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PRIME MINISTER

E.&O.E. - PROOF ONLY

TRANSCRIPT OF PRESS CONFERENCE, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, 3 APRIL 1984

PM: Well ladies and gentlemen, thank you. I wanted to meet with you particularly in respect of the decision that I made that Stewart West should return to the Cabinet which decision was unanimously endorsed by the Caucus this morning. If I can just briefly recapitulate and recall that last year, 3 November, Stewart expressed the view that he could not accept the decision in respect of uranium taken by the Cabinet. He was quite straightforward about that and accepted that on the basis of Cabinet solidarity that would mean that he would have to leave the Cabinet. With regret I accepted that position. I have been of the view that Stewart should return to the Cabinet. I discussed the matter with him and he indicated to me now that unequivocally he accepts the principle of Cabinet solidarity. On that basis I believe that the Cabinet should re-acquire his services in the Cabinet and I repeat I put that to the Cabinet yesterday and the Cabinet unanimously agreed as did the Caucus this morning.

JOURNALIST: Mr. Hawke, will this Cabinet solidarity extend to the National Conference of the Party? Will you expect that Mr. West should abide by the Cabinet decisions on uranium at the Conference?

PM: I don't know whether Mr. West is going to be at the Conference. In that sense it is quite hypothetical. But I understand that Stewart has accepted the decision of the Government that has been made.

JOURNALIST: If you are at the Conference Mr. West will you abide by the principle of Government solidarity?

WEST: Well the principle of Government solidarity I have accepted. I always did accept that in the community and the principle of Cabinet solidarity between the Cabinet and the Caucus is of course accepted. It is not known whether I will be a delegate or not at the Conference. I may be part of any on-going discussions on this or any other matter. I accept the principle of Cabinet solidarity and Mr. Hawke has re-iterated that.

JOURNALIST: Mr. West, why do you accept the principle now when you apparently didn't accept the principle back in November?

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WEST: Well the uranium question was a very difficult question for me personally, as is well known. The decision on uranium as far as the Cabinet and the Caucus and the Government is concerned has been made and of course all Ministers of this Government are expected, and I accept that, in the public arena to abide by the decisions of the Government as they are made within the proper democratic processes - decision making processes - as outlined in our Cabinet memoranda.

JOURNALIST: Does this mean you have said that you were wrong last year?

WEST: Well, I was wrong within the concept that Cabinet solidarity ought to be maintained. Obviously I accepted at the time that if I didn't abide by Cabinet solidarity that I would have to be stood down from the Cabinet and that is precisely what occurred and I knew that that would occur when I took the decision that I did. I believe, as I have said, that the decisions that are properly arrived at within the Cabinet/Caucus decision making process under a system which the Caucus and the Cabinet and the Ministry have endorsed ought to be complied with and of course I have always done that. The point was at the time that I didn't abide by Cabinet solidarity on the uranium issue within the Parliamentary Party and once that decision was taken there was never any question that any Minister including myself would support it publicly in the open arena.

JOURNALIST: Mr. West, is it fair to say that this indicates that the uranium question is largely a fait accompli - that is at the conference in July that the Government's decision will be passed by the conference?

WEST: I am not saying that it is my duty to pre-empt what the conference might do. My own view is that there be a continuing rational discussion on the issue within the Party as there ought to be within the confines of the Party leading up to the Federal Conference.

JOURNALIST: Does your return to Cabinet, Mr. West, signal a change in attitude on uranium by you?

WEST: It doesn't signal any change in my beliefs. It certainly signals that I accept that I or any significant section of the Party wishes to be part of the Government, part of the Cabinet, that we accept solidarity in the context that that is the decision of the Cabinet, the Minister and the Caucus and that I act within those guidelines.

JOURNALIST: Can I clarify the point with either of you about the rules for Conference. Cabinet solidarity does not apply, surely in any vote at National Conference an internal decision making organ of the Party, does it?

WEST: The Cabinet solidarity to which we are referring is the solidarity in the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party that also applies in the open public arena.

JOURNALIST: What about Conference?

WEST: Well that's a hypothetical question. I don't know whether I will be a delegate and I certainly would expect, as I have said, that a rational discussion on any issue would occur within the Party, but I accept that it is not my role as a Government Cabinet Minister to be putting any position in the public arena that is contrary to Government policy.

