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**PRIME MINISTER**

24 October 1996

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER  
THE HON. JOHN HOWARD MP  
JOHN LAWS PROGRAMME RADIO 2 UE**

**E & OE.....**

**LAWS:**

Okay, a surprise visitor has arrived in the studio, I'm pleased to tell you. The Prime Minister of Australia, John Howard, fresh from the doctor with a good report, I hope. Good morning Prime Minister.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Good morning. Good morning John, always good to be here. As I said, if I could, I would. I had an appointment that was even more important than you this morning with the doctor.

**LAWS:**

Dr John is a good doctor and I presume he's got it under control.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Yes, he's very good, he's first class.

**LAWS:**

Yes but you weren't having problems with your ears, were you? I mean, you were hearing what Australians were saying in light of what was said by Pauline Hanson?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Literally I was having trouble with my ears. Metaphorically, what are you getting at?

**LAWS:**

What I'm getting at is there's a lot of discussion going on in Australia that I think you as an Australian, and a very proud one, and a strong one, would find abhorrent. There's lots of talk of immigration, there's lots of denigration of Asians, there's denigration of Aboriginal people. There are statements being made which aren't necessarily based on fact. Now you must know what was said by Pauline Hanson and you must know that many Australians agree with a lot of what she said, me included, and you must also know that much of what she said was not based on fact. Don't you think it needs to be clarified or do you agree with her?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I agree with the reality that we need to have a debate about things like immigration. I believe that it is silly in the extreme for leaders of major political parties to chase off down some blind alleys which are created by Independent Members of Parliament. I don't believe the Prime Minister of this country should respond to every speech made by every Member of Parliament.

**LAWS:**

But you do..

**LAWS:** P.M.

I do believe, as I have done, that the Prime Minister of this country should reaffirm the principles on which our immigration policy is built and those principles are first and foremost immigration policy is meant to serve the interest of Australia, not to serve the interest of a particular ideology and secondly, and very importantly, that immigration policy has for more than 30 years been based on a non racial foundation. We do not believe in choosing people on the basis of their race or their ethnic background and that is a commitment that my Party has had for a long time. I accept that the Labor Party has had it and I have probably stated that on ten occasions at least and this is the eleventh since I have become Prime Minister but I am not going to have this debate hijacked by responses to the speech of an Independent Member of Parliament.

**LAWS:**

But when that speech causes concern in the country, the country of which you are the leader, and they look to you for leadership on the issue and you've shown leadership on other issues since becoming Prime Minister, then surely it doesn't matter who says it. If it

becomes an issue amongst the Australian people then it becomes important. Do you agree with anything that Pauline Hanson said?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Look John, what they look to leaders to do is to say what they believe in. Now I have been asked about immigration, I have been asked about the level of the programme, I have been asked about whether it should be discriminatory and I can recall doing an interview five weeks ago on the Ray Martin programme in which I was asked about whether statements that this country was being swamped by Asians, whether I agreed with them and I said no. I was asked about the attitude of my Government towards Aboriginal disadvantage. I expressed my views but I am not in the business of responding... part of what is happening in this debate is that because I haven't actually done, as some people have told me to do, some editorial writers have said, you know, he's got to do this, he's got to do that. The comment has gone on and on that Howard ought to do this, Howard ought to do that. I'll tell you what I will do as I've done in the past, I will answer questions about the policies of my Government, I will answer questions about my values and the values and the beliefs of my Government. I will of course defend the right of any Australian to argue in a reasonable, sensitive fashion for any proposition. We are a free country.

**LAWS:**

But when it ceases to be a reasonable, sensitive fashion...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

There are always some unreasonable, insensitive people. Of course there are and it's, you will never get a perfect society but I do not believe that Australia is made up of a mob of bigots. I have always repudiated the notion that Australians cannot be trusted to debate something in a sensitive fashion. There is evidence that some people in political and other circles believe that there are some debates that are too hot for Australians to handle. Now I regard that as a patronising, insulting view.

