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PRESS CONFERENCE

Question:

You said today you saw this draft for the first time today. When did you become aware of its existence?

Prime Minister:

I've been aware of the existence of a draft sometime ago, but I deliberately didn't see it.

Question:

Didn't you say this morning that you didn't know of such a draft? I'm sorry I haven't got the exact words...

Prime Minister:

I said I haven't seen any letter at any time.

Question:

Where does it...(inaudible) Mr. Robinson actually wrote it? Where has it been said that Mr. Robinson wrote it?

Prime Minister:

I think the copy was destroyed and it was re-written from shorthand notes this morning.

Question:

Wasn't that how it was destroyed or by whom?

Prime Minister:

You would have to ask other people that because I never had a copy in my possession.

Question:

Isn't that splitting hairs a bit to say that you hadn't seen the draft?

Prime Minister:

I didn't say draft, I didn't see any letter at any time. and there never was a letter. Nothing was ever signed or sent.

Question:

What did you want it for?

Prime Minister:

Because I had always been puzzled as to why Eric Robinson had a very clear recollection of events of which I had absolutely none and what he said amongst Ministers, that what had been said in the office on the 17th, was the fact of the phone call, but not the substance, that would obviously give me an explanation in my own mind in relation to that, because if a Minister comes in and says he's had a talk with his Permanent Head, that's in no way remarkable. If he says he hasn't spoken to his Permanent Head for three months, that would be remarkable. In addition, a conversation can become remarkable because of its nature, its content or its motive and the full nature and content and the motive attributed to it by the Judge, later became apparent in relation to that particular conversation, a very (inaudible) much later time. At the most it could have resulted in one or two sentences additional to my statement in Parliament. Nothing else than that - not altering the substance but offering as a possible explanation because I haven't challenged Eric's recollection, (inaudible) my awareness of the matter was Senator Durack came to me about these matters with concern, as Attorney-General, at a much later point.

Question:

In the statement that you put out today with the categorical denial, followed I believe talks with Ministerial colleagues today. Could this statement not have come out on the same day as the Bulletin last week which would have prevented the issue dragging on for three or four days?

Prime Minister:

It should have, but there is a certain principle of confidentiality of discussions between Ministers and especially so if it involves in part discussion with a full Ministry, and I happen to regard that principle of confidentiality as one of very great importance to the proper workings of Government, but its over the weekend and discussion with the Deputy Prime Minister and Eric Robinson and other Ministers that came to the view that that principle ought to be breached on this occasion.

Question:

If I could push the point there? Presumably your reservations about making public confidential talks in Ministerial meetings was raised with the Ministers today. Could not this meeting have taken place on the same day as the Bulletin was circulated.

Prime Minister:

They were discussions...

Question:

Allegations have been very damaging, which have taken (inaudible)...

Prime Minister:

Let's say you made allegations. Sometimes the judgement made in Canberra of what's happening in Australia is not the judgement made by people outside. I've made that point on a number of occasions. The judgements were made last week that the principle should not be breached at that time because it was also believed that the comments, statements, made by Eric Robinson in the Parliament and by myself, answered the thrust and the intention of the Bulletin article, as I still believe they do and as I know Eric Robinson believes they do.

Question:

Why has it then been decided to breach the standing regulations as you might say, and put out the statement now. What has occurred?

Prime Minister:

A continuation of public interest, or media interest, obviously.

Question:

It seems odd, looking at this, that Mr. Robinson, whose recollection of most these matters seems to be fairly clear, has produced, or seen to produce at this Ministerial meeting, a recollection which is fairly different from that given in his evidence.

Prime Minister:

I think you ought to look at his evidence in total. For example, there is one part in Page 1685 which I know is immediately followed by another, but one part that said I was only aware how the name came to be changed when Mr. Pearson gave his evidence, and the detail to the Royal Commission.

Question:

He says specifically that he was aware of the name change and he aware that Withers told you about the name change on January 17...

Prime Minister:

I'm well aware of what's in the evidence but it was when certain matters were related to Ministers, which were very specific, it is the fact and not the substance that could have offered an explanation in my own mind as to why I had no recollection of it, and that's why I was interested in it.

Question:

Talking about the principle of confidentiality, when Mr. Howard moved to stop speculation on television licenses he breached a principle of not commenting at all on the Budget. Isn't that the same sort of principle?

Prime Minister:

I don't think these two are exactly the same but making a comment on that was delayed a number of days also.

Question:

Do you think this sort of note either adds anything to the press, anything from Mr. Robinson's desk?

Prime Minister:

I don't want to comment on the note in relation to the evidence. I've said on a number of occasions that I accept Eric Robinson's evidence in relation to that ... (inaudible).

Question:

Why did... (inaudible) send it to you on the day that he did it? Does it not suggest that after re-reading it, he decided that at least (inaudible) were in conflict with the evidence?

Prime Minister:

I think you'd have to ask him that. It was suggested at the time, and as far as I know suggested before anything was drafted, that the evidence ought to be checked; the transcript ought to be checked, and I certainly concurred with that - very much so.

Question:

You have no knowledge of why it was not sent to you by Mr. Robinson?

