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PRIME MINISTER

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PRIME MINISTER INTERVIEWED BY HAYDN SARGENT ON RADIO 4BC
TALKBACK, BRISBANE - 27/6/85.

- HS: Mr Hawke I understand on Monday night the members of the Centre Left faction met and decided they wanted option A which must cause you some concern?
- PM: I don't know, I haven't had any such reports and I'd be surprised if any such decision had been taken, but anyway what I've said is that we'll go to the summit, we'll listen to what's said and as a government we'll go through the processes of coming to a decision which we believe will be in the best interests of this country. I would think that all members of the party will play their part appropriately in that process. I don't believe they would have closed off options..
- HS: Are you disappointed in the lack of support for your tax proposals from the various State branches of the Labor Party?
- PM: Obviously one would have rather seen them being more positive and affirmative about it, that's clear, but I'm not entirely surprised because this is a debate which covers an area of considerable emotion and an area in which there have been historically hard-held positions within the Labor Party, that is against indirect taxes, and that is a philosophically sound position if that's all you're doing, but Paul Keating and I are no less aware of the reasons for being against indirect taxes than anyone else in the party. It's because we are aware of the regressive nature of them, that is that they can - all other things being equal - hurt lower income people more, but the package contains \$2 billion worth of compensation to compensate and more than compensate, those

who would otherwise suffer that that injustice. Now it's not to be expected that everyone within the party would be a) as well aware of all the details of what's in the package as we are, nor b) have had the opportunity to study the way in which the whole system has decayed and to really understand the paradox that it's only in a sense by overturning that previous philosophy that you can really achieve the fundamental objectives of the party.

HS: It seems in the past that Bob Hawke and the Labor Party have enjoyed very much the women's vote in Australia, and it seems to me that come the consumer tax the women are going to be confronted by taxation perhaps in a more startling way at the supermarket cash register. Is that going to affect your political fortunes?

PM: You go to a very interesting point there Hayden, it was raised very early on in the discussions we were having about tax reform. It was at a meeting at the Lodge soon after the election and we were starting to get ready to prepare for the work on tax and one of my advisors there made the point - he said listen one thing you're going to have to watch is if you go over this route you're talking about you've got to remember there's still a lot of Australian households where the old man gets the pay packet and the lady of the household doesn't know exactly how much he has, he hands out a certain amount, and he'll have a whole lot more in his pay packet and his wife will be going to the supermarket, see the higher prices and she'll still have the same amount in her handbag. It's a serious point that has to be taken into account so that if the sort of option we're talking about is brought into operation, there'll have to be a very heavy education campaign so that the women - and not just the women but I'm particularly referring to you're question - will know that Dad certainly has got some more dollars in the pay pocket and she should be getting her hands on them.

HS: Maybe that's a domestic question that a Prime Minister should stay clear of?

PM: Well I'm in the happy position - well happy for me - that since our marriage Hazel handles all the financial matters at any rate. It's not something I'm conscious of. But it's something that's quite serious that should be taken into account.

HS: I suppose only a masochist is really enthusiastic about taxes. I haven't met anybody yet who is really enthusiastic about paying tax. Do you sometimes regret that maybe you've called the tax summit, because it really is an unpopular topic - it's a bit like castor oil it's got to be taken and maybe the simplest thing would have been for the government to have met, made a decision and said to the Australian public "this is it"?

PM: No, on the contrary the more this process goes on the happier I am about it because tax as you recognise is a touchy subject and there are probably very few, as you recognise, will touch it and it's much more sensible that we provide the opportunity for significant public discussion debate, and then at the summit be in a position as a government to listen to the views of widely-representative organisations. The great tragedy of the present time, the reason why tax reform is on the agenda in 1985 is because for 30 out of the last 35 years our conservative opponents have been in charge of this country and the present tax system is their tax system and it's precisely because they did what you were saying - get an idea in their minds, bring it in, no discussion no consultation, except what some of their privileged friends presumably said - you had the emergence of a system which is totally against the interests of ordinary Australians. Now it's much more sensible that we should say all right we've inherited this mess from you people who acted in that way, who created a system in which more and more of a burden is imposed upon the ordinary wage and salary earners of this country, the ordinary people. We're going to bring an end to that, we're going to say "here it is" we're going to expose the inadequacies of the present system and go to the people and say we think these are possible ways of going to get a...

better system, let's hear what you've got to say. That's an infinitely better way of conducting the affairs of this country than the alternative because you look at the alternative you see what's it's produced.

