

PRIME MINISTER'S INTERVIEW WITH KERRY O'BRIEN ON FOUR CORNERS  
SATURDAY 18 OCTOBER 1975

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O'BRIEN: Mr Whitlam at the outset can we ascertain one thing: is there going to be a half Senate election?

PRIME MINISTER: There well may be; I will not be certain about this until or unless the Senate rejects the Budget Bills. At this stage they have not rejected them, they've just moved to defer them.

O'BRIEN: Is it as clear cut as that, that until such time as they actually reject the Bills, if they just keep delaying and delaying?

PRIME MINISTER: If it becomes clear that from the extent and the duration of the delays that they're only hedging, that they are, in effect, rejecting, then it is very likely that I will ask for there to be a half Senate election.

O'BRIEN: Wouldn't that be a moot point as far as the public is concerned; I mean the situation is here, now?

PRIME MINISTER: No, it's a very critical point among the Liberal and Country Party - not maybe among the Country Party - but in the Liberal Party there are very great qualms felt about rejecting a money Bill. It's never happened in Australia in the Federal Parliament yet. And there have been many occasions when the Government - that is, the party with the majority in the House of Representatives, has not had a majority in the Senate. But in those circumstances there have been 139 Bills which could have been rejected by a Senate, where there was an anti-Government majority, but it's never been done. So they are very reluctant to come to that crunch.

O'BRIEN: Well, what is your scenario of the next few months?

PRIME MINISTER: All I can be positive about at this stage is that I will not advise the Governor-General to issue the writs for the House of Representatives election at the behest of the Senate. That is, as long as I have a majority in the House of Representatives.

O'BRIEN: How long can you afford to stall?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, this is two Parties here, each taking up an attitude; one will have to yield. I will not yield on this issue. It is central - not just for my government but for any Australian Government from now on - it is an impossible situation if the Senate can dictate when there are House of Representatives elections. I will not cop that.

O'BRIEN: Do you hold out any hope that Mr Fraser might yet back down?

PRIME MINISTER: I'm not going to speculate on what will happen in the Liberal Party. All I'm positive about is, that as long as I have a majority in the House of Representatives I will never advise the Governor-General to issue writs for a House of Representatives election at the behest of the Senate. I will stand firm on that, no question whatever.

O'BRIEN: What's your own analysis of how a half-Senate election would go; could you in political reality hope to gain a temporary majority in the Senate?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes. There are six persons who would be in the Senate from the day that the polls were declared: six persons who are not there now. The rest of the Senate, that is, the successors to the people who were elected to the Senate, would not take office until the first of July. But following on the High Court decision of Friday week, there will be two Senators for the Northern Territory and two from the Australian Capital Territory from the day that the polls are declared and also there would be a replacement in Queensland and New South Wales for the two appointments, non Labor appointments, which were made to succeed the former Labor Senators. So there would be six Senators from the day that the polls were declared, as distinct from next July.

O'BRIEN: What are you prepared to put the country through in terms of Public Service disruption?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, we obviously will do all we can to remove or reduce the distress that will be caused to Public Servants, soldiers, patients under Medibank, people in aged persons' homes, students, all those people that can't get payments from the taxes until the Australian Government gets its Budget passed.

O'BRIEN: Although it was Mr Fraser's decision that forced the situation, do you have any moral right to expect or ask the country to share that with you?

PRIME MINISTER: Certainly, certainly. This is quite basic to democracy in Australia. The Constitution says—and everybody has assumed—that the House of Representatives should last for three years. Now the proposition that is being put up by the Opposition under Mr Fraser's dictation at the moment is: that if the Government, the Party with the majority in the House of Representatives doesn't have a majority in the Senate, that is if it is in a minority or if it only has half of the Senators, it can be made to have an election at any time within that three years. Obviously in October, when the Budget has to be passed or in April with the Supply has to be passed. Now this is an intolerable situation. No Prime Minister would have accepted it - in my time Menzies' wouldn't; Holt wouldn't; Gorton wouldn't and Gorton, of course, doesn't accept it now.

O'BRIEN: To what extent would you be relying on drastic economic disruption to turn public opinion against Mr Fraser?

PRIME MINISTER: There will certainly be a great deal of disruption. From all the signs I see, from hundreds of telegrams pouring into the office, and also of course, crowds that you saw outside Parliament House - admittedly that was Canberra, full of Public Servants-on Thursday; from all those indications people are very much aroused by this thing. Not just Labor supporters; it's true that in my Government's first term there was a similar threat half way through. Well, we took it then. Now there is a threat a second time, midway through our second term; we will not accept it this time.

O'BRIEN: Just on the point of public support; are you concerned that a militant response from trade unionists could led to political violence?

PRIME MINISTER: I don't know what you mean by political violence?

