

PRIME MINISTER INTERVIEWED: JEFF HUDDLESTONE, RADIO STATION 8HA,
TALK-BACK

ALICE SPRINGS

Jeff Huddlestone

Mr. Fraser, welcome to Alice Springs sir.

Today you took a light plane journey to traverse the progress on the Tarcoola to Alice Springs railway project.

Prime Minister

Yes I did. It was a very interesting trip because the construction was going very well. It was ahead of schedule. We had to provide additional funds - either that or the work was going to have to be slowed down and that would have destroyed the efficiency of the operation. It really is something to be proud of.

Huddlestone

The very fact of being so far ahead of schedule, 12 months, and within its budget of \$145 million will certainly add a great boost to the Territory, particularly when the line reaches the border in November of this year.

Prime Minister

It will be a boost to the Territory then, but I think it will be a better boost when it reaches Alice Springs. I imagine that will be quite a day.

Huddlestone

This evening you and Mrs. Fraser will be attending, along with other official guests, the launching of the Australiana Fund here in Alice Springs at the Old Telegraph Station. A little of the Australiana Fund and just what that seeks to do.

Prime Minister

It is really a private organisation which the Government has given, in a sense, tacit support to. There are four major official establishments belonging to the Commonwealth: there is Government House, Yarralumla; there is Admiralty House which is the Governor General's residence in Sydney; Kirribilli House, which I use sometimes when I am in Sydney, but which is also used for official guests of the Government - and that really is the main use of it; and the Prime Minister's Lodge. Now none of these houses are personal. They don't belong to the people who are in them. They belong to the nation. But up to the time I became Prime Minister they had really been furnished according to the personal whims of the occupants of the day.

Prime Minister (continued)

I thought, and Tamie thought, that this really wasn't the best way to go about it. So we'd established an official establishments committee to look after these four residences; to make recommendations about their development, having in mind the historic background of the buildings and the occupants they have had over the years.

Attached to that committee is the Australiana Fund and the people involved in that operation. The purpose is, either by money or in kind, to collect pieces of furniture or other household things, which might have had some historical significance in Australia in earlier times.

The two Sydney residences have been opened to the public. Shortly Yarralumla and the Lodge will again be open to the public. This will show what is being done with the residences. They are being looked after I think much better.

They belong to the nation and they should have some of Australia's history in them -- in pieces of furniture or paintings. We got, the other day, quite a notable portrait of the first Labor Prime Minister. It came on the market. Somebody saw it and it was made available through this particular operation. If it hadn't been started, that portrait might have just gone into limbo. It's a good portrait. We've got it hanging in the hall at the Lodge, That is part of the life of the place. It is part of Australia's history. We have an old colonial sideboard which was discovered - if Tamie was here she could tell you more of the details - but it was discovered in Australia, made in about 1820 by I suppose some of the original skilled tradesmen who came to this country from the United Kingdom; made out of Australian timber, a unique Australian design. Well now for the rest of time it will be in the dining room of the Lodge. I think this is much better than having bits and pieces of no real value and no real historical significance.

Huddlestone

Of course it is significant in itself that the function tonight is at the Old Telegraph Station - itself of great historical importance and significance to Australia and of course the Territory.

Prime Minister

It is. It has obviously been chosen for a purpose. I think it is a very fitting location for the function. What Tamie has been trying to do especially, is to emphasise that these four residences - houses - do belong to the nation. They are part of the nation's history and we ought to start building up and housing some of that history in them. Therefore, there are Australiana committees in all the States and in the Territory, and this is the launching day here.

Huddlestone

And of course, Mrs. Fraser is the President of the Australian Fund.

Prime Minister

Yes. She knows much more about it than I do.

Huddlestone

We have a number of questions that have been 'phoned in to you this afternoon. The first one is from Pam Gardner of the Anglican Lodge here in Alice Springs.

CALLER

I have two questions. The first one is that there are plans for building a dam outside of Alice Springs and also in the Tennant Creek area - the Mary Anne Dam -- and what I would like to know is if the Commonwealth can have some kind of legislation drawn up that it makes it a law that an environmental impact statement has to be made before these decisions can be decided ad hoc. An environmental statement; how it affects the people living in these areas - the Aboriginal people and the white people and also to introduction of foreign bacteria that might cause (inaudible), meningitis, or any other unknown germs that are foreign to these areas. Also, that the environmental council in Darwin, if it can have teeth to enforce this legislation. My second question is, the public hospitals in the Northern Territory seem to be understaffed with professionals and paramedical staff and I would like to know whether this is the CLP's way of letting people think that public hospitals are incompetent when really they are not. They are just understaffed and medical staff are working longer hours and consequently the public have to wait longer. I was wondering if this can be rectified also.