HS: It seems to me that the key job for you as Prime Minister and for Mr Keating as Treasurer is to sell to rank and file Australians, not necessarily to the influential of Australia, this issue of privilege. Some people enjoy privilege - tax-free cars, chauffeur-driven cars, entertainment expenses, travel allowance - and other don't enjoy those privileges. It seems to me that's one of your key selling..

PM: It's one of the jobs, it's one of them. I think you really can see by looking at the overall statistics you go back 30 years ago to 1953-54 then you had the situation where one per cent, just one per cent of people in full-time employment, paid a marginal rate of 46¢, now that figure is just under 40 per cent - 39 per cent - are paying almost half of that extra dollar in tax, and that's the sort of clearest indication of what we're talking about. You're getting this growing and growing pressure and burden of tax on the lower and ordinary income people of Australia because the more privilege are avoiding their tax altogether, and that's the aggregate figure of it and it's only happening because the share of tax that should be coming from areas with greater capacity to pay has been diminished.

HS: Final question - coming back to this meeting of the Centre Left on Monday night, at which I understand Senator Button was present, and I understand he's one of your closest advisors and confidante, don't you feel that some of your Ministers are virtually pulling the rug out from under you?

PM: No, I don't think that. We as a Cabinet had to take this process through and we did, but it was acknowledged that some Ministers had reservations or concerns about, not the principle of the approach, I think it's right to say concerns as to whether all the elements of compensation and assumptions about inflation rate, whether they were exactly right, and they wanted to be able to do more work on that, and I understand

that but the government had the responsibility of getting what it thought was the best position and then going out and selling that. What I've said from the very beginning during the election campaign and right through and I say now and I'll be saying at the summit, we accept the responsibility of doing two things - of analysing the existing system showing its inadequacies and that there must be changes, and secondly saying here are ways in which we believe the system can be improved and including saying it looks to us as though this is the best way of going, option C. Now we will be listening very closely at the summit and if it emerges that there are qualifications or better ways of doing it, then I've got an open mind about that and so has Mr Keating. We strongly believe, on the evidence available to us at this point, this is the preferred way of going and we're going to listen.

HS: Let's take some calls.

PETER: My question, the first part of my question is, when are you going to honour your 1983 election promise of reducing the price of petrol at 3¢ a litre?

PM: The government's position has been that it will proceed along the path of the import parity pricing policy we've done that and where that policy has involved decreases well that's what's happened; where it's involved increases, either because of what's happened to the market prices, the Arab light(?) or depreciation in the Australian dollar, we've done that. Up to the last meeting we had last week when we decided we would not merely take account of what was happening in the price of Arab light (?) the official price, but that we'd also look at spot prices as well, and the result of that has been that there will be a reduction 0.3¢ a litre in the price of petrol. We've got to operate on the basis of combination of trying to keep the price of petrol as low as possible and consistent with the fact that it's a scarce and limited resource and we've got to see that it's therefore priced at an appropriate economic price. I would remind you that compared with the rest of the world Australians still get their petrol very, very cheaply indeed.

PETER: I understand petrol's going to go up again at the tax summit by 12½ per cent, is that right?

PM: What we've said in the White Paper is this - under the preferred option C, then you would want if you could to differentiate between the business input of fuel and its use for private consumption so that you wouldn't be taxing it as a business input; but at this stage it looks as though the differentiation between the business input and private consumption is rather difficult to make, and so it has been designated as what's called a restricted good and it would be subject to the consumption tax - so you're right but if the preferred option C in its present form were to be adopted, then there would be an increase in the price of petrol, but it's no good when you're talking about tax reform just looking at one element. It's no good saying but the price of petrol will go up, or the price of something else will go up, you've got to ask yourself will you have more in your pay packet than before, and more in fact than will be necessary to cover the increase in the prices you'll be confronted with by movements in goods subject to the broad-based consumption tax. And the answer is that you'll have more in your pay packet, so that in nett terms you'll be better off.

HS: We'll take a second caller.

CLR: Regarding your allegation against Sir Joh, Mr Hawke, about him being an incompetent leader, what grounds did you base this on?

