



PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF DOORSTOP INTERVIEW WITH THE PRIME MINISTER

Phillip Street , Sydney
Tuesday 26 March 1996

E & FO

PRIME MINISTER:

Ladies and gentlemen, you may remember that last year when I addressed the Australian Council of Social Services I said that an incoming Coalition Government would establish a pilot project to determine whether it might be possible to use the expertise and the resources and the skills of the major voluntary welfare organisations in Australia to respond to a community concern about the operation of the Youth Homeless Allowance. Today, I met leaders of five of the major welfare organisations in Australia - the Society of St Vincent de Paul, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, the Salvation Army, the Wesley Mission and the Anglican Welfare Organisation from Queensland, headed by Archbishop Peter Hollingworth.

And out of that discussion it has been agreed to establish a task force representing the Federal Government and those, and perhaps one or two other organisations, in the area.

I want to stress that the purpose of this pilot, series of pilot schemes, which will be entirely voluntary, will be to determine whether it is possible to use the resources of these organisations to ensure that the Homeless Allowance is made available to people who are properly entitled to it. In no way is the purpose of this pilot scheme to make arbitrary judgements about the entitlement of people of the Homeless Allowance. But, in Opposition and it continues with us in Government, there is clearly the conflict of views in the community. On the one hand there are obvious cases where family life has completely ceased to exist and young people are deserving and in need of support because they are genuinely homeless. And yet other groups in the community representing parents who felt that the system has worked against them have argued that there is not a sufficiently effective surveillance made under present arrangements of the entitlement of young people.

And it occurred to me last year and I have given effect to it today that one of the most practical ways of approaching this problem is through the use of a pilot scheme to determine whether, with the help of these organisations which have an unrivalled understanding of the human problems that are involved in youth homelessness, they see it both from the point of view of parents and also from the point of view of the young people who are in need of help and it seems to the Government that the most intelligent way of approaching the problem is to involve their resources, their expertise and their skill and their understanding, but also their hard-headed appreciation of the way in which the social security system ought to work and I've established out of today's discussion, I will be establishing a task force and I hope that over a period of time we can bring a better focus to bear on this problem. I'm not promising any rapid, quick fix of the Youth Homeless Allowance but I do not think that there is a genuine community interest in this issue. I am not trying to arbitrarily take people off it. That's not the goal but I am trying to put a premium on as much mediation and reconciliation as is possible, but always recognising that in some cases that will prove fruitless and that there are young people in the community who do have reason, distressingly to be homeless and that they are in need of ongoing help and care and assistance.

JOURNALIST:

..... (inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER:

.....no, no, that is utterly the wrong approach, I'm sorry. You think the whole purpose of this is to save money. You are wrong. This is not a money saving exercise. This is an exercise designed to, utilising the resources and the skill of the organisations and the people who understand the problem. It's designed to get more accurate, more sophisticated, more intelligent judgements made about an entitlement. It is not a money-saving exercise and anybody who writes that it is, they couldn't be further from the truth.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, what was the response from the welfare agencies in the meeting to the suggestion that there might be some people on the allowance who don't deserve it?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, their response to our initiative was very positive but once again you are making the mistake of your colleague in seeing this as an exercise in cracking down on people. It's not.

It's an exercise in trying to get a more pragmatic and compassionate understanding of entitlement, to respond to a community concern that some people receive the benefit when they're not entitled to it, but equally to respond to a community concern that in

some cases parents are shut out of the process, they are not consulted, they are not involved. Their rights and responsibilities in the issue are in some cases ignored. But, I've deliberately consulted people who, better than any of us and better than any other system that has been devised, have a practical understanding of the problem, and, I wasn't talking to a group of people who are counting beans or wanting to save money. I was talking to a group of people who represent the major welfare organisations of this country and bring together people who have a compassionate commitment to the welfare of young people and any suggestion that this is some kind of exercise related to saving money is wrong.

I mean there are other exercises that the Government will be involved in, I promise you, that will involve saving money. This is a pilot program for which \$4 to \$5 million has been committed and it's not about chopping people off at the knees. It's about responding to a community concern. I have colleagues who have had meetings all over different parts of the country of parents and community groups who are concerned about the way in which this allowance is operated and I want to see if there is a better way of doing it. But I don't come to it with some pre-conceived prejudice or notion.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, who will be on the task force?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, there will be representatives of the relevant Government Departments and certainly representatives of the organisations who I saw today and perhaps one or two others. But, the purpose of it will be to bring together that expertise and as I say, it's not going to offer any quick fix to the issue. It's not designed as a money saving exercise. It's designed in delivering fairer and compassionate outcomes in this area but outcomes that recognise that there is a role for family mediation where that is possible and can be achieved and that the goal of reconciling homeless young people with a family structure, some kind of reference point, if that is possible and that is feasible as something that always should be sought.