JOURNALIST: Mr. Hawke, could you clarify the rules on this matter?

PM: Could I clarify what?

JOURNALIST: The rules on whether Ministers are bound at Conference to support the Cabinet decision.

PM: Once the question of a decision is for the supreme policy making body of the Party, I would imagine that people there as delegates could have the opportunity of expressing their views, but how Ministers will operate on this matter I think will be a matter for particular discussion within the Ministry. In other words we will have a discussion about this before the Conference and I am not going to by answer here pre-empt the view that we may adopt on that issue.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, do you think that Cabinet was weakened over the last five months by not having a representative of the left wing faction?

PM: Yes, I think it would have been better for the operation of the Party if Stewart could have been there and Stewart would quite readily concede at the time of the discussion that we had which was a totally amicable one I just put that point of view quite specifically to him and he understood it, but he felt strongly at the time and I accepted it. The answer to your question is yes, I think it would have been better and I am glad for three reasons, if I may say personally to have Stewart back. Secondly, in regard to the factional consideration that you allude to, Laurie. Thirdly, let me say this, I think the portfolio is a very important one and I have had some points of view put to me from within the migrant community that they regretted the fact that their portfolio having been in the Cabinet was no longer there. And I'm glad for that reason as well. So, for the three reasons I am pleased that Stewart is back in the Cabinet.

JOURNALIST: Mr. Hawke, you said it was your own decision to have Mr. West back. Was that a spontaneous thing that occurred to you, or did people have a yarn to you from within the Caucus beforehand?

PM: There had been some discussion with me going over a period of time. I just don't know how far back, but quite some time back, but I wasn't under any pressure at all on this and I was thinking about it the other day and I thought the time had come so I had some discussion directly with Stewie and we - I don't know what you are laughing about, I just thought it would be a bit much of a shock to his system if I announced it without telling him. I wanted to check that he wanted to come back, you see.

JOURNALIST: Mr. West, has the administration of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs suffered while you were outside the Cabinet?

WEST: No, no, of course not. I think that on the contrary that it won't suffer now, but it certainly being in Cabinet imposes some extra strain and responsibility, obviously. But I think if I might be allowed to say this that it is generally conceded by particularly the ethnic communities that we have done very well across the whole area of ethnic affairs legislation and implementation of programs and the way we have handled the immigration program generally and I think we have done very well and I am quite certain that all of the migrant leaders and ethnic communities across Australia will welcome the Prime Minister's decision and I am very proud of it actually because I do see the need for those people to be represented in Cabinet and I see the need, as I said at question time, for the widest possible representation of all heard in the Party to be represented in Cabinet and quite frankly if I can conclude on this note, the uranium question was always a vexacious problem in that regard because I always saw the need to be interested and putting representations on all of the broad range of questions that this Government is concerned about and obviously if myself and a whole range of views in the Party want to be represented in Cabinet to put views upon economic matters, on industry matters, on taxation reform matters, well then obviously I have to accept the fact that Cabinet solidarity if you want to be involved in that decision making process, then I accept that absolutely.

JOURNALIST: Mr. Hawke, if at National Conference Ministers are tied to the principle of Cabinet solidarity, don't you think that that would inhibit proper discussion about proposed changes to the platform, seeing that is the purpose of conference?

PM: I have already answered that question, Paul, and it was a very clear answer I gave - that I can see the issues arise that you claim in your question and we will have a discussion in the Ministry before the Conference as to what is appropriate course of action.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, on the issue of uranium generally. Do you as Mr. Dawkins - I want to get his words right - suggested last week that the mood or the ... within the Party is one more of open ... of mining rather than of winding down the industry?

PM: I don't want to go too far in pre-empting the discussions which will go on before the conference and at the conference, but I think it is fair to say that there is a discernable change in the context of the debate and I would say no more than this - that I think and what I have seen, what has been said to me from a number of quarters that the position that the Government has decided upon here at the end of last year - that that position will be contained within any decision that is made at the conference. I don't see, in other words, the uranium debate being the divisive issue that it has been in the past. By that I'm not saying that there won't be debate and strongly put points of view. I think, however, that one of the big achievements of the approach that we adopted last year here in the Parliamentary section of the Party was the move to a much more

rational basis of discussion about this issue. I think that will be reflected at the conference.