PM: I'm glad you asked me that question. I think you'll agree that Sir Joh, more than any other political figure in Australia in recent years has been making allegations about other parties and saying that he is the best man and his party's the best to govern, and he makes allegations against other parties in this State - not just the Labor Party, but the Liberal Party, and he makes them against federal governments, and so we start from the first step, therefore, that Sir Joh believes that the man in charge and the party that he leads determines in one way or another the quality of government and the level of economic performance. So, therefore, the no 22

step is to say very well if that's right let's look at the level of economic performance in Queensland and compare it with the other States and that's what I did, and the sorts of things that people will make judgments about in this area is what's happening to employment, unemployment, prices and things like that, so let's have a look at a few of those things by which you contest Sir Joh's theory, not mine that I'm talking about now, his theory that it's the quality of the leadership and the party of the leadership that determines the quality of economic performance. Let's look at unemployment - the fact is that the unemployment rate in Queensland is the worst in Australia. The Australian average is 8.4 per cent, here in Queensland it's 9.9 per cent. Employment in the rest of Australia has been rising, here it's falling; inflation in the year to the March quarter for Australia as a whole 4.4 per cent, Queensland 4.8 per cent; let's look at the registrations of new motor vehicles which is always regarded as a test of how an economy is moving, for Australia as a whole new motor vehicle registrations, that's over the past year, have gone up by 18.3 per cent, in Queensland only 10.9 per cent. Another very important area of the level of economic activity how an economy's going is what's happening in the housing industry. Here in Queensland an appalling performance compared with the Australian average. If you look at the last March quarter, the most recent figures, for Australia as a whole an increase of 0.9 per cent in dwellings approved; in Queensland a decline of 19.8 per cent. So if you look at all these things all these critical indicators Queensland is doing worse than all the other States. Look at the question of industrial dispute, Sir Joh that this is very important, well how is it that for the rest of Australia we have a situation where under the policies basically that we've been following and which have been reflected in all the other States, you have industrial disputation at almost a 17 year historically low point in Queensland with industrial disputes going through the roof. So if you take the Premier's own test that it's leadership and the policies of that leader and his party that count to determine the level of economic performance, then he comes out worst in Australia, and it's not surprising because he doesn't regard the task of leadership as trying to bring the economy

together, his concept of leadership is to try and tear the community apart - set group against group - and it's no wonder, therefore, that the great people of Queensland, I mean you've got a great State - you've got the resources here in this State which would be the envy of many other States, you've got great resources, you've got a great population, the trouble is that you've got the worst leader, and in the result the very fine people and the fine resources of this State are being made to turn in a worst performance. There's only one thing to do and that's - well, fairly obvious I would think.

CALLER:
(KEVIN)

The 12½ per cent tax that you're going to put on meat, milk and groceries - how is the unemployed going to be given extra money to balance that?

PM:

Very simply the Social Security payments will be increased by more than the increases in prices that will result. What you've got to understand is that while what's being talked about is a 12½ per cent increase in a consumption tax - a consumption tax at a 12½ per cent rate - the impact on the CPI is 6½ per cent because that 12½ percent is compensated by removals of prices associated with the existing wholesale and sales tax, that goes, and there are adjustments in certain excise areas, so that the nett result is 6½ per cent. Now the payment of unemployment benefits and other Social Security payments will be increased by significantly more than the amount necessary simply to cover the 6½ per cent increase in prices.

CALLER
(ERIC)

I have a small butcher's shop and a couple of restaurants. Under the new tax scheme, the tax for restaurants and they in turn will charge it again to the public, isn't this double taxing?

PM:

Well in any free enterprise society - here you've got the situation, if I understand your question rightly, where enterprises may try and cover themselves by passing on tax to consumers, but in the whole assumptions that we've made in our approach here, I would not assume that where the tax

is met by the enterprise that he's not going to pass it on, that's the whole reason why you get your calculation of the 6½ per cent increase in the CPI that we're talking about, and what we are saying is, that in the package as a whole the people who are going to be coming into your shop or going into your restaurants, are in fact going to have very much more money in their pocket than they otherwise would have. I do try and plead with you, Eric, not just to pick out one part of the package and say, there is the whole explanation of the whole thing. I mean it's absolutely no good saying a person's going to be confronted with somewhat higher prices, if you don't at the same time understand that they're going to have significantly more in their pockets, and more in their pockets than the increase in the prices that are going to be operating, so that there's no reason why the people that are your customers are not going to be at least as well able into the future to come and buy the things that they have been accustomed to buying as they were in the past.

