

18 June 1997

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
PRESS CONFERENCE
THE STAND HOTEL - LONDON**

STRA

E & OE

I just thought I would say a couple of words at the beginning and then I would be happy to answer any questions.

High Commissioner, ladies and gentlemen, the visit to the United Kingdom is a very important opportunity for the Prime Minister of a still new government to reinforce with the Prime Minister of a very new government the importance of a relationship which, although it has an enormous amount of history to it in every possible respect, is a relationship that I see in very modern and contemporary terms and a relationship particularly, but not exclusively, economic that will be enormously important both to Australia's future and to Britain's future.

Our Party differences aside, the new British Prime Minister and myself, I am sure, will have much in common. That we will have in common the renewal of the commitments of our respective governments to the forward looking character of the Australia/UK relationship. I notice with some interest the similarity in some of the language that Mr Blair and I have used quite independently of each other in recent times. I have spoken of mutual obligations in relation to the interaction of welfare payments and the rights of individuals and he has spoken of reciprocal obligations. In August of last year I spoke of my Government being a government of ideas and ideals, but not of ideology and in a similar theme the new British Prime Minister has spoken of the goals of his government.

The economic relationship between Australia and the United Kingdom is a very deep relationship. Thirty seven percent of all foreign investment in manufacturing in Australia comes from the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom and the United States between them are the two largest foreign investors in Australia and reinforcing the importance of the relationship between Australia and those two countries is therefore very important to the preservation of thousands of Australian jobs and over time in the future the development of new job opportunities.

This trip will be an opportunity for me to reinforce to my British hosts which will not only include the Prime Minister but also the Deputy Prime Minister and three or four other senior Ministers. The two former predecessors of Mr Blair as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, perhaps even the new Leader of the Opposition and also senior figures in the British business world. It will be an opportunity for me to reinforce the strengths of the Australian economy. I notice against the background of the debate on the EMU and without in any way wishing to involve myself in domestic political matters in the United Kingdom, Australia, with ease, joins Luxembourg in passing the convergence the criteria laid down for membership of the EMU and in fact the latest OECD survey of world economies reinforced the relative strengths of the Australian economy and I will be at some pains and spending a great deal of effort in the days ahead to reinforce those strengths because to the extent that they are reinforced then the attractiveness of Australia as a destination for British investment will be further enhanced.

It is also an opportunity to emphasise the Asia-Europe interface of our relationship. If you pick from the Asia area and from the European area two countries, none would have more in common and have more to offer each other in terms of an understanding of the respective areas than Australia and the United Kingdom. That is not, of course, to say that Australia does not have in our own right very deep bilateral links with many of the countries of Europe and likewise British companies that have their

regional headquarters in Australia and they therefore see Australia as being very much a glide path in some respects into the Asia area.

The other specific issues that I would intend to discuss with the British Prime Minister, of course, would include some particular perspectives about the Asia Pacific area which seen from Australian eyes I think will be valuable for the British government. The concerns that we have about the impact of the climate change proposals currently being mooted abroad and the concerns we have about their impact on Australia and the particular circumstances in which Australia as a highly developed country would be a major net exporter of energy as, I will of course be emphasising the contemporary character of the relationship, I will be saying something of my Government's reform agenda and I would expect to share with Mr Blair our common experiences and common challenges of social problems which are not only common to the United Kingdom and Australia, but also common to other western nations.

Any questions?

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, in one of those common social problems is the question of unemployment. Since you'll be talking to Mr Blair will you be discussing the sort of ideas he and Bill Clinton have been discussing on unemployment.

PRIME MINISTER:

