued should be issued, together with the draft of the letter which was never sent, never signed and which I didn't see until today.

QUESTION

Do you intend it to be your last word on this subject or will you make an explanation to Parliament as well?

PRIME MINISTER

I have got no doubt that the Opposition will ask one or two questions on the subject, because they seem to be incapable of asking questions on mainstream matters that are of prime concern to Australians. Throughout this whole year they have been interesting themselves in peripheral issues, not devoting themselves to Australia's main problems, main concerns, not contributing to debates in that arena in any useful way.

QUESTION

Prime Minister a central point of these allegations has been that you asked Mr Robinson for a letter. Now you say you did ask him for a note if he was sure of his recollection. Why should he reexamine the evidence that he gave on oath before a Royal Commission?

PRIME MINISTER

Let me explain that in plain terms. I had always been puzzled why Eric Robinson had such a clear recollection of a conversation which he believed took place in my office on 17th January, when I had none and had no awareness of that particular matter until Senator Durack told me about it in April, he was concerned - because he was concerned, I was concerned. I was puzzled about this difference in recollection. If it was merely the fact of a phone call, that would not be remarkable. The phone call from

Senator Withers to Mr Pearson became remarkable when you knew its purpose, its motive and its content. Part of that did not come out, I think, until we read the Royal Commission Report - when it was not only the fact of the call, the content of the call, but the purpose of the call in the terms of Mr Justice McGregor. That was certainly remarkable.

When Mr Robinson said to a group of Ministers it was the fact of the phone call, not the substance or contents of the phone call that was related in my office on the 17th, when that was said I said, well, maybe that is an explanation why he remembers it, and why I don't. I asked him if your recollection, meaning his recollection at the time, a couple of weeks ago on the 7th and 8th of August - that recollection then - could he give me a note about it. That might have lead to one or two additional sentences in my statement to the Parliament giving a possible explanation for the difference in recollection - but it didn't turn out that way as you know.

QUESTION

It was construed that you had tried to influence Mr Robinson. Asking him to reconsider the evidence he gave to the Royal Commission, you say if he was sure of his recollection. What would have happened if he had not been sure?

PRIME MINISTER

I wasn't asking him to reconsider his evidence. What I did was to - if you are sure of your recollection, of what he had just told Ministers on the 7th and 8th August, it was the 8th of August - and the point he just made then was it was the fact of the phone call that was related in my office, not the substance. But it was said that he shouldn't do anything until he had checked with his evidence, and I certainly concurred in that, and the letter was never sent - there never was a letter, it was never signed, there was a draft but nothing else.

LAST QUESTION REPEATED:

QUESTION

Prime Minister, could you relate how it was that you did ask Mr Robinson for that note?

PRIME MINISTER

Mr Robinson was telling Ministers of what had happened, relating events, and in the Ministry meeting the records show that he raised this particular point in relation to the 17th January - that he himself made the point that it was the fact of the conversation and not the substance that was brought to my attention. In addition to that, the same point had been made in discussions with other Ministers. When I heard it I was interested in it for a very obvious reason - I had always been puzzled about why he had clear recollection of these events while I had none. It was only the fact of the phone call, as opposed to the substance, and that in itself is not remarkable. It is remarkable if Senator

Withers had said he had not spoken to Mr Pearson for three months, being in a sense his permanent head - that would be remarkable. This phone call could only become remarkable when its substance, its purpose, its contents and the motive behind it were known.

QUESTION

Didn't Mr Robinson give evidence to the Royal Commission that the question of a change in name of an electorate was mentioned in that phone call and repeated after it?

PRIME MINISTER

I think you have got to read the whole of Mr Robinson's evidence, and when you read that I think you will then get to a full understanding of the position. In parts of that evidence he makes it perfectly plain he didn't understand the full nature of the phone call until Mr Pearson gave evidence before the Royal Commission - that was in May. I hadn't understood the totality of what was alleged to have been said or not said, and in that sense, when you again made the simple comment: it was the fact of the phone call and not the substance that was related in my office. I was obviously interested, because that was not the impression I had got from earlier events and from the evidence as a whole. That has led me to say, well, if your recollection - meaning your recollection here and now - is correct, can you give me a note in relation to it. I again make the point, that the most that could have led to would have been one or two sentences perhaps in my statement to the Parliament giving a possible reason why he had a recollection of those events and while I had none - well, those one or two sentences weren't there.

ENDS