



PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF JOINT NEWS CONFERENCE WITH SENATOR THE HON
GARETH EVANS QC AND SENATOR THE HON GRAHAM RICHARDSON,
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, 22 MAY 1989

E & O E - PROOF ONLY

PM: I apologise that Senator Richardson has been delayed, but we understand that you've got some other timetable and deadline and schedule that you want to adhere to so we decided it best to start.

The Cabinet considered the question of Antarctic environment at its meeting this morning and we have decided that we will not sign the Minerals Convention, but instead will pursue the urgent negotiation of the comprehensive environmental protection convention within the framework of the Antarctic Treaty system. We recognise that the proposal to have such a Convention could offer something better than the existing situation or no Convention at all, but we believe it wasn't acceptable to us in terms of the absolute commitment that the Australian Government has to no mining in the Antarctic.

So we will be pursuing, as we've indicated in our joint Press Release, in the relevant forums the attempt to create such an expanded and comprehensive Convention to protect the environment there. Within that context to attempt to secure the establishment of an Antarctic Wilderness Park.

Let me make the point in regard to the concept of an Antarctic Wilderness Park that this is to be pursued within the existing framework of the Antarctic Treaty system which provides a context in the framework for such an international regime to be established.

We recognised, and the whole Cabinet understood, that to achieve what we want to do, this comprehensive protection of the environment in the Antarctic is not going to be a simple process. Putting it the other way, it's going to be extremely hard row to hoe because there is, as we understand it, a fair degree of opposition to that approach.

Nevertheless, we believe that there is a growing perception around the world of the responsibility that governments have to protect these fragile environments. That is a generally growing perception we believe and it has been enhanced more recently by the disastrous oil spill in Alaska. So we intend to try and muster within the international community all the support we can for this approach.

As I say with my colleagues in the Press Release in the visits that I and Gareth and Graham Richardson will be undertaking in the near future, we will use those visits as an opportunity to press the Australian Government position.

So let me sum it up by saying the Australian Government is opposed to mining in the Antarctic and because of that firm position that we have we do not intend to sign the Convention and instead will pursue the concepts, as I say, the comprehensive Antarctic Environmental Convention and within that context the hope to establish an Antarctic Wilderness Park.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, from statements from Senator Richardson earlier it would seem that the Government wasn't going to end up on this course. What's swung the Cabinet and the Government around to this position?

PM: Well, let me go to it. There was a view which in part of the comment I've made that goes to that. There was a view, an understandable view, that the Moratorium which exists down there is a Moratorium which is expressed as being in place until such time as a local Minerals Convention was signed and an attitude that the Convention would be necessary and desirable to have a regime within which you would be able to control, regulate and possibly prevent mining. Now in our consideration of this matter, we have come to the view that we want to have Australia in a position where, not only are we opposed to mining, but in a sustainable international position, can be said to be opposed to mining and acting in that way. Now there is no way, as we studied the matter in terms of international law, that you could sign the Convention but with a reservation which said you were opposed to mining because as a matter of international legal convention and interpretation such an unqualified reservation would, in fact, be not acceptable from a signatory. And as that became clear and as we were firm in our position that we were opposed to mining that course of action was not possible.

JOURNALIST: How strong was the vote in Cabinet?

PM: As in nearly all positions in my Cabinet there was no vote and we don't only have consensus in the community we have it in the Cabinet.

JOURNALIST: Well, was it overwhelming view of Cabinet members that this should be -

PM: Let me say that there was (a) no vote, because we don't have votes in the Cabinet, and (b), in the end, there was no expression of opposition to the course of action.

JOURNALIST: [inaudible]

PM: Well I have addressed that point and we've indicated that it could be in that sense some improvement, but what we are saying is that as we discussed this matter and wanted to sustain a position of the Australian Government being opposed to and being able to be opposed to mining, the advice clearly was that you couldn't sign the Convention and at the same time enter a reservation which said that you were opposed to mining and would stop mining. Now you can't have that position sustainably with our opposition to mining. And so we've also taken the view in that context that there is a possibility of a changing attitude amongst nations who have hitherto expressed views on this question. We think there is a changing world climate of opinion, if I can put it that way, which is a function both of the general increase and awareness of the responsibility of governments in this generation to protect the planet generally and most particularly in regard to the Antarctic, because of the experience of the recent oil spill in Alaska, an increasing understanding of the absolute fragility of that environment. So while we quite frankly acknowledge that there will be difficulties in attempting to change views of government towards the position that we are adopting we nevertheless believe that Australia has a responsibility to take a lead in this matter.