I'd be very interested to talk about any aspect of the unemployment challenge with the Prime Minister. Mr Blair, of course, inherited a relatively lower rate of unemployment than was the situation with my Government and I'll also take the opportunity of discussing across the spectrum of British politics the experiences with unemployment in this country but it remains the case that unemployment is a very significant challenge for all western industrialised nations. Australia's unemployment rate is higher than the United Kingdom's, it is markedly lower than that of many other countries in Europe. It's higher than that of New Zealand, Japan and the United States and it's naturally our desire to see our unemployment rate trending towards the levels that now exist in the UK and the United States rather than the other direction.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, in the feature today the Guardian newspaper suggested that Pauline Hanson was better known than most of our cricketers. Does she cast some sort of pall over the visit in the sense that she damages our reputation when you combine it with the controversy over stolen children?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, she certainly doesn't cast a pall over the visit and I'd be quite surprised if she were better known than certain numbers of our cricketers. I find that an astonishing proposition, in fact. Paul, I think you have to understand that in recent years all western societies have experienced the socially dislocating effects of major structural change and the difficulties that that poses for people who loose their jobs or who feel that their jobs are under threat and Australia in common with most other societies, has seen against that background the emergence of people who in a rather populist fashion will seek to exploit the fears and the insecurities of people who are effected by change. And rather than sort of seeing her and some of the views she has expressed as some kind of one-off phenomenon that is peculiar to Australia, I think you have to see it in the context of the emergence of such voices in many countries.

The truth is that her view is a minority view. The truth is that most people do not see her views as representing the views of the main stream of the Australian community and in a democratic society it is inevitable that those kind of voices will rise. They have a right to be heard, or those who utter those views have a right to be heard. Equally, in the democratic process the invalidity of the responses that those voices give will be exposed over a period of time and I believe that is happening increasingly in Australia in relation to the Member of Oxley.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, the Member for Oxley issued a statement saying... Prime Minister escaping the issue of rising unemployment by leaving the country. When is John Howard going to do something to create jobs? Jobs, Prime Minister Howard, not jetting to London for the cricket. What's your response?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, a fairly cheap, unoriginal shot. A very cheap, unoriginal shot. I would have thought one way to secure Australian jobs is not to denigrate foreign investment in Australia with cheap jack populist attacks. I would have thought that one way of securing jobs in Australia is to reinforce abroad the strengths of Australia. I thought one way of securing jobs in Australia is to make certain that the two nations in the world that invest more in Australia than any other two nations are reminded by a new government of Australia for the first time in a direct fashion through personal contact with the leaders of those two countries of the attractiveness of Australia for foreign investment and the strengths of the Australian economy.

JOURNALIST:

...your interest in cricket...(inaudible)...

PRIME MINISTER:

No, I'm not Laurie. I knew that some had made reference to it. I don't apologise for the fact that I like cricket - so do millions of Australians. I don't apologise for the fact that I'll be cheering for the Australian team tomorrow. But if you look at the totality of the time that I'm going to spend in the United Kingdom I think it is a busy, well-balanced trip. When you look at it, the end of it will have served Australia's interests. The notion that an Australian Prime Minister in the second year of his first term in office should be seen as indulging himself in visiting the United Kingdom, bearing in mind that the last Prime Ministerial visit to the UK some was some three or four years ago and given the importance of the UK in both contemporary and historical terms and economic terms, the notion of that as seen as some kind of indulgence is one I find quite extraordinary.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, do you see Pauline Hanson in the same light as extremist groups in other countries such as the Klu Klux Klan?

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't think you can. I wouldn't and I haven't in terms of her attitudes likened her to that. That would be inaccurate. But I do believe that what she has done is to try and exploit in a populist fashion the insecurities that people feel. But I wouldn't suggest that the view she has expressed quite in that extreme situation. I think in fact it reinforces the point I made that there is nothing unusual in a western society about people trying to exploit the insecurities and fears that people feel.

JOURNALIST:

There will be an open letter rolling off the presses tonight in which newspapers appealing to the Queen, as the Queen of Australia, to respond where you haven't, according to the letter...stolen children...

PRIME MINISTER:

I've read the letter...

JOURNALIST:

...do you expect the Queen to respond any way?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I would be somebody who would just sort of adhere to the normal convention in relation to these matters and not seek to involve her in what are domestic Australian political debates. So far as the letter is concerned, it is a stunt. I would have thought some of the people who contributed to some of

the organisations that are listed as sponsors of that letter would be rather aggravated that their funds are being used for such a blatantly political purpose and I thought the observations in Australia of Peter Hollingworth and Sharon Firebrace are appropriate. But it's a free society. There is nothing unusual about people wanting to make a point...

JOURNALIST:

...are you embarrassed...

