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Monday 4 June 1973

INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL WILLESEE BY THE PRIME MINISTER,
MR E.G. WHITLAM, Q.C., M.P., CANBERRA
MONDAY 4 JUNE 1973

WILLESEE: This would seem to be an interview which doesn't require a great introduction. The Prime Minister, Mr Gough Whitlam, is the first Labor Prime Minister in 23 years and he has now been at it for six months. Mr Whitlam; Do you think that the worst thing that has happened to you so far might be the Victorian State elections?

PRIME MINISTER: No. That's only an episode.

WILLESEE: Have you had a worse episode in six months?

PRIME MINISTER: No. Of course I was disappointed at how badly we did - our Party did in Victoria. But I think the clear thing was this. That a good progressive Liberal can still do well and keep the middle ground. We won it in Victoria six months ago; Mr Hamer was able to keep it at the present time.

WILLESEE: Sir Henry Bolte said; "Thank God for Gough Whitlam!"
PRIME MINISTER: But if Sir Henry Bolte had been there, there would have been a very different result. Mr Hamer is different from Sir Henry Bolte and the people of Victoria knew it.

WILLESEE: Do you think you're wise to say to the people of Victoria: Make this a test vote; show me what you think of the Opposition's actions in the Senate.

PRIME MINISTER: No I wasn't. They took no notice of me.

WILLESEE: Are you sure they took no notice.

PRIME MINISTER: They took no notice.

WILLESEE: Do you ever think that you can do it that way, say make this a test vote?

PRIME MINISTER: I thought

WILLESEE: If you had won you would have claimed a success, wouldn't you?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes, of course. I suppose this is always the difficulty. If a Federal Leader is asked to take part in a State Election, what is he to talk about? All the interests I have in politics are Federal, not State. So I made a speech and I put this in. Mr Hamer is a good politician; he didn't pick up the dead cat. It got no publicity; it had no effect.

WILLESEE: As you have been the front runner in Australian politics for six months, very clearly. You have been talked about most. The political atmosphere has been one of discussion about Gough Whitlam, and one State had an election, and you didn't do very well.

PRIME MINISTER: If you want to go on that basis we did very well in the Brisbane City Council elections. We did very well in the South Australian elections. I don't take the credit for either. I am not going to take the blame for the Victorian. The fact is that on all the issues of significance Mr Hamer was not at odds with me. Mr Hamer and Mr Holding were putting substantially the same program as I would put in the position of either of them.

WILLESEE: What do you think about the Catholic Bishop coming in and saying "Don't vote Labor because of abortion".

PRIME MINISTER: Well let's be specific. It was one wicked old man; he is contemptible. I will waste no time on him. He was a liar and I am not going to enter into controversy with him .

WILLESEE: What do you think of the Church for allowing one of its Bishops to interfere in politics in that manner?

PRIME MINISTER: I think that the Church would do well to be tougher and to insist on the retiring age for some of its wicked old men. But the Church has made terrific changes in the last couple of decades and there are changes which some Bishops don't like.

WILLESEE: Did you ask anybody in the Church to try and counteract what that Bishop said?

PRIME MINISTER: No, no.

WILLESEE: Why not?

PRIME MINISTER: It is not my business; the Church can deal with these things very well.

WILLESEE: Let's move from one State to the States. One overriding problem that you appear to be having is one of State rights, dismissal of the Privy Council, the last court of appeal and also ownership of Australian minerals offshore. How was it that you and Don Dunstan can differ so markedly over this?

PRIME MINISTER: There is a difference between all the States on this issue and the Commonwealth has been ever since John Gorton first brought it up. There is a difference these days between the Liberals in the Federal Parliament as there has been for the last three years. Now the whole point about it is this. We can't as a nation allow our offshore resources to be dissipated in the way our onshore resources were. Look what would happen if you had six States making different arrangements as you had, say, Sir Charles Court and Mr BjelkePetersen doing with onshore resources. We have to deal as a nation or we fail and Mr Connor has shown how successfully we can deal as a nation. Look at the deal he got from the Japanese mineral importers this last week.

WILLESEE: Three of your Labor Premiers disagree with you.

PRIME MINISTER: Yes.

WILLESEE: Does that alarm you.

PRIME MINISTER: No. They are wrong. They are playing the role of Canute. There is no question that Australians don't believe that British courts are better than the High Court of Australia. Why should we still have appeals to the Privy Council in England? Also I don't believe that Australians believe the States can look after offshore resources better than the Commonwealth.

