



PRIME MINISTER

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P.M.: I believe that you probably want to ask me some questions in regard to the issues and the events that have arisen today and so I'm available for any questions that you'd like to put to me. I hope you understand that I do have to speak in the House before very long, so I can't be open-ended about it.

JOURNALIST: Sir, Mr Peacock says that an imbalance has been created since your Government came to office. What's your reaction to that?

P.M.: That is not correct if it implies some deliberate action on our part. The facts are very simple. That all governments have had as the major criterion for determining the level of immigration intake economic considerations. That determines the absolute level that comes in. Within the decisions that are made on that ground there are categories for the intake of immigrants. Those include the occupational shortages category, if I can put it that way, the business migration program, the family reunion component and the refugee component. And we made a decision in our first year of Government which was our decision as to intakes that on economic grounds the total level would be reduced somewhat. It was a maximum of 70,000. That's the gross arrivals, in net terms it will be less than that. Now we have followed the policies of the previous Government because in Opposition we endorsed them. And that meant that people that were already in Australia, irrespective of their country of origin, had the rights in regard to family reunion. And because of the operation of that and continuation of that non-discriminatory approach it has meant, as the Minister has indicated, some relative increase of immigrants of Asian origin. But I want to emphasise that has not been any deliberate policy to change the ethnic composition of immigrants coming to this country, but merely reflects a continuation by this Government of what has been a bi-partisan approach.

JOURNALIST: Mr Peacock says that until there is a balance restored between European and Asian migration then that bi-partisanship will not exist.

P.M.: Well just let me give you the figures of what's happened over recent years in regard to the element of Asian refugee intake. If I go back to the period when it started to increase

P.M. cont.: significantly which was 78/79, I'll give you the figures from 78/79 through. In 1978/79 the number of Asian refugees was 12,000, - I'll round it off to the nearest thousand - 78/79: 12,000, 79/80: 15,000, 80/81: 16,000, 81/82: 15,000, 82/83: 13,000, and in our first year 83/84; 10,000. Now you can see the intake of refugees, which we let me say entirely endorsed at the time that it happened, rose during that previous period, it is at a lower level in 83/84. And if the Opposition are about a debate as to the level of immigration into this country, and of course that's a legitimate debate, it seems a strange way of trying to get there but I can simply repeat what is the incontrovertible truth and that is that having made a decision as a Government about a lower absolute level of immigration in 83/84, then the components within it, proportions within it, inevitably follow if you are going to say that in respect of those people who are here irrespective of their origin, that they have the same rights in respect of family reunion. You see, I'll just do a quick count of the period that I covered from 78/79, that's 12,000, 27,000, 43,000, 58,000, 71,000. 71,000 refugees have come in in that period from 78/79 through to 82/83. Now Australians are not going to say in respect of those people that they haven't got the same rights to exercise in respect of family reunion and they were entitled to exercise those rights. They have done that. And inevitably in those circumstances it will reflect the marginal changes in composition to which I've referred.

JOURNALIST: Mr Peacock has suggested an increase in European immigration in total, to increase the total number of migrants to fix the problem. What do you think of that?

P.M.: He said to fix the problem? I don't accept the existence of a problem, because what exists is the application by my Government of the principles that have been followed consistently by the previous Government and with the support of the Opposition. Now if Mr Peacock is arguing for an increase in the level of immigration, that the level of immigration is too high and that can be the only thing - that the existing level is too low and that we should have a higher level - then that is one thing. If he wants to debate that then, of course, that is a legitimate debate. We simply made the decision in our first year of office that given the level of unemployment that we'd inherited where you had hundreds of thousands of Australians who were unemployed, then it was not a sensible decision to keep up such a high absolute level of immigration that had existed. And I believe that that is a policy and a decision made last year which would be endorsed by the overwhelming majority of Australians. Now if he wants to argue that there should be a significantly higher level of immigration in total in 84/85, well then that is legitimate. I would simply say to you that in making a decision as to what the absolute level of immigration will be in 84/85 we will take that decision on the grounds, the basis, that we did last year. Now what figure that will come out at I can't say now. But we will not deviate from the principles that we've followed. If you're

P.M. cont: talking about a problem here we've got to make it quite clear that if you're saying that there are too many Asians compared to non-Asians, to be saying that's the problem and to meet that "problem", that you've got to bring in more people from the non-Asian category and therefore get residually an outcome in absolute terms, then he's entitled to put that. But I'm simply saying that we will make a decision about the absolute level of intake on economic grounds. Once we've said that we are not going to deny the people who have come into this country under the policies of the previous Government, which we endorsed, we are not going to deny to them the rights of family reunion which apply to everyone.

JOURNALIST: If it's not your Government's policy to create a change in the ethnic composition of the state of society - if it's not your policy - if it is however the effect of the principles on which your policy is based that there is a change in the ethnic composition of Australian society, does that give you, or do you think that ought to give many Australians cause for concern or regret?