ERIC: Yes, but I still think it's a sort of double-taxing. I mean they're going to be copping it from both of us really.

PM: The situation is the people are going to be paying a tax on goods and services as a result of a consumption tax, that's true. But that assumes that at the present time your customers aren't affected by the tax system - the fact is that they are, because what they have got available to them to spend on goods and services is there as a result of how much tax they pay. Let me put a simple example - let's say they're getting \$100 a week that's your pay and that the tax is \$50 on that, that leaves you \$50 to spend on goods and services. Now that \$50 that you've got to spend is a result of tax, it's the level of direct income tax operating on your pay determining the amount of goods and services you can buy. So tax now currently determines people's capacity to buy goods and services. They buy with their after-tax income. Now if we reduced that tax on the \$100 significantly, let's say it comes down to \$30, that means they've then got \$70 to spend on goods and services. Now we impose some tax on those goods and services OK they are still being affected by tax on the amount of goods and services they can buy, but the whole package will mean that

the increase in the price of goods and services associated with the consumption tax will have a lesser effect than the reduction on their direct taxes. So in the example I've given the \$70 they've got to spend on goods and services the prices of which will go up by 6½ per cent, will still leave them better off. In other words don't let's operate in our discussion on this new proposal as though it's only with the introduction of a consumption tax that the capacity of people to buy goods and services has been affected. It's being affected now but the terrible thing is that the capacity of the ordinary wage and salary earners to buy your goods and services is progressively being reduced because a greater and greater tax burden is being imposed upon them and in the overall package that's being proposed by us you will find I'm sure we'll be proved right, that the community as a whole will be better placed and there will be a fairer distribution of capacity to buy goods and services.

HS: Prime Minister, just a point on that consumer tax, how many times will it be applied? The restaurant meal is probably a good illustration. Will it be applied when the farmer sells his beef, will it be applied when the wholesale slaughter yards sells the cut meat or carcass to the butcher?

PM: As I said it's a broad-based consumption tax - you see what the alternatives we were faced with the concept of VAT which is the one that's been adopted in many countries of Europe, or the broad-based consumption tax. This was looked at and there were certain arguments in favour of a VAT but the main argument basically against it is that you have a much more complicated mechanism and many more collection points, and it was suggested probably the opportunity of evasion may be greater, and certainly the administrative costs would be greater and you would be imposing administrative burdens on more points in the community. So this is at the final point.

HS: So when the butcher sells the meat to the restaurant there's no tax at that point; but when the restaurant sells the meal?

PM: It depends how the restaurateur does his purchasing. If he just goes along to the butcher shop yes he'd pay.

CALLER: I'd like to talk about tax on the everyday commodities. It's been talked about that things like washing machines/cars will be cheaper. If we have to tighten our belt we'll just have to make do with those items a little longer instead of trading them in and getting the latest model. You don't buy those every day of the week. But, we have to buy food so we can eat and live. If cars and washing machines can be reduced you must have been collecting a pretty big revenue out of them. In my view the rich will benefit from the reductions because they're the ones who trade-in their cars every couple of years, as do you people in the government. But if the petrol goes up we won't be able to afford a car. What's your honest view on those things.

PM: You don't have to, with respect, use the adjective what is my honest view, because all my views are honest Madam and I'm not very keen on reintroduction of the adjective, but let's go to the facts. You pick out cars. At the moment, under the wholesale tax system which is full of anomalies, it's not only cars, it covers TVs, radios, soaps and detergent, pet food, soft drinks, insecticides, toys, toilet paper, watch, shavers, cosmetics, toiletries, pens and handbags. I mean you've got this whole range of goods, many of which you use, where there is an existing wholesale tax. Now with the abolition of the wholesale sales tax then the prices of those goods obviously come down and that's why in total where you're talking about a 12½ per cent broadly based consumption tax the overall effect will be only 6½ per cent. You talk about the impact on lower income people. The whole of my public life, in the trade union movement, in the Labour Party and now in government, has been a concern to try and ensure that the lower-income people of this country get a fair deal. I mean that's what my whole life has been about and I not going to suddenly when I come to tax reform say, oh no the principles that have guided me all of my life are suddenly going to fly out the window. Because we know that if you brought in a consumption tax and didn't do anything else that poorer people would be helped, is why we've got a total

