



PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP
INTERVIEW WITH CAROLINE TUCKER, 4QR, BRISBANE, QLD
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CT: Now, you were preaching to the converted today, weren't you?

PM: Now, well, I suppose if we are to say that the Queensland education system is already giving a lead to Australia in the promotion of Asian languages maybe that's true. Because, the Premier and I had the pleasure of going to a classroom after the assembly and I must say, seeing a class full of Australian kids speaking in Chinese with a very enthusiastic teacher of Chinese, was really a thrill.

CT: Do your children study Asian languages?

PM: No, they don't but as a consequence of this, the Premier bought this up at the Council of Australian Governments which is, as you know, a non financial Premiers' meeting and we adopted a policy of developing a national Asian languages policy. This will focus on the speaking of Japanese, Chinese, Korean and Indonesian and we announced a \$48 million dollar program in the Budget for it so we're now starting to see it move. So, there's a bit of Queensland leadership which has been very good.

CT: Good to see. On the subject of education still, it appears the republican debate is set to be rekindled, can you tell us about the public education campaign which is being designed?

PM: Yes, well, somebody, today, got a story from the bureaucracy about a matter the Cabinet was considering, or a Cabinet committee, about some general education about the Constitution. Now, as it turned out, the Cabinet didn't adopt it - that didn't make the story. But, the point was that one of the things that Malcolm Turnbull's Republican Advisory Committee found was that the understanding of the Constitution was fairly slight. That's in part because it was basically written, as you know, in the last gasp of the 19th century for the British parliament to

keep an eye on Australia. And, so, they had all of these mechanisms there like the Executive Council - the Cabinet isn't mentioned - and so a reader, today, of the Constitution would hardly understand how Australia works.

So, you know, the Premier was saying as we were coming in in the car today that we often despair about the fact that kids sort of lose interest in public life and in politics - and lose faith in it; if they don't understand at least how the Constitution operates then we're a bit of a loss. Anyway, this was a proposal to talk about the Constitution, not to put the 'yes' or 'no' case on the republic. And, we didn't even adopt it, anyway.

CT: So, it's not even on the table?

PM: It's not even on the table. But, it may come back because I think, probably, Constitutional education or education on constitutional issues is something we should do. It's a bit like the Asian languages.

CT: So, would you be sticking to the timetable for the republican debate to go ahead?

PM: Well, in a sense we don't have a timetable. I think this is something that Australians want to think about and as the public debate filters on - and the work of that committee was very good, it was the first real bit of text that we've ever had about the quantification of powers and mode of election and all these other things. As it seeps out in the debate, generally, there will be a better understanding of it. And the government will be saying more about it as we move through the next, you know, year or two.

CT: If we could just go back to Asia, you're going to Jakarta next month?

PM: I am.

CT: That's four times since you've become Prime Minister, is there a special area that you're interested in over there or do you think it's just a regional issue?

PM: Well, I'm going on this occasion because of the Australia-Indonesia 1994 Exhibition which will be the largest trade exhibition we've ever mounted in any country, or ever mounted outside of Australia. And, because Indonesia is so significant as an economy and matters so much to us as a society and it being such a very large exhibition, I thought the thing to do was to respond to the invitation to open it. And, secondly, I'll have a chance to see President Soeharto and talk about the forthcoming APEC leaders' meeting which is on in November so it's a natural point to have another conversation with him and the government.

- CT: Do you see Indonesia becoming increasingly important to Australia?
- PM: I think it is the country of greatest significance to us in terms of our foreign, commercial and trade policies. And, therefore, understanding it, getting to know it better, building trust and confidence between us is central to Australia's best interests.
- CT: Well, with that focus in that particular region and countries like Indonesia how do you view sending Australian troops to Rwanda?
- PM: This falls into the general humanitarian category and our general support for the United Nations as an institution. I think the UN has asked a number of countries if they'd be willing to provide military assistance to assure delivery of humanitarian assistance. They're not saying, "Come over here and separate the warring parties." But, at this stage there is no formal Security Council decision about the nature of the operation and while we've been generally sympathetic to these sorts of operations in the past, we'll want to see exactly what is being proposed.
- CT: Would you support it without a truce of some sort being in place?
- PM: Well, I think I'd let that one go until we see exactly what the UN intends, itself. And, even after it decides something it doesn't mean to say that we will necessarily agree, though, on occasions we have.
- CT: Alright, on to something else, last week's Budget set aside \$500 million for Aboriginal health over five years, the AMA doesn't quite agree with those figures, what's the real picture here?
- PM: Well, the AMA, this Brendon Nelson character, this is an organisation whose general policy is to do Medicare in. I mean, this is an organisation which is about tramping all over the one health system that provides lower to middle income Australians with security in health. And, they're now going on, taking up the cause of Aboriginal health as a cause celebre for which you would believe they were the principal protagonists. They never have been. And, we don't believe that with a massive increment in funding proposed by the government that you could actually spend more than that and spend it wisely. So, you know, this is a.....
- CT: Is it really a massive increase, though?
- PM: Oh, it is, it's a big increase.
- CT: To what extent?
- PM: Well, it's, I think, at the limits of what we can sensibly program to spend. And that's, I think, the important point. But, the idea that this is a betrayal of Aboriginals, if you said to Mr Nelson, "Listen, what about

