



PRIME MINISTER

13 June 1996

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
PRESS CONFERENCE - TOWNSVILLE AIR TRAGEDY
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA**

E&OE.....

Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen. Along with all Australians I'm very saddened at the helicopter crash in Townsville last night that claimed the lives of 18 young Australian soldiers. It was a reminder to all of us of just how hazardous service life is and the extent to which men and women who serve in the armed forces of Australia place their lives even in peace time in the service of their country. On behalf of the Government, and I know the Opposition and the people of Australia, I extend my sorrow and sympathy to the families of those Australian servicemen who died in this very tragic accident which is, I understand, the worst peace time military disaster since the Voyager back in the 1960's. I've spoke, a few moments ago, to Mr McLachlan who is going to Townsville this morning with Mrs Bishop and I was given a briefing on the accident last night by Mr McLachlan. Everything, of course, is being done to properly care for those who were seriously burned and injured in the accident. And whatever comfort in these very sad and harrowing circumstances that can be provided to the families of the men is also being made available. It is a very sad day and I want to express, very warmly and very deeply, the sorrow I personally feel and the sympathy that I extend to the ADF, to the SAS which is one of the great regiments of the Australian Army which has a very distinguished record, but most of all to those who have lost their sons, their husbands and their lovers.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister you mentioned the Voyager. Sadly since that disaster there's been ongoing litigation between victims' families and the Commonwealth Government, have we learned any lessons from that disaster?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well Paul it's too early for me to do other than make the obvious historical reference. There are full inquiries being instituted to establish why this accident happened. It would be wrong of me to make any comment about cause and effect. It would be wrong of me to jump to any conclusions. There is a proper procedure of due inquiry to be followed and the last thing that the Prime Minister or, indeed, any political figure should be doing is jumping to conclusions about why it happened.

JOURNALIST:

But you are assuring that the families will be looked after?

PRIME MINISTER:

We will do whatever is necessary to properly respond to the needs of families who have been left bereaved and affected.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard have you given any thought to going to Townsville yourself or visiting the SAS Regiment in Perth?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well there will, I understand, be a memorial service in a short period of time. I spoke to Mr McLachlan this morning and it seemed appropriate today that he go to Townsville with Mrs Bishop. The regiment itself, of course, is stationed in Perth. I understand that the men come from different parts of Australia and therefore, their families would be scattered around the country. The RAAF special squadron services will be available if necessary to transport the families of the men. Mr McLachlan and I have agreed that whatever facilities are needed to ease their bereavement as best we can they will be provided. I don't know the details as yet of the memorial service. Obviously I will attend that and I would expect, naturally, to be accompanied by the Leader of the Opposition.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard while it's hard to distinguish between different sorts of tragedies, is it any worse knowing that these people were the elite of the army, were probably the best of the army?

PRIME MINISTER:

The death of any family member is a tragedy. The death of anybody in the service of their country carries a special poignancy. I don't think I should put it beyond that. You lose somebody who is

in their early 20s who is your son or your husband or your lover, it's harrowing no matter what the circumstances are.

JOURNALIST:

Was that the average age of the men involved?

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't, I imagine most of them would be in their early 20s in the nature of things. Some of them may have been a little older, a little younger, but I don't know.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister is there a view towards grounding the helicopters pending an inquiry?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I'm not going to express a view on that. It implies a personal judgement as to what happened and I don't know what happened. And it is wrong in the extreme for somebody in my position, without knowing the reason, without advice, without briefing to say well this or that should happen. I mean, the last thing the army wants at the present time is uninformed comments from people in the political field. There will be an inquiry. I don't know what the reason is. All I know is that a tragic accident has occurred and 18 young Australian lives have been claimed. I can't say any more than that and I don't intend to drift into the area of speculation.

JOURNALIST:

When do you think you'll get the results of the inquiry?

PRIME MINISTER:

I have no idea. It's too early Louise to say that, far too early.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard does this cast a pall over today's Premiers' Conference?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think it casts a pall over the country, of course it does. It's a very sad thing. It's a very large number of lives to be claimed in one accident and the fact that they were so young and acting in the service of their country makes it particularly sad, of course it does and I know my colleagues, the Premiers, will feel the same way.

JOURNALIST:

Is the Commonwealth still prepared to negotiate with the States over today's sales tax arrangements?

PRIME MINISTER:

We'll be starting the meeting shortly and I'll probably have something to say later in the day. I don't really want to get into that area this morning.

JOURNALIST:

Were you able to soothe them a little bit at dinner last night Sir?

PRIME MINISTER:

It was a pleasant dinner, but I have to say we received the news of this accident during the course of the evening and I think that had a understandably sobering, concerning affect on people.

JOURNALIST:

Were you surprised by the strength of the Premiers' reaction to the plan outlined by Peter Costello?

PRIME MINISTER:

I've been to a lot of Premiers' Conferences and nothing ever completely surprises me in politics any more. We'll talk it through. We have a budget problem, they understand that and they have indicated to me that they understand that a contribution must be made by the States to the resolution to the nation's budget problem. It's not realistic for the States and they're not asserting this, I should say in fairness to the Premiers, they certainly weren't asserting it to me in private that there should be, sort of, no contribution at all from the States. But I don't really want, in recognising the fact that we have a meeting to start in a few minutes, I don't really want to go any further than that.

JOURNALIST:

What would be your main message then to the Premiers in the opening address this morning?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I'll be telling them something of the plans of the new Government in the areas of reform, such as industrial relations and micro-economic reform and the proposals in relation to a rationalisation of health services between the roles of the Commonwealth and the States. I'll be mentioning those things. I'll be saying something of the budget problem we face. I'll be

emphasising some of the strengths of the Australian economy and I'll be talking about the importance the Government places on responding to the views of mainstream Australia. I noticed an interesting echo in those comments from the latest recipient of the Miles Franklin Award.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister have you had any indication or hint from the Premiers that in terms of your reform in Federal State relations they might not be quite so prepared to play ball given the sales tax exemption change?

PRIME MINISTER:

No.

JOURNALIST:

Sorry, what did you say you drew from the winner of the Miles Franklin Award?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I think he had some interesting things to say about political correctness, by implication, the importance of the mainstream. I think you ought to read, I mean I'm not suggesting you haven't, but one should read them.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister should there have been more consultation before this was announced?

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh you can never consult in advance about a change to a tax law. That's never been the case and that's understood. If people get wind of those sort of changes their purchasing habits can alter suddenly.

Thank you.