

22 October 1997

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
PRESS CONFERENCE
CLARIDGE'S HOTEL - LONDON**

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Since arriving in London, I've had discussions with the British Prime Minister Mr Tony Blair, the Canadian Prime Minister, Mr Chretien, and the Prime Minister of Singapore, Goh Chok Tong.

In relation to the discussions with Mr Blair they covered a range of subjects, climate change, to which I'll return in a moment. I took the opportunity of congratulating Mr Blair on the cautious progress that had been made in dealing with the very difficult and painful problem of Northern Ireland. We discussed at some length the currency turmoil in South East Asia, we also touched again upon the most difficult bilateral issue between Australia and Britain and that is the indexation of pensions paid to former residents of the United Kingdom now living in Australia.

I can report that as a result of an initiative of mine during my last meeting in June of this year, the officials of both countries have agreed the basic data and I put it again to Mr Blair that it was a very strong Australian view that there should be some movement by the British in relation to the indexation of pensions.

He didn't indicate immediately any movement on that but he did indicate that that was something to which he'd give further consideration.

I indicated to Mr Blair that the Australian Government had a very strong commitment to maintaining and refurbishing the relevance of the Commonwealth into the 21st Century and I'm very keen personally to assist him in any way to ensure that the first Commonwealth conference that he's hosted as Prime Minister of Britain is a very successful one and in many areas I know that both of us will be able to work together very constructively.

In relation to climate change we had a particularly good discussion. Everyone knows that the vantage points from which Britain and Australia come on this issue are different, however in the course of the discussions he did recognise that an issue that affects different countries in a different fashion.

That it was desirable that, particularly at the Commonwealth conference, we endeavour to adopt an outcome and agree a language which encourages all countries, including developing countries to be involved in the process.

I indicated to him as I've indicated publicly in Australia that before the Kyoto Conference the Australian Government will be announcing a number of initiatives in the area as an earnest of our willingness to carry a fair burden and to do our share in contributing to an overall reduction in greenhouse gas emissions around the world.

I think both of us see the CHOGM conference in relation to climate change as an opportunity to give effect to the principles that I've stated. Both of us want to find a way of involving the developing countries and both of us recognise that there has to be an understanding of the different positions of different countries.

I'd have to say that on this issue, where the starting point of the two countries has been somewhat distant, it was a particularly good discussion.

I look forward to a continuation of those discussions over the course of the CHOGM Conference and also in the further bilateral discussions that will take place between myself and other people attending the conference.

I'd be very happy now to answer any questions you have on what I've said or indeed anything else.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, you said the Australian Government was going to raise some initiatives on greenhouse gases. Can you give some more details on that?

PRIME MINISTER:

No

JOURNALIST:

The Financial Review provides extensive details.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I don't speculate on leaks or press speculation. We will have something to say about that at the right time.

JOURNALIST:

Did you discuss any of those initiatives today with Prime Minister Blair.

PRIME MINISTER:

No, no because they haven't been finally resolved. I merely repeated to Mr Blair what I have told the Australian public.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, would you ever rule out measures such as accelerating the phasing out of leaded petrol, and things like that?

PRIME MINISTER:

Glenn, I'm not going to get into responding to questions on possible particular measures. I've said that we are going to announce measures. We are quite serious when we say that Australia has to play her part.

We are quite serious in saying that we will shoulder a fair share of the burden. But until those measures have been and the details of them have been finally resolved and agreed upon, I'm not going to speculate about what they might be. But I do repeat that we're quite serious about making a significant contribution but we are equally serious in saying that the formal European Union position is utterly unacceptable and nothing has changed or will change or can change in relation to that.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, is it likely that CHOGM will reach a unified position on greenhouse and is there any other country in CHOGM that agrees with the Australian position as stated at the moment.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, it depends what you interpret to be the Australian position. If you interpret it to be that any sensible outcome in this whole area must recognise that different countries have different situations and

that also to be effective, an agreement must involve all countries both developed and developing then I would hazard a guess that quite a number of countries would share Australia's position.

The point I'm constantly making on this is that the European Union proposal, which is a 15% reduction on 1990 levels is manifestly unfair to Australia and there is no way that the Australian Government will accept it and I think that position is very well understood.

It is certainly understood by the British Government, it is understood by the Canadian Government. And it is understood by the United States Government.

And I understand that at 7.30 pm Greenwich Mean Time or is it British Summer Time, I think it's the latter, President Clinton will be making a statement about the United States' position.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, what sort of statement would like CHOGM to make in relation to the role of developing countries? How specific should that be?

PRIME MINISTER:

What I believe the sensible thing would be to try and find some language, an approach that recognises that in order to have a comprehensive agreement there must be an involvement of the developing countries.

Now, look I'm not going to try and say precisely how you would express that. It would be ... oh no, no, no, I'm not going to try and get into that sort of thing. I'm not going to try and be pre-emptive, but I mean it is self evident that unless you have developing countries involved, even the most stringent regime in relation to developed countries could end up being counter productive, because an unacceptable industry might move from the stringent regime of a developed country to the regime-less atmosphere of a developing country and the amount of pollution and the net addition to greenhouse gas emissions could, in fact, end up being worse.