**LAWS:**

That's what's being suggested here and when you say that..

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I think it is patronising and insulting to Australians to say, look, you leave this to us. It's too important, it's too special and there has been an underlying theme of that attitude in relation to things like immigration. Now we will never go back in this country...

**LAWS:**

Just tell me this...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well, could I just finish saying one thing John, we will never go back in this country to having a discriminatory immigration policy based on race. That is gone and I think it is morally, politically and economically in this country's interest that it be gone. Now I have said that time without numbers so, I mean there is nothing more for me to say on that subject. I mean, if some people don't like the way I say it well, I'm sorry but I say things in a way that I feel comfortable with. I think the people listening to your program understand exactly what I am saying. I think Australia understands exactly what I'm saying and exactly what I believe.

**LAWS:**

Okay, there's little doubt about what you're saying because you say it very clearly and there's little doubt about what you believe because you've expressed it on more than one occasion so we accept that as being your belief.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

.. since I've been Prime Minister.

**LAWS:**

But how do you react to the fact that Pauline Hanson has made certain statements, some accurate, some inaccurate, but some polls even indicate that to the tune of 98% Australians agree with her that we are being swamped by Asians, that Australians agree with her, that Aboriginal people get special privileges that are not given to other Australians. Now isn't that concerning that even if the 98% is wrong, even if it's 60 - 70%, some polls show that - 70%. Isn't that of concern to you?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

One of the polls that I saw on that subject, the question asked was so sort of anodyne that of course a lot of people would say yes to it. John, like anybody's contribution to public debate, some things would have been said that people agreed with. Others they would have half agreed with. There is in the Australian community because we have high unemployment, because we have gone through a long period of very, very difficult adjustment economically and socially, there is a great deal of insecurity in the community and it is only natural when you have insecurity in the community that people look around for explanations and a lot of Australians, and the Government has some sympathy with this, I think a lot of people do have the view that if you have an immigration policy which

is resulting in certain segments of those who come to this country having high levels of unemployment, it's a bit silly not to change it and I think I announced on your program a couple of months ago changes to our immigration policy.

**LAWS:**

So do you think the Asians are being used as a scapegoat?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I think it is inaccurate to say that we are being swamped. Look, can I just say one very simple thing and we, you yourself say we're dealing with a sensitive subject so I'll make my own words on this because it's a very important thing to talk about. Everybody who comes to this country is entitled to be treated decently, respectfully and to be part of a tolerant, sensitive, compassionate Australian community. Australians of Asian background have made a very big contribution to this country, very big contribution and their contribution is welcomed, their contribution is noted and their contribution is thanked and I want to make it very clear as Prime Minister of this country that they are very welcome in this country and that has always been my view. We have never demonstrated any intolerance as a Government and as a broad community. You will always get some examples of intolerance. There will always be some people who will do that and but broadly speaking, Australians are to be congratulated not denigrated for the extraordinary tolerance and decency that I believe Australians have demonstrated over the years to successive waves of migration from different parts of the world and I think one of the problems with this whole debate is that we've had some self appointed cultural commentators and dietitians who have sort of said, well, Australians basically are bigoted and racist, which is wrong and offensive.

**LAWS:**

Well when you get poll results like the sort of poll results you get, if you ask a simple question, and you're quite right, it is a simple question, do you agree or disagree with Pauline Hanson and...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Everybody has... I mean, I just think this obsession with one speech is ridiculous.

**LAWS:**

So do I and that's why it needs to be stopped.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well, no but you won't stop it by me giving a comprehensive commentary on her speech. You will only stop and..

**LAWS:**

I don't want you to do that.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

No well, what I will do is what I've said from the very beginning I will do and that is I will talk about what I believe in, what the Government believes in, what I believe as the Leader of, the political leader of a country what I believe is good for Australia. I am not going to go down a path laid by a combination of a maiden speech and some pompous editorials that have said I've got to do this or I've got to do that.