Prime Minister:

Well, he made a decision not to send it to me. One reason why, it had been said that he should check and I think it's also known that he checked the generality of this with his legal advisers. But he was advised that he should check against the transcript and I concurred and certainly agreed with that. I don't think there was any question of anything being drafted and signed forthwith.

Question:

Were you there when he drafted this first version?

Prime Minister:

I was in the same building, I certainly wasn't in the - I wasn't in the room with him, and I didn't know what he was dictating obviously.

Question:

You categorically denied that you requested Mr. Robinson to cast doubts on his evidence. Can you deny the entire Bulletin article?

Prime Minister:

I think that the only element of the Bulletin article which carried credibility is that there was a note. But I think the purpose, the intent, and the thrust of it, is totally and absolutely distorted and made so grotesque that it bears no relationship to the original, to the facts of the matter.

Question:

Isn't there a very real risk, in asking anyone to (inaudible) whether they are sure of their recollection, that you are inviting people to cast doubt on that recollection. It's just a fact of life....(inaudible). Are you sure of your recollection. Isn't there a danger of that being construed as an attempt, as a request, to change that recollection?

Prime Minister:

It was a question in relation to that of recollection on the 7th or 8th. If you're sure of what you're saying now, not of what was said in relation to the evidence of the Royal Commission.

Question:

Mr. Robinson volunteered this (inaudible)?

Prime Minister:

Yes, the records show that he raised the subject.

Question:

At a full Ministry meeting? Right - and when did you talk about...

Prime Minister:

No, he raised the subject of his evidence and the nature of of what was said on the 17th. He raised that. There was no question about it at all until after he had raised it.
(end tape).

(Rest of interview from SMH draft)

QUESTION

And later, not at that full meeting, but later you spoke to him about the possibility of a note?

PRIME MINISTER

It was either at that meeting, or at a meeting of five, six or seven people. There were no bilateral conversations on the point at all.

QUESTION

Just one point if I may. The transcript of Eric Robinson's evidence - page 1731 - says: the question was: But I thought you said that Senator Withers raised the change of name. Answer: yes. What did he say about that? Answer: He informed the Prime Minister in my presence of his role in the change of name.

Doesn't that cut across the draft of the letter where he is not aware of the specific content of the telephone call?

PRIME MINISTER

But hten he spoke to Mr Pearson - read the next line - that he had spoken to Mr Pearson. You've got to read it in total.

QUESTION

That evidence there on page 1731 appears to cut across the last paragraph in the draft letter.

PRIME MINISTER

Well, I'm not commenting on that because I didn't draft either of them.

Prime Minister (continued):

Again, if you go to page 1685 referring to the statement: "I was only aware how the name came to be changed when Mr. Pearson gave his evidence in detail to this Royal Commission".

Question:

He appears to contradict himself.

Prime Minister:

But if you take the question and answer immediately after that....there are a number of points...page 1687 "I don't recall any detail other than that Senator Withers in my presence told the Prime Minister of his phone call with Mr. Pearson. I don't recall anything else."

Question:

This apparent conflict in Eric Robinson's evidence is why you wanted it checked, I gather?

Prime Minister:

Well, I said before I was always puzzled why he had such a clear recollection when I had none. But I don't challenge this recollection. I made the point that it was only the fact of the call and not the substance, or its nature, or its purpose, or its motive, it's not remarkable.

Question:

What I mean is - the point you just made about before he drafted the letter, he was advised to check the transcript. This is why you wanted it checked, presumably?

Prime Minister:

Obviously, It wasn't related to drafting. It was obviously before anything was signed that it had to be done.

Question:

Who suggested that-- somebody else?

Prime Minister:

Somebody else suggested it and I concurred. In fact everyone who was present concurred.

Question:

Why, Mr. Fraser, did you ask Mr. Robinson if he was sure of his recollection to write you a note when he had already given evidence before a Royal Commission.

Prime Minister:

I was referring to the recollection as he was relating to ministers at that time. I've already indicated my interest in the matter that if it was conversation of substance I would have expected to remember it. As I have no recollection of it it was merely a Minister referring to a phone call, a Minister to a Permanent Head, that's most unremarkable. I made the point earlier, it's much more remarkable if a Minister comes in and says he hasn't been speaking...

Question:

It appears that Mr. Robinson in his evidence said that he was aware of Senator Withers' involvement in the name change which seems to imply that he was aware of the nature and substance of that phone call.

Prime Minister:

Well, I can only go back and suggest you read the totality of the evidence. I can't answer questions about somebody else's evidence.

Question:

If you did not learn then from Mr. Robinson what was the substance of the phone call by Senator Withers, did Senator Withers himself tell you that he had made the call.

Prime Minister:

I've got no recollection, as I said in Parliament, of this. I became aware of this matter when Senator Durack brought it to my attention in April. When he brought it to my attention he was concerned in his own mind in relation to it. I've got a clear recollection of the time and the circumstances of that.

Question:

When were you first aware of the conflict of Mr. Robinson's evidence, because there does seem to be a pretty clear conflict between page 1731 and page 1685.

Prime Minister:

To the extent that there is or isn't when I first read it. But I'm not commenting on the evidence in terms of substance. The evidence is there and I don't seek, and I never have, to challenge it or to quibble with it any sense, shape or form.

(ends)