JOURNALIST:

But how likely are they to sign on, given that today in the ...(inaudible)... G77 actually pulled 35% cuts by 2020 and said that they're not going to make any commitments now or in the future?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, people always take positions like that and often it takes time for them to change but I can only state the obvious that you will never have a comprehensive, workable agreement in this area unless you involve everybody.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, did Mr Blair give an indication that he would be willing to accept wording in the communique which was not specific. Did not have specific targets to get used? Or will he be pressing for ...

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't think that at a press conference like this that I should presume to speak for somebody else. I think if people want to know precisely what the British intend to do, then the question should be addressed to Mr Blair and his press office.

I can only, well I've indicated to you that I'm not going to hazard a guess to what the British negotiating strategy will be at the CHOGM conference. That's a matter for them. But I can say that the discussion we had was very constructive and very good and there is a recognition as expressed to

me by the British Government and by the British Prime Minister that there has to be an understanding that different countries have different situations in relation to greenhouse gas emissions.

Now, I'm not going to go any further than that and I don't think it is appropriate for me to go any further. I'm not going to pre-empt the CHOGM discussions.

It's not right to do that and I'm certainly not going to hazard a guess as to what the British Prime Minister, indeed any other Prime Minister or President or representative might say at the conference.

I can only repeat what I've said about our discussion, the flavour of them, the tenor of them and the very positive view that I took away from them in relation to this issue and to repeat the attitude of the Australian Government for which naturally I am responsible.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, is there something that can be done in Australia to reduce emissions, things which don't directly affect production and therefore economic growth? Are those the sort of things that you'll be looking at?

PRIME MINISTER:

We're looking at a lot of things, Malcolm. But there are some things that fall into that category but I really much as all that I know you'd like me to, I'm not going to get into a sort of piece of seriatim speculation or yes, no, maybe, possibly, still looking at, etc, in relation to particular issues.

We are quite serious about putting forward a credible, impressive set of measures. In some cases involving direct budget cost in order to make a strong, Australian contribution to a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. It has always been our position.

We have never taken the attitude that Australia should have a free ride. What we have always said, though is that we're not going to cop an unfair share of the load.

And that has been my constant position, and I believe that there is a greater acceptance of that general proposition now than there may have been a few months ago.

JOURNALIST:

When you announce these measures, will you also flesh out any further Australia's international position, when you announce the domestic measures?

PRIME MINISTER:

Let me put it this way, Michelle, that we will handle this in a fashion in the lead up to the Kyoto Conference that maximises the negotiating position and the bargaining strength of Australia.

JOURNALIST:

Did you offer Mr Blair any sense of concession from your position in return for his apparent easing of these ...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I don't seek to quantify or qualitatively describe what he's done, that's not for me to do that, and I don't seek to do that in any way. I simply report what I report out of the discussions. I made it very clear to Mr Blair that we would announce a series of measures and we would demonstrate before the Kyoto conference that we were a serious participant in the process of reducing greenhouse gas emissions around the world, consistent with our economic position and consistent with the fact that uniquely, Australia as a developed country, is a net exporter of energy and I can't think of another country that is really in that situation.

Now, I think he would have gained the impression from what I said that we were quite genuine. He did express an understanding of the differences that countries have on this issue but he is personally very strongly committed to achieving progress in this area, as is President Clinton, as am I. But it's got to be progress that is built around achievable, realistic targets, targets that recognise the different situations of different countries. Now that has always been my position. It has never been my position and the position of my Government that we say to the rest of the world, this is all too hard for Australia.

That is not our position. What we are saying to the rest of the world is that you must understand Australia's special situation. You must understand our reliance on fossil fuel, you must understand our status as a net exporter of energy, you must understand the efficient character of large sections of the mineral export industries of our country, and the impact of the European Union proposal on regional areas of Australia in particular.

JOURNALIST:

Well, what then is an achievable, realistic target for Australia?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well it is entirely inappropriate, Matt, in the national interest for me to start speculating about that now. I mean, I am approaching the Kyoto Conference seriously and in a way that maximises an outcome from that conference from Australia's point of view and it is plainly unwise of me at this stage to start talking in detail about that because I judge it to be in Australia's interest to stay our hand on that for the time being.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, you are going to APEC soon. Will you be arguing with leaders in that forum, or around that forum, your position on greenhouse?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think arguing is probably not the right way of putting it. Certainly, the issue will be discussed. I mean, I discussed it tonight with the Canadian Prime Minister who will be at APEC. He's the host. We spent quite a bit of time in our discussion tonight talking about it. I mean, it's an issue that is on the agenda of most international fora now and rightly so because it's an issue that the world has got to confront and it's an issue that the world has got to deal with in a sensible fashion.

JOURNALIST:

What came out of that discussion with the Canadian Prime Minister tonight?

PRIME MINISTER:

What came out of it?

JOURNALIST:

Was Canada sympathetic?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think Canada is understanding of the need for accommodating the different views of different countries, yes.