Prime Minister

These things basically ought to be referred to Territory officials and Territory Government. So far as the Commonwealth is concerned, in major capital works that we fund, we do have strict environmental laws and for any major work likely to have any significant impact on the environment, an environmental impact statement is necessary. That is taken into account. Most of the States also have equivalent provisions, but this particular one concerning dam, it would seem to me that the responsibility there lies with the Territory administration, with the Territory Government. We have quite deliberately made decisions over the last two or three years which has led to self-government in the Territory. I think that is better because I don't believe people from Canberra should make decisions for people in the Territory. But it does mean that certain matters have to be addressed to that Government. I think this is one of them.

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Prime Minister (continued)

Environmental matters are important and people are right to be concerned that proper protections and courses are undertaken.

On the other question you raised, the Commonwealth has been involved in hospital funding, of course, with the States, but by and large the States have determined the levels of staffing in the Northern Territory. This again is a matter coming under the control of the Territory Government. The actual staffing levels are not something that the Commonwealth is going to determine in the future. I had understood that the staffing levels had been pretty good in many areas. I am not making a comment now about a particular area, but in many parts of Australia hospitals have had about only a 60 per cent occupancy but they have been staffed up to 100 per cent. That is one of the reasons why the hospital costs have risen very greatly. That all comes back to how much money taxpayers have to provide.

What we have been trying to do is to work out with the hospital authorities in the States arrangements which will enable the hospitals to be run as efficiently as possible without in any sense diminishing the services available to the public -- but doing it a bit more economically than might have been the case in the past, because an enormous part of health costs comes from the straight out hospital costs and associated facilities. It is important that they use these economically and sensibly, so long as health care is not diminished. If there is a particular instance that you would like to have looked into, I am sure Senator Kilgariff or one of the local members would be prepared to follow that up for you.

CALLER

I would like to know if the Army could build the road from Adelaide to the Northern Territory border, especially as it is being classed as a military road.

Prime Minister

Technically, some elements of the Army construction squadron will obviously have that capacity, but it has not been the practice to send Army construction squadrons to send people to do work that is expected to be done by civilians. That is a tacit agreement, or understanding, throughout Australia, and it goes back a very very long time. The north-south road needs upgrading. It takes time, but I think it would be wrong for the Army to be used in current Australian circumstances. I know Peter Nixon has been examining the national highway program around Australia. Again, one of the questions in this area of course is the extent to which the Commonwealth should determine what roads money is spent on, and the extent to which the States themselves should set priorities. We have been trying to establish the circumstance in which States would accept responsibility within their own borders for the priorities. I think that is as it ought to be. Again, in one or two instances I know Peter Nixon has tried to persuade a State to provide additional funds.

CALLER

My question is: the radiation levels at Narbalek are exceptionally high because of the richness of the uranium ore. I have been trying to obtain information on worker exposure for well over two months now, in which time I have been given the run-around. It now transpires that Queensland mines not only do their own monitoring, but they also do not need to release any information on this radiation level unless they so want to. Now would please ensure that monitoring is done by an independent body and that all data on worker radiation exposure be made freely available to interested members of the public.

Prime Minister

I think you are wrong in implying that there is any secrecy about any of this. Australia is establishing nuclear codes for the operation and safety of people working, whether it is in mines or any sort of material that can provide radiation. That covers a wide range. It can cover medical areas. It can cover Lucas Heights. It can cover mining operations. The provisions and arrangements that Australia is making after the Royal Commission by Mr. Justice Fox are stricter I believe than in any other country of the world. There was some publicity about Narbalek sometime ago. But, I know quite well the people there are taking all proper precautions; are sticking with the requirements. There are independent authorities that monitor these things. I really believe that your concern in this particular area is quite misplaced. Our rules are very very strict indeed. Quite obviously the well-being of people working in a uranium mine, or at Lucas Heights, or in the medical area where there can be materials that can involve radiation. In any of these areas there need to be very strict provisions, and there are.

CALLER

The question I would like to ask is why does Darwin have greater holiday benefits and (inaudible) -- or mainly greater holiday benefits on a remote area basis than Alice Springs, where Alice Springs is probably more remote than Darwin in a lot of respects as far as transport and access to coastline and Eastern States. That is my question.

