

9



PRIME MINISTER

18 July 1996

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD, MP
INTERVIEW WITH NEIL MITCHELL FROM 3AW
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA**

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MITCHELL:

In our Canberra studio the Prime Minister, Mr Howard. Good morning.

PRIME MINISTER:

Hello Neil, good to be on your program.

MITCHELL:

Thank you for ringing in on Jeff Kennett.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I thank Jeff and the station for allowing me to appear as a guest interviewee.

KENNETT:

That's all right John, I always give way to Prime Ministers.

MITCHELL:

Is that true, he always gives way to Prime Ministers, I'm not sure about that?

PRIME MINISTER:

How pronouncedly in the cheek is the tongue, I can't see?

MITCHELL:

Thank you Mr Kennett. Thank for you time Mr Howard. Now the serious, obviously, the very serious issue we want to talk about today is guns. I was just discussing it with Mr Kennett as well. Do you believe that you will get uniform national gun laws without a referendum?

PRIME MINISTER:

I hope so. It depends on what's finally decided by the Queensland, Western Australian and Northern Territory Governments. I don't raise the referendum as a threat. I'm not waving a big stick. A referendum is a complicated, expensive undertaking. It would cost \$50 million to hold a referendum, \$50 million to hold a referendum. It would have to be held quite separately from any general election and referendums always involve, no matter how strongly supported they are at the beginning, they always involve some risks, some complications, some divisions, some splits on one another's side of politics. I would expect to have the support of the Labor Party and the Democrats and most Coalition supporters throughout the country. But I really don't want a referendum. It would be a major distraction from the other business of Government and other responsibilities I have. I hope it is not necessary and I hope by agreeing to the majority view expressed yesterday the three States, or the two States and one Territory I mentioned, will save us that expense. But you've got to remember, Neil, that there's an overwhelming passion, almost, in the community to have strong effective national gun laws.

MITCHELL:

This is why it baffles me that the other States, that the States and the Territory are backing away from it. Will you go to a referendum if you have to?

PRIME MINISTER:

We'll consider that next Tuesday if it's necessary. I hope, I really devoutly hope it is not necessary, but I am very conscious of what the Australian people want of me and of their other leaders. This issue has now become, really, a test of whether governments have a unified resolve to match the nation's need and the nation's want and that's what it's all about. You can go on forever arguing some of the technicalities of these things and there always are arguments about technicalities. People want the May 10 resolutions undiminished in their strengths and their uniformity and that is why this issue has persisted for a long time. I would wish to have it wrapped up. It is a very important issue, but naturally it consumes a lot of my time and the time of many of my ministers, but I'm determined to see it through. I hope seeing it through does not ultimately involve a referendum.

MITCHELL:

What about the suggestion, what's your view of the suggestion of arsenals being set up so that some people can still retain the weapons for competition shooting and that sort of thing?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well we agreed yesterday about a very limited thing that would make it certain that Australians could continue to be effective players and competitors in Olympic sport, shooting contests and other recognised national and international contests. It's a quite limited exemption to people who are bona fide involved in that and we're having some rules drawn up in relation to it. We're not talking here about a huge number of people. But the idea of there being arsenals, generally speaking, doesn't attract me. This is the problem while ever the issue remains unresolved there will be constant further proposals put forward designed in some way to further qualify it and there's got to be an end. I mean, people out there are starting to get impatient and they're starting to say; "look, you know, please fellas will you get this wrapped up". We thought we had an agreement on the tenth of May. Every day produces a further new proposal which involves further technical examination, further compromise, if that technical examination is accepted. Once you make compromise in one area you open up a new group of people who will say can we please have a compromise and if they get their compromise a third group of people say can we have our compromise and in the end the whole thing will begin to unravel. Now, look can I say again, that many thousands of law abiding, decent Australians will be inconvenienced by these new laws. I apologise to them. We are stopping them using certain categories of weapons we are not stopping them being sporting shooters, we are not stopping primary producers having access in a demonstrated need situation for low powered semi-automatic weapons, we are not, of course, prohibiting people from getting licenses for bolt-action rifles and double-barrel shotguns. There will still be a large number of weapons in the community. Some people might say still too many.

MITCHELL:

Mr Howard, did you see the letter Walter Mikac sent yesterday to the Police Ministers?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes I did see that.

MITCHELL:

He's feeling a sense of betrayal. You can understand that can't you?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I do. I, of course, I don't want to play in any way on or exploit the personal grief of that man, or indeed, the scores of other Australians that have been touched by these tragedies. I am

nonetheless very conscious of how strongly he feels about it and I am sure that my colleagues at the meeting are conscious of how strongly he feels about it.

MITCHELL:

He read me that letter earlier this morning and authorised me to use some of it on air. The point he made was that if we don't get a uniform approach here, if, God forbid, there's another Port Arthur then that at least some of the responsibility for that is borne by the Police Ministers, by the politicians. Is that a fair thing to say?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well all politicians in positions to do things carry responsibilities. I can't, by passing a law any more than my State colleagues can, guarantee there'll be no disaster in the future. But what we can do is reduce the possibility of it. The great thing that Australians will get out of these uniform national gun laws is a feeling that we have turned back an almost unstoppable deterioration in our civil society. We will almost, alone amongst the nations of the western world, instead of accepting the inevitable of a further slide towards a gun culture we will have said, "no we're not going to allow that to happen".