WILLESEE: Would you agree that in most senses you and Don Dunstan think in a very similar manner?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes, we do. We always have; we have been closely associated for twenty years.

WILLESEE: Then why do you differ so markedly on this one?

PRIME MINISTER: We don't discuss it, we just differ on it.

WILLESEE: Could it be that your respective positions influence your thinking?

PRIME MINISTER: I suppose.

WILLESEE: Well could it be then that Gough Whitlam would like more power?

PRIME MINISTER: On things like this I am certain that the Australian Government, whether it was under Mr Gorton or under Gough Whitlam, needs to carry this responsibility. I am quite convinced of this and I believe that my predecessors as Prime Minister would really have been of the same view.

WILLESEE: Do you think Don Dunstan would change his mind if he were in charge in Canberra?

PRIME MINISTER: No, but he won't prevail on this issue. In Canberra, yes he probably would.

WILLESEE: You say he won't prevail.

PRIME MINISTER: Of course not.

WILLESEE: In the Federal Conference?

PRIME MINISTER: Of course not.

WILLESEE: Your quite sure on that?

PRIME MINISTER: Absolutely. Do you really think that the Federal Conference of the Labor Party would do anything to down-grade the first Federal Government we have had in a quarter of a century?

WILLESEE: Could I put that question to you? Do you think they would?

PRIME MINISTER: No.

WILLESEE: The Labor Party has a rather nasty history of toppling tall poppies from time to time,

PRIME MINISTER: Yes, but not when they are carrying out party policy. This was settled at our last Conference, and that they will not be deterred by the obstruction of the Privy Council or the offshore resources.

PRIME MINISTER: Don't mind me putting this in. The differences of significance on this matter are within the Liberal Party. The Labor Party in the Federal Parliament is absolutely united on this. The Liberals have differed between the House of Representatives and the Senate.

WILLESEE: I just suggested perhaps unfairly that you may be motivated in these actions for a desire for more power. You have had power for six months now. Do you enjoy that?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes, sure. Very much.

WILLESEE: How different does it feel to have power?

PRIME MINISTER: All the frustrations of twenty years preparation in Opposition are no longer there.

WILLESEE: Are there different frustrations now?

PRIME MINISTER: I suppose so, but they haven't yet emerged.

WILLESEE: What about Caucus, that body of all the Federal Labor Parliamentarians who can override you and your Cabinet?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes. They haven't. They are fully involved in the whole process and they get the same satisfaction.

WILLESEE: What would you do if they did?

PRIME MINISTER: Well of course I would accept it. But is it likely? It hasn't happened. Do not let us be hypothetical about these things.

WILLESEE: Well politics is almost the art of hypothesis isn't it?

PRIME MINISTER: No. It is the art of the possible. And is Caucus going to embarrass a successful, positive, Government? They are proud of it. They are part of it.

WILLESEE: In personal terms, while we are talking about, your attitude to power and so on, you still come under some criticism for your personality. Strangely you win the popularity polls that are taken by the survey people. The last one I recall you were clearly ahead of Mr Snedden and Mr Anthony in most factors except arrogance. They were rated to be more humble than you.

PRIME MINISTER: I thought that we were all pretty close. I suppose they have more to be humble about. Is that what you expect me to say?

WILLESEE: I don't expect any answer. Does that concern you?

PRIME MINISTER: Not terribly. I expect, you know, it is inevitable in a Parliamentary system where people are asked

questions and give answers and so on that whoever has the numbers, whoever is the Prime Minister or the Premier will appear or be called arrogant. It goes with the job.

WILLESEE: It is not a peculiarly personal weakness perhaps?

PRIME MINISTER: No. I can't tell. You ask me to be too subjective.

WILLESEE: The other point, that is raised against you is that you are sometimes.....

PRIME MINISTER: Is the Federal Conference tossing me? Are the State Premiers tossing me, the Caucus tossing me, the personality faults? What's next?

WILLESEE: We have twenty minutes to go. To be impetuous appears to be a Whitlam trait? Is it?

PRIME MINISTER: I wouldn't think so. The things which I do are usually the result of years of consideration. I mean you have been talking about some of these matters of policy on which there would be, say, a difference in the Party. These are deep seated views of mine, you can go back for twenty years

WILLESEE: I don't think I can accept that fully; I am not talking about policy

PRIME MINISTER: There has been a very consistent or you might say stubborn adherence to those principles.

WILLESEE: I think I am talking about Whitlam on his feet. What about the outburst about President Nixon a couple of days ago.

PRIME MINISTER: No outburst. No outburst.