Now, I recognise in some cases, in many cases, that is not possible but there are many people in the community who feel the way the thing operates at the present time arbitrarily shuts out parents and others who do have rights and responsibilities in this area and we want to try and see if there's a better way of doing it, not with any eye to saving money but with an eye to having the best outcomes for both the young people concerned and also others in the community who have a concern and an affection for them.

JOURNALIST:

.....(inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER:

Well yes. I, some of the complaints that have been made - I can only speak of them in terms of complaints that have been made to me as somebody, until recently, in Opposition, on some occasions the allowance has been granted without - complaints without proper investigation of whether there is or were proper reasons for people leaving home - that's one of the complaints. Other complaints involve a failure of authorities to, because of concerns about privacy which in some cases are justifiable and in other cases are not, to notify parents both about the whereabouts of children and their receipt of the allowance. Now you can't make blanket judgements. You can't say all of those complaints are justified or all of them are unjustified. Some of them clearly are - some of them aren't. And the whole purpose of this initiative of mine, the whole purpose of it is to see if there is a better way of ensuring that only in a minimum of cases in the future will there be bad or wrong decisions made.

JOURNALIST:

Do you anticipate that there will be increased scrutiny.....(inaudible)...

PRIME MINISTER:

I'm not approaching it from the point of view of scrutiny. I'm approaching it on the basis that, if I can give you the bare bones of how I would like to see the pilot scheme operate. A person who seeks the allowance agrees to participate in the pilot scheme is initially paid the allowance for a designated period, perhaps 6, 8 or 10 weeks and during that period of time, that person is helped and counselled and advised, talked to by one of the agencies and an investigation is made as to whether any kind of reconciliation, if the person has a family, it can be achieved. If not then a recommendation is made by the agency to the department that the benefit be continued and although it's the final judgement of the department as to whether the benefit should be paid or not, no department in those circumstances would lightly disregard the recommendation of the agency, and the agency would have an ongoing role in helping and counselling and advising in helping and counselling and advising a young person about employment and accommodation arrangements for the future. So the agency would have a total responsibility in relation to the future welfare of the job and accommodation prospects of the person in question.

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes.

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER:

I think in some of these areas, yes, I am saying that. And that's not critical of the Government. I mean, organisations, like the ones I met today have an unrivalled mix of hard-headed pragmatism and compassion and that is what you need in this area. You don't want people who say yes all the time. But you also don't want bean counters. You want people who bring together a compassion and pragmatism and I can't think of organisations in Australia who better combine those than organisations such as the Salvation Army, the Wesley Mission and the Society of St Vincent de Paul.

Now, that's not being critical of the bureaucracy, it's just that they are not really trained for that. They are trained to make assessments on tight guidelines. As the question of a moment ago implied - you need a lot of individual personal judgements made and you are dealing with people who overwhelmingly have very low self esteem, who have in most cases come from very disturbing and difficult backgrounds and they need the understanding of people who combine compassion and pragmatism.

JOURNALIST:

You talked about \$4-5 million earlier - is that money which will go to agencies to hopefully do that?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes and also otherwise to fund the cost of the pilot, but we don't expect the agencies to be out of pocket. We're certainly not throwing ourselves in any way upon the bounty or the charity of them. I mean, their resources are already very sorely stretched because of the high level of social distress in some areas of the country. We're not unrealistic and we won't be expecting them to operate and respond to what we're asking them to do using the resources they currently have so the answer is yes.

JOURNALIST:

.....(inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER:

No, I haven't seen it so I'm not going to comment on it.

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER:

No I haven't seen it so I'm not going to comment on it.

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER:

The answer is yes I will. The ACTU has approached me for a meeting and I'd be very happy as I indicated before the election, I'd be happy to talk to Jenny George and Bill Kelty and other representatives of the trade union movement.

What do I hope to achieve? I hope to tell them of the Government's plans in this area, which have already, I guess, been outlined by Peter Reith. I will tell them that we intend to implement the policies that the people voted for. I will tell them that so far as the new Government is concerned it will deal comprehensively and in a bonafide way with the trade union movement. It will have a different relationship with the trade union movement than that enjoyed by the former Government with the trade union movement, but we will treat the Union movement seriously and decently. It is an important part of the fabric of Australian society and although its role has changed a lot, although its membership has declined and although its role will change and evolve even further in the years ahead I expect the Union movement to be a significant part of the landscape for many years into the future, although, the extent to which it influences life in Australia will depend upon its capacity to change in accordance with a changed society. But, as I've said on a number of occasions since the election - I do not seek the destruction of the trade union movement. I do not seek conflict. I do not seek industrial confrontation in any way. But I do intend to implement the policy that the Australian people voted for. I am happy in the process of implementing that policy, to talk about the mechanics of the implementation, to hear the views of the trade union movement, consult the movement, talk to it, listen to it, but at the end of the day my responsibility is to do what the people asked me to do on the 2nd of March and that is to implement the policy on which I was elected. And I will do that with resolution but with good will towards all sections

