



PRIME MINISTER

16 June 1996

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP GUN RALLY SALE, VICTORIA

E&EO _____

Well thank you very much Peter McGauran, to Mr Howard, to my other Parliamentary colleagues, to my fellow Australians.

Last night I saw on national television Mr Ted Drane, the National President of the shooters' organisations in Australia. And he said something with which I totally agree. He said that he and his fellow shooters were not criminals, they were Australians. And I want to start my address to you today by saying at no stage in the weeks that have gone by since the decision taken by the Federal Government and the Police Ministers in that decision, at no stage have I sought to describe or categorise the attitude of people who enjoy shooting or people who are shooters as being in anyway criminal or un-Australian. I have not used language which has thought to label or smear you or other tens of thousands of law abiding citizens.

I acknowledge and I have acknowledged in the very beginning and I do so again today, that the decisions that have been taken by all the Governments in Australia, decisions that were confirmed last Friday at the Premiers' Conference meeting, they are decisions that will inconvenience, they will influence the activities of people who hitherto have engaged in law-abiding pursuits. And at no stage is it the basis of the decision taken by the Federal Government and at no stage is it part of my own personal attitude that in any way any of you or any people who have been involved in what are, up until now, the lawful possession of firearms, in no way have you people been involved in criminal behaviour - at no stage. And that is not the basis of the decision. But the basis of the decision ladies and gentlemen is that we believe that it is in the national interest that there be a dramatic reduction in the number of automatic and semi-automatic weapons in the Australian community.

In taking that decision I recognise and my colleagues recognise that many people who previously have been carrying on a lawful pursuit are going to be inconvenienced. I know that, I regret that, I apologise for that but that is the basis of our decision. And it has been taken, ladies and gentlemen because we believe not just because of those tragic events at Port Arthur, they were the culmination of a long series of events in this country which have demonstrated as has been demonstrated in other parts of the world, that there is a clear link between the volume of powerful weapons in the community and the extent to which they are used in an indiscriminate manner.

If you look at these statistics out of countries such as the United States, if you compare them with statistics in other parts of the world there is a clear and irrefutable link. And in taking the decisions that we have taken we are mindful that they will impact unevenly on sections of the community.

I am mindful that people who have never owned a weapon, have never had any desire to own a weapon are not going to be affected in the way in which people such as you are being affected. I know that, I regret that and that is a matter of concern and apology to me but it cannot alter the responsibility of a national Government to take a decision that it believes serves the greater good of the entire Australian community. And that my fellow Australians is the basis of the decision that we have taken. We have not sought in taking this decision to brand any of you people as being anti-social. We have not sought in taking this decision to brand people who enjoy shooting as being engaged in any kind of criminal activity and you will find nothing that I have said and you will find nothing that I will say in the future that will in any way take that attitude.

But there come occasions for any Government to take decisions which can only be effectively implemented in the interests of the overall national good if they involve some disproportionate inconvenience and some disproportionate deprivation for one section of the community. I'm sorry about that but there is no other way that we can achieve the objectives. And it is always, my friends it is always the responsibility of a national Government to weigh up the gains and to set them against the losses. And the gains to the Australian community of there being fewer weapons of great destruction in the community are, in my view and in the view of all governments throughout Australia very, very significant indeed and that is why we have taken the decision.

Now I don't pretend for a moment ladies and gentlemen that the decision that we have taken is going to guarantee that in the future there won't be other mass murders. I don't pretend that for a moment. What I do argue to you my friends is that it will significantly reduce the likelihood of those occurring in the future. I wouldn't be so foolish as to say that it is going to completely eliminate them. And I know that in the wake of what happened at Port Arthur I know ladies and gentlemen in the wake of what happened at Port Arthur that people have argued that one of the great weaknesses in the present system and one of the causes of mass murder is that we have an approach to mental health laws that are too permissive.

I certainly agree with that and one of things that I said after the decisions had been taken in relation to automatic and semi-automatic weapons was that we are going to

investigate whether the practice of governments throughout Australia over the last 10 years in pushing too many people too soon out of mental health institutions unsupervised into the community, whether in fact those practices ought to change. And that is one of the things that we are going to examine.

And I've also expressed the personal view that is shared by many people throughout Australia that one of the causes of the inculcation of violence in our community is the mind-numbing, repetitive violence that is seen on some of our television screens. And I think that along with the approach to mental health issues, they are other issues that must be seriously examined by society.

