



PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP
DOORSTOP, VIETNAMESE BUDDHIST TEMPLE, LANSDALE, WA
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PM: While I have been in Western Australia, we have had some political reshaping going on in the east, with Mr Howard trying to do the political chameleon number and almost vanish against any background - the budget paper, society, his history, his past, his old policies - and I now notice with a round of print interviews yesterday, they again reek of the opportunism which he displayed all last week in trying to say; "isn't it a dreadful thing that the Government has got spending cuts", yet he in fact favoured them. You will have noticed that with the slightest bit of pressure, which I applied to him last week - a little bit of the blowtorch on the belly - and straight away he is now saying that he only tried the spending cuts racket on the Government as a way of putting pressure on the Government, and today he is backing off - he says: "he's got to be realistic, and revise his position about big spending cuts". So he's out there last week saying "isn't it shocking - all these spending cuts", and I say to him "there he is - being the same opportunist about this that he was about all of those things in the 1980s - his views on migration, his stand on various other policies", and straight away he is out there dropping it. But, in these interviews today, what we can't find - if you dredge through the tonnes of wasted newsprint just from the Howard interviews - there is not one single idea.

What I think we can only deduce from all this - all of these interviews - is the only plan is to hide his policies. His interviews are dominated by backflips, indecision, policy weakness and a lack of vision, and as Geoff Kitney in the Sydney Morning Herald said, "John Howard remade may be unrecognisable", and then we actually have the Courier Mail saying "vague is best" - "vague is best". So John Howard thinks he can win a national election by standing for nothing, and by being as vague as he possibly can. As I said, he keeps trying to remake himself - I described him last week as the Ronald Biggs of the

Liberal Party, that he didn't have a past - and now he is trying to remake himself again this week. He says he is now going after the blue-collar vote, but who can forget the contempt in which workers were held with his "JobsBack Policy"? Or who can forget the recent trouncing of his candidate which was suffered in the Communication Workers Union election? I mean, this was only a few months ago. So, he expects - I don't know whether he thinks working Australians are silly, or gullible - but this guy is out to rip their wages to pieces - he has opposed every wage increase since 1983, yet he says he is going for the blue-collar vote.

He said he would support sensible spending cuts, but then refuses to nominate which ones he would support, even though he has a primary list of proposed spending cuts by Departments. He says...he denies in the Telegraph, in Sydney, that he has an inability to make tough decisions - he denies he has the ability to make tough decisions - and then he appoints both Crichton-Browne and Prosser as his delegates in Western Australia because he won't make the tough decisions about which one it should be. He says history is important to him when it comes to the monarchy, but he tells the Telegraph that when it is his own history, history is not important. When we talk about his history it's not important, but history is important to him. He tells journalists he may change his mind on the republic, but he's against it now. In other words, if the Prime Minister Mr Keating will actually lead Australia towards a republic, he might make his mind up and he might follow. Some leader! He indicated he may change his mind about the republic while he was still opposed to it now - he could not say what his view might be in 5 years. In other words, "if Mr Keating will show leadership" - as usual - "I might consider my position, and I might follow".

But as we go through these amazing acrobatics, he says that there was a reform fatigue in Australia, and in the Australian electorate - that he believed there was a desire for gentler policies. In other words, no more reform. So if you look at the headlines - "Vague is best", Mr Kitney's view that he may become unrecognisable, that he is walking away from all these policies - you wonder what he actually stands for. Some of my critics and his supporters - like Mr Alan Woods from The Australian, or Mr Steve Burrell from the Financial Review, or Mr Des Moore - what do they think of their great dry hero now? When he is opposed to revenue raising, he's opposed to interest rate rises, and he's opposed to large spending cuts - in other words, he is opposed to all the variables of an Australian Budget. So where does he stand? I mean, where is the hairy-chested Budget keeper of old? Where is the dry Mr Howard? Well, he has dried up. He has almost dried away. So, it was very revealing...there is Mr Howard backing off budget cuts, but then he said - Mr Howard said - that he would oppose in the Senate any tax increases in the Budget as an exercise in political accountability. In other words, he will try and wreck the Government's

budget, but is opposed to tax increases himself, he's opposed to large spending cuts - he says - and he is also opposed to using monetary policy or interest rates to slow the economy.

He says the country has got reform fatigue, and he wants to be a political chameleon. The question has to be then asked - why do we need him? If we think Australia should become a republic, he says he's not sure - he will see where Mr Keating leads us, and if he leads, he may follow. Well, I don't mind leading. I don't mind leading - and I am after followers, even if it's him. But he goes on to say that he has expressed serious reservations about the Racial Vilification Legislation, casting doubt on the Coalition's promise to produce it's own Bill, where they would not support - the Liberal and National Party - would not support the Government's Racial Vilification Legislation, but introduce their own, he is now saying they may not even introduce their own. They may not even introduce their own. So, on that he has sort of moved backwards. So, I think, I can only, I mean, I'm not a great admirer of sub editors in this country, but The Courier Mail did pretty well today and 'Vague is Best' from Mr Howard. I mean here he is with a round of interviews - 'Vague is Best' - is about all that people could drag from Mr Howard's chameleon like stunts over the last couple of days. So, as long as we now know that the sort of government which Mr Howard is proposing to Australia is one which has no policy specificity, no strength in any of the fiscal or budgetary instruments, no clarity in where he stands ideologically and only an opportunist view that he is going to support, look after, the blue collar people who he spent half of his working life trying to down in every wage round and every tax cut and every benefit that ever came their way. I don't know whether he thinks they are silly or gullible or both. At any rate, at least I now know what I am dealing with - a political blanc mange and one thing about him, I'd probably be able to stretch him around a bit. If he is pliable and rubbery, that will do me fine.

