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PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF COMMENTS, QUEANBEYAN - FRIDAY 27 MARCH 1987

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JOURNALIST: Will you rule out an early election?

PM: You can't put a question like that - will I rule out? I've got nothing to add to what I've said.

JOURNALIST: Well some of your backbench don't think you can win an early election.

PM: And a lot of them do, so what's that mean?

JOURNALIST: Can you explain to us why Rod Cameron was asked to interrupt his Japanese trip to return home?

PM: I didn't know he'd been asked. I read it in the Financial Review that he'd been asked to interrupt his trip.

JOURNALIST: Care to speculate as to why?

PM: No I don't care to speculate about these things. All I notice is the rapidly diminishing acceptance of the Liberal Party under the leadership of John Howard. His performance in the last couple of days has defied description. They were committed to supporting the equal employment opportunity legislation and he's walking around the country saying his foremost responsibility is to defend the integrity and the independence of the Liberal Party. That they were not going to be dictated to by outside forces. So what happens? His first test, the very first test after he says he's going to defend the independence of the Liberal Party he gives in, he changes his position, he says they won't support the bill because it might upset the National Party in their meeting here this weekend.

JOURNALIST: How important is the National Party, the results of the meeting, to the prospects of an early election?

PM: I think it has a very great significance just in its own right. Leave elections aside. What you're witnessing now is the tearing up of the fabric of the traditional conservative politics in this country. You have this force from Queensland which is saying it shall be the determining direction of where the non Labor forces go. That force in Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen has a contempt for the Liberal Party, a total contempt as he does for anyone in the National Party who doesn't agree with him. It's very important for the whole of Australia to see what happens

there this weekend at the Lakeside. Are they going to tear up the Coalition? He says they will. Then what does the Liberal Party do? Does it continue as it has to just kowtow to the dictates of the more extreme elements of the National Party, or is it then going to just concentrate its energies on just fighting within its own ranks? The bitterness between Mr Peacock and Mr Howard are fundamental, they won't go away. And so you've got a disintegrating conservative force in Australia, which is not surprising. If you're going to analyse this properly you've got to understand the reason why these things are happening is because neither Mr Peacock nor Mr Howard, in the four years they've had the responsibility of leading the conservative forces in this country, have done any significant work at all about addressing themselves to the issues of policies, the issues that are confronting this country. They have nothing. John Howard has come up with what? Incentivation! When you create, as I say, that sort of vacuum, that's what opens up the possibilities of your Joh Bjelke-Petersens.

JOURNALIST: This morning Senator Richardson said the electorate doesn't traditionally like an early election. You'll have the Australia Card as a trigger. Do you think you can keep the electorate on side if you do decide to go early?

PM: It's not a question of keeping them on side if I decide to go early. The question of the Australia Card has a very great intrinsic significance. I think people need to understand how important it is. It's not just a piece of legislation. It is fundamentally important to do two things, which leads to a third result. First, to crack down on tax avoiders, the black economy, people who don't pay their taxes and they can do that in the absence of an identity card. And also, it's the only efficient way of totally cracking down on welfare cheats. If we have the capacity through a card with photo to crack down on tax cheating and welfare frauds, that in a relatively short period of time will bring in the best part of an additional \$1 billion into the coffers of Commonwealth revenue, which means there are lesser burdens on the rest of the people. It means there's a greater capacity to do things that people want. So you can see this piece of legislation is just no ordinary bill. It is fundamental to decent government, to proper tax collection, equitable tax collection so that people have to pay their share. It's also fundamental to seeing that people don't cheat on the welfare system. The Liberals and Democrats have got a very serious decision to take. Not just in terms of whether it will trigger an election. But they really have to ask themselves are they going to insult the Australian people by casting their vote in favour of tax cheats and welfare frauds. It's a very big decision.

JOURNALIST: Is the legislation that crucial you'll take it to the people though?

PM: I haven't said that.

JOURNALIST: Just in relation to Mr Howard's comments this morning. He was saying your credibility would be damaged if you decide to go early, or if you change your mind and say you're going to go early. What do you say in response to that?

PM: Well I say these things in response to Mr Howard. Firstly, he is in no position to talk about questions of credibility. He has this week performed the most unbelievable turnaround, saying at the beginning of the week his first responsibility was to protect the integrity and the independence of the Liberal Party from outside forces. First test, within 24 hours he capitulates to the National Party. So don't let's take any notice of Mr Howard. You talk about an early election. I think the only thing you can be certain about in early elections is that there will be an early election for the leadership of the Liberal Party.

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JOURNALIST: national implications do you think?

PM: I don't think national implications, no.

JOURNALIST: What about the ABC/SBS merger. What's the current state of play?

PM: Well it looks as though there's not going to be support for that in the Senate and I've made that quite clear that the Government would not proceed by administrative means to attempt to make that merger. I think that in those circumstances we'll have further discussions with the representatives of the ethnic community because I think they increasingly understand that the Government is concerned with maintaining and indeed improving the standard of the services provided by the SBS. I'm making clear to them that before I agreed to the proposal to merge I wanted a guarantee in writing, which I received, that there would be an improvement in the capacity to deliver the SBS type services in a merge situation because the SBS would have access to the greater capital facilities of the ABC. But if the Parliament, the Senate, is not going to pass it then that will give us more time, the Government and the ethnic community, to talk together and move to a position where they could be satisfied that their legitimate requirements would, in fact, be more than met in such a situation. I think it's probably in everyone's interests that we have the opportunity to do that and I think that can be achieved.

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