

INTERVIEW WITH PAUL DAVEY, ABC

Question:

Are you now categorically saying that the Bulletin article is wrong?

Prime Minister:

It's wrong in its thrust, in its substance and that's been said all along.

Question:

And yet there were discussions on August 7 and 8 which you said in your statement, which included the matter of Mr. Robinson's evidence concerning the evidence of January 17.

Prime Minister:

Eric Robinson raised these matters when he was reporting to Ministers, refreshing Minister's minds on what had happened and as it makes plain, he had reported then that it was the fact of the phone conversation and not the substance, or contents that had been conveyed in my office on the 17th. Now, in putting it in that way, I was obviously interested in it because one of the things that had always puzzled me in a sense was why Eric Robinson had a clear recollection of the matter being mentioned and why I had none. Now, if a Minister comes into my office and says he has a conversation with his Permanent Head, I'm not going to find that remarkable, it would have to be the nature of the conversation that would make it remarkable or alternatively, if he came into my office and said he hadn't spoken with his Permanent Head for three months, I would find that remarkable and what the Minister said, in my mind, appeared to offer an explanation for that to me, for myself, and I had asked myself this on a number of occasions and that's the way the matter fell out.

Question:

What did you then say to Mr. Robinson?

Prime Minister:

I said, well if that is your recollection, can you write me a note about it? But it was also pointed out that he ought to refresh his memory about the evidence given at the Royal Commission which he did and even though a note was drafted, by Eric Robinson which I didn't see until today, it wasn't sent for reasons that are plain.

Question:

Would it be fair to say that Mr. Robinson, what he said in evidence to the Royal Commission, was if you like a little more forceful, a little more direct than what he has in this draft statement which you have now released to the press?

Prime Minister:

I think you've got to take his evidence in total. There are a number of questions on this subject and I think you need to look at them all.

Question:

Mr. Robinson told you in the statement which you've released, that he recalled Senator Withers on January 17, amongst other things, making reference to a telephone call that he had made to Mr. Pearson. Do you, Prime Minister, see any inconsistency in that fact and the fact of your telling the Parliament that the first time you became aware of the situation was on April 16.

Prime Minister:

No, because that is the first time I became aware of it. I've got no recollection of having been told of it on other occasions. Now, that's as it is. I mentioned that fact to you that if it was the fact I recall and not the substance, that could have been an explanation in my mind about Eric Robinson's recollection and my recollection. But that's not as it is. He re-read the evidence, I re-read his evidence, in terms of his evidence in relation to that point I accept it and I've never sought to belittle it.

Question:

One must ask, with respect, Prime Minister, why Mr. Robinson should remember that January 17 meeting better than you do?

Prime Minister:

Well, that might be one of the mysteries that will never unfold. I had thought that this particular matter might give myself an insight into it because again I make the point that if it was the fact of the phone call that in itself is a very unremarkable event, and it can only become remarkable if the substance and the substance I would believe, combined with the motive that the judge attributed to it, and that of course didn't unfold until a very much later time.

Question:

Given the - looking at the overall situation of the past week - given the tremendous political flak that you have received, why have you, if you like toughed-it-out, stone-walled, refused to answer direct questions on this?

Prime Minister:

Well, I answered the substance - let me just make that point again - I answered the substance and in my understanding Eric Robinson answered the substance, but I do place a very great importance on the confidentiality of discussions amongst Ministers, of discussions that take place in a Ministerial meeting, for example, and in these circumstances I felt that however important I believe that confidentiality should be, that the matter needed explanation and I discussed that the Deputy Prime Minister and with Eric Robinson and that's why this statement is being made, a statement in a sense which is against convention; against convention of confidentiality of those discussions.

Question:

Do you think your credibility^{though} you could have saved, if you like, or your credibility might have been overly damaged by not doing this last week?

Prime Minister:

Well, maybe I am overly concerned about maintaining appropriate confidentiality in discussions amongst Ministers and in my own mind and in my own heart I know absolutely that the discussions in their intent and in their purpose were completely innocent and completely clear and to that extent I suppose I was surprised at the degree of political flak that that in part's the name of the game isn't it?

Question:

Are you quite confident now that the issue is dead, that is is finished?

Prime Minister:

I've got no doubt that the Australian Labor Party will continue to try and revive the issue, but they will want to do that because they've got no thought to offer on the Government of Australia. They've not over the last two and a half years had a constructive word to say about the management of the economy. They know the economy is starting to run well. They know quite well that we are facing a 5 percent rate of inflation, within the 12 month period, and they also that in spite of some of the newspaper headlines, this Budget out in the countryside and where people gather in the cities and the countryside has been much much better received than the headlines would lead one to believe.

Question:

What about your own Government members, though, Prime Minister. There has been a lot of talk, open talk, by many of them that they wanted a categoric explanation from you that there were eruptions within the parties - the Joint Government parties - are you happy now that this will silence them, that you are going into this coming week with a united front?

Prime Minister:

Open talk, I don't know who open talk about - any discussions with me have always been very constructive and sensible ones.

Question:

I'm just trying to (inaudible) backbenchers - the feeling in the backbench?

Prime Minister:

I think that members in the total circumstances have a right to know the nature of the discussions and now they know.

Question:

And are they happy do you think?

Prime Minister:

I would hope so, and believe so.

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