Prime Minister

The Government doesn't directly set terms and conditions for its employees, or for anyone in Australia. For general people under Federal awards, there is the Arbitration Commission and they make determinations depending on a whole range of factors; site and location can be taken into account. If it is a question of Public Service employment, then it is the Public Service Arbitrator in the Public Service machinery that can make determinations, taking into account whole range of factors.

Prime Minister (continued)

If people believe that there has been unequal handling of different situations between Alice Springs and Darwin, the normal arbitral procedures, the tribunals, is the appropriate way to pursue that. These things aren't left to the direct determination of governments. I don't really believe they ought to be. We've established a system of having an umpire for industrial matters and award matters. I think we should stick to the umpire. Sometimes you win out of it, sometimes you don't, but having that third party making the judgement is a good a system as any.

CALLER

My husband and his brother are Lebanese and have lived here in Alice Springs. We've been trying to bring his family to bring his family here for years and we've been having an awful lot of trouble. We get no definite answer; yes or no. Senator Kilgariff has done numerous things trying to help. We have spoken to Mr. MacKellar and we've written to the Prime Minister's office and have received only replies saying that the matter will be looked into. But this has been going on this last time now for well over a year and we are still getting replies saying the matter will be looked into. I wondered if the Prime Minister could give us any idea of anything else we could do to get a more definite answer, even if it is a no -- either a yes or a no.

Prime Minister

I don't know the details of the case, but Senator Kilgariff is with me and he has told me that the Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Mr. Michael MacKellar, has in fact reviewed the case. I don't know what the position is and what the decision is, but I will be happy to speak to Mr. MacKellar about it.

CALLER

My question is: who is responsible for the current deplorable state of the Stuart Highway, or South Road in South Australia. Has the South Australian Government been allotted sums specifically for sealing the Stuart Highway. Also, can the Prime Minister state when Stuart, the south road, will be sealed?

Prime Minister

The South Australian Government hasn't been allotted sums specifically for the Stuart Highway, but it does get significant sums from the Commonwealth each year for national highways. That includes the Stuart Highway. But we have adopted the policy of providing this money to State Governments, and in this case to South Australia, and then we believe that the State Governments ought to exert their own sensible judgement about priorities. Unfortunately, the South Australian Government has put the Stuart Highway on a very low order of priorities and therefore, without taking the question completely out of the hands of the State Government, Mr. Nixon has sought to bring a good deal of pressure to bear on the transport Minister in South Australia to provide additional sums.

Prime Minister (continued)

I think the caller is quite right. Much of the highway is in a pretty bad position. In the Commonwealth's view it ought to have been given a higher priority rating out of the funds that are available. I know Peter Nixon has had some limited success in getting additional funds allotted, but as we are administering these road grants at the moment, and making the bulk funds available to the States, our power is a persuasive one rather than one of dictatorship. That is the way the Premiers want it. They say give us the money and let us make the decisions. But then when something goes wrong they very often tend to blame the Commonwealth. I know that Peter Nixon is examining the future framework of a national highways program and I also know he is concerned that more funds be made available for the Stuart Highway. But at the moment, under present guidelines, it's question of persuading the South Australian Government.

CALLER

What is the Government policy in relation to minority groups and in particular to Aboriginal people. Is it one of separate development or of assimilation. If it is a policy of separate development, how far is it proposed to take that policy. It is thought locally that a policy of separatism is being encouraged, and examples of this are the lack of access to non-Aboriginal members of the community to land granted under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act. About one third of the Northern Territory's area is so affected, and both residents and visitors find difficulty in being unable to freely travel along roads passing through Aboriginal lands.

Prime Minister

The policy of the Federal Government in relation to minorities - let me deal with it in two parts. For people who have come to Australia, if you like, in the years since the last world war, we now have a special program designed to provide much better post-arrival services for migrants. This might involve resource centres where they can get advice and assistance relating to State or Federal Commonwealth departments; more English language classes and generally greater assistance in helping people to settle in to what is very often a different life in Australia compared to their previous homeland. I think these programs are useful. We had a special inquiry under Mr. Frank Galbally. We adopted in full the recommendations of that inquiry and the program is going forward very well. For Aboriginals there are special obligations. We all know the history of the past. I believe Australia was a little late in introducing special programs designed to overcome some of the difficulties that have grown out of the past. In other words, in plain terms, there is positive discrimination in favour of Aboriginals in a number of Government programs. I think that ought to remain. I don't say indefinitely into the future, but ought to remain certainly for the foreseeable future. It is not a policy of separate development for all minorities and ethnic groups. It is a policy of, in a sense, encouraging people to seek out their own future in their own way. If you like, strength through diversity, unity through diversity.

