

PRESS OFFICE TRANSCRIPTINTERVIEW WITH "TODAY TONIGHT" SHOW

BRISBANE

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Question:

Prime Minister, on Thursday you have a threatened national stoppage. Is it your intention to do anything about it, to intervene?

Prime Minister:

I have been keeping in very close touch with Mr Viner, and I have also spoken to Des O'Neil, who is the Acting Premier, in relation to this particular matter. It is very serious, but I doubt really if everyone understands precisely what has happened. I have been advised that there was a compulsory hearing in relation to a dispute in the Pilbara, which was actually in process, and that a number of people went along, disrupted the hearing, prevented it going ahead, and virtually called a meeting - disrupted it - on the doocrsteps of the hearing. Now, I don't think that message has got through, and, if that is correct, I think it might put a slightly different view of what has occurred. In addition to that, of course, nobody can be above the law. If a law is bad, people can look at that in calm circumstances and then examine it. But the law in Western Australia, again as I am advised, is related to meetings in a public place. I am told that there have been several hundred meetings under the law and no problem whatsoever. I have also been advised that the particular people concerned might well have gone along and advised the police that they were going to break the law. In other words, they knew what it was and the law had not been oppressive, I don't think, as I am advised that...

Question:

You don't believe that it is oppressive?

Prime Minister:

Well I said as I am advised, I don't believe that there are any cases in which the right to hold a meeting had been withheld. And there is a question of the protection of the general public when meetings are in public places, no question of private places. Against that kind of background, I think we want to make quite certain that we have a full understanding of the facts before we go in and say that a law should not be upheld. So often people say that in industrial cases the law should not apply, the trade unionist is above the law. Now, our society just won't work that way, and it is saying something terribly serious and terribly dangerous if we are going to say that any particular trade unionist has carte blanche to

do what he likes - break any law - if it is in the name of trade unionism.

Question:

Sir, that very attitude, it would seem to me, is going to exacerbate the situation, because it is not the interpretation of the trade unionists, put on what has happened in Western Australia.

Prime Minister:

I know. But also what I have just said as to the facts, I think, is not understood. Now, I said if what I have been advised is correct. I put that proviso on it. I have no reason to believe it is not correct, but I haven't been able to check and double-check up to this point.

Question:

All right, then let's put it this way. You don't want a national stoppage on Thursday, do you?

Prime Minister:

No, of course we don't.

Question:

Is there much you can do to avoid that happening?

Prime Minister:

I think it might be very difficult, but one of the things that would certainly help is understanding of what the circumstances were about. Now, if again, as I have been told, the people concerned had in fact disrupted a compulsory hearing called to settle a particular dispute, if that had been done deliberately and designedly, well then I'm not too sure that that is something that the authorities should ignore. I think that is a serious matter.

Question:

So, you are really going to stand by the West Australian government by the sound of it.

Prime Minister:

What I have said is subject to confirmation in relation to the facts. But I think we need, again, to understand that if we are going to say that a particular group of people are beyond the reach of the law within Australia, then we are saying something that has fundamental consequences for the nature and development of Australian society. We know very well that trade unions exert very great power. Sometimes they use that power with a real degree of irresponsibility.

Nobody ever says that companies, that individually have much much less power than I think the trade union movement, should be beyond the law, and if a company or company director breaks the law, it comes down on him like a ton of bricks. It is only in the trade union area, and for the very reason that unions are so powerful, for the very reason they can have so much influence, for the very reason that they can cause so much harm and disruption not only to the general community but also to their own members, they cannot be placed above the law.

Question:

All right. They have the power to bring this nation to a standstill on Thursday. You have the power to stop it. I think that most people would say stop it Prime Minister. Certainly that is what is being said in the papers today and by the employers.

Prime Minister:

I think - that is one thing too - but I'm not too sure again how many employers in the Eastern states understand what it is all about. You have the power to stop it - people have the power to give in to every union demand. If that is the only way it can be stopped, that also is saying something very fundamentally serious about the nature of Australian society.

Question:

Have you told the West Australian government not to yield?