package. Now that package involves \$2 billion-worth of compensation so that people in the lower-income level who depend upon social security benefits will get those benefits increased not just by the 6½ per cent but by more. Let me give an example for a single pensioner - what you would need to cover the increase in prices associated with the broad-based consumption tax would be a \$6 a week increase, well we're proposing \$9 a week increase and so on through the whole range of social security benefits. The level of people who are in employment, the proposed cuts in direct tax will be very very much greater. I just ask you to think about this situation and if you are afraid that the bringing in of this consumption tax is going to be unfair in that it will be, as the economists say regressive, that is it will hurt more down the bottom and help the people at the top, the great tragedy of which you ought to be aware and the people of Australia ought to be aware, is that at this time the most regressive feature of the tax system is that you're paying tax but that the people who can afford to pay tax are not. The most regressive feature of any tax system is that people avoid tax they don't pay, and what that's meant is you, and tens of thousands of people like you, under 30 years of government of our conservative opponents, more and more tax has been paid by you and no tax has been paid by the wealthy and the privileged. So what we're about in this whole approach is gradually relieve the burden upon people such as yourself, so that in relative terms we're going to have much greater fairness in the system. It's totally unfair that billions and billions of dollars have not been paid in tax by the rich and the privileged and the wealthy. Not by people like you because you can't afford a rich tax accountant or a smart tax lawyer to tell you how to get out of paying tax - you pay your tax. And what we're about is trying to remedy the whole system, so that you will pay less, that your capacity to consume will be increased and the rich and the privileged in the community will at long last start to pay their fair share.

CALLER:

Sir, I support your moves to bring in a fairer taxation system and it seems to me you are on the right track. As you know there are more than 2 million people living below the poverty line now, and I'm one of them. When you bring in your new taxation system will your government automatically adjust

the incomes for all those Australians, and I'm talking about those below the poverty line, to bring them above the poverty line, and I'm not forgetting that yesterday the Treasurer, Paul Keating, said the average median income wage is \$19,500 a year and could I suggest that at least the poverty line today...would be equal to a third of that which is equal to \$6,500 a year. And don't forget in a free enterprise system there is no limit on the profits and prices of people in that free enterprise system.

PM:

We will, of course, be increasing social security benefits by an amount more than is necessary to compensate for the increase in prices associated with a broadly-based consumption tax, if that's the route the government finally goes, so that people in that direct sense will be more than compensated. As ^{to} the suggestion of the lifting of the tax-free threshold also from \$4595 up to \$6250 would mean that at such a new tax scale, if that were implemented, that would increase the amount of money that you would be able to earn would be before you had to pay any tax at all, would rise from \$88 a week to \$120 a week. It's quite clear, and I'd be misleading you if I were to say that in one fell swoop associated with tax reform we were able to make the giant jump in payments to get above the calculated poverty line that you refer to, but I think the important point to understand is that until we have a tax system in which everyone is paying tax, with the capacity to pay that is and not avoiding it and costing us over the years billions of dollars, then neither my government nor any other government is going to be in a position to move gradually towards achieving that objective. It will be our intention once we get the tax system reformed, once we get a fair and equitable tax system we will be able gradually to move towards making life even more acceptable than it is now for those who for one reason or another, and often through no fault of their own, are at the lower end of the income scale.

CALLER:

It's Patti Smith here from the Australian Family Association. First we'd like to congratulate the government on the 14 per cent increase of 14 per cent in the spouse rebate and family allowances. This represented two of our recommendations.

in our written submission to the tax summit, the third being income-splitting. The increase in spouse rebate merely partly addresses the inequity in between the single income earner and the dual income earner. Notwithstanding all this and the fact that we represent, the Australian Family Association represent's the largest single interest group in Australia, we were not invited to the tax summit. Prime Minister could you comment?