JOURNALIST: Well Mr Hawke, what if the worst comes to the worst and you aren't able to get the support you want for an Antarctic Wilderness Park? Where does that leave you ...

PM: We are not going to be consumed at this point by what, in the sense that you put it, is a worst case scenario. What we are committed to now is to exercise as much influence as we can both at official levels and at the level of Ministers with Gareth, myself, Senator Richardson, to try and get the sort of outcome that we think is appropriate, and we think the appropriate outcome is a commitment to no mining. We are not satisfied that the alternative course of action that had been intelligently analysed, looked at, we are not satisfied that pursuing that course is consistent with that unqualified opposition that we have to mining so we are going to use all the resources that we have at the official and governmental level to try and change attitudes on this point.

JOURNALIST: What sort of reaction do you expect from international ... do you expect any adverse ...

PM: Let's be quite straightforward about it, there will be many significant players who, on the basis of their known positions on this point, will be opposed to the Australian position. But Australia, under this Government, has not been a country which just wets its finger to the aura of international opinion and says well that's what determines Australia's position, if we believe that something is right then we have been prepared to pursue it. That's been true whether you look at questions of nuclear testing, South Pacific nuclear free zones, some quite critical questions in

PM (cont): the disarmament area where this Government has believed that a course of action is what is necessary in the best interests of the world then we have been prepared to pursue it. Now we are quite aware of the fact that in pursuing this course of action there will be opposition but I go back to the point that we don't live in a static world and if the attitudes of governments today, in regard to environmental issues is markedly different, to what it was even 12 months ago. Gareth has attended, I think it was in March, the 11th of March in the Hague, the Conference there that was called by three nations, the French and the Norwegians and the Netherlands, and the range of attendance that you got there is something that I think perhaps 12 months ago before that you wouldn't have been regarded as possible. So we don't believe that we are acting, as I say, in a static environment which is incapable of change of attitude and opinion and we think we have got a responsibility to try and change attitudes.

JOURNALIST: ... attached to this strategy that we could end up with no Minerals Convention, a Moratorium which doesn't hold up if, as some people fear, there are nations out there who are determined to go ahead and explore?

PM: There are risks in all strategies that one adopts, whether it is in domestic affairs or international affairs. What you've got to do is to say 'well what is the basic objective that you want to achieve?'. Now the basic objective that we want to achieve is no mining in Antarctic. We think we have got time to pursue that course of action, we think there is a chance of persuasion although, as I have said at the outset of this Press conference, we don't underestimate the very considerable difficulties through that course and we will conduct ourselves in a way which is directed towards achieving that goal. If you have got to consider a position at the end of those processes as to where you think the world's best interests and our best interests are served, well that will be the time to do it. But we are going to wholeheartedly and without qualification pursue this course of action now.

JOURNALIST: [inaudible]

PM: Well one can't be certain of the French position. Certainly there have been expressions of opinion from authoritative quarters within France which have expressed points of view which are similar to the one that we are expressing. The obvious point to make therefore in response to your question is that when I meet Prime Minister Rocard in Paris next month I will obviously be discussing this matter in very considerable detail with him and hoping to get French support for our position.

JOURNALIST: Senator Richardson, you've made it clear in the past that you're pro-convention and so is Senator Evans. Has it been a case today that you've been converted to the cause or is it going with the Cabinet flow?

RICHARDSON: Well I've been saying for some months actually that it was a pretty marginal decision but I favoured signing. But having said that, there's a good case that we ought to try to do better as we tried last time, so the Australian Government's going to try it. That's the appropriate course of action.

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke will World Heritage Listing be a considerable ...

PM: No I made the point in an earlier comment that there is in existence an international Antarctic Treaty system and that provides the framework within which we are convinced that the concept of an Antarctic Wilderness Park can not only as a concept work, but there is a structure there - an international structure - which can give effect to it. See what you've got to understand that is under the World Heritage concept that the management of an area listed for World Heritage devolves upon the country in which that area listed exists. Now you haven't got that situation in the Antarctic. There's no country which has sovereignty, exclusive sovereignty or any sovereignty in a sense. You claims to sovereignty in the Antarctic. So the concept of World Heritage Listing in that sense doesn't lend itself to what we are about, but you don't therefore have a vacuum, you have a situation of the Antarctic Treaty system which lends itself to both the concept and the supervision and working of the concept.

JOURNALIST: [inaudible]

PM: We couldn't do it unilaterally because no-one's got sovereignty there and so by definition the World Heritage concept can't apply.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, nobody's going to South America, or no-one's scheduled to go to South America -

PM: Not that I know of. I haven't signed up for anyone to go to South America.