JOURNALIST:

...(inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER:

I didn't go to the last election with a commitment for a trade-off and I'm not seeking the expansion of the Commonwealth's jurisdictional empire in any particular area. What I am seeking in the industrial relations area to do is to implement the policy that I took to the Australian people and for which they voted overwhelmingly. Now, I'm going to do no more, no less, than that in the near term. The question of whether we can effectively harmonise the two jurisdictions - federal and state - is part of the

policy. As for issues of total transferring of powers, that was not in our policy. If any State Premier wants, in the appropriate forum, to raise that, well, I'm prepared to listen.

JOURNALIST:

So it wouldn't happen in this term?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, look, it is not something that was in our policy. What I want to do in this term is to do what I promised the Australian people I would do and for which they voted overwhelmingly. Now, if I can accomplish that I will feel very well satisfied. If along the way people want to put proposals about other arrangements - well I'll listen to them. But, at the end of the day what really matters is that we free the labour market, we have higher wages based on higher productivity. Now, it matters not to me in the long-run the combination of State and Federal dispensation that brings that result about. What really matters is the outcome rather than the mechanics, the system or the process.

JOURNALIST:

...the meeting between Mr Downer and Dr Mahatihir...(inaudible).

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't think their cause is helped by my giving a running commentary. There have been some diplomatic exchanges between officials of both countries - something initiated by Mr Downer. I understand that Mrs Gillespie has expressed satisfaction with that but this is a difficult issue involving essentially a private dispute between citizens of two different countries. And the right way to handle it is the way in which it's being handled at the present time - not to be seen as some kind of feature of direct discussion between myself and the Malaysian Prime Minister.

JOURNALIST:

On the budget deficitfirst of all there is some confusion whether you're looking to eradicate the (inaudible).

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't there is any confusion at all. The goal that we have set ourselves is over the two year period to achieve a balance - an underlying balance.

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER:

No, an underlying balance is an underlying balance. It is not a structural balance it is an underlying balance and that is the goal we've set ourselves.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, do you have any information, at this stage, of the cost of your relocation (inaudible)?

PRIME MINISTER:

I can't give you a final figure but I can say a couple of things about that if you give me the opportunity of doing so. The first thing I would like to say is that there is a bit of a notion around that I've shifted the seat of Government from Canberra to Sydney. Now, I haven't done anything of the kind. What I'm going to do is what a number of my predecessors have done and the most recent one was Malcolm Fraser, and that is as well as having the seat of Government in Canberra and Cabinet Meetings overwhelmingly in Canberra I will have Cabinet Meetings in Sydney from time to time and because I come from Sydney and my principal family home will be in Sydney, my family will be living in Sydney, that I will work out of my Sydney office more frequently than either Mr Hawke or Mr Keating worked out of their Sydney offices. But it doesn't mean for a moment that I'm shifting the Government to Sydney. I will be spending a lot of time in my Canberra office when Parliament is not sitting and most of the Cabinet Meetings will, of course, take place in Canberra, although there will be some in Sydney and there will be some in each of the State capitals over the next three years. So, I just wanted to make that point.

Now as for what you say, what will be the additional costs - there will obviously be some upgrading of the Sydney office as necessary because it was hardly ever used by either Mr Keating or Mr Hawke. I'm not going to hazard a figure on that at the present time because I'm still getting advice on that and you've also got to take into account any savings that might be occurred as a result of other decisions that I've made. I mean I ought to, for example point out that although there are some quite modest refurbishments being undertaken at Kirribilli House, I will be engaging in the two official establishments, the Lodge and Kirribilli House something like 3, 4 or 5 fewer staff than were engaged by my predecessor. Now, I'm not being critical of him in that context - I'm simply making the observation that I'm going to get by with fewer staff and the significant savings in that area ought to be set off against other expenses that might be involved, but can I say to you that as soon as I have the precise dollars and cents I'll be more than happy to make them available because I know there is always interest in these matters, I understand that. There is a legitimate public interest and I can assure you that I have absolutely no intention of committing the Australian taxpayer to any unreasonable additional expense and I think you will find that on the other side of the ledger, there are quite significant savings in the new living arrangements that I'm undertaking - quite significant savings.

JOURNALIST:

How did you find Mr Keating's demeanour when you visited him at The Lodge the other day?

PRIME MINISTER:

Courteous, amiable.

Ends.