I don't pretend that it is simply a matter of imposing a stricter regime regarding the possession of automatic or semi-automatic weapons. But that is an element of turning around the culture in this country and that is the reason why the Government has taken the decision that it has taken.

And I've come here today ladies and gentlemen as I will go to other rural areas of Australia and other provincial areas of Australia to explain directly to people who I know are unhappy with the Government's decision, to go to explain directly to those people the general basis of that decision, to remind you that the effect of the Government's decision is not to take all weapons out of the community.

The effect of the Government's decision has been very, very carefully designed to ensure that, for example, the legitimate use of farmers, of weapons, the entitlement of farmers if they can demonstrate a need to the possession of the low-powered semi-automatic weapons will be retained and the whole purpose of the firearm regulations that have been devised by all the Governments of Australia is to ensure that we achieve our overall objectives of a dramatic withdrawal of the number of potential weapons of destruction from the Australian community.

That is our goal, that is the objective and it is a responsible objective. But in the process we have sought to make reasonable provisions in areas such as primary production. We have also, as you know, decided to introduce an effective, fair compensation scheme for weapons based upon the value of weapons as at March 1996. The goal of the compensation scheme which will be fully met by the Federal Government out of the proceeds of one-off, special increase in the Medicare levy, which is predicted to raise something like \$500 million and if there is any surplus, that surplus will be returned through the health insurance levy system so that there will be no money kept out of that other than the money that is used for the compensation scheme.

But ladies and gentlemen the intention is to pay fair compensation for weapons. That is the intention and that is the commitment and there will be a 12 month amnesty during which any of the weapons that are prohibited as a consequence of the decisions taken by the Government can be handed in and proper, fair compensation will be paid. And I give you that undertaking. I acknowledge that we are asking you to give up, we are taking away property you have previously lawfully owned and in those circumstances you are entitled as Australians under the Constitution of this country to have proper compensation based on fair value as at the time of the decision taken by the Government in March of 1996.

I have read during the past few weeks some reactions to the decision taken by the Government. I acknowledge that many of those reactions, although very strong and very vigorous and very determined have been absolutely measured and the sort of reaction that you would expect in a strong, robust, democratic country such as Australia. But I have also heard suggestions, for example, that the whole idea of this is to bring about the complete disarming of the Australian population. I've heard people make suggestions that this is the first step in some kind of march along a road to the deprivation of peoples' individual liberties. I want to say to you ladies and gentlemen that that is a totally unreasonable, it is a totally inaccurate and it is a totally discredited response to the decision that has been taken by the Government. The decision taken by the Government is not part and parcel of some plan to deprive Australians of their liberty. The decision taken by the Government is taken because we are committed to generating a safer Australian community and that is an aspiration. That is an aspiration that hundreds of thousands, indeed millions of Australians support the decision taken.

So ladies and gentlemen, they support it not only in the urban areas of Australia but they support it throughout the rural and provincial areas of Australia as well. I understand why, I understand why many of you feel angry. I understand why many of you are here today to protest against the decision. I fully understand that and I can sympathise with people who have spent a life in a particular sporting pursuit and they find that life is no longer available to them and that is something that I deeply regret and I do deeply regret it but it does not alter the commitment of the Government in the aggregate national good to take decisions which we believe and all governments around Australia believe will bring about a safer Australian community, and that my friends is a proper objective of Government. It is a democratic objective of Government and in taking that decision and implementing that here what we had sought to do my friends is to frame the regulations and to frame the laws in such a way, ladies and gentlemen that people who have legitimate primary industry needs that the retention of weapons that aren't in the automatic or semi-automatic category will be allowed. We are not touching those, we are introducing a regime for registration that will be nation-wide. It's a registration regime that will bring about a significant reduction of weapons, dangerous weapons in the Australian community. And we have based it upon an approach that will give people fair compensation based upon values as at March 1996.

So ladies and gentlemen, I've come here today to explain to you as directly and as simply as I can the basis of the decision, the reason why we have taken it, the reason why, however reluctant you may be to do so to accept that it has been taken in good faith by the Government in the belief that it will add to the overall safety and good of the Australian community.

And that is the greatest and ultimate responsibility of any Government of any Prime Minister of this country, whatever his political stripe, is to take decisions that if he believes or she believes will benefit the overall national good and that is the reason behind this decision.