MITCHELL:

And you remain confident that you'll get that through those others?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, look Neil, I am hopeful that the other three will agree. I have some grounds for that optimism, but I am not certain. They did not give me any guarantee that they would agree. They are able to consider this matter according to their own priorities and they'll do that next Monday. I will be going to the National Party Conference in Queensland on Saturday in Townsville. I will not just be talking about this issue I will, in fact, be talking about quite a number of other issues.

MITCHELL:

Because it's the third anniversary of Port Arthur on Sunday.

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes, as far as ...

MITCHELL:

I mean you would have hoped, presumably, it would have been sorted out faster than this wouldn't you?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes, although it always takes a while. A cooperative federalist arrangement does take time because there are six States, two Territorial and the Commonwealth Government involved so there are nine governments. It always does take a bit of time, provided we get the right result by Monday it will have been a remarkable achievement and I want to thank my State colleagues and I want to thank Mr Kennett for the very strong support he's given me, very strong, unwavering support from the very beginning and I appreciate it very much because the strength of support I have received from Jeff Kennett on this has been very useful and may I also thank the Labor Premier of New South Wales, Mr Carr and also Mr Beazley and Senator Kernot at a Commonwealth level for the support they've given me.

MITCHELL:

If this does need to go to a referendum would it be a single issue referendum, or given that we'd be spending \$50-\$52 million would you expand it to other issues?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I haven't thought about that. Off the top of my head I'd say that if you start confusing such a stark, stand alone issue such as this with other issues you start to imperil the outcome. That is why having a referendum really is a last resort.

MITCHELL:

And there's no doubt that it would be won ...

PRIME MINISTER:

I have no doubt that it would be, but why should we have to spend so much money, \$50 million, on a referendum when plainly all that is needed is an acceptance of a majority decision by the other participants in the process which produce that majority.

MITCHELL:

Mr Howard, I know we're almost out of time, if I may another couple of other quick issues, the ABC is on strike. Is there any room to negotiate this?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well we're not negotiating with the strike with the ABC. We have kept the commitment to maintain the current triennial funding which runs out this year. I mean this current financial year the only cut the ABC will take, let's get this straight, is a 2% cut in it's running costs and every single agency of the Government has taken that. Next year ...

MITCHELL:

Well it was a bit misleading during the election really wasn't it? You could understand why people thought there would be no change, really, to ABC funding.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well the commitment was to maintain the current funding arrangements, which was the current triennium. But next year there will be a cut of around 10%. Now that type of cut is being applied across many areas of Government, in some areas even greater. It is not an attempt to destroy the ABC, it's not an attempt to muscle the ABC. I won't be politically interfering in the ABC. I mean what in fact has got me in to trouble, if I can put it that way, is that so far from, sort of, try and go behind the doors and ring up the Managing Director of the ABC to complain about things, I have been quite open and public in expressing any criticism I have about the style of reporting on the ABC. I haven't attempted to go behind anybody's back and yet people are suggesting that I have a secret agenda. I don't have a secret agenda. I disagree with some things that are said on the ABC in some of it's approaches, just as I might disagree with some things that you or other commentators say. But I am a very strong supporter of a politically independent ABC. I want an ABC in this country which is equally critical of the Labor Party and the Liberal Party and an ABC that, on occasions, is equally praiseworthy of the two sides of politics according to the merits of the issue. I don't want an ABC that in the words of one of it's own former employees, the *Sydney Morning Herald* Columnist Max Walsh, actually runs an agenda of its own.

MITCHELL:

Does it run an agenda of its own?

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh I think people who want an idea of some of the things about which people are concerned would be well advised to read that article that Mr Walsh wrote.

MITCHELL:

What is it, an anti-conservative agenda?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think it's more, the concern I have is that the range of views held on issues, particularly social issues within the ABC or as expressed, are too narrowly based compared with say the range of views on those same issues that might be heard on 3AW, 2UE or written in the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* to quote at random three media outlets that quickly come to mind.

MITCHELL:

Just finally, I know you must go, the United States has decided to seek mandatory limits on carbon gas omissions. Does this leave Australia a bit isolated on this one?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I'm disappointed that the Americans have done that. What is happening here is that the Americans are looking after their own national interests. It suits the Americans and the Europeans to take a different line on this issue than Australia. It hurts Australia for the Americans and the Europeans to take the line that they have taken and I'm disappointed it's occurred. And what we have done is to recognise that it's not in our interests to go down the path that we were going down before because that would impose a disproportionate burden of adjustment and cost on Australian industry and you won't get serious world wide action in this area unless you get some constraints operating on greenhouse gas omissions in the developing countries.

MITCHELL:

So the American decision won't change our position?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I haven't had an opportunity to talk to my colleagues about it, but our position was not developed because of some heard response to the previous American position our position was developed because it was in Australia's interests and that is the only basis on which any self respecting government can deal with these sorts of issues. You don't just follow the mob.

MITCHELL:

Well how does the decision hurt us, you said the American decision ...

PRIME MINISTER:

No, well the majority view that is emerging in this conference is towards a regime that is in the interests of the Europeans, the Americans and the developing countries but in a number of key respects it's not in our interests. Now in those circumstances for us to just roll over and ignore our own interests would not be discharging our responsibility as a government. I will be talking to several of my colleagues today in the wake of what the Americans have said and done and if there is any further amplification of our position it will be announced. But let me say again, we took the position we did because the previous regime was clearly against Australia's interests and would have imposed unreasonable costs on Australia and was designed to suit the convenience of the Europeans and the Americans and not necessarily the convenience of Australia and clearly in those circumstances it's my responsibility to state and maintain the Australian national interest.