Prime Minister:

No, I have discussed it with Des O'Neil, I have discussed the matter with Ian Viner, and against that background I have been principally wanting to make myself fully advised as to the facts of what had occurred. From what I have been told as to the facts at the moment I think it would be very difficult to see a cause for intervention by the Australian government to disrupt the processes of the law. Sir Charles Court has said that after the matter is over he is prepared to look at the law and the application of the law. He has made that perfectly plain. But against the background that there would have appeared to be a very deliberate attempt to disrupt a compulsory conference designed to settle an industrial dispute between management and labour in the Pilbara.

Question:

Can I put it to you though that it may simply be this: someone exercising the fundamental right of assembly. That is quite democratic.

Prime Minister:

Yes, there is a fundamental right of assembly, but is there a fundamental right to disrupt a compulsory conference called by the industrial authorities? Is that the way we are to conduct our business?

Question:

All right. An illegal assembly is what you are saying.

Prime Minister:

It would have been very easy for the people concerned, as I am advised, to make it a legal assembly - very easy.

Question:

Prime Minister, let's change the subject. I think I would be pretty right in saying that the average Queensland, at the moment, is very suspicious about the way the Federal Government and the State Government have gone about dissolving the question whether there is to be drilling on the Great Barrier Reef. I think most Queenslanders believe that at some point in time the Reef will be drilled. Do you think I am wrong?

Prime Minister:

I think probably. I haven't had that view put to me over the last four days when I have been travelling quite widely in Queensland. I think you need to understand what has happened. We made a decision to support the Royal Commission findings in relation to the Barrier Reef. There will be short and long term research, and no question of drilling arises until after that research is undertaken and then we look at it. So, there certainly can't be any immediate problem. Secondly, we have come to final and complete arrangements about the management of the Reef itself. The authority of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, under its present act, remains totally unimpaired. Now, certainly I announced with the Treasurer that there would be a ministerial council that would monitor and survey what is happening and make recommendations to Government. But if there isn't agreement on that Ministerial Council, it is the Federal Government that would have to make up its mind, and under its own act the authority of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park not only operates over the full region of the Reef, but it will also operate over that area of the Reef that will encroach on Queensland's three-mile territorial sea, where we want to give the States practical power for a number of other reasons not related to the Reef. But we wanted to do that in a way that wouldn't prejudice or diminish the responsibilities and authority of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. So, I think the government of Queensland has been very reasonable indeed in this particular matter. They didn't press us to alter the Commonwealth act. They accepted that as a fact of life, and they have accepted as a fact of life that it should cover the whole region of the Reef.

Question:

Can I suggest, though, that all that is very confusing. That what some Queenslanders want is an assurance, a very firm assurance, that there will never be oil drilling on or near the Barrier Reef. All you have said so far really is that there won't be any drilling on the Reef.

Prime Minister:

No, we've said much more than that. We have said that there is going to be a great deal of research undertaken before any decisions are made. Secondly, we have made it perfectly plain that the power of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority is totally unimpaired. It will be conducting its proper activities, the proclamations will be going ahead, and really in this particular matter there is nothing whatsoever to be concerned about.

Question:

So, the possibility is there though, is it not, that given the right conditions, given the right recommendations, that drilling could go ahead on the Barrier Reef?

Prime Minister:

Certainly not in any kind of short-term time train, because the research has got to be undertaken first, recommended by the Royal Commission, and depending upon the result of that research then governments can make decisions. But you are

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asking me to say in a thousand years time can I give a guarantee something won't happen, obviously I can't. There will be different governments in power and all the rest as you go down the track into the distant future. But the Great Barrier Reef's safety is assured absolutely.

Question:

Do you have a personal view on it, even with all the recommendations. Science makes mistakes, we all know that.

Prime Minister:

I have a personal view that governments should not take any risks whatsoever with the Reef. You mightn't know, but I was a foundation member of a conservation foundation long before conservation and environmental matters were a popular issue. I have been instrumental in getting the world wildlife fund established in Australia. The record of this government in environmental matters I think is second to none. Sir Peter Scott the other day, as the President of the World Wildlife Fund, indicated that in environmental matters, with its decisions on whaling, policies on whaling, Kakadu National Park, Fraser Island, all of these matters, we have set a world lead. Australia's name stands very high. The decisions we have taken in relation to the Great Barrier Reef stand in the same vein. Nobody is going to take a risk with the future of the Reef.