Ladies and gentlemen I thank you for coming, I thank you for giving me the opportunity, however much many of you will disagree with me, to explain the basis of the Government's decision I would be very happy to answer questions that you might

like to ask and I've agreed to meet after the meeting with some representatives of the shooter organisation here in Victoria.

Ladies and gentlemen thank you for coming and I would be very happy to answer any of your questions.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

QUESTION:

Ian McLauchlan, Victorian Field and Game Association. A Freudian slip Mr Howard; we do not own weapons, we own sporting firearms. It is sporting firearms we wish to obtain. A great deal of your comments recently have been that we do not understand the legislation. We do. We understand its origin; 1988 Labor Party policy, that's its origin. We understand it and we are not misrepresenting it. In fact, had you stopped to talk to us you would have learnt that the shooting organisations support 90% because that is the part that has been lifted from the Victorian legislation that has operated very well in this country for 10 years. We understand it and we are here and we are protesting because you have simply gone too far. And we are protesting as much about what you have done as how you have done it for your failure to discuss the issues with responsible firearm groups. We are not rambos. We are protesting because you wish to take away a large sector of our sporting firearms, self-loading sporting firearms. That is why we are protesting. So I ask you...my question is, are you here just to repeat your, what's becoming dogmatic position, that I am not moved, or are you in fact prepared to sit down with us and negotiate the remaining 10%?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I've come here to explain the basis of the Government's decision and the reason for it, and that is what I have sort to do today. I have not come here, as your question implies, to call you or anybody else here a rambo. I have not done that and you won't find anything in any comment that I have made in the time that I have been Prime Minister or before that has ever suggested that. I don't suggest that, I never have and I never will. So I want to make that very clear at the very beginning. You asked me whether I am prepared to talk to your organisations. I am prepared to talk to your organisations. You say to me, am I prepared to negotiate the legislation? I want to say to you Mr McLauchlan, that we have taken decisions and those decisions are not going to be changed. But we will talk to you about their implementation, we will talk to you about their meaning and I think in the process some of the concern that you perhaps have may not any longer be present. I haven't thought to adopt a patronising attitude to you or any of the members of your organisation to say that you don't understand. I think some people have sought to spread misinformation; people who say that the effect of the decision is to take all firearms out of the community, that that is our goal.

People who spread that are deliberately trying to misrepresent my position and deliberately trying to misrepresent the position of the Government. I know that the position that you have, and I have, is in relation to some issues of very hard substance.

I think our positions are significantly far apart. Sir, I haven't come here to negotiate the Government's decision. I've come here to explain it. I've come here to try and justify it, and I've come here to express a willingness to talk to you about the implementation of it and to talk about the implications of it.

QUESTION:

Mr Howard, my name is Desmond O'Riley and I represent the premier deer hunting organisation in Australia. In the gun summit, resolutions there, in an Exceptional Circumstances category of people who will be permitted to use a semi-automatic centre-fire rifle, this list includes occupational categories of shooters who have been licensed with strategic purposes, for example, extermination of feral animals. Why is this limited to occupational needs? Why not expand it to include recreational hunters who are licensed for specific purposes such as deer and duck hunting that requires the use of semi-automatic centre-fire and shot gun?

PRIME MINISTER:

Mr O'Riley, the decision was taken to...no it wasn't a knee jerk decision. Somebody interjected and said it was a knee jerk decision. The decision was taken by all of the governments and by the Police Ministers who against the goal of the total prohibition of high-powered semi-automatic and automatic weapons, the view was taken that the only exception should be of course for official purposes, meaning the military and the police and for occupational purposes such as the ones that you described. Now, your question goes really to the core of the differences that exist between the view that you are taking and the view that the Government is taking. What you, by your question, are really saying is that we should allow for other than official purposes or for occupational shooters for such as the destruction of feral animals, that we should allow for a whole other category, the possession of high-powered semi-automatic weapons.

Now, if that were to occur, that would in our view, undermine the whole basis of the change that was announced by the Police Ministers' Conference. Now, I know that that goes to the heart of the differences that exist between us, but if the Government were to agree to that kind of change it would prise open the whole basis of the decision that has been taken by the Federal Government and by the Police Ministers, and that is the reason why we cannot agree with that change.