PM: If what you were looking at was a drastic change in the composition, it may become a legitimate area for discussion, but, as you will see from the quote that I made in the Parliament today, of what Mr. Peacock said - I think it was on 22 March - he was saying himself that it is not right to talk about Asianisation. He has acknowledged that and quite clearly the dimensions that we are referring to in the total population now of getting on for 15½ million people - you can't statistically assert with any veracity that that situation exists.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, Mr. West has said that one of the reasons for the change in mix is a diminution from the European and British Isles - people wanting to come over, but Mr. Peacock produced figures - allegedly from the Department today - saying that that wasn't in fact the case. Will you look into that?

PM: Certainly I will look into that, but it still doesn't divert from the basic points that I've been making that once you've made a decision as to absolute levels and you remain committed to the element and the rights of family reunion concept then that must inevitably - it is a statistical inevitability - that that will have an impact upon the composition of your intake.

JOURNALIST: The figures you gave us a second ago were for a percentage of refugee intakes from Asia. I take it they don't include family reunion intakes. Do you have those figures?

PM: I haven't got those in front of me, but no, those are strictly the refugee figures, yes.

JOURNALIST: Sure, that's right, but I assume what we are talking about are the total intake.

PM: Yes, but I did say in my comments that if you look at the aggregates of those that will obviously be reflected in your family reunion figures.

JOURNALIST: I just wanted to make the point that following your argument, which is obviously quite correct, it also becomes a statistical certainty, that we will have a higher proportion of Asians because of the very reasons you advance as you continue with this policy.

PM: Well, what you have got to say is that as those that are here and the numbers, as I've indicated, are declining that are coming in under the refugee program - as they exercise the right of family reunion then that is going - by definition, that is going to diminish. So it is not possible to say at this stage, Max, what the sort of proportions will be over the next few years other than to say that what you've got, really, looking at the Australian situation now is that the people who have come here from non-Asian sources over a longer period have probably tended to exercise their family reunion rights earlier and that is diminishing. You will have the same sort of thing happening now with this much lower level of Asian immigration that they are exercising their family reunion right now.

JOURNALIST: So there will be a lag for some years.

PM: Lag to some extent.

JOURNALIST: What I'm suggesting is that you're facing in the next few years this relative shift, as you described it, of Asian intake or actual increase over the next few years of ...

PM: No, of course that depends, Max, on what decision is taken about your aggregate level of immigration. See, it may well be - I'm not saying that this will be the case - but it is quite arguable for instance, that within a year or so's time the economic situation may well be that your occupational category component may increase, that you increase the absolute level so that that mix will change. I'm simply making the point you cannot ...

JOURNALIST: The family reunion, say, is what I was talking about.

PM: The family reunion side in respect of those people who are already here, what you are saying is correct. Of course the current situation, as I repeat, reflects the fact that those who have been here from non-Asian sources for some considerable period of time have exercised the right.

JOURNALIST: If it's an issue now, it might become an even greater issue in a few years time.

PM: Just in respect of that component, yes.

JOURNALIST: Sir, I have to go in a second, can I just ask one quick question.

PM: Let me make it clear, ladies and gentlemen, that we must arrange this press question to suit your convenience, Laurie.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, do you believe that the Liberals and the National Party are trying to whip this issue up as an election issue - the issue of Asian immigration?

PM: I'm not going to answer that question because what I was concerned about in the House today and what I'll be concerned about in the House when I make my speech is not to try and make this a partisan issue, to score points off anyone. What I'm really concerned about, Laurie, is to try to eliminate what is potentially an ugly feature of the Australian scene, to try and eliminate that from the political debate and I'm certainly, therefore, not going to answer that question.

JOURNALIST: Is that why you asked the Opposition not to appeal to, I think you described it as uninformed emotions, and how do you think those uninformed emotions might be manifested?

PM: I think all of us have seen some evidence by slogans on walls and certain observations that have been made about Asians. One point I will be making in my comments in the House in a short period is that I have been associated now for nearly 40 years publicly with the immigration program and with trying to ensure that there is an elimination of prejudices in this country. I will certainly also be making the point that it is worth thinking about the fact, isn't it, that there has been very prominent in our public life in the last few weeks - there is a person called Dr. Chang, who at this moment is leading a team fighting to save the life of a young Australian, Phiona. Now, I don't know where Dr. Chang's antecedents are. I'm sure they are not in Gundagai or Tullarook. Do you mind if I finish? And that man is obviously of Asian origin. Now, he is an Australian and he is doing a fantastic job within and for Australia and the strength of this country over the period since the war derives very substantially from the fact that we are a country now composed of people, who, I think were shown in the 1981 census have people here from - I think it is - 92 countries of origin and what as Prime Minister I am concerned about is trying to help Australians to understand that the strength of this country very much derives from the fact that we have this very rich diversification of source. We are a country of just over 15 million people and we live in a part of the world which is going inevitably and inexorably into the future to be interwoven with our fortunes and Australians must understand these things, I believe and the overwhelming majority of them do. What I'm concerned about today and into the future is to try and ensure that as far as it is humanly possible we eliminate from the face of public life in Australia this divisive issue and one which is very dangerous potentially.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, do you think it a worthwhile decision to have shut down the Big Brother movement in the light of all this debate over the last couple of days?

PM: I don't in a sense want to debase the fundamental issues that I'm addressing and hoping that Australians will address, by building that up into an issue beyond its intrinsic importance. I believe that the decision which was contemplated by the previous Minister and which has been given effect to by this Minister is an appropriate one.