O'BRIEN: In the current...

PRIME MINISTER: I don't know what you mean by political violence are you meaning, you know, physical violence?

O'BRIEN: Yes physical violence?

PRIME MINISTER: Oh, I would certainly hope not. But there can be no question...

O'BRIEN: Do you see that the mood is there?

PRIME MINISTER: People are very incensed, they are very roused by this and the appalling thing is of course, that it's the conservatives who have flouted the conventions. It was conservative governments that broke the convention about appointing Senators of the same party as former Senators to vacancies. It is now conservatives who are flouting the convention that the Budget and money Bills generally are passed by the Senate. And it is the conservatives who are threatening that State non-Labor Governments will advise State Governors, not just the Governor of Queensland but State Governors in general, to refuse the Governor-General's request to issue writs for a half-Senate election. Now the conservatives are putting all these basic conventions in jeopardy.

O'BRIEN: Well what of the conservatives' point that, in fact, you wanted to reject Supply in the Senate in 1970?

PRIME MINISTER: There was one money Bill there, wasn't it? I know this is constantly... Mind you if they think that the view I expressed on a particular money Bill at that time was correct, why don't they reject Supply? But they're shrinking from that. I did in fact express that view; I might have been right or I might have been wrong. If they think it is right, why don't they bite the bullet, why don't they reject the Budget? They haven't.

O'BRIEN: Isn't that awkward ground for you now to be arguing on?

PRIME MINISTER: No, no. When it was for real, let me quote this, there is no question about this circumstance. In 1967 the Holt Government was in a minority in the Senate and we and the DLP - whom I got rid of at the last election - combined to reject increased postal charges: they are not money Bills incidentally under the Constitution. When the Budget came on the Holt Government reintroduced those in the form of money Bills. And when they did that I successfully argued in the Caucus that we should not oppose them. Now there was a big fight in the Caucus on this, some of the Labor Senators wanted to vote against the money Bills; they could have done it; I said that it was wrong. And I prevailed. That is when it has been for real when there has been an anti-Government majority in the Senate that could have rejected a money bill, I successfully strove to see that the Labor Party didn't connive at that course.

O'BRIEN: Isn't expediency the first convention of politicians?

PRIME MINISTER: No, no; oh no. What my Government does, what I do as Prime Minister now, can affect every subsequent Australian Government. If I don't stand firm on the principle that money Bills are the responsibility of the Government, that Governments are made

or unmade in the House of Representatives, then every subsequent Australian Government will be under threat by a Senate in which it doesn't have a majority, twice a year. And it is impossible for any political party, even in the most tranquil times, to have predominant popularity throughout a three year term. No Government can be sure that it will be popular in six months' time.

O'BRIEN: Quite obviously, you will be arguing Constitutional crisis as a main thrust in the campaign?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes, quite, quite; and this is a winning issue.

O'BRIEN: Mr Fraser on the other hand argues the totality of your performance in government. A failed Budget...

PRIME MINISTER: No...

O'BRIEN: ...and of the loans affair?

PRIME MINISTER: How can you say that the Budget has failed when it hasn't been passed? This election - when and if it takes place - will be very largely on the Budget. And for the first time Mr Fraser would then have to say on behalf of the Liberal and presumably the Country Parties what sort of Budget the Senate would pass. This is just not an idle thing criticising our Budget: it would be a question of what Budget would it pass, what Budget do they think would be better? And as any viewer would know, I'm satisfied that the public believes that Hayden is a better Treasurer than Lynch would be.

O'BRIEN: What about his other point, that you have had to sack two senior Ministers because they misled you?

PRIME MINISTER: Well these are very big wounds for the Government, obviously. And I regret to say that these two senior colleagues misled the Parliament. They have paid the penalty.

O'BRIEN: How does a man of reputed abilities and experience allow that to happen?

PRIME MINISTER: I suppose I was too trusting. These were people who had been in Parliament in one case for 20 years and in another case for 25 years. They should have known better.

O'BRIEN: Do you accept Mr Khemlani's claim that he's been in such close and constant touch with Mr Connor?

PRIME MINISTER: I don't know; I don't know whether that is so or not.

O'BRIEN: Did Mr Connor explain to you why he misled you?

PRIME MINISTER: No, he didn't. He didn't dispute that Mr Khemlani had sent him several telexes about which of course he hadn't told me, nor the Parliament. But these are side issues. This might have driven the Opposition to the brink, as Senator Gair's appointment to Ireland. During the campaign you never heard about Gair.

O'BRIEN: But if we can just pursue that side issue for a moment. You've said that dismissing Mr Connor, or accepting his resignation, was one of the most painful decisions....

PRIME MINISTER: Yes of course it was.