QUESTION:

Mr Prime Minister - Peter Watkins, Secretary of the Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia, Victoria. In December 1995 the Victorian Police Minister, the Hon. Pat McNamara, initiated and in fact headed a national consultative process to achieve national uniformity in firearms laws - all States were represented including Tasmania - run by the Victorian Justice Department and it included all Australian shooting associations. All issues in the current debate were being resolved by consensus and every expectation of a national outcome acceptable to all but the extremists in the community was being achieved. Why was the consultative process abandoned in favour of Labor Party policy?

PRIME MINISTER:

The question of whether it is the policy of one or other side of politics can't alter the merit of the decision, or the lack of merit in the eyes of those who don't agree with it. The fact is that with a rare degree of unanimity and spontaneity across the political divide the Police Ministers came together after the tragedy at Port Arthur. As I said in my speech, it's not only because of what happened at Port Arthur that there was a heightened community concern about the number of automatic and semi-automatic weapons or firearms within the community. It wasn't only because of that. But it would be naive in the extreme for anybody to pretend that what happened there did not have a dramatic impact on the attitude of the Australian community and I didn't dwell on that in my speech. But I think it is unrealistic in responding to your question sir, not to acknowledge that of course it played a significant role in it and the view was taken with a great degree of unanimity and spontaneity.

The view was taken right across the political divide, that the decision that emerged from the Police Ministers' Conference ought to in fact be the decision that is taken to the Australian people. And the fact that it has gone further than an outcome that may have arisen earlier, I acknowledge that. But that is characteristic of many decisions that are properly taken by government in what they believe to be the national interest. And while public opinion is not the only determinant of government decision, it is a fact that the governments have got to take that into account in assessing what the national good is. The fact is that across the political divide people have come to the conclusion in government, and it is the right of people in the political process to object to that and to vote against it when the opportunity comes if that is their wish. That my friends, is the democratic process. I understand that, and I know that in the process of taking the decisions that we have taken, we are going to incur the political hostility of some people in the Australian community. I don't deny that; I don't walk away from it; I understand it and I accept it. But we took a decision across the political divide because we thought it was the right decision in the interest of the overwhelming majority of the Australian community.

QUESTION:

Thank you Mr Prime Minister. Maybe the ballot box is the answer for all of us.

QUESTION:

My name is Rick Foster. I'm the State President of the Victorian Field and Game Association. I've got two very short questions, but firstly can I take the Prime Minister to task on one small matter. Why is it that people continue to talk about automatic firearms in our community when in Victoria they have been banned since 1926? That's half the problem, we've got people making decisions on things they know absolutely nothing about. Mr Howard, you are certain that at no stage have you described us as criminals? How can you say that when your legislation to remove semi-automatic shot guns and .22 rimfires from the community in fact contains within it an implication that they'll be used for criminal attempt? You therefore don't believe what you say. Secondly Mr Howard, I ask you, the same firearms that farmers will be allowed to retain are the same low-powered firearms that are issued here in Victoria;

semi-automatic shot guns, 22 rimfires. What makes a farmer more intrinsically trustworthy than recreational firearm owners?

PRIME MINISTER:

We believe that if the objective is to withdraw the maximum number of semi-automatic weapons in the community, and the only exceptions to be very limited, we believe however much of it may be an unacceptable position for you people, and I acknowledge that, we believe that there is a distinction to be drawn between something which is clearly needed for somebody's occupational purposes and something which is of a recreational nature. That is the basis of the dividing line that we have chosen. What we have said is that primary producers are entitled to retain the non-prohibited category of weapons, the single and double shot rifles and shot guns, and if that if they can demonstrate to the licensing authority a clear occupational need to have one of the low-powered semi-automatic weapons then they are entitled to have it.

Now, we believe that in order to achieve the objectives of the legislation, and that is the withdrawal of the maximum number of these firearms from the Australian community, then the exemptions and exceptions should be very limited indeed. Sir, you made an observation about the state of the law here in Victoria. I acknowledge that the law around Australia has varied enormously, but I think you would have to acknowledge that regimes that have operated nationally, and in other parts of Australia, have allowed large numbers of automatic weapons to get into the Australian community.

QUESTION:

You're correct there Mr Howard, but why should we be persecuted for the lack of political intent in other States?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think sir, one of the objectives of having a national approach is to ensure that a national goal is applied as much as it possibly can in a uniform basis throughout the country. I understand that people feel they have operated in a lawful way. And I say again, the fact that we are deciding by this legislation, to declare that in future certain kinds of firearms are prohibited firearms in the Australian community, that does not represent in any sense a personal judgement of criminality in relation to people who have owned and possessed those weapons up until the time that we have declared them prohibited. It does not represent any kind of personal, dismarking judgement on the behaviour or the character that people have used. It represents a decision, as I said in my speech, that we believe overall is in the best interests of the greater number of the Australian community.