JOURNALIST: Mr. West have you seen Senator Walsh's draft policy on uranium and if so do you agree with it?

WEST: I said, and I agree with the Prime Minister, that I anticipate that there will be a rational discussion on that issue and on other issues in the lead up to the national conference within the proper confines of the Party apparatus and decision making structure and that has got to occur and quite frankly that is what I expect - that there will be a rational discussion on a contentious issue and I believe and accept what was said by the Prime Minister, that it is not in anyone's interest to make a Roman holiday of obvious disagreement reaching across Australia on contentious issue at the national conference. Clearly there will be divisions of opinions, but we have the committee structure and we have the proper decision making structure in place where a rational discussion can occur and the delegates at the conference can take a decision on that issue and indeed on any other issue within the confines of the national conference structure.

PM: One thing we can be certain of - we will have a much more rational discussion about uranium policy than the Opposition has about wages policy.

WEST: That is right.

JOURNALIST: Mr. West, have you discussed your return to the Cabinet with the members of your left faction and if you have, have you made it quite clear to them that if in future there is a conflict between principle of Cabinet solidarity and your own commitment to the anti uranium cause then the form of principle will prevail?

WEST: Yes, let me be quite unequivocal. I am absolutely certain that all of my colleagues, including those in the area that you refer to, are completely supportive of my decision to accept the invitation of Cabinet, Caucus and the Prime Minister to return to the Cabinet. They take the same view as I do, that it is not acceptable for the portfolio that I hold and further that the people whose views I might share in the Party should be not represented in a Cabinet of 14 or 15 in the Labor Government of Australia and that there are other issues to consider besides uranium on which they want their voice to be heard.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, on the Ministry generally. What is your view about a Minister who has a Government flat in Canberra and also is entitled to a travelling allowance of \$86 a day while living in Canberra?

PM: Well, let me say two or three things about that. I don't know why we should be as elliptical as we are. Usually people are more direct than that. We are talking about Mr. Uren. He is entitled as a Minister to Government housing. The fact he has it is in accordance with a policy which was established in 1956 and has been supported and followed by successive governments

since 1956. I am informed that since 1956 25 Ministers have had tenancies in their names. Now, the fact is that in respect to this particular portfolio he is required - Mr. Uren is required to spend a very considerable amount of his time in the ACT and that of course is even when the Parliament is not sitting. I understand that he pays standard rent for his dwelling. It is \$113 a fortnight and the fact is, according to my understanding, that Mr. Uren acquired and retains his accommodation strictly in accordance with the long established rules in relation to housing in the ACT for Ministers. Now, let me say on this that in relation to travelling allowance, Ministers who maintain a residence in Canberra, including Mr. Uren, claim the travelling allowance when away from their principle place of residence in another State and they do it when on official business and they do it for a maximum of four days a week and I don't think I need to remind you that that represents a very considerable improvement over the situation under the previous government when, for instance the Member for Corangamite could claim travelling allowance for 327 days in a year and the former Leader of the National Party continued to claim travelling allowance while living in a Government home financed by a low interest loan. So, the attitude of Mr. Uren and his actions, I repeat, is consistent with policy followed since 1956 and 25 Ministers have had a tenancy in their name and in fact the maximum of four days a week which has been followed by Ministers in my Government is significantly an improvement on previous practice. The final point I would make about Mr. Uren is this. If there is one person in the Parliament who consistently has had a commitment to the concept of the responsibility of governments to make adequate provision for public housing it is Mr. Uren. He doesn't have to lower his colours to anyone in the Parliament. It is well known I have had my differences at times with Tom Uren on issues, but I make it quite clear that more than anyone in the Parliament, he has played a prominent role in securing a position of Government commitment to significant increases in financing public housing. To be precise, this Government in its first year of office made a decision to increase the funds for public housing by 50% and that was the largest increase in public housing ever made by any Government and in our preparation for Government, Mr. Uren played a very significant role in the development of that policy.