PRIME MINISTER:

No, I'm not embarrassed, any more than I think people who have visited Australia and have been pursued by people putting a particular point of view are the embarrassment when they have visited Australia. I mean, what I think it all emphasises is the strength and the vitality and the robustness of the democratic debate in Australia. I think it highlights the strength of Australian democracy and the robustness of the political exchange in Australia rather than my seeing it as an embarrassment. I see it really in a way as a strength. But in a part of the strength debate in Australia is the right of people in Australia to put that point of view twelve thousand miles away and equally my right to describe it accurately as a stunt.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, given that Mr Blair apologised for the Irish Potato Famine do you think that he and you would see eye to eye on apologies and stolen children?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I wouldn't have thought that the British Prime Minister would see such a matter as being anything other than a domestic political matter and certainly any statements that the British Prime Minister has made about the history of anglo-Irish relationships, I would see something as a matter for the domestic political affairs of the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom.

JOURNALIST:

Is there much chance then that you will see eye to eye with Blair on greenhouse emissions given the strengths with which they've advocated uniform...targets?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, British interests and Australian interests on this issue are different and although we have a close relationship and it is a very important relationship, the very strengths of that encourages each of us when the circumstances require it to state our own national interests. The national interest of Australia supports very strongly the stand that I'm taking on greenhouse gases. I'll be pushing my case to Mr Blair. I understand the British position. They are in a totally different situation from Australia. What I am really asking for is that the very freedom of movement within what is called the European Union bubble in the climate change negotiations. That is the permission that individual members of the European Union have to differentiate their targets. I am asking that that same freedom of movement be allowed for Australia. I mean, we are in a special situation and I'll be putting that. It is in the national interest that I do so and I'll be putting it to British industry. I'll be explaining our position to British companies when I address the Confederation of British industry next week and I'll certainly be putting my situation in relation to that again to President Clinton when I see him in Washington.

JOURNALIST:

Will you be in a stronger position for putting that case despite Mr Blair's...

PRIME MINISTER:

No, I think the more critical contribution given Australia's special situation and given also that Australia will be represented at that conference and the conference will be addressed by our environment Minister and Government leader in the Senate, Robert Hill. I think the more effective work can be done on a bilateral basis.

JOURNALIST:

Is there a danger that the British media concentrating on the race aspects...over the stolen children, over the Pauline Hanson and One Nation Party that that will overshadow some of the messages that you are trying to deliver?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well no, but even if there were a concern about the focus in the British media on that, that would underline the importance even more of my being here. If the premise on which your question is based is valid, namely that there is an undue preoccupation in the British media on such matters, then it is even more important that I be here and it is even more important that I have the opportunity of directly telling the British people about the contemporary strengths of our country, about our economic strengths, about our record of tolerance and liberalism - using that expression in its broader sense as well as its party political sense - I think that your question in a sense validates what I said at the opening of this press conference and that is it is important that this time at this juncture in the relationship between our two countries that I be here directly with the members of the new Government and in the broader British community to reinforce Australia's credentials as an open tolerant vigorous forward looking prosperous and economically strong nation.

JOURNALIST:

Do you think it is hypocritical or unfair of European...to allow the differentiation on targets whereas...deny Australians that same right?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I wouldn't use words like hypocritical or unfair. I would simply ask that we be given equivalence of treatment. I don't at this stage lapse into such perjorative expressions. I merely ask that Australia be given the same fair go within the overall situation that countries that deserve it receive within the European Union bubble.

JOURNALIST:

When you see the Queen and brief her on the Constitutional Convention what will you be telling her about it in the wake of what the Senate has? Will the Convention be going ahead?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I'm not going to canvass out of respect for normal convention which has been observed by all of my predecessors. As Prime Minister of Australia I'm not going to canvass in advance or indeed afterwards what I discuss with the Queen. It's normal in the situation for me to have an audience with her - which I will. But, as to what is discussed I will observe convention and not speculate about that.

JOURNALIST:

Do you believe that the Constitutional Convention will go ahead with the changes...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, things have happened in the Senate in recent hours on that since I left Australia. I think everybody knows the position of my Government but as to specific reactions to what has happened in the Senate I'll leave that to Mr Fischer, the acting Prime Minister, and Senator Minchin, both of whom I know will handle it in a very direct and articulate fashion.

JOURNALIST:

You got lousy press in the British broadsheets this morning, does that concern you? Are you surprised by it?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, I'm not surprised by it because most of it I think has been written out of Australia and I think it reflects some of the press comment on some of those issues in Australia. But it just reinforces again,

Laurie, the importance, and you used the word, lousy press, I think it just reinforces the importance of my being here to tell the correct story and the positive Australian story to the British public and to the British Government.