QUESTION:

Mr Howard, my name is John Morrissey. I'm the Victorian State President of the Australian Deer Association. Mr Howard, the Australian Deer Association supports the forceful uniform national gun laws and a general band on military assault weapons.

The ADA strongly believes that if the current proposals are legislated without change, they will be under siege at every future state and federal election. Political parties and especially oppositions seeking election will not feel bound by the resolutions of your gun summit. Do you agree that unless there is wider community agreement than exists at present, the laws will gradually be pulled apart and patched together at successive elections?

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't agree with that. I do acknowledge, as somebody who's been in politics for 22 years, I do acknowledge. I do acknowledge, ladies and gentlemen that there will be enormous pressure placed upon Opposition parties at both a federal level and a state level. I do acknowledge that there will be particular political targeting of individual members, that is already occurring. But can I say to you, that is an authentic part of the democratic process. And the idea that having taken a decision on something like this, any government or political leader can chloroform political discussion or political debate, of course you can't. And I don't seek to do that, and that is why I am prepared to go to different parts of Australia to talk to people who disagree very strongly with the decision that I have taken to try and explain the basis of it. I don't fear the political process in Australia. If the political process in Australia turns against me because of the decision that I have taken, I will accept that decision.

QUESTION:

Mr Howard, my name is Jim Snow. I'm a third generation farmer of the Gippsland area. Myself and my family are in strong agreement that no farmer in Australia needs to have access to automatic or semi automatic firearms. Mr Howard, we believe that the decision made by the Government was the right decision. We believe quite firmly and quite fervently that the decision was a decision reached in accord with the majority of the Australian population. I don't need a rifle to help milk cows, thank goodness. Mr Prime Minister I believe that there are many people in Australia who are in complete agreement with what's been done. What I want to ask you is what do you believe the situation would now be if you hadn't acted in accordance with our desires?

PRIME MINISTER:

Sir, I believe the situation now would be that the great majority of the Australian people would have believed that we had failed our political responsibility if we had not acted. Now that is not a view that has majority support at this meeting. That is self evident. But as I said in answer to the previous question, I am happy to submit myself to the democratic political process in Australia. I have taken a decision. I will defend that decision anywhere in Australia. I will argue for that decision. I accept that there will be people who will campaign politically against me. That is their democratic right as Australians and I repeat that if the judgement of the Australian community at their first opportunity is that I have taken the wrong decision, then that is a judgement that I will freely and willingly accept.

QUESTION:

Mr Howard, Sebastian Zircone, President Sporting Shooters Association of Australia, Victoria. You called this meeting and you gave us your reasons for coming. This is an opportunity for the broad based Australian population to make their feelings on your resolutions known. Looking around, apart from the dozen up on the stand with you, and one here in front, I find it hard to believe that you have the support of the broad based community. I ask you are you running this campaign on Morgan Gallup polls? Are your advisers giving you the right advice? Are you taking advice from individuals with a vested interest? You say that the safety of Australia is going to depend on the reduction in the inventory of firearms then why haven't you banned everything if you fear them so much? You asked us to believe that we will not be persecuted yet you are asking the states to implement legislation which will make it easier for them to take what we've got left. How, how are you going to prevent that from being the ultimate achievement? Please.

PRIME MINISTER:

You asked me what drove the decision that was taken by the Government. Can I tell you it wasn't a Morgan Gallup poll. You asked whether I'd received the wrong advice. Can I say to you very directly sir and to everybody else here today that the basis of the decision that I took was a strong view based on my own instincts as a leader of the political movement, based upon my understanding, my understanding of the feelings of the mainstream of the Australian community, that this decision would give to the Australian people a greater sense of security and a greater belief that we have a safer Australian community in the wake of not just the events in Tasmania but in the wake of a series of events over a long period of time. You once again Sir, you foretell, you suggested this legislation is the basis of further encroachments into civil liberties. It is the beginning of a walk down a long track.