Question:

Prime Minister, one thing that does worry Queenslanders too, and it relates to the Reef again, and that is inadequate surveillance really. As you know, Taiwanese are taking out hundreds of tons of clams off the Reef. Do you regard the surveillance of that area as adequate?

Prime Minister:

Well it has greatly improved under the new surveillance arrangements that have been introduced over recent months. Obviously we have to make an assessment later as to how the new arrangements are working, whether they themselves are adequate. We have made quite sure, because of the involvement of army light aviation that the shortage of Avgas is not going to reduce surveillance around the Australian coast. The army, with their aircraft will be filling in the gaps, not using Avgas, I think their turbine aircraft can use a different fuel. So surveillance, around the Queensland coast and across the north of Australia is something which we are taking very seriously. The arrangements that my Government introduced to undertake that are certainly giving us a much better coverage than we have ever had before. Now, whether that is totally adequate or not, we'll have to make a judgement about it. But we also have to get some kind of return for what we do with surveillance. If you are going to be watching every piece of water 24 hours a day with the coastline Australia has, that is then an operation which would cost a massive amount of money.

Question:

You raised the question there of Avgas, and that does concern a lot of Queenslanders.

Prime Minister:

It greatly concerns the Government also.

Question:

Is there much you can do about it?

Prime Minister:

Over recent days we have been conducting a survey of all the oil companies. We want to assess as to whether or not there is any direct action that the Government can take which would help in this particular matter. If we have to go into Government purchasing to increase and enhance oil supplies to Australia, then I'm quite certain we will stand ready to do that. But there would be not much point in going to government purchase if that meant that by other means, other devices, the oil companies reduced their allocation to Australia. There will be a report ready for the Government very shortly. It's not not only in Avgas. The whole oil scene is one for concern, and I think we will need to be introducing some measures in relation to conservation, in relation to encouraging people to move to other forms of energy perhaps much more rapidly.

Question:

Do you think we are going to have rationing very soon?

Prime Minister:

Well obviously one would hope that we can avoid that. And I think it's too early to make a judgement about it. But I certainly can't put a guarantee that that could not arise. In some countries there has been enforced rationing by the lack of availability of oil, and it is not helped when the United States continues with oil, fuel, that is too cheap because they haven't got a world parity pricing policy, and I was even advised that they are subsidising the import of heating oil by \$5 a barrel. That doesn't sound to me like a conservation measure.

Question:

It doesn't look good thought does it at the moment for Australia? I think a lot of people would expect real energy cutbacks very soon.

Prime Minister:

Well Australia needs certain things, because we're a large country. People have to travel by road or by air under very

substantial differences and therefore fuel is very important to them. Having said that we're much, much better placed than many countries. We have coal, we have uranium we have substantial quantities of natural gas and therefore we do have alternative sources of energy within our own control. On the longer term, there is research being undertaken about with a German group and there's the possibility of shale ore development in Queensland and I certainly hope the Queensland Government will do everything it can to process that as rapidly as possible, because I think we're going to be in a long-term situation and the more self-sufficient we are the better but those developments aren't going to help break in the shorter-term situation and I think maximising the use of natural gas both in the Sydney area has been enormous over the last 12 months because of the opening up of the pipe-line. There's been a very substantial conversion of taxi fleets in Melbourne and Sydney to gas-fired cars and maybe there's an opportunity for much greater activity there. New South Wales and South Australia could help much more by not insisting that their States go onto higher emission standards which will make the cars more expensive in the use of energy, less efficient and more expensive and it's the very wrong time for Government to be taking decisions but from late cars use maybe 4% or 5% more petrol for the same mileage. So there are a number of things we are looking at as a matter of urgency. There are a number that we'll be wanting to put to the States and a number of matters that we'll be looking at on our own account. Now I hope all of this, which is under the most vigorous examination by our officials will be ready for the Government's determination quite shortly.

Question

Prime Minister, thanks very much for talking to us.