**LAWS:**

But aren't we entitled to know how you would react when..

**PRIME MINISTER:**

No, you are entitled to know what I believe in.

**LAWS:**

But aren't we entitled to know what you believe then when you hear...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

You are entitled to know what I believe and I am always ready to answer questions as you know. I am here, I have been on other programs..

**LAWS:**

But aren't we entitled to know what your attitude is to certain things? For example in Dubai, the Khalese Times editorial is headed, "Shrill Voice of Racism Holds Centre Stage in Australia". Now, aren't we entitled to know how you'd react to that?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I react to that in the same way that I react to some newspaper editorials in Australia. I don't take any notice of it.

**LAWS:**

But is it good for Australia?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Look, the Dubai, or whatever the paper is can write exactly what it wants. I know that so far as the attitude of countries in our region is concerned, what they look for are statements and expressions of policy by the Government and on occasions by the alternative government.

**LAWS:**

But isn't...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

No, no, I think it's very important because there's been some prime examples in the past week of significant figures in the region who have stated this principle. Now I don't want to bring the leaders of other countries into this debate. It's not fair but the fact is that the leaders and the governments of the region know where I stand, they know where my Government stands, they know where the alternative government stands - the Labor Party, it is the opposition, the alternative government within our system. They know where we stand on these issues and they know that we have a non discriminatory immigration policy. They also know that we are a democracy where, and one of the things about a democracy is that from time to time you will have a debate about something. You may not agree with everything that is said but you defend the right of people to participate.

**LAWS:**

Well we all know that and the alternative government...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well can I tell you John, with respect, they know it and I think it is verging on...

**LAWS:**

But the people in Dubai don't know, the people in Asia...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I think with respect, the people who are calling the shots within the leadership of our major trading partners know where we stand. I went to Indonesia and Japan. Within two weeks of that maiden speech having been made. I went to a press conference in Tokyo. I

was told by the embassy that it attracted the largest number of Japanese journalists to any press conference conducted by an Australian Prime Minister in Tokyo, and not one question was raised about the issue that has occupied I think far too much time...

**LAWS:**

So do I.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

On the airwaves of Australia and I think people listening out there are probably more interested in knowing what's going to happen to their interest rates or their workplace arrangements.

**LAWS:**

Would you like to tell us what's going to happen to their interest rates?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I would hope that if the wages figures today are broadly in line with what the Reserve Bank regards as satisfactory, I would hope that they, the bank, it controls these matters, would see it's way clear for a further cut in rates but that's a matter ultimately for the bank but we have got 1960s levels of inflation in Australia now and that is unqualifiedly good news for this country.

**LAWS:**

Now can I just get back to this other issues because..

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I thought you would.

**LAWS:**

Well, I just have to.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Yes and I have to, I have to say I have to continue to put the view to you John that the right way for the Prime Minister of this country to conduct his stewardship of the office is not to respond through the prism of a maiden speech of an Independent but is rather to tell the Australian people what he stands for, what he believes in, what he thinks is important to the future of this country and I have never, ever been reluctant to do that.



**LAWS:**

Do you intend to join with the Labor Party to do what you can to get rid of Pauline Hanson at the next election?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

that's ultimately a matter for the Party organisation. I don't control that.

**LAWS:**

Did you approve of that suggestion?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well, that came up, I didn't even know that that matter was under discussion but Andrew Robb and the Queensland Division of the Party will ultimately handle that. I never, can I tell you this, I will be utterly opposed to a deal with the Labor Party. I have never, I mean, I don't deal, I mean, the Labor Party did a deal with the Australians Against Further Immigration in the Lindsay by-election. They've been running around the country saying that I haven't made enough comments on this issue and then they went and did a deal with the Australians Against Further Immigration.

**LAWS:**

Do you think it's damaging to Australia's image in other parts of the world, what's going on?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

No, no I do not. I don't, I really don't. I think the whole thing will...in six months people will look back in amazement and say good heavens what was that all about.

**LAWS:**

Well I'm sure they will, but in the...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well I think they'd probably do it in three months...

**LAWS:**

In the interim is there going to be any damage. I mean I talked to Geoff Dickson yesterday from Qantas and he said, without being asked, he said to me that this discussion

that was going on was being reported and he felt wasn't doing us much good in Asian climes. I mean if we've got the Hong Kong *South China Morning Post* saying they spit on Asians in the street - I mean it's not good stuff is it?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well that kind of remark, I mean I don't know whether it's based on reality, but I mean there are plenty of things that are said in overseas newspapers that are not based on reality. There are plenty of things that are said in Australian newspapers sometimes that are not based on reality.

**LAWS:**

But isn't it about perception? Aren't we going to be perceived to be...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

The perception that I have, very strongly - it's not only a perception I think it's also reinforced by reality - is that a lot of people have quite foolishly chased one speech in this country and I think that is, that is never the way to make policy and it won't be the way that I make policy...

**LAWS:**

Do you find it extraordinary that reputable programmes like *60 Minutes* devote two segments of their programme to Pauline Hanson? Do you find it extraordinary that we get overwhelming numbers of telephone calls and responses greater than ever before to what she said?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

It's a society that feeds off, understandably, a 24 hour controversy and sensational news treatment but that's part of a vibrant democracy. I think the role of political leaders is to state their views to defend the principles of our free society. I mean, I defend the principles of free speech very strongly. That doesn't mean to say people have got a license to insult each other, but it does mean that they are entitled to express their strongly held views on a subject without being intimidated into silence by some pejorative views. I also find it offensive for people to engage in debate using pejorative, insulting terms about somebody else's race. I mean I have always believed that men and women in this country should be treated decently irrespective of their ethnic, religious or racial background...

**LAWS:**

Do you find it surprising then....

**PRIME MINISTER:**

...the cardinal principle of our free society...

**LAWS:**

Sure, but do you find it surprising that so many people respond in the affirmative to the pejorative to which you refer?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

No, no I don't entirely find that. Look, there is an unease in this - you see what happens with these sorts of things people have a general idea of what is being talked about, they don't read the detail of things they have a general idea and there is unease when you have high unemployment. There is unease about continued, well there's a perception that we have continued high immigration although our rate of immigration this year is going to be lower than what it was, although not as low as what it was a few years ago. I mean, people do have that perception and that is why you get some of these reactions.

**LAWS:**

Are you going to alter the balance?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

We have.

**LAWS:**

But are you going to alter it further?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well we'll consider that when the changes that we announced a couple of months ago have had an opportunity to operate...

**LAWS:**

But in light of the response...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

...no, no we're not going to be poll driven.

**LAWS:**

So you're not going to respond to the majority?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well what we're going to do, what we're going to do, John, is to make sensible policy in the national interest. I'm not going to wake up every morning and read an opinion poll and say: Well it says that therefore I'll change the policy and if the poll changes in a couple of weeks' time change the policy again...

**LAWS:**

Nobody would want you to do that...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

No, well I'm not going to run the country that way...

**LAWS:**

But the 98% who say that they're in favour of Pauline Hanson probably would like you to do that.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well, I don't know which 98%, I don't know which question said that...

**LAWS:**

Do you approve or disapprove of Pauline Hanson...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well everybody has a different view of what she may or may not have said.

**LAWS:**

That's true. That's why I'm trying to clarify it.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well that's why the only sensible way is to ask me what I'm going to do on particular issues and that has been the stance that I have taken all along on this issue - if you want

know what my Government stands for and what I believe in then I will tell...(interrupted by 10.00am news bulletin)...

...a capacity to absorb people from all around the world and produce a marvellously new and different country. We ought to be out there, you know, bursting with pride about that instead of, sort of, being told by some people in the community that we have a bigoted background. Now we don't have a bigoted background, we have a decent background.

**LAWS:**

The reason that I wanted to talk to you was I believe that this debate was encouraging bigotry and I believe that you as leader - I mean, you can't say it's unimportant, we can't talk about it, who cares about some maiden speech.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

No hang on. I didn't say you can't talk about it but you shouldn't criticise people who chose, as I have done, to state my views in a positive fashion and not, sort of, through the back door in response to a speech that's been made by somebody else. I mean, I just say that again and I don't apologise for having taken that attitude, I think it's the right attitude, I think it's demeaning...

**LAWS:**

Well I think that's a terrific attitude...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I think it's demeaning for the Prime Minister of this country or indeed any other significant political leader to be required to state his policy on these important issues in other than a forthright, open, positive fashion which I'm always happy to do.

**LAWS:**

But if most Australians are sitting around the dinner table discussing this and sadly they are...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well some of them, some of them...

**LAWS:**

Well a lot are.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Can I say levels of immigration are things that are important to people and people do feel insecure. We do have high unemployment, they do worry about the fact that some of the recent arrivals in certain ethnic groups - you've got unemployment levels of 40, 50, 60%. Now that is unfair to all of us...

**LAWS:**

Why do we have it?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well, we're starting to change it you see. This is...

**LAWS:**

I mean, they asked the question not stupidly - why do we bring people to this country if they can't get jobs?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well that is a fair question. I don't disagree with that...

**LAWS:**

Well...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well we've started to change it. I mean the changes that were announced a couple of months ago were driven by our concern that the migration programme was too heavily skewed in favour of the family reunion component and too heavily against skills and it was contributing, at least in the short term, to very high levels of unemployment amongst some of the people whose language skills were poor. And that is one of the reasons for a number of the changes that we have announced. Now we were criticised very, very trenchantly. I heard on the radio this morning the leader of one of the ethnic groups criticising us for making those changes, we were criticised by the Labor Party, by Kim Beazley and by some of the others for making those changes. Now I think the majority of Australians out there agree with that. Now it takes time to change because people make arrangements to bring relatives in and so forth and you have to try and oversee these changes in a sensitive sort of manner and I think Philip Ruddock is doing an extremely good job of precisely that. But I'm very mindful of the unemployment worries that people have and that's one of the reasons why we've changed it. I mean, we were several months ahead of this debate, if you like, on that particular aspect of it. But we've made it very

clear that the changes are not being done on any kind of racial criteria. It will depend entirely on how the policy works out, who comes from where and that's not been our policy for some time.

**LAWS:**

Will the results of these supposed polls make any difference to your attitude?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Look, I listen to what the Australian people say. Leadership, John, is a combination of two things. On some issues you do have to get out there, stand in the middle of the road, and dare them to run you over - depending on what the issue is. On other issues what you have to do is to listen to people, go forward a bit, consult them again, go forward a bit further, perhaps adjust the pace of forward momentum. It's a combination of the two. I mean sometimes leadership is listening, sometimes leadership is saying this is good for Australia I don't care what you think I am going to do it in the long run you'll thank me for doing it despite your current opposition. Now you can't apply that approach to everything any more than you can apply the listen cautious approach to everything. You have to pick the issue, you have to...

**LAWS:**

Well which approach to this issue?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well I think on this issue people are concerned about the level of immigration.

**LAWS:**

But they're concerned about the level of Asian immigration.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well I don't believe that is as deep...

**LAWS:**

You should have heard some of the telephone calls that we've had here.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

That is true, that is true but I think the majority of Australians would believe that any reversion to a White Australia Policy would be against the interests of this country.

**LAWS:**

Of course it would.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

And I believe that and all I can say - perhaps in answer to your question I am demonstrating my answer to your question by saying what my view is. Now these sort of discussions really have to be conducted in the context of somebody saying to me: John Howard you're the Prime Minister, what is your view and what is the view of your Government on this issue? Now the view of my Government is that 30 years ago this country turned its back on the White Australian Policy and on a discriminatory immigration policy and I think that was in Australia's interests.

**LAWS:**

Certainly.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Now, it is also in Australia's interest to have community consensus on immigration - in other words if people feel shut out of the immigration debate, which many of them have. I mean, the greatest complaint I have from people - and it's been going on for some years - is:- "Look, we don't feel that we've ever, sort of, been consulted about the level of immigration, we don't feel that we've ever been asked, we don't feel that you lot down there have ever listened, we have this idea that you've all sort of got together and decided it's too hard for us to handle."

**LAWS:**

Well now they suddenly felt that they had an opportunity to say something.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well, can I say that...I mean, that's the point...I made that point ten minutes ago that I think part of the problem with this whole debate is that people have felt as though it's a bottled up thing. In the process of taking the cork out of the bottle - we've got to be absolutely certain that the ratbags and the bigots and the...and there are some ratbags and some bigots and some ill-advised...of course there are, I don't pretend that...of course there are - we've got to make certain that they get treated as they deserve to be treated, and that is with contempt. But in the process of doing that, by all means let us have a proper open debate on immigration levels. But let the people understand that as far as I'm concerned and as far as the Government is concerned, it ought to be conducted in a sensitive tolerant fashion...



**LAWS:**

And it should be based on fact and there should be an element of rationality.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well it should be based on fact. And, I mean, one of the facts is that in the 1980s Australia had the second largest population growth in the OECD, and it was almost entirely fuelled by immigration because our natural birth rate during that period was quite low. So that's one of the facts that the proponents of higher immigration don't always want acknowledged. There are facts that have got to be let out on both sides, but it must be conducted decently and tolerantly and with respect for all Australians. I mean, once you come to this country - this is an absolute, you know, indivisible, immutable principle - once somebody has come to this country, that person is entitled to every respect and every protection and every decency that is available to the rest of us. And any discrimination against that person according to race or whatever is quite unacceptable to me and I think it's unacceptable to the great majority of Australians. But people do - having said all of that - people have got a perfect right to advocate as vigorously as they will allow, as circumstances will permit, what the level of immigration will be, what multiculturalism means. It means different things to different people. To some people it means the preservation of a distinctive identity and almost sort of a federation of cultures. To other people it means an overriding commitment to Australia but a natural affection and respect for your home culture. Now, defined in that second fashion, it's something that I can embrace to find in...

**LAWS:**

So can I, but it doesn't seem to work that way.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well, because perhaps some people have defined it too vigorously in the first way. And I think that these are things...but you've got to be able to attack the first definition of it without being, sort of, treated as being bigoted or insensitive or intolerant.

**LAWS:**

Okay. Finally - and you've been very generous with your time and I'm very grateful, I know the listeners are - but finally, these people that are expressing a fear about Asian immigration, how do you placate them? Is their fear valid? Is their fear founded?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well, I can only talk about the...you know, I can talk about the facts. I really don't like talking these percentages because there's something clinical and tribal about it, but you

asked me. I mean, my information is that the Australians of Asian descent comprise about 4.7, 4.8 per cent of the population, and that's likely to rise by the year 2030 to about 7 per cent. Now, they're the facts. It's also my, you know, my certain knowledge and understanding, of course, that as often has happened with patterns of immigration, there's probably a greater concentration of people of particular backgrounds in particular parts of the country. Now, they are the facts. I mean, Australians of Asian background have made a big contribution. I mean, they've made a special contribution to Sydney and they have made a contribution in all walks of life: in business, in the professions, in commerce, in culture. And they help an understanding within this country of the Asian Pacific region. I have found the overwhelming bulk of them to be tremendous Australians.

**LAWS:**

So the fear that these people have is invalid?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well, they're the figures. I mean the figures speak for themselves. I think people worry about, at the moment, they worry about any significant level of immigration because many people feel insecure because of their jobs. Now, that is a natural thing. It's no good people sort of saying: Oh well, that's an ignorant fear and it's wrong anyway and we're not going to take any notice of it. I mean, you do have to understand the legitimate concerns...

**LAWS:**

Yeah, well we discussed that very thing yesterday. But I'm afraid that many people are inclined to not accept the figures irrespective of how factual they may be. So there's not a great deal you can do about that, is there?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well I think all you can do is, sort of, keep this thing in perspective. I mean, you don't go chasing every speech that's made in Parliament. Leaders don't do that. They make their own pace and they make their own statements and they respond to questions from the people who put them there, which is what I'm doing this morning. I think I've made very plain where I stand - as I have on a number of other programmes over the past couple of months - where I stand on these issues. And I don't apologise for anything I've said. I don't apologise for standing aloof from a point by point response to a particular speech. No, I don't operate that way and I don't think the Prime Minister of this country should operate in that fashion. I think the Prime Minister of this country should tell the Australian people what he believes in and he should listen to what the Australian people say. If he believes what the Australian people are telling him is fair and reasonable and strong and conveying a vigorous message, he has an obligation to take that into account and to adjust policy. He doesn't have an obligation to roll over to every opinion poll.

**LAWS:**

Okay, so in this instance you don't believe that what they're saying is fair, accurate or reasonable?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

No, I didn't say that John. I think some of the things they are saying are completely understandable. I've just been spending a few minutes saying that. Look, see these are...they're the sort of questions - they're good questions - but they're the sort of questions that can sort of...if they're not answered in the way that I'm answering them, can sort of create a completely false impression of what my view is.

**LAWS:**

Well, that's not my intention.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I know that's not your intention, I'm sure. I know it isn't and I mean that. But I have given a very, very concise statement of where I stand on a whole range of issues this morning. People who've been listening to what I've been saying I don't think they'd be in any doubt at all about what I believe on all of these things. So I think we ought to just leave it at that instead of, sort of, running the risk of muddying the waters.

**LAWS:**

Well, I shouldn't like to do that.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

No, I know you wouldn't.

**LAWS:**

But you can understand the object that I had in mind, is that if we get responses to telephone polls or if we get, literally, bundles of faxes, hundreds of internet notes, agreeing with what has been said, I think it's reasonable...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Yes, but everybody has a different view about what is being said. I mean, I heard the person in question say yesterday that she wants everybody to be an Australian. Well, we all believe in that.

**LAWS:**

Well of course we do.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I mean, it doesn't matter where you come from, everybody has to be an Australian far and away before anything else. I mean, the idea of a sort of indivisible, national commitment is fundamental to our society. But people from different parts of the world can become as good an Australian as you or I. It doesn't matter where. The fact that you and I were both born in Australia...

**LAWS:**

Well, you'll certainly get no argument from me on that.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

No, exactly.

**LAWS:**

In fact, you don't get any argument from me on anything. I'm the one who has tried to temper the debate. I'm the one who's proffered all the figures that you've given us this morning, day after day after day after day. I mean, I don't encourage the debate, but you can't turn your back on it.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

No, no, no, but you've also got a responsibility - we all have a responsibility - to keep the damn thing in perspective...

**LAWS:**

...that's what I'm trying to do...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

...and not to get to a situation where, in six months' time, everybody will look back and say: heavens above, that sort of debate really happened. And also, you don't want to turn people into martyrs and you don't want to, sort of, create a situation where people attract unnecessary levels of attention. Now, I understand the sense of unease and insecurity that a lot of people feel about their jobs, about the future of Australia. I think we've had too much...we do talk too negatively about our past. I sympathise fundamentally with Australians who are insulted when they are told that we have a racist bigoted past. And

Australians are told that quite regularly. Our children are taught that. Some of the school curricula go close to teaching children that we have a racist bigoted past. Now, of course we treated Aborigines very, very badly in the past - very, very badly - but to tell children whose parents were no part of that maltreatment, to tell children who themselves have been no part of it, that we're all part of a, sort of, a racist bigoted history, is something that Australians reject. I think Australians want to do something profound to help the disadvantaged in our community. And they see Australian Aborigines as a group as very disadvantaged, they are. I mean, that is unarguable. If you look on any measurement at the health levels - the trachoma - all of those sorts of levels, they are disadvantaged. Now, what Australians want to do, I think, is to look to the future and say:- how can we fix this? They're not interested in debates about past guilt. What they're interested in is doing something now to fix the problem. And they can't understand how...

**LAWS:**

Well, that's what they should be interested in.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well I think they are...

**LAWS:**

But the kind of discussion that we've been having of late on the subject, I think, is damaging to that desire.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

No, well I think part of the reason you're getting this response is that so much of the debate about these issues in the past has tended to focus on blame and guilt and allegations of racism and bigotry. I think that is the problem, I really do. I think Australians are a generous people. I think they want to help the disadvantaged, they hate waste, they hate humbug, they hated the Hindmarsh Bridge exercise because to them that was just absolute nonsense. But they wanted to know why couldn't the money that was spent on that - the several million dollars that was spent on various inquiries - if that could have been...

**LAWS:**

...given to kids...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

...given to help the sanitation conditions of people in the Northern Territory or Queensland, and to help with sensible practical things, they'd be happy to make the most...I mean, I think Australians are generous about the underprivileged.

**LAWS:**

Well, I think that fundamentally they are.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Fundamentally very decent and they resent being told that they're not.

**LAWS:**

Well sadly the displays that we've witnessed in the last little while would indicate that perhaps they've forgotten their fundamental decency, and maybe the talk that we've had today will encourage them to get it back.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I think you can always say that about some, but...

**LAWS:**

But it doesn't mean it's gone forever.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

No, but I think part of this reaction is a repudiation of the categorisation of them as being intolerant. And I think people do resent being told that they're intolerant.

**LAWS:**

Well why then do they choose, at this time, to behaviour in the main in an intolerant fashion?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well, I think when you understand the background of it, that is probably not a fair description of the feelings of the great majority of Australians. I don't think the great majority of Australians are intolerant. I think they're quite the reverse.

**LAWS:**

Well, the great majority of Australians respond to polls.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Yes, but they can change.

**LAWS:**

That's what I said.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

It depends a lot on the question that's asked. You know that.

**LAWS:**

But that's what I said...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

You know exactly that. But anyway, I can't express myself any differently or more clearly.

**LAWS:**

No, I wouldn't want you to.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

That is, I have said this morning exactly what I think about all of these things.

**LAWS:**

And I think it's terrific that you have.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

And well, I always did intend to come.

**LAWS:**

I'm aware of that and I think the majority of Australians, too, will be pleased to hear what you have said. And those who haven't acted with the country's best interest at heart over the last few days, perhaps now may reassess the situation.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

But they are a very small minority.

**LAWS:**

Well, I suppose you can look at it whichever way you like. I can only look at the results that we get by way of telephone calls - not polls - by way of telephone calls, reaction...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I think yes, but I think a lot of the things those people have felt are some of the things that I've said this morning. I mean, don't underestimate the accumulated, you know, feeling that a lot of people have that, it's just not been possible to talk about certain things without being banged on the head...

**LAWS:**

Yeah, I know that.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Of course you do, you know it very well, precisely. And you know it better than many, most. So I think people feel that way and they've wanted to react. And it's important, though, in reacting that they understand that this is a tolerant society and that once you come to Australia, once you embrace the Australian community, you're entitled to the protection and the decencies and the values of that Australian community and that's very, very important and it's absolute.

**LAWS:**

Okay, Prime Minister thank you very much for your time. You have been generous and I know that the people of Australia will appreciate what you've said over this period of time. And it will be interesting now, to witness whether or not there is a change in the attitudes of the calls, the faxes and notes we get on the net.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well, I'm always interested but as I say, I don't sort of roll over to the latest poll each morning. You've got to take a longer view than that. And I don't think Australians would respect me if I responded otherwise.

**LAWS:**

Well, I will watch with interest and I think Australia will too. Thank you very much for your time.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Pleasure.