Prime Minister (continued)

If Aborigines want to live on their reserves, through the outstation movement, well then they ought to be entitled to do so. But if at the same time there are others who wish to join the mainstream of Australian society and life, then they ought to be encouraged and assisted where possible, to do so. It is a policy of self-development, self-fulfillment, trying to meet the special needs of Aboriginal people, but really with the same kind of objective that we would have for all Australians to lead the kind of life that they themselves want to plan for themselves.

CALLER

Would you please let Alice Springs' people know when the Stuart Highway, which it is by name only, is going to be upgraded by sealing it between (inaud) and the Northern Territory border. We all know the trouble section is in South Australia. But should this make any difference to a national highway. We had Mr. Nixon try to visit Cooper Pedy but could not land his aeroplane because of the wet weather. We all know Ministers are busy people, but surely he could have driven as many private people have to. Their vehicles are being wrecked. Even when it is dry, the road is corrugated and very pot-holey. Creek crossings are a nightmare. Has this road not been sealed because there is very few people in comparison with the eastern and southern cities living along it, which in short means not many voters. Northern Territory people rely heavily on this road because the rail is slow and unreliable, which should improve with the completion of the new line, but still cannot provide the service of private enterprise. When will this road be sealed. It is hard to imagine the tourist increase to the Territory.

Prime Minister

I can't give a definite time scale because at the moment it is the South Australian Government making decisions about how much money gets spent on the Stuart Highway. I am told that nearly \$4 1/2 million is in the program at the moment, this year. But a great deal more than that could be spent. We make the bulk term available to South Australia for national highways, as we do to other States, but then they decide what roads the funds will be spent on. I know that Peter Nixon is particularly concerned about the Stuart Highway because of its importance and also it has been given a low priority by the South Australian Government. I know he has been looking at this question. I can't argue against the thrust of what the questioner was saying. I only wish the South Australian Government would show greater sense of national responsibility in the distribution of the funds that are made to it.

CALLER

I am a Commonwealth Public Servant and we are finding it difficult to buy our Commonwealth Public Servant house. I am wondering if the Prime Minister is aware of the situation of Public Servants in my position and if he could perhaps implement some sort of suggestions to speed up the procedure

CALLER (continued)

of being able to buy these houses.

Prime Minister

The policy in relation to this is being reviewed by Mr. McLeay, the Minister responsible, right at this moment. I think it might be a good thing if I could get Senator Kilgariff to get hold of your address and when the policy is reviewed he could drop you a note about it and then we can see if that provides some help.

CALLER

The Labor Party has stated that they will commence sealing the south road as part of their unemployment relief plan. This sounds like a good idea because employment and transport would both benefit and dole money would be diverted into a major national project. Why doesn't your Government support such a policy.

Prime Minister

The Labor Party had such a policy before and when Mr. Hayden was Treasurer he abandoned it because it was costing a vast amount of money and providing very little employment. Road works at the moment - a lot of it is undertaken with big machines and heavy equipment, and it doesn't really provide all that much employment. But we've taken the view that the only way to get this economy right is to make sure that the farms and pastoralists, and the industries in Australia are competitive so that they can sell better and get into markets overseas and because they are doing better they will employ more. In the last 12 months private employment has grown again for the first time in a number of years. I think that is very encouraging indeed. The sort of "make work" programs that have been tried in a number of countries, including Australia, just haven't worked. South Australia has programs of that kind. But if you look at the record of the last 12 months unemployment has grown significantly in South Australia where it has fallen a bit in other States; employment has fallen in South Australia where employment has definitely grown in other States. The reason for that is that the policies of the South Australian Government have not encouraged investment and development. I believe that the Northern Territory is moving forward quite strongly. The pastoral industry is doing much better. Mining is going ahead. This is the way to solve the unemployment problem. If you want to argue, or suggest that more money should be spent on road construction - to get roads developed more quickly, that is a different kind of argument. It is one, that if we had the funds, I would certainly be sympathetic to, but I don't think that really it is the way to tax the vexed and difficult problem of employment.