JOURNALIST: We could expect a lot of this significant opposition to listing those areas of ...

PM: Yes, but there's the meeting in Paris in October of the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting there. These countries will be represented there and we're not confined in terms of communication with these countries simply to sending Ministers off there. So at both officials level and in a day to day sense but then in the meeting in Paris in October there'll be the opportunity to put our views to these countries.

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke is there any possibility ever of being forced to resurrect the Minerals Convention or do you regard it now as dead and buried?

PM: Well, you can't say it's dead and buried. It's out there, it exists and it's part of the international discussion. So it's not within Australia's province to kill and then bury something which is the property of a whole range of people. But as far as Australia is concerned we are not going down that line. We are saying, 'here is the decision that we've made, this is what we're going to pursue and going to concentrate all our resources on trying to achieve that objective'. Australia will be taking the lead to try and get a more comprehensive Convention and as part of that a Convention which involves no mining that's what we are about.

JOURNALIST: internationally on this. Do you think it is going to damage our credibility in international quarters?

SENATOR EVANS: I don't think so. We have always made it clear that we have got an intense and overriding concern for the protection of the environment. We haven't committed ourselves to support for this particular Convention, we have committed ourselves to support for an effective environmental regime. We are acting consistently with that and in a way in which I think will not in any way undermine our credibility.

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke, are you aware -

SENATOR EVANS: Can I just add to that that we did float the idea last week in the Paris preparatory meeting of a comprehensive environmental convention as perhaps an alternative way through this and it was a proposal which while meeting with opposition from two or three countries of a predictable kind - US and UK particularly - also one a measure of support including from some South American countries, conspicuously Chile, and so the item is accepted as a legitimate one for international discussion and that is the base on which we will be building as we carry the initiative forward.

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke, are you or Senator Evans concerned about the escalating level of violence in Bougainville and is the Government looking at any ...?

PM: Yes, of course we are concerned with the evidence of escalating violence there which tragically is involved with shooting of an Australian citizen and as I understand from some information just before I came in here, some gunshots at workers travelling by bus to the mine. Of course we are concerned about that we are concerned for two fundamental reasons (1) - and they are both of importance - the safety of Australian citizens - there are some three to 4,000 Australian citizens who are in the region and whose welfare, of course, is a matter of considerable concern to us and secondly, of course, the welfare of Papua New Guinea because this is a dispute, an issue which goes not merely to the question of land and so on, the question of shares of

PM (cont): royalties as distributed between local people, the provincial government and the central government, but it goes also to the very fundamental questions of the stability of the country and the capacity of the central government to conduct its affairs peaceably in the way it wishes to. So obviously we are concerned. We are monitoring the situation very closely. The Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea is due to arrive here on Wednesday and obviously this will be a matter which will be very much at the top of the agenda of matters that I'll be discussing with him.

JOURNALIST: So are we looking at contingency plan to protect Australians in Bougainville, Mr Hawke?

PM: In what I said before about monitoring the situation closely and that I referred to the welfare of Australian citizens, obviously without being alarmist about it, and I don't intend to be, but obviously our people in watching these issues will have in their mind what, in a worst case scenario, could be necessary to protect those interests.

JOURNALIST: Senator Richardson earlier in the debate on the Antarctic area you said that you thought mining there was inevitable. Do you ...?

RICHARDSON: Well I have always believed that the chances of mining in the Antarctic depend largely upon what's found and what breakthroughs there are in technology. Having said that that doesn't prevent any nation, in particular ours, from doing its best to prevent it. Because while you said I've always said it is inevitable, I've always said that I was against it and would do anything I could to prevent it, and what we are doing today, hopefully, is going down that path.

JOURNALIST: Were you worried about the recent ... having no protection, no regime set for mining that go ahead as a result of ...?

RICHARDSON: What we are trying to do is to get in place a better ... protection for the Antarctic environment than exists now, or would exist if the Convention was signed. That being the case I'm hardly in a position to object.

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke do you support Senator Richardson's suggestion that there could be a referendum on the question of the Commonwealth overriding the States powers concerning certain environmental controls?