we start reviewing the common fees for some specialist consultations and we provide some of those savings for Aboriginal health?", you'd hear the shout and the hue and cry from AMA headquarters. So, we could treat a lot of these general protestations with the scepticism, healthy scepticism, I think they deserve.

- CT: There's been a fair bit of discussion about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) having control of those funds as well. Do you feel that that is really the right decision, to leave those funds in the control of ATSIC?
- PM: Well, health, in respect of Aboriginals, has never been exclusively with ATSIC. The Commonwealth Department of Health and general national health delivery has found its way to support of Aboriginal people. There's always this question of a trade between so-called self determination in the management of Aboriginal affairs, including health, and the other general programs of the Commonwealth. I think we've got the balance pretty right and the notion that we should take it away from ATSIC and just dispense it all departmentally I don't agree with. The main thing here is to make sure that Aboriginal people, that their health environment and the direct help for health in acute terms, is more effective. That's what has to happen here and we think these programs can be made to be delivered effectively. But, once you start pushing the envelope out where you can't be certain you can really wind the programs up, you've got to wonder about the point of all that.
- CT: You must be reasonably pleased, just to finish off, reasonably pleased with the sort of reception the White Paper and the Budget have had out there in the community? Jeff Kennett seems to think you could win another election in the near future, would you give it a go?
- PM: Well, I said the other day, elections are too hard to win to give the time away for nothing. I mean, it's just fifteen months since the last election and I don't think the public want nor appreciate anyone sort of, at this point, looking around for an electoral opportunity. They want you to do what you said you'd do. Now, in the election campaign, we said that one of the things - one of the things I made very clear - is we would pick the unemployed up, we'd bring them along with the rest of us, that we wouldn't leave them behind. And the White Paper is a serious attempt, not just in Australian terms but in world terms, to do something innovative and new in terms of the labour market to personally case manage - and next year we'll be personally case managing 509,000 Australians - to understand their personality, to understand their aptitudes, their educational standards, their work experience and to try and design training for them and then place them into a job with a job subsidy. In doing that, what the White Paper says is we will remain a society that cares about one another and we will remain an inclusive society. That is, one where we move along together and we don't develop an underclass. Now, I think Australians expected the government to do that, we said we'd do it in the election

and that's the nature of the Paper and, I think, Australians have felt good about that. They've said, "Good, that's what we think, that's what we think you should do."

CT: Has business said that?

PM: By and large, yes. The White Paper got a very good response from - I've got some of them with me - from the Metal Trades Industry Association, from the Business Council, from various other, if you like, business bodies. Because, in this recovery skills formation - which we always have problems with in recoveries, shortages of skills - normally we have recourse to the migration program, on this occasion we won't be able to have the recourse to it in the volume we've had in the last recovery phase. So, the skills will have to come from our domestic labour market, from new entrants to the workforce from school and by training those three to four hundred thousand people who've been unemployed for 12 months or more. So, I think business has said, "Look, we will face some skills bottlenecks here; it's a good thing the government is doing here." Basically, if we can get these people and train them and place them and get them back into the mainstream, not only is it an equitable and decent and fair thing to do, it's also an efficient thing to do.

CT: Alright, I'm afraid I'm going to have to leave it there - once again, we've run out of time if I want to include anything else in the program today. Thankyou very much for coming in. Good to see you.

PM: Good Caroline. Thanks for the opportunity.

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