JOURNALIST:

And you're saying that you believe Mr Blair is also....

PRIME MINISTER:

No, look, I am not saying anything about Mr Blair's attitude beyond what I stated in my opening

remarks. I mean if you want to get an expression of Mr Blair's opinion, well then you should ask Mr Blair.

JOURNALIST:

One thing Prime Minister, is our declaration of a set of measures a unilateral one or is it dependent on a specific set of outcomes from the Kyoto Conference?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, in relation to internal measures, things that we announce we're going to do because we think they're desirable. Obviously, the stance that we take internationally and the negotiating strategy that we adopt, as any sensible Government will do, some of those things could be conditional on what other countries do but we are prepared to make a contribution. We have spent quite a bit of time considering what that contribution might be and we will announce it at the right time, and the right time in terms of Australia's national interest in gaining the best possible outcome for our country at the Kyoto conference.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, did Mr Blair raise the issue of native title or indigenous rights with you in any sense today?

PRIME MINISTER:

No. No, could I just say that I was fascinated, on the subject of the commentary of Australian politics in the United Kingdom, I was fascinated to have my attention drawn to an op-ed article in *The Guardian* today which said that one of the reasons why my Government was taking the attitude it was on greenhouse gases was quite naturally, for a Labor Government, we were sensitive to the attitude of miners. Now can I say that I am sensitive to the job security of miners and can I say to the mine workers of Australia that we are looking after your interests in taking the stance that we are taking and I am very happy for such a prestigious publication as *The Guardian* to have identified a concern for the job security of the mine workers of Australia in calculating my Government's attitude on greenhouse gas emissions.

I am concerned about the jobs of miners in Australia and can I say to the mine workers of Australia, as your Prime Minister I will do everything I can to deliver the maximum achievable level of job security and the attitude I am taking on greenhouse gas emissions is far more supportive of your job security than the attitude of the Australian Labor Party, and certainly the attitude of the most recent recruit of the Australian Labor Party.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, did you discuss land mines in your talks with the Canadians?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes I did, and let me indicate on that that we are very sympathetic to the Ottawa process. We would like to see those countries that produce landmines and are not yet in the tent, change their position or be persuaded to change their position.

JOURNALIST:

On the Asian currency crisis, Mr Howard, were there any practical discussions with either Mr Blair or the (inaudible), Prime Minister, in relation to the currency...

PRIME MINISTER:

Australia has already done a lot and can I say that the role that Australia played in the Thai currency exchange has resonated throughout the whole region and is seen within the region as a powerful demonstration that we are heavily committed to the welfare of the region, that we are deeply integrated

in the region and they are words that were a sense of what was stated by the Japanese Prime Minister, who is probably the most powerful political figure in the region in a recent meeting with the Foreign Minister, Mr Downer, and I was reminded of the impact that it had made in Thailand last night when I had a brief discussion at the stop-over at Bangkok Airport with our Ambassador there. He said the impact of our very decisive and high-level response to the difficulties of Thailand had really won us, quite properly, a lot of points, not only in Thailand but throughout the whole region.

So we've already done a lot. I think the main value that I brought to the discussion with Mr Blair on the issue was as a major player in the Asian Pacific region an understanding of it. I gave him my own assessment of what I thought might be some of the developments. We are a very interested and sympathetic player and participant. Obviously the ultimate responsibility rests with the measure of domestic economic policies in the countries concerned and what has happened in the Asian region in recent weeks is a very powerful reminder that the most important thing any Government can do is to get the economic fundamentals right.

If you want to waterproof your economy against the turmoil that globalisation can sometimes bring because of the rapid ebb and flow of financial resources into different parts of the world you've got to get your fundamentals right and that is why what my Government has done in tackling the budget deficit, in bringing down inflation, in producing that historic, that landmark inflation result yesterday is a demonstration to the Australian public and to the world that there is a government in Australia which is determined to always keep the Australian, the fundamentals of the Australian economy in good order and that is your best protection always and I think what has happened in recent weeks is a powerful reminder of the wisdom of the policies that we have pursued in that area since we were elected in March of last year.

JOURNALIST:

On the pensions issue, why has there still been no concrete progress and when would you expect this ?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well this is something that has been going on for a long time. I guess one of the reasons why there hasn't been any progress up to now and why it will still be difficult is that it's not something that has an immediate electoral impact in Britain.

JOURNALIST:

Is that a criticism of Mr Blair?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, it's not a criticism of Mr Blair. I mean, to be fair to Mr Blair, he has done nothing more or less on the subject than his conservative predecessors. I am not singling out Mr Blair for criticism. I wouldn't be so ungracious as to do that. I think successive British Governments have been insensitive on this issue and I will continue to put it whenever I meet a British Prime Minister, whoever he may be, whether it's Mr Blair or somebody else so it's not a question of criticising him. I think you just have to understand that because you're dealing with people who no longer live in the United Kingdom, I guess it's slightly lower on the scale of priorities but I will keep doing it and it's just a matter of fairness and justice that they should be treated a little better.

Thank you.

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