O'BRIEN: ....of your life; how close were you to him?

PRIME MINISTER: I thought he was a very capable man. And he has done, he has produced, a transformation in the attitude of Australians to their resources. He's been terribly delayed of course by challenges in the Courts, by actions of the Senate. But he has brought about a complete transformation in the terms upon which Australians are able to develop their resources or sell the products of their resources.

O'BRIEN: Was he an influence on you politically?

PRIME MINISTER: We were on each of us. He is a very able man indeed. It's distressing that he made this error, a gross error; an isolated error, I believe. But he has paid the penalty.

O'BRIEN: And you accept none of the blame for either of those two?

PRIME MINISTER: None whatever. I knew nothing about these telexes. He never told me. He never told anyone. But these are side issues quite frankly. Connor's influence on Australia's resources for the good will endure. It was remarkable the way, when the Liberals bought out their policy on natural resources or overseas investment last Monday, it was a copy of what we'd brought out a week earlier.

O'BRIEN: Just one last question on that side issue. Does the buck not stop at Gough Whitlam's desk? Could the Opposition fairly claim that, as they also fairly claim, that under the Westminster system you should resign?

PRIME MINISTER: They are wrong. Once I knew that a second minister had misled the Parliament, there was only one course - he had to go, and he did. Whenever I have found anything like this, I have acted immediately.

O'BRIEN: Is it political reality to think that you have the option now ahead of you, of loss or victory at the polls, or is it more a choice between decimation and respectable loss?

PRIME MINISTER: I believe that if my Government goes the three years for which it was elected, we shall win. After all, this is a very good Budget, a very good Budget. I think it will be a popular Budget, but it must be given an opportunity to work. And this constant threat which we've had, you know, twice a year in the three years we've been in about rejecting money Bills, because this has been threatened every time, it was threatened the first six months we were in - in April 1973 it was threatened. This obviously upsets business confidence.

O'BRIEN: In this campaign do you have more respect for the Opposition leader now than you have had for his predecessors?

PRIME MINISTER: I thought I would have - I now don't. I think Mr Fraser...

O'BRIEN: I mean in terms of him as an opponent?

PRIME MINISTER: No, no, I think Mr Fraser is now seen as a naked opportunist. He'll do anything. He was getting rid of Holt; he got rid of Gorton; he got rid of Snedden on the second occasion. And I think people see that he will stop at nothing. He will eschew no methods to get into office.

O'BRIEN: If, after a half Senate election, the decision was made on the vote of Senator Albert Field to go to a double dissolution, to what extent would you exploit him as an issue?

PRIME MINISTER: Mind you, you're assuming that if the Governor-General asks the State Governors to issue writs for a Senate election, something which Governors-General have asked on 24 previous occasions and which every State Governor has always complied with, you're assuming that if that's done, Mr Bjelke-Petersen would advise Sir Colin Hannah not to issue the writs. From what I know of Mr Bjelke-Petersen, he might well do that. From what we now know of Sir Colin Hannah he is the sort of man who might, for the first time, break a three-quarters of a century convention in Australia. The conservatives will stop at nothing: Premiers, or, I regret to say, some State Governors.

O'BRIEN: Are you aware of a groundswell of support for you within the Party now like you haven't had before? Do you feel that your standing is higher?

PRIME MINISTER: Well there's no question - in our Party there is a strong feeling of support that this is an outrage we cannot cop. On the other hand the Liberal Party is unquestionably beset by qualms over this.

O'BRIEN: Why does it take potential disaster like this for the Party to pull you together?

PRIME MINISTER: I don't feel that it needs, that there is a potential disaster, I don't feel that it needs a disaster to pull us together. I think people don't realise that political parties do change over the years. It's true that the Scullin Government, the Lang Government, went to pieces, the last time Australia was going through an economic situation, world-wide as it was, similar to what Australia, and all western societies, are going through now. But I don't believe that this will happen to the Whitlam Government.

O'BRIEN: You've presented a picture in the last few days of a man who's in a tight corner; who's come out fighting, and you've looked like you're enjoying the fight. Would that be an accurate observation?

PRIME MINISTER: I wouldn't be, I wouldn't stay, in this life if I didn't think that there were compensations for the rigours which it entails. It's a very tough life, but I've been in it for a long time. I believe in the Parliamentary system and I'm going to fight for it.

O'BRIEN: Even allowing for your optimism in the elections, if you did go into Opposition, would you want to stay on as leader?

PRIME MINISTER: I haven't thought about that. Let that happen. I don't concede it will. There will be a House of Representatives election sometime before July 1977. When it comes about, I shall decide. I shall not advise the Governor-General to issue the writs at the behest of the Senate.

O'BRIEN: Mr Whitlam, thanks very much for appearing on 'Four Corners'.

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