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CALLER

I have a question to the Prime Minister about land rights for Aborigines. The majority of Aboriginal people are alienated from their traditional land by cattle station leases. I want to ask the Prime Minister what you will do to help them get some land rights in the form of (inaud) from cattle station leases since the Northern Territory Government has refused to make (inaud) compulsory under their ordinance. Will you press the Northern Territory Government to make (inaud) compulsory where necessary. The Central Land Council is forced, by the Land Rights Act, to devote its full time to attend to Aboriginal claims to unalienated Crown Land, and has no staff or money to attend to the problem of station (inaud). Will you fund the Central Land Council sufficiently to take care of this problem. Also, the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission is supposed to supply funds to purchase (inaud) when necessary, but it has insufficient funds for this purpose. Will you fund the Land Fund sufficiently so it can also do its job. If you don't do these things, will your Government accept responsibility for the fighting and resentment and social problems, the loss of culture, which are occurring and will continue to occur amongst Aboriginal people until all Aboriginal groups and families in each tribe get some adequate land rights in their own country in the Northern Territory.

Prime Minister

I think you are omitting the fact, or forgetting really, in the thrust of the question, that it was this Government that established the Land Rights Legislation and has therefore provided opportunities to Aborigines which they haven't had under any previous administration. Also, I have visited over the years a number of Aboriginal settlements and reserves. There is a very real difference between them obviously. But also, there is a feeling of optimism and enthusiasm for the future in a number of settlements which might not have been present several years ago. I think that is as a result of the general policies that the Commonwealth has introduced. The Land Fund Commission is going to be subsumed into a new body - an Aboriginal Development Commission - which Senator Chaney will be launching. That will have funds. There will be a commitment to it but the Commission itself will determine the directions in which the funds will be provided. I think again, that significant progress has been made in relation to Aboriginal problems, but a great deal more remains to be done.

CALLER

What is happening as far as these Aboriginal houses - these houses that have been built in Alice Springs. Apparently an amount of money was set aside to build a number of houses and because of what was happening recently, it has been dropped down to ten houses that are going to be built in Alice Springs. As quite a number of Aboriginal people have applied for a house in town, (1) what is going to happen to the rest of the people that are on this special housing because of 10 that will be put into these houses. And another, from the cutback from 20 to 10, what is happening to the money that was set aside for those houses to be built? Is that money going to be channelled back into Aboriginal housing in other areas or in Alice Springs?

Prime Minister

I would have to speak to Senator Chaney about the details of that. We are providing additional funds for Aboriginal housing and for the first time we are providing substantial sums out of the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement for Aboriginal housing, which around Australia will provide a very significant boost to Aboriginal housing of a kind that I think we haven't had before. One of the oddest things is that we have had the major welfare program for housing with the States - there had been a special allocation for pensioners as a needy group - but there had been no particular allocation for Aboriginals. Now there is and there will be in future programs. I think that is a very significant advance. But I will be happy to speak to Senator Chaney about the particular matters that you are referring to in Alice Springs. I understand they are being discussed with the Northern Territory Government.

CALLER

I would like to ask Mr. Fraser, why haven't the armed forces been put to work when strikers hold, or bring the country to a standstill. Mr. Chifley did it with success. There is no such word as can't.

Prime Minister

No, there is no such word as can't and you might note that during a particular dispute, especially centred in N.S.W., Mr. Wran was offered certain assistance if he needed it for moving blockages on major highways. He didn't pick up that offer. But he would have had to ask for it because it was essentially a State matter. Commonwealth power in industrial disputes varies. Where they are Commonwealth employees we have pretty substantial power and we've acted, especially in the Postal Commission and Telecom, in a very vigorous way. New legislation has been proclaimed and I think we have the powers that are needed. If people are under State awards, if the State Government is the employer, then they have the authority and they need to act, sometimes much more vigorously than they do. If it is a private employer then there are many provisions in the Arbitration Act which they could use if they wanted to. But again, the initiative sometimes has to be taken by employers. There is a belief that the Commonwealth has direct responsibility in all dispute situations. I am afraid that just isn't true. Our primary responsibility is to establish a framework of law, for people under Commonwealth laws, then it is for the parties to use that law. Secondly, we have a very particular responsibility for our own employees and I think we fulfill that. The circumstances in which Mr. Chifley put troops into the coal fields I think, well, they haven't arisen since 1948 and you'll know, then, that the whole of industry was held up because of shortages of coal, shortages of power. There were blackouts frequently in the south eastern part of Australia because not enough electricity was being generated. Again, we haven't seen that kind of situation since.