



PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF NEWS CONFERENCE, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, 9 MARCH 1989

E & O E - PROOF ONLY

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke what were the factors that caused ... to state your concerns about the Protocols?

PM: ... let me make clear what the Protocol 1 of the Geneva Convention does. It relates to the treatment of civilians and civilian targets in war time and it's designed to prevent attacks on them. The decision to sign it was taken by the previous Liberal Government. This Government took a decision in principle to ratify some time ago but we delayed a final decision pending very extensive consultations with our friends in the United States. Six NATO countries have already ratified it and others are expected to. We expect to make an explanatory statement at the time of ratification to clear up any possible residual problems on interoperability. Our military advisers are confident, I'm advised, that Australia's adherence to the Protocol will not adversely effect interoperability and they strongly endorse ratification. I think if you consider each of those points you'll see why we've adopted the position we have.

JOURNALIST: What do they mean by interoperability?

PM: What do they mean by interoperability? It's not a complex - I mean I must confess Milton that at times when we get into the area of military strategic discussion I have to think a bit about some of the terms, they get rather esoteric. But interoperability is not a difficult one, it doesn't come into that category. It means the way in which the forces of one type of the alliance actually operate in war with another.

JOURNALIST: Well isn't that a matter of major concern to Australia?

PM: If it hadn't been a matter of major concern as to the possible impact upon it then we wouldn't have had all these discussions. I guess if it was a matter of such concern that it made it questionable as to whether you could have effective interoperability I guess 6 NATO countries wouldn't have signed. I guess if it had been a fact that it would have adverse impacts on interoperability our Defence Force people wouldn't have been in favour of signing it. They are.

JOURNALIST: inaudible

PM: There's not much more in that one is there.

JOURNALIST: Are you concerned at all Mr Hawke about the way your Minister, Mr Punch, has handled the Sydney Airport issue, and do you think that there has been at least some scope for improvement in his performance?

PM: No the only criticism I would have is of what would've appeared at one stage in public, not in the Parliament, to have been a pre-emption of a consideration by the Cabinet of all the options. Now that was the only criticism and I've mentioned that to him as I thought it was not wise to have conveyed an impression that all the options wouldn't be on the table. But apart from that no I have no reason to question his performance. I have confidence in him. I thought he handled himself very well in Parliament yesterday.

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke what is your view on third runway -

PM: It will be expressed in the Cabinet.

JOURNALIST: Will that decision be finalised today?

PM: I don't know whether it will be finalised today Michelle. It is an extremely - I mean there won't be any argument about this, it's an extremely complex issue. It's one which I want to allow to all my Ministers a full opportunity for discussion and consideration. If I judged that there hasn't been enough time by the end of this evening - when we will be considering it tonight in the Cabinet - then more time will be given. But I can assure you and the Australian public that the decision will be made in the very near future. If it's not made this evening it will be made within the week.

JOURNALIST: ... that the Government here is driven by politics rather than considerations of national interest?

PM: I repudiate it completely. It is an obscenity of an argument because with a thing like this there is no way I - or would I allow any of my Ministers - to make a decision simply on political grounds. I mean all decisions that governments make - it would be dishonest to say that some elements of political considerations don't come into it - of course they will. But as far as I'm concerned the decision will be made on the basis of what is best for this country and I can assure you that in regard to this issue those who would seek to paint it as one which is made simply in terms of which decision offends the least people or gets the most kudos from others, are completely on the wrong runway.

JOURNALIST: Was it not unwise to put Mr Punch in that job?

PM: Of course it was not unwise to put him in that job. I was conscious when I was allocating the portfolios that his interests and involvement in this area - and I referred to it at the time - and indicated that all these things had to be handled according to their merits. Now the fact that he has a view will have nothing to do with the decision of the Cabinet ... I think Laurie that you appreciate the political realities of knowing the make-up of the Cabinet. I don't think you would believe that the Cabinet and the people in the Cabinet would have their position determined by the attitude of Mr Punch.

JOURNALIST: ... vested interest than a view?

PM: Well he obviously has an interest from his own particular point of view as a member ... It would be stupid to deny that. But this submission has been prepared by and will be presented to the Cabinet by Mr Willis. As a member of the portfolio Mr Punch will be in the Cabinet but he will not be making a decision on this. Mr Willis has the carriage of it in the Cabinet.

JOURNALIST: Is the third runway still an option?

PM: Well let me put it this way. It is an option which I insisted - there was no problem about insisting on it - we've accepted that that's the way it had to be. But I want every option and the arguments for and against before the Cabinet. There is no way that this matter will be decided on the basis of simply saying "well someone has a preference for one and doesn't like the other so only the one will be there". All the options, as I say, with all the pros and cons will be there.

JOURNALIST: Do you believe Badgerys Creek can be built in four years or three years or whatever ...?

PM: If you have some doubt let there be no doubt as to what's been said. No-one is saying that from the point of decision that Badgerys Creek could be built in three years. No-one is or has said that. It could not be.

JOURNALIST: You'd be well aware of the history of the whole thing -

PM: But make it ... also clear nor could the third runway.

JOURNALIST: But you'd be well aware of the history of the whole episode going back at least to the Whitlam Government in considering -

PM: And before, yes.

JOURNALIST: Would you concede that this decision should've been made actually a long time ago?

PM: It should've been made before this Government came into office. Let it be said this is the first government which has made a relevant decision in respect of the expansion of airport facilities to meet the needs of Sydney. That is by the decision that we have taken and which we've already acted upon to acquire land at Badgerys Creek. A decision like that should've been taken before hand. Because remember this, it seems to be overlooked and it certainly was overlooked in the discussion and debate and observations of the Parliament yesterday, no-one, no-one involved in this discussion and debate is arguing that you will not need to have Badgerys Creek. The arguments are simply whether it is a third runway plus Badgerys Creek at some time. It was this Government which was the first and should've been done before hand by previous governments, to take some steps to acquire the additional land for additional capacity. Because no-one and I repeat no-one is arguing that Badgerys Creek will not at some stage have to be built. It will.

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke if neither of those options can be done quickly is there anything that you can do in the interim ...?

PM: Yes there are some things that will be done and they'll be announced.

JOURNALIST: Can Sydney afford - and indeed Australia - afford the economic cost of waiting until Badgerys Creek is ready when a third runway at Sydney must be a quicker option?

PM: Well on what do you base that? There is no evidence whatsoever. I mean that's nice to say and I don't intend to be ... in saying this. But one of the unfortunate things in this discussion has been the mindless, uninformed assumptions that are made by many people, and that's on both sides of the argument. The mindlessness hasn't been confined to one side. Now there is no evidence available to support the assumption that the third runway can be built quicker than a facility at Badgerys Creek. Because you've got to take into account the period - and quite considerable period - that would be involved in an environmental impact statement in regard to a third runway at Kingsford-Smith. I repeat there is no basis for the assumption which seems to be explicit or implicit in so many positions on this. The third runway at Kingsford-Smith, click you fingers, there it is, Badgerys Creek much longer. It's not accurate.

JOURNALIST: Can the Government afford to fast track Badgerys Creek?

PM: There are ways, I believe, in which this would be capable of being done. But it involves questions not only of government but there's a limit to how far obviously I can go in all of this discussion. I mean I don't want to be not forthcoming in regard to your questions. As you can see I have been responding to your questions