PM: I haven't yet had the opportunity of discussing this matter with the Senator because I understand from what he said it wasn't something he was talking about tomorrow or the next day but as something like 10 years down the track. I just make this point that obviously we have worked as hard as any government possibly could within the existing constitutional division of power, to protect the environment. It is a matter of record that that's been very difficult in getting the support of Tasmania, matters

PM (cont): concerning them and in Queensland concerning that Government and so it would be the case that if you didn't have that sort of constitutional division power, if there was a clear head of power our task in the past would have been easier than it has been. But I believe that we have demonstrated the capacity and the commitment and the tenacity, if you like, of working under the existing arrangements we'll continue to do that. Let me say that I would hope that with, what I believe, is an increasing awareness within this country of the importance of environmental issues, that States have hitherto wanted us to bow at the shrine of States rights. Something which I have always regarded as rather difficult to comprehend that a citizen has some interest and rights because he lives within a State border which is different from his rights and concerns as a citizen of this country and of the world. I have never been quite able to understand that. Now I think that those who want to worship at the altar of State rights are going to find a diminishing congregation witnessing their worship.

JOURNALIST: Is it a referendum that you could win not in ten years but in a much shorter time frame ...?

PM: Let me say this. I've said just in some brief conversations I've had with different people this morning in my office when there was a reference to Graham's idea of perhaps something down the track, that I would have thought that this is an issue in which the way things are going you would have a much better environment for acceptance than you would on many other issues.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, are still confident -

PM: Although one would have thought that on some other issues that we put to them last year that a consideration of their own interests would have led to that conclusion too.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, are you still confident of achieving significant reform of the waterfront in time for a statement in Parliament next week?

PM: Yes I wasn't - and I suggest neither should you be carried away by headlines of a newspaper. I know that we saw the message of doom on the front page of the Australian Financial Review but as predictors of events they have got something less than an entirely impeccable record over the recent 12 months or two years. I wasn't led to believe from reading this morning that they were improving their record.

JOURNALIST: Senator Evans could you tell us the main factor in your change of heart on the ...

EVANS: No ... The matters that really have been detailed by the Prime Minister and my concern all along, has been to get an effective environmental protection regime. I certainly was persuaded as we say in the joint statement that the present Minerals Convention is better than no

EVANS (cont): protective regime at all. But if there is a chance of doing much better than the existing Convention I'm very happy and keen to support it. There is evidence not least with the statements attributed to the French Prime Minister of an international environment growing in which there might be more fertile ground to pursue and more far reaching approach than that which I'd previously thought was possible.

JOURNALIST: So was the French thing the main factor in your change in the position?

EVANS: That's a relevant factor. Another factor was that identified by the Prime Minister when he said that to make clear our position if we were to sign the Minerals Convention we really would have to accompany it by a statement which made clear that we would exercise the veto right which is effectively given to parties to the Convention in a way that we'd stop mining. But if we were to make a reservation in those terms it would as a matter of international law be so much at odds with the underlying concept of the Convention that we wouldn't get away with it. So we were caught in that bind, a bind which frankly I have to acknowledge the logical difficulty with. And combined with the other factor I mentioned I think that did create a situation where it's worth going down this track.

JOURNALIST: If you were really not interested in Party politics on the issue of immigration, wouldn't you have moved exactly the same motion on immigration in the Parliament this week that you moved last year -

PM: There is a very simple answer to that question. It's a matter of Standing Orders that you are precluded from moving a motion in exactly the same terms as one that's previously been passed. So there is nothing sinister, mischievous, or -

JOURNALIST: The only reason is -

PM: It's not a question of getting around. It's not a question of getting around. The simple fact is this. That as far as Australia's interests are concerned in the region, the region very much wants and understandably wants a resumption - and a stated resumption - of the bipartisanship on this issue which has characterised Australia's approach for the last twenty years. And Australia's interests are served by achieving that position. There is nothing involved, there is no attempt here to take advantage of the Opposition or the change of leadership. Indeed in the blood and gore and chaos that's characterised the change of leadership there is one thing in all that which has stood out like a beacon - and hopelessly you might say for this country - and that is a clear and unequivocal statement of Mr Peacock - which I've welcomed and which is consistent with what I've said in the Parliament - and that is that no-one would be happier than the Prime Minister, no-one would be happier than the Prime Minister, if we could get a

PM (cont): return to that bipartisan position. I've said that at the time, I meant it at the time, that's what I wanted to see as soon as the opportunity for achieving that has arisen then you're going to get it. It's not for the interests of the Government, it is very much for the interests of this country and of the region.

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke isn't there a danger though that by re-opening this debate that you ...

PM: I would think not. I would think that so many people in the community who will welcome what Mr Peacock has said and people within the Liberal Party and the community generally, they want to see a return and a known return to a bipartisan position and certainly I can assure you from my visits in the region - and I know that the Foreign Minister can tell you the same thing - that the region profoundly wants to have a position where it is known that as far as this country is concerned we will have a return to bipartisanship on this issue.