PM:

May I firstly say thank you for your acknowledgement of some of the things we have done in meeting the objectives that you regard as appropriate. Secondly as to the point you make about the unit for taxation in the difference in tax impost - broadly what you are saying is correct we are aware of those arguments and that is a matter discussed in the white paper and will certainly be discussed at the summit. Thirdly as to actual attendance at the summit, we were faced with a situation of hundreds of organisations and individuals who wanted to be there and in drawing up the invitation list we tried to do the best job we could, knowing that some would be disappointed. I can only say this the submissions that your association has put in are included within the documents which will be available to the participants at the summit and I think a lot of people are making arrangements to have material available there for distribution to participants and I imagine you'd be doing that, so I think you should have no concern at all that the thrust of your argument is already before the people who will be at the summit, both by the issues being raised in the white paper itself, by the availability of access to your submissions and thinking - I hope that in the immediate post-summit situation if you've got anything more that you would like to put to us in the light of the sort of things that are said and done at the summit, that you won't be discouraged from not having been there but will give us the benefit of your thoughts in the immediate post-summit situation. They will certainly be taken into account.

CALLER:
(RITA)

I'm one of the poverty people, a pensioner. Would it be feasible to stagger this consumption tax and have a lower rate of tax on some essentials graduating by 2% per cent rises to 12% per cent for luxuries.

PM:

I can assure you that one of the questions that has been considered, not only in this country but elsewhere, is the possibility of the sort of thing that you're talking about, to have differential rates, but the unanimous advice that we've received in our consideration of this tax reform has been both from other countries and from international experts, that once you start having differential rates that you are then pretty much on a disaster path to the possibilities for avoidance and evasion, the administrative complexities are increased enormously plus the fact you immediately then set up the situation where all governments are continuously subjected to pressures saying there ought to be this exemption or that exemption or this or that lesser rate, which would mean you would have a repetition of what you've got now in the wholesal tax area where you have the absurdity that confectionary like Kit Kat on the one hand and chocolate biscuits which are virtually the same thing one is taxed and the other isn't. Because of the arguments against having a differential rate or exemptions of the sort that I've put to you, we've nevertheless wanted to try and make sure that what we do by way of compensation more than covers the best calculations of what the increased cost to you would be. Very detailed work has been done to try and get a picture of the consumption patterns of poorer people and then to load the figuring in such a way that means, according to our best estimates, the amount of additional money that we'll be giving to you and others on social security payments, that the amount of increase you'll get will be more than the increase in the price of goods with which you will be confronted. Let me repeat the example I gave with regard to the pensions - in regard to the single pension you'd need \$6 a week increase in the pension to cover the increase in the cost of things the pensioner would be faced with. So we're not going to make it \$6 a week we're going to make it \$9. And that sort of approach is also being followed throughout the area of social welfare payments. An important part of the summit will be to enable the representatives of the welfare community to go through our assumptions, go through our work, to see whether the judgment we have made is over-compensatory in the way we have proceeded to ensure we have done the right thing. I can give you this

undertaking that one part of the proceedings that I'll be listening to most closely will be this area that you're talking about. Because I'll need to be absolutely sure in my mind that people who do depend on social welfare payments are going to be at least as well off after the reform as they were before - I give you that undertaking.

HS: Just one final question - if after you've met in consultation with so many organisations and so many different pressure groups, I have a feeling that there won't be the simple consensus at the end of this conference that there was perhaps at the end of the Accord, but that in fact it will still be left to you to bear in mind their recommendations and their opinions and their preferences, but when it comes down to the crunch it's you and Mr Keating who will have to make the final decisions.

PM: I've never thought that we'd be able to get consensus at this summit because in the nature of the thing a summit on taxation is different to the sort of summit we had in 1983. Rather I've hoped and I still expect that at the summit we'll have the opportunity of hearing directly from a wide range of people in the community what they think and what their preferred approaches are and it may be that out of the process we would also see that some of the work that we've done needs some qualification to take account of particular views we regard as relevant. Take the example of the welfare area that we've just been talking about. I mean if it could be shown that some of the assumptions that we made in the calculations which we're now confident that those people will be more than compensated, if we were shown there was some questionmark about those, then we'd need to re-think that, and if it emerged that there wasn't nearly enough support for some of the concepts, well we'd have to take that into account. But you're quite right in the sense that ultimately we're the government and we're going to have to make the decision and that's the way it's always been - the way it should be. But I believe that as a result of these processes of widespread public debate and then at the summit, I think we should be in a better position to be more likely to make the best decision. Thank you Haydn and thank you listeners.