JOURNALIST:

Will you be raising directly...

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh, I certainly won't be raising the matters relating to native title and stolen children.

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible)...so none of those issues will be...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, they are not of...they are domestic Australian political issues. I will naturally in speeches and comment, and I have already done so, canvassed those sorts of things which are the common experience of western nations. But I think the response to the High Court decision on Wik and the response to the Human Rights Commission report on the removal of Aboriginal children, they are domestic Australian matters and I certainly won't be initiating discussion. If I am asked about them naturally I will reply on behalf of the Government and state the Government's position. But they are not matters that I would volunteer discussion on simply because they are domestic Australian political issues.

JOURNALIST:

But Prime Minister it is on the basis of those issues that you are getting lousy press...(inaudible)...counter that.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, you counter it by communicating the strengths of Australia. By communicating the strengths of our economy, by communicating the strengths of democracy in Australia, by communicating the liberal principles of Australian society and the record of Australia in relation to racial tolerance.

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible)...will you raise with Mr Blair the issue of indexation on pensions?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes, that remains an irritant in Australian-UK relationships. I do have some proposals to put to him. I understand there are financial consideration in it for the British Government. It has been on the agenda for some time and it was the subject of discussion between the former government and the former British Government. Naturally, there is an Australian point of view which at the present time which is different from the British point of view. But I certainly will be raising it.

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible)...is your proposal different to...

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, I don't think I should say any more. I mean, it is not going to be the first thing I raise. But, once again, looking to the Australian national interest which is my constant responsibility and certainly my overwhelming responsibility it is a matter that ought to be raised but I don't want to go into any further detail.

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible)...now 40 000 more unemployed. Can you explain your...restructuring of youth allowance...(inaudible)...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I will be giving him a broad spectrum of the reform process in Australia, yes.

JOURNALIST:

And will you be explaining your rationale...

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh, look, I once again...I don't want to go...I mean, I will be meeting him tomorrow. I am not going to give a full dress rehearsal of every single thing I am going to raise. I said earlier that I was going to talk about the reform process in Australia, but once again, I am not going to get in this news conference, get into detailed comment on that particular proposal. I think that has been dealt with extremely well back home by Senator Newman.

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible)...but why announce it now...during the Budget...?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, it is absolute...I am simply not going to...there is no connection between those two events.

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible)...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, Mr Oakes, I think that out of respect for the fact that I am a guest in his country, if you want to know Mr Blair's view on that or any other subject you should ask Mr Blair. I think it would be ungracious in the extreme of me to try and peer into his mind on that particular subject.

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible)...any meetings on media ownership...

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't have any meetings scheduled with anybody. There are rumours around about other guests of this city at the present time but I don't have any meetings scheduled. No, I don't, but you sometimes run into people along The Strand or somewhere or other.

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible)...will you be happy to tell us if you do?

PRIME MINISTER:

Tell you? Well, it depends who it is Glenn.

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible) Mr Howard, your predecessor was here, he very strongly advocated Australia becoming a republic. He made speeches...he had the Queen's blessing and put out a statement...(inaudible). Has your assessment of the mood changed...?

PRIME MINISTER:

My line, as Prime Minister, on this issue is the same as my line as Opposition Leader and that is that I don't intend to initiate discussion abroad in relation to something that is entirely a matter for Australians to decide in an Australian way in Australia and obviously if I am asked by anybody I will respond by explaining the processes that are in train. And the fact that the Australian people will decide this and decide it in their own way and their own time, and I don't think it's appropriate that there be any different nuances given to the debate by me here in the United Kingdom or indeed any country. It is not a bilateral issue between Australia and the United Kingdom. The question of whether Australia

becomes a republic is a matter that bears upon the relationship between the Crown and Australia, not between the Government or the people of the United Kingdom and the Government and people of Australia.

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible)...

PRIME MINISTER:

I have been tried on before. I am simply not canvassing matters that might be raised between us.

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible)...your reading of the Australian mood has...