J: Maybe he thinks all he has to do is tread water.

PM: Or melt. Tread water or melt. Change shape again.

J: You don't seem to be very impressed with him, but Mr Packer does.

PM: Well, that's all right. I mean, he and Mr Packer have obviously had conversations.

J: Do you think Mr Howard has promised something to him?

PM: Well, I think, there is no doubt that Mr Howard has given him the nod that he would remove the cross media rules.

J: Are you going to have to make some decisions about that in the near future?

- PM: Well, I may well do, may well have to.
- J: There are reports that Mr Murdoch has bought more Fairfax shares.
- PM: Well, who knows, who knows.
- J: Are you going to be intimidated by Mr Packer's remarks last night?
- PM: No, I told him yesterday, I am in the conflict business. I don't take the troubles I give them to people like that.
- J: Are you going to have to enforce the 15 per cent law though?
- PM: I'm sorry, you look taller than yesterday.
- J: With people buying shares, Mr Packer and Mr Murdoch, the Government is surely going to have to step in.
- PM: Well, the Government will make policy wherever it needs to be made, wherever we come to a policy fork in the road, we will go one way or another.
- J: Are you at one at the moment?
- PM: Not necessarily, no.
- J: There are elements in Caucus that want to tighten the cross, media ownership laws.
- PM: We have got elements in Caucus that want to do most everything, but anyway.
- J: Is that just an anti-Packer thing?
- PM: I think there is a genuine desire in this country for plurality in the media and ownership and it is a good thing. Look here in Western Australia, you have got one newspaper and one newspaper only, you know the Pravda of the West. You can have a day out here and not even be recognised, just obliterated, just like a Pravda sub editor. That is why we need plurality. That's why I'm glad to see you all here.
- J: Is this a nationalistic argument? Is this an argument about Australians owning Australian newspapers?
- PM: Australians obviously should have, at least, as many rights as foreigners, but again, there is another overlaying thing with that and that is the concentration of ownership and plurality.

- J: Is he just flouting the laws?
- PM: I don't know. I'll have to take advice about that. Ok, well let's leave that bit there. What else have you got?
- J: Can I just ask you one more on that.
- PM: Well, maybe, just one. Promise, cross your heart and hope to die.
- J: Is Mr Packer thumbing his nose at the Government?
- PM: I don't know. Did it take you long to think that question up.
- J: Have you enjoyed your stay here?
- PM: I have actually, but Richard got very snaky yesterday, didn't he? Not making a pun I mean, snaky and he came and said, he come out very ashen saying, what was the word he used, he said 'no, I'm not thin skinned' or words to that effect.
- J: The Premier has come out this morning and accused you of using tax payers money to campaign in marginal Labor seats.
- PM: Oh shucks, did he? Shucks.
- J: What do you mean by that?
- PM: Shucks.
- J: Have you seen reports this morning that the Ford Motor Company is considering closing its operations in Victoria?
- PM: I haven't seen it.
- J: Last time you were here Mr Keating, I suspect you may have been a bit more reserved about the Premier. You didn't try and upset him. You're comments were a bit less provocative. Have you changed your attitude?
- PM: I think Western Australians should note that when the Prime Minister of Australia comes to Western Australia, the West Australian Premier should try and do business on the things between us. But, you have got a Western Australian Premier who is so arrogant and puffed up with his own importance that he thinks he doesn't need to do any real business with the Commonwealth Government. Well, that's fine with me, I mean, I think that is a mistake, but that's the way he has chosen to make it.
- J: Is it just words or is it affecting the relationship?

PM: Let the people of Western Australia make a judgement about these sort of antics that he puts on. I mean, I come over here it is a planned visit. the itinerary is well known, he was invited to at least one of the functions and I do see Jeff Kennett. I do see John Fahey, I do see Wayne Goss and half the time the media don't know I'm seeing them. We go in, just have a talk about various things, try to get things resolved. But here it is grand standing and little boy games and that is why I said, if he wants to play games, well we can give him a game.

J: How successful do you think your message was? That is, that the Federal government is responsible for Western Australia's growth?

PM: Well, that is, I think, the central message that West Australians should understand. That is, the growth in Western Australia is coming from the Federal government's policies, but these State Ministers wonder around cutting ribbons on projects and they say where did these come from. You know, they are cutting ribbons saying where do these come from? Well, they came from the Federal government, that's where they came from. I think it is important that Western Australians know that the central plank of the last election campaign wherein I committed myself to growth and employment growth has been faithfully honoured by me and the Federal Labor party. Thank you.

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