JOURNALIST: Mr. Hawke, you mentioned the Opposition wages policy. It is an area where you have had a bit of experience. Can you give us your opinion of the new wages policy?

PM: Can I first of all give you some observations on how they get there. I mean, I think this is as interesting as the policy itself is the way they got there. Now, we have had well over a year now in which they have been flagellating around trying to find something which they can call a policy and we read in the press - you people assiduously discovered that they had a meeting and it was six all and the whole question of the policy of the Opposition in regard to wages depended on Mr. Ralph Hunt. Now, we

all have an affection for Mr. Hunt, including myself. I have a great affection, but I don't think any of us would feel that Mr. Hunt's depth and depth of knowledge of economics and industrial relations was a proper repository finally for determining the Opposition policy. So, there they were meeting - was it yesterday or the day before. And they couldn't get anywhere and Andrew went rushing in and said I've got to have a policy by one o'clock, otherwise I'm a pumpkin. And so they said, alright, we'll find a policy by one o'clock. And so Mr. Howard stopped saying to Mr. Macphee that is stupid. And Mr. Macphee stopped saying to Mr. Howard that is stupid. And they seemed to find the parts out of each of their propositions which they thought was the least stupid, wrapped them up together and said that is a policy. Now, I simply want to say in terms of analysing their policy, that is a hell of a way of getting there. And indeed I was surprised before that I could, as Prime Minister, be in a more satisfied position about the Opposition and wages policy than I was when they didn't have one. But I must say that now I'm even more satisfied that they have got one because the policy "up with which they've come" is amazing. I mean the business community are laughing at it. The trade union movement are laughing at it. Every commentator is laughing at it because it means all things to all men which in the end means it can't work. It won't work. It is a prescription for chaos and I'll have great pleasure at the appropriate moment - let me say this - the only hope that they have is that they don't change it. Now that they've gone through this traumatic process which I have described in complete accuracy and no embellishment, I only plead with them now that they've gone through that, that they don't change it - that they adhere to it because between now and the election, whenever that will be, I will have great pleasure in analysing it's inadequacies in considerable detail.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, could I invite you to repeat the comments that you made to the Caucus meeting about the ABC this morning.

PM: Yes you can.

JOURNALIST: Well, could you expand on the remarks that you made?

PM: No.

JOURNALIST: Why not?

PM: Because you know that Caucus is a sacred place. That what happens in the Caucus is like a confessional box, almost. I have never been in a confessional box and I don't think the chances are great that I ever will, but we regard it as a sacred place and I don't think, despite the tendency of my colleagues apparently to break the rules of the confessional, it is not something that I intend to do.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, what are your views which you talked about the strategic bases document and do you think the on-going debate about it has weakened Mr. Scholes position?

PM: No, let me make the position quite clear about the strategic bases. The thing of concern there is the leaking of the document. The actual document itself - the accuracy of which of course I neither confirm or deny as you have heard me say - but what is in the purported document is not a matter of very considerable concern. As I have said, the document that was considered by the Cabinet represents a putting forward of points of view analysis by various bureaucrats. It doesn't represent the adoption of any policy prescriptions by the Government. So the actual policy position of the Government is not affected by the disclosure. I have made my point about the inadequacy and certainly the total bias of the way in which the release was made and people can clearly make up their own mind about that - the mischievous nature of it, but coming to the latter part of the question about Mr. Scholes, no, I don't think Mr. Scholes' position has been weakened.

JOURNALIST: Mr. Hawke, are you satisfied in your mind that the problem of the disposal of nuclear waste has been solved or do you think it really matters?

PM: Well, they are not alternative questions as you put them.

JOURNALIST: Well answer the first one.

PM: Please?

JOURNALIST: Please.

PM: I don't think anyone would say, including Senator Walsh, that you can say in respect of the next question of the disposal of nuclear waste that is completely solved. I think rather what I would say that there seem to have been important advances made which offer hope that we may be able to deal with the question, but I certainly wouldn't say unequivocally that we can assert that the problems of waste disposal have been irrevocably solved. But now I will direct myself to the other question which wasn't an alternative although you put it as such. Of course the question of the disposal of nuclear waste matters. There is no-one I think in any point of the debate on the question of uranium who would say that it doesn't matter. Of course it matters.