Sir, with great respect, that is not based on any reality. It is not based on fact. It is a completely irrational assertion which cannot be justified on any sort of basis of reason. This is a particular measure taken to achieve a greater sense of security, to achieve an actual and dramatic reduction in the number of firearms in the community which can be used, which can be used for dangerous and criminal purposes, and that is why we have taken the decision. It is a decision that I defend. It is a decision I believe does have the support of the Australian community. If I am wrong in that decision and you are right, if I am wrong and you are right then the democratic processes of the Australian community will vindicate you and condemn me.

QUESTION:

Mr Prime Minister, a simple question and I feel I can comment on this as I am a dealer. What are you going to do for money when the \$500 million runs out because I can assure you, based upon Mr Williams' figures that were presented at the Police Ministers' Conference, on the amount of firearms that he proposes should be surrendered, your \$500 million will go nowhere near the mark?

PRIME MINISTER:

Sir, that is not the advice or the understanding of the Government and I do not believe it will run out. Can I give this assurance to all of you that if you are right in relation to that and we are wrong, we will not be confiscating the property of Australians without just compensation. I want to make that perfectly clear. Under no circumstances is this a Government that will violate the just compensation provision of the Australian Constitution.

QUESTION:

Mr Howard, my name is Andrew Keane. I am a deer hunter and my wife is a deer hunter and we're proud of it. Personally I believe the Victorian gun laws are fine and should be kept and should be incorporated nationally. My question for you is under the genuine reasons for owning a firearm, under your Commonwealth code is the ADA, another major hunting organisation, going to be an approved organisation under your proposal?

PRIME MINISTER:

From my understanding, yes.

QUESTION:

Mr Howard my name is Peter Kelly. I'm a former member of the National Party and a central councillor here in Victoria and I agree with the reply that you gave to Mr Reilly earlier, that your legislation is not a kneejerk reaction. Anecdotal evidence exists that you had personal objections to private ownership of firearms prior to becoming the Prime Minister and your new Attorney General, Mr Williams, was appointed knowing that he had an agenda for national registration of firearms. I find it rather disgusting that you state your Government has no money for conservation but you're prepared to throw away in excess of \$500 million on this exercise to advance your own agenda.

The question that I want to ask is can you tell me that no government anywhere has used registration to confiscate private firearms and I'd appreciate an honest answer to that question and perhaps I could also ask why don't you put this matter of your legislation to a referendum? Thank you.

PRIME MINISTER:

Sir you asked me about the use of gun registries in relation to certain things. I can only speak for the activities of governments of which I have been a member. Well I can't, I'm not going to answer for the activities of other governments. I can only say to you that in relation to the laws that we are supporting, the purposes of those laws are as have been explained and there are no hidden agendas. There are no ulterior motives. There are no conspiracy theories and there are no sort of strange moving forces that have not been disclosed. You asked, you remarked about anecdotal evidence concerning my own situation. Can I say quite openly to you I have held for a long time the view and I'm not frightened to repeat it today, I will repeat it all around

the country, I've held for a long time the view that I would dread the thought that this country would go down the American path so far as the possession of firearms. I would really do that. That is a view I have held before. It's a view I've expressed before and to the extent that it has played a role in my own attitude, I am no different from any other political figure or any other political leader who has strongly formed views on particular issues.

It's not based on any particular experience and it's not based upon any particular view about people who are recreational shooters. So far as the Attorney General is concerned, I have to say to you sir in all honesty, when I appointed him as Attorney General of the Commonwealth I did not ask him his views on gun control laws. I had no particular idea of his views on gun control laws and it was not something that I weighed in the balance in deciding whether or not he should be Attorney General for the Commonwealth.

QUESTION:

And you didn't answer the question.

PRIME MINISTER:

You asked me, look, can I say to you if this thing were put to a national plebiscite that I think the Government's position would be supported.

QUESTION:

Mr Prime Minister, my name is Tony Kelly. I am a director of the Shooters' Party. Sir, my question to you amongst all this rhetoric about high powered, centre fire weapons is, will the Government consider an option, although unpalatable to a lot of us shooters that the magazine's capacity of shot guns and rimfires be reduced? If that's the case they would be in the same position as normal side by side or under and over shotguns and I don't see any reason why a licensed shooter shouldn't be able to possess one.

PRIME MINISTER:

I've indicated to people who have raised all sorts of issues with me that proposals that completely accord with the spirit and the intent and the effect of the Police Ministers' resolution will be of course considered whereas such a proposal achieves that purpose varies enormously according to whom you speak. I have had people who have advocated the so called crimping option. Our view and the view the Government has taken in relation to that is that if, unless something can be irreversibly converted from a semi automatic or self loading weapon then it's not a change or an exception that we can agree to.