WILLESEE: Really?

PRIME MINISTER: No. No outburst. You are going on the headlines.

WILLESEE: No, I am going on what you said. I read it, I interpret it as a criticism of both President Nixon and the United States political system.

PRIME MINISTER: I believe Australia has a better political system than the United States. Don't you?

WILLESEE: It doesn't matter.

PRIME MINISTER: No? Well I think it does matter, and I don't believe that we gain anything by suggesting that the Australian political system is inferior to the American political system. America is a very great democracy but she has run into some very bad shoals, because of deficiencies in the system.

WILLESEE: You talked about the parlous position that President Nixon finds himself in because of his personal behaviour.

PRIME MINISTER: No. I respond to a smart question by my predecessor saying that I am breaking-in in a Watergate fashion. Now is the reference to Watergate meant to be insulting to President Nixon or to me?

WILLESEE: But it doesn't matter. He is not the Prime Minister, you are.

PRIME MINISTER: Mr Nixon wouldn't take it as flattering. I didn't take it as flattering either. Watergate has been a disaster. I didn't mention it, it was mentioned in a question to me.

WILLESEE: You must accept that what you said could only harm personal relations.

PRIME MINISTER: No, not at all. Where President Nixon has been right I have been unstinting in my acknowledgement and praise of the fact that he was right. He is the first American President who has faced up, in twenty years and more, to the existence of China. He is the first one who has faced up to the necessity of having reasonable relations with the Soviet Union. He is the first American President for twelve years who faced up to the necessity of getting out of Vietnam and I praised him for those three positive achievements.

WILLESEE: Are you the first Australian Prime Minister to face up to an American President?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes, where he has been wrong as I thought he was and every other leader in the world is of the same view. He was wrong on the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong.

WILLESEE: Does it help for you to draw his attention to his embarrassment over the Watergate?

PRIME MINISTER: I didn't. The Watergate was raised by my predecessor.

WILLESEE: And you answered?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes. What am I to say? He is in a parlous position and so is the Presidency because of deficiencies which have now been shown in the American system compared with ours. Now look, let's face it. Mr Heath or I, we face a Parliament every day it is sitting. If President Nixon had had to be in touch with public opinion every day the Congress was sitting, things wouldn't have been allowed to drag on till they became so critical.....

WILLESEE: Alright, you support....

PRIME MINISTER: And I do prefer, and there are many forms of democracy in the world, I must say I prefer the system where the Executive is responsible to the legislature.

WILLESEE: Now you stand by your actions and your words about President Nixon, but you must accept that a lot of people think.....

PRIME MINISTER: That is, I praise him where he is right. I have done so publicly. I have explained to him privately where I have thought he was wrong.

WILLESEE: Well, let's accept that there are some people, it doesn't matter how many, in Australia who are most concerned about what you said. What are you going to do to allay their fears? Will you meet President Nixon?

PRIME MINISTER: I would expect so. No arrangements have been made yet. But I am glad you raised this, because the last three Prime Ministers of Australia has sought an official invitation to visit the United States, as if it were a test of legitimacy. They had to go to a coronation. Sir Robert Menzies, Mr Menzies, he didn't wait for official invitations; if he was going to Britain or the United States he would expect to see the Prime Minister, the President. They don't wait for an official invitation. I expect to see Mr Heath, I expect to see Mr Nixon.

WILLESEE: It is a fair sort of gamble if it doesn't pay off in Washington, isn't it?

PRIME MINISTER: On whose side?

WILLESEE: On your side.

PRIME MINISTER: Well let's face it. I am going. It has been known for months that I am going to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference in Ottawa early in August. Among the many invitations that I have received to make official visits to countries where Australian Prime Ministers have never previously made a visit is Mexico and I said, right, I will go there on the way to Ottawa. I will obviously go through or across the United States, and in those circumstances I would expect to see Mr Nixon. After all, Australia and the United States are more closely associated than most of the Commonwealth countries are associated with the United States. What would be said if I went straight to Ottawa and didn't visit the United States?

WILLESEE: What would be said if you went straight to Washington and didn't see Nixon?

PRIME MINISTER: Wait until that happens. You know very well that anything we say on this program will continue all the speculation on this matter. Now I believe that President Nixon is a mature, courteous head of government.

WILLESEE: A lot of Australians see a great need for a big powerful friend in defence terms. They want some sort of umbrella and they still see America as being No.1.

PRIME MINISTER: In the case of a world war, that is so, I agree.

WILLESEE: You would not jeopardise that position?

PRIME MINISTER: Not at all. Don't forget, America needs us in the case of a world war, just as much as we need America.

WILLESEE: Do you accept that

PRIME MINISTER: There is a mutuality of benefit here.

WILLESEE: Some Australian voters think that you are jeopardising that umbrella?

PRIME MINISTER: Of course some of them think that; they brought that at the last elections. But the majority of the Australian people no longer want to touch the forelock to any great power. They think Australia ought to make some decisions herself.

WILLESEE: Are you happy about the performance of your Cabinet?

PRIME MINISTER: In most cases I am delighted.

WILLESEE: Does Senator Murphy embarrass you?

PRIME MINISTER: In some respects, yes; in other respects, I am delighted with him.

WILLESEE: Where does he embarrass you?

PRIME MINISTER: I won't go over that. But let me bring in where I am delighted. Nobody could have done more

WILLESEE: I am sure people are more interested in

PRIME MINISTER: I am not. But I want the public to realise that Senator Murphy has done a magnificent job, not just for the Government, but for the Australian nation. In Britain on the Privy Council issue. In The Hague, before the world court, on the French Test Issue, and he will do so in modernising, humanising, our laws. There is no man better equipped to do these jobs, no man more dedicated in doing them, than Senator Murphy.

WILLESEE: What about the Croatian controversy?

PRIME MINISTER: I will no re-hash that, at this notice. Senator Murphy has my complete confidence in doing these things I have mentioned.

WILLESEE: Do you think a Prime Minister should be able to say a Cabinet Minister embarrasses me in some respects and let it go at that? Shouldn't you do something about it?

PRIME MINISTER: I keep a sense of proportion. The important things have been done splendidly.

WILLESEE: Does Dr Cairns embarrass you?

PRIME MINISTER: No. When he is doing his job as Minister for Overseas Trade he has been the most successful we have had in our country's history. This visit he has just made to China will be as significant as the relations which John McEwen was able to establish with Japan in the middle fifties. This has been a landmark in our overseas trade.

WILLESEE: You said when he is doing his job. What about when he steps outside that job?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, he doesn't. And I am not going into various headlines there.

WILLESEE: Do you show unqualified support for Dr Cairns?

PRIME MINISTER: As Minister for Overseas Trade he is the best Australia's ever had. This has been a landmark.

WILLESEE: You keep qualifying your support to that job.

PRIME MINISTER: I am not going to be distracted from the essential things. I chose Dr Cairns in that portfolio and I am delighted with his performance of it. And every Australian ought to be proud of it. This was the biggest overseas trade mission we've ever had. And it has been very successful.

WILLESEE: Would you like a Cabinet reshuffle?

PRIME MINISTER: No.

WILLESEE: You are quite happy the way it is?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes. That is the people that Caucus chose for me I think were good choices. I mean I might have made a few different choices, but they have been good choices. The allocation of portfolios I would not change.

WILLESEE: Are you surprised by the performances of some of your Ministers?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes.

WILLESEE: Who?

PRIME MINISTER: That is, I am still more pleased than I expected to be with many of them, yes.

WILLESEE: Disappointed with some?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes.

WILLESEE: What can you do about that?

PRIME MINISTER: They are learning.

WILLESEE: If you are disappointed with some why don't you want a Cabinet reshuffle?

PRIME MINISTER: Because they are learning.

WILLESEE: Is it because you can't?

PRIME MINISTER: I could reshuffle the Cabinet, that is, I can reallocate the portfolios whenever I want to. I don't want to. They are doing very well.

WILLESEE: Would you like to have the right to choose your Ministers?

PRIME MINISTER: No. Certainly not. A lot of people suggest that somehow this is an embarrassment; it's not in the least. And the most successful, the only successful Liberal leader in Australia, Mr Hamer has the same sort of Cabinet, one elected by his Caucus. That is the effective and democratic way of going about it. I have always supported it, not least now that I have such a Cabinet.

WILLESEE: In very general terms, how is the man in the street affected by this Labor Government? What is different in his country for him?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, there are some external things that we have mentioned already; for instance, what Connor has done with the export of minerals to Japan, what Cairns has done for

WILLESEE: Can I chip in, because that is almost not what I am talking about?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, OK then, you mean internally?

WILLESEE: Yes, Foreign Affairs, switch in emphasis and all that. It takes a long time to get through to the man in the street. How does he know he is in a different Australia? Or is he in a different Australia?

PRIME MINISTER: Well there are very great number of people who are already benefitting from the things which can be done swiftly internally, such as welfare matters. There has been the biggest improvement in welfare payments, repatriation, social services, that there has ever been, and there is the guarantee to maintain those benefits in the future. People in the Armed Forces, certainly, and to a fairer extent the Public Service, realise that they now have a Federal Government which will look after them properly. The other things are emerging; for instance this week we got what I think is probably the most substantial achievement we have had so far. We had the report of the Interim Schools Committee. I ordered it before Christmas, it came in last Wednesday. A couple of weeks before there was the one on the Insurance, the Health Funds, and also this week there was the one on the Hospitals. Now it is on this basis of expert reports which are now available for everybody to read.

WILLESEE: Are things going fast enough for you?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes, I mean of course I would like to do some things more quickly, but it is not possible to deal with, say, hospitals and schools any faster than what we have. We have acted on these very quickly. We were in six months last Saturday and we have got the basic reports in already. Now that is pretty fast work. The experts have collaborated with us amazingly, and the State Government, I want to acknowledge that too. N.S.W. has made available five of their Supreme Court Judges. New Zealand has made one of their Judges of Appeal available. And there are several Federal Judges and many other top business people and academics are happy to work for

us, because they know that what they say won't be suppressed, the public will know what their recommendations are. We are seeking advice, we are publicising it and we will try to carry it out.

WILLESEE: Your programs are costing you more than you anticipated, aren't they?

PRIME MINISTER: In some respects, yes.

WILLESEE: Does that alarm you?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes. But at the same time we have a task force under Dr Coombs, that will cut back on a lot of the freakless expenditures which we inherited.

WILLESEE: Will this money problem stop you from doing some things that you want to do?

PRIME MINISTER: It will stop us doing as many things as we want or doing them as quickly as we wanted. That is true, but we will be committing ourselves to the programs unquestioningly. Let me give you an instance: I suppose we will not be able to carry out the sewerage schemes in all our big cities as quickly as we wanted to.

WILLESEE: Is your overall job much more difficult than you thought it would be?

PRIME MINISTER: No.

WILLESEE: Is it easy?

PRIME MINISTER: No, it is not easy. It is satisfying. There are some things which obviously I would be able to do better and my colleagues would be able to do better, if, for instance the States, were to hand over their railways, and their hospitals to the Australian Government. The railways and the hospitals in Australia would be very much better. This will take longer. I am not surprised at their acting so slowly or reluctantly, I accept that that is in the game.

WILLESEE: Are you a confident Prime Minister?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes, I suppose so.

WILLESEE: Are you confident enough to really have a double dissolution and take both houses back to the electors.

PRIME MINISTER: If the Senate makes it clear, in a few months, because there can't be a double dissolution for a few months, the situation has not arisen yet, but if by the end of the year or early next year it's plain that the Senate will not let basic legislation through, then we will have a double dissolution.

WILLESEE: You are quite firm on that?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes.

WILLESEE: You are not prepared to concede any of your substantive legislation?

PRIME MINISTER: The important things are to get the structure transformed. To get basic legislation through, and if the Senate prevents that then the people will have to decide.

WILLESEE: Will you let the doctors beat you?

PRIME MINISTER: No. Not just beating us, beat the public.

WILLESEE: How can you stop them?

PRIME MINISTER: The doctors depend for half their incomes on the taxpayer. The doctors, specialists and surgeons, depend on the public to provide them with their equipment, their laboratories their operating theatres, and so on. There is no calling in Australia which depends so much on public expenditure - taxation - as the doctors.

WILLESEE: But precisely how do you make them compromise? How do you make them see reason, see what you would see as reason?

PRIME MINISTER: The conditions on which doctors use public facilities, the conditions on which the public underwrites doctors incomes, is determined by elected people, by Government.

WILLESEE: But if you take action in those areas you risk hurting the people again, the patients.

PRIME MINISTER: No we won't.

WILLESEE: Are you satisfied you will win?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes. Public opinion is behind us. Because doctors will do very well out of our programs. We want the public to have as good a health service as possible. Now don't forget that the doctors are very much divided on this. There are only, in simple terms, some of the general practitioners, who are obstructing. The research people, the specialists, the surgeons, the young ones, they are in general much in favour of what we want to achieve on behalf of the Australian public.

WILLESEE: Mr Whitlam, we are now out of time now. You have been Prime Minister for six months, how long do you think you will be Prime Minister?

PRIME MINISTER: I am determined to give up the job before I am sixty-five. So what is that, another three Parliaments?

WILLESEE: Mr Whitlam thanks very much for talking with us.