EVANS: Can I just say on that that straight after Peacock's statement I went around to the PM's Office and said that this is an ideal opportunity to start to run that particular motion again and I found that the idea had already taken hold there, entirely for reasons in my case of Foreign Affairs and getting on the record bipartisan support for that resolution which is a tremendously important part of our regional credibility. I can assure you that the motivation within the Government is wholly as the PM has described it.

JOURNALIST: While on the region Senator Evans, how will the Government be viewing the Democrats proposed motion in the Senate supporting the latest protests in China ... support of democracy ...

EVANS: Well I think our present position on the Chinese situation is best explained in the statement I put out today which makes the point that it's very much the Australian Government's strong hope that the situation in China can be resolved without violence and with respect for fundamental human rights. I think beyond that it would be premature for us to make any further comment. I'll deal with the Democrats motion when I see the terms in which it's expressed.

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke on a separate issue, the Australian dollar has fallen by over 1.5 cents today.

PM: Against the United States dollar.

JOURNALIST: Yes and the -

PM: But very, very slight fall against the pounds sterling, the deutschmark and the yen.

JOURNALIST: Well financial markets are indicating that they're not happy with the outlook for the Australian economy. They're considerably concerned about the fact that Mr Keating yesterday said commodity prices had peaked providing a ... balance of payments over the next six to twelve months. Do you think that provides any scope for an easing of policy or tightening of policy?

PM: I've nothing to say other than what Paul Keating and Bob Hawke have been saying for some time now that we will keep the instruments of policy this tight for as long as is necessary to deal with Australia's economic situation. Now Paul has said that, I have said it and there is no reason in the light of anything that's happened today or the last 48 hours, or the last 72 hours to change that clear statement of our position.

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke Nauru has taken Australia to the International Court of Justice over the issue of rehabilitation ... phosphate. But what's your response? Is Australia going to strongly defend this case?

PM: Yes we've made that clear. I've made that clear to the Chief, Hammer Deroburt. I made it quite clear when he'd been here that that is our position. We have got nothing that we have to apologise for or to explain in terms of the action we've taken. If they regard it as in their interests to pursue this course of action we will vigorously defend Australia's interests.

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke on the waterfront ... is this consensus the correct way way to approach these issues and with the Cabinet being seen to impose overall plans for the waterfront if their ...

PM: Well there are some greater degrees of difficulties which have emerged in respect of some matters that had not been anticipated in the first place. The Minister is engaged in discussions with the parties on that. I indicated my response to an earlier question, don't get carried away by your journal - having got it wrong yet again - there will be a statement and a meaningful one. If part of your question, 'is it better to go by consensus or some other way', obviously it's best if you can negotiate by consensus. The worst thing to do is to go by way of confrontation which not only doesn't improve the situation it's likely to make it worse. I mean we've had - let's look at this nonsense. This sudden embrace by the Opposition about micro-economic reform in general and the waterfront and the maritime industry in particular. It is a load of nonsense. They had their time and their time in Office was characterised by total inaction in regard to these areas in particular and in regard to industrial relationships and management generally, you ... the confrontation which made things worse. You know what the overall position is in regard to their period and our period? And in our period in Office if you look at industrial disputes generally, 58%

PM (cont): reduction in time lost under the processes that we've followed. Now if you want a certain recipe for exacerbating the situation on the waterfront and the maritime industry and in the economy generally, let's pick up this concept of what we'll do is get out the great big stick and start belting employers and belting trade unions around the ears. It doesn't work. So what you've got to do is to try and make them understand that their own interest and certainly the interests of the nation will be served by change and change there will be.

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke back on the Antarctic, the working party that you established recently to advise you on ... Can I ask you what they were ...

PM: Well you can but there's not much point in the question because all we were wanting to do was to say, 'well now give us the issues that are involved, the sort of processes that we'd need to think about following'. Now that's an exploratory sort of piece of work and as a result of what we've done and today we'll take that further. We'll now have further work done on what needs to be done and part of that has been reflected in an answer I've already given in the - we won't be talking about a world park as such. We'll be talking about an Antarctic wilderness park and that essentially reflects the sort of considerations I gave in answer to an earlier question - that you've got to have a process which is capable of being given effect to. Now if you talked about a world park which may carry with it concepts of world heritage listing and so on and United Nations, involvement by definition it's a path that can't work. So what we will want our people to do now is to as quickly as possible to firm up now that we've made this decision as a Cabinet the sort of framework with which we'll be going to other countries.

JOURNALIST: At this stage it would seem ... encompassing all mainland Antarctic ... surrounding oceans?

PM: Yes that would be the concept, yes.

ends