QUESTION:

Thank you Sir. The only aspect is that if the weapon, as licensed is converted and then is found in the possession of a shooter, then he would be in the same position as

someone in possession of an unlicensed firearm and would run the risk of the penalty. I just ask you to consider that. Thank you.

PRIME MINISTER:

Shall I repeat, I am perfectly happy and my colleagues are perfectly happy to talk about proposals, provided those proposals meet in full the principles laid down by the Police Ministers' decision and that process of discussion and dialogue can of course continue to go on.

QUESTION:

Mr Howard, I wrote to you a few weeks ago and you were talking of getting rid of all of these firearms. Now I'm a woman. Any women in here - are they able to walk the streets of a night time and feel free? Put up their hands if they're game enough to walk the streets of a night time, even when he's taken these guns out. We've been not able to walk the streets, even when the guns were here so it's not going to make one bit of difference taking the guns out. We still won't be able to walk the streets. What you've got to do is look at the mental health system. That's what's the problem, not the guns. Thank you.

PRIME MINISTER:

Ma'am I would agree that one of the areas that does need examination is the way in which our mental health laws operate. We have over the last ten or fifteen years had what I can only call a preoccupation by the part of governments around this country in pushing people too soon into the community without adequate supervision and the behaviour of some of those people has been behind some of the acts of violence, some of the deaths and some of the senses of insecurity that women in the Australian community in particular experience. So as I said in my speech, I don't pretend to you for a moment that implementing the legislation that we have proposed is going to bring some kind of peaceful nirvana where there will be no violence, no discord or no unhappiness. I'm not saying that at all. What I am arguing is that it will make a significant contribution towards a safer community and I think that is a legitimate and reasoned proposition.

QUESTION:

Mr Howard, my name is Jim Lake and I come from a little place called Stratford. A lot of the folks know me here and I'm just Joe Bloggs. I'm not a member of a shooting association as such but I've been around rifles and guns all of my life and I hope to think Mr Howard that I'm speaking for a lot of the folks that are either here and not following a particular banner and the folks that I've been speaking to that are still out there doing their bit, working away in Australia. The first thing Mr Howard I want to get clear to the media, and no offence to some of the media but get the bloody story right.

Mr Howard, a lot of people have stood up in front of you today and they're going to be classified as some wild, red neck extreme, right wing fascists. Mr Howard, I want

to get the record straight. I'm not one of these blokes and if I am, you and me both, mate, we're in bloody trouble because I voted for you. I hate to say it Mr Howard but mankind, regardless of what his education, he's a savage and primal and blood thirsty, bloody animal and there's nothing....

Tape Break

....and to the Victorian Police authorities. And the last thing I say sir, if there is any negative description of this gathering today, if there is anything done by the media to misrepresent the behaviour of people at this gathering, as a genuine concern that people of this gathering have about what the Government has proposed as distinct from a rambo rejection of any kind of lawful authority, well that will not be the result of anything I say. And I say to the media today that I regard this as a perfectly legitimate lawful Australian gathering, and the views expressed by people at this meeting are the views that Australians are entitled to express in an over-democratic society. I don't agree with them, I can't accept them, but I will defend to the end your right to say them as loudly as possible. I don't shrink from what I have decided. I respect the depths of feeling that you have expressed. I think as good Australians together, I will have to agree to disagree with a number of the things that you have said.

QUESTION:

John, just one more thing. Just quickly answer that question, and that is, if the good people of Australia that own firearms, if they say we've drawn the line John, and this is enough, you'll not get another inch or another round or another gun because history has shown us that it hasn't worked when we've given them in before. And the people of Australia that own firearms say that, are we going to become criminals and are we going to have somebody kicking our doors in to come and take them? Are you prepared to make the Australian firearm owner a criminal, and maybe the only thing in the bush won't be an old man Kangaroo, it will be a gorilla?

PRIME MINISTER:

Sir, I believe that the Australian community over the years has always been a law abiding community. I believe that when something is properly and fairly and patiently explained to Australians, and when they are persuaded that it is a decision, however much they may be personally unhappy with it which has been taken by the Government in a bona fide belief, that it serves the best interest of the Australian community, I believe as in the past in the future Australians will be a law abiding community.