PRIME MINISTER:

Michael, I've just said, look, you know my broad views on the subject. The most important of which is that it is a matter for the Australian people to decide. We have put in train a process in accordance with our election undertaking - I stress that - in accordance with our election undertaking, we've put in train a process that will produce a convention which I expect to be held at the end of this year and as I said in the election campaign. We've got every confidence in the capacity and the wisdom of the Australian people to decide this issue. It is a matter for all of the Australian people to decide and the Convention process will allow the ventilation in full of arguments for and against and also arguments in favour of different models. What I don't want to do in deference to and out of respect for the Australian people is to either in reality or to be seen to be giving some new dimension or new perspective or new nuance to the debate when I'm out of Australia. I think it's an insult to the Australian people to do that. This is something which is our business and our business alone and I don't intend to sort of pay other countries the compliment of giving new versions of the debate or new emphasis to the debate that I don't do in my own country. I think that is quite insulting to the Australian people and I don't think they would appreciate it.

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible)...this is something that you won't do...(inaudible)...

PRIME MINISTER:

No, the point I made was over the years when you have - how should one put it - insecurity and instability as a result of social and other changes you have the emergence of fairly extreme voices and I listed some of them and I said that in that context the emergence of Pauline Hanson was not to be seen as unremarkable or surprising. I didn't directly suggest that her attitudes were similar to those of David Duke. I am no fan of hers but I think one has to be careful in the sorts of comparisons that one makes. But I certainly did make the point and I make it quite unapologetically that if you look at most western societies at various stages over the last 20 or 30 years, largely but not entirely in response to social and economic change, you get strident voices on the fringe trying to take advantage in a populist fashion, offering no solutions to the insecurity and the instability and the sense of loss and vulnerability that people feel in the face of widespread economic and social change. When you look at Australia, the UK, France, Germany and so many countries - I mean, Germany in the more modern context - that was the point that I sought to make. I mean, some of her views certainly can't be regarded as anywhere near as extreme as some of the others. That doesn't in any way detract from their invalidity.

JOURNALIST:(inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh yes. Yes.

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible)

Well, that's for you to find out, isn't it?

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, that's for you to find out, isn't it?

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER:

I think the ultimate judgement on that will be how she goes at the time of the next election. I think that really matters. I've seen a lot of people rise in the firmament, stay there for a while and then disappear. I think the appropriate way for a mainstream political party to respond is to respond to the issues, not use excessive language but where something is plainly wrong and stupid to say so.

JOURNALIST:

How will she go at the election?

PRIME MINISTER:

Poorly.

JOURNALIST:

How do you think we'll go tomorrow?

PRIME MINISTER:

We are a very adaptable people and I think one of the things that we've embraced over the last few weeks is a new philosophy and that is the first one doesn't count. I think Australia has a long history of doing well at Lord's. I think you have to go back to probably the 1930s to find - 1934 is it? - to find a test at Lord's that's been won by England. I think Mark Taylor's return to form is a wonderful tonic to the team and a tremendous personal tribute to the persistence of a bloke who's gone through a lot in terms of his personal performance over the last little while and I admire very much his tenacity and the fact that he's come back.

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible)...why is Lords so special?

PRIME MINISTER:

I'm not saying Lords is special to me - I don't think it's the best cricket ground in the world. I think as far as light is concerned I think the Sydney Cricket Ground, in terms of light, is the best for players although the cricketers say that the atmosphere of Melbourne, which is undoubtedly the great sporting stadium in Australia, is a great experience. But Lords to all cricketers, not particularly to myself, but to all cricketers, is sort of regarded as the home, or spiritual headquarters, or whatever you like to say, just as Wembley Stadium is to soccer and other grounds are to...what's that place? - Eden Park in New Zealand - to rugby.

JOURNALIST:

Is this the first time you've been to Lords?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, the second. I saw Slater get his tonne at Lords in 1993 - it's on the second time I've been to a test match here.

JOURNALIST:

(inaudible)...will you be here to see the next one here as Prime Minister?

PRIME MINISTER:

Don't tempt me.

JOURNALIST:

A couple of Australians are playing at Wimbledon...(inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER:

Given some of the earlier questions, that's an interesting question. I'll follow what they do - I've got a very heavy programme. I'm very proud of the fact that we've done so well. I think all Australians are proud of the fact and I'll keep in very close touch with what happens over the next few days, but I do have a very full programme as from tomorrow and I'm just not sure.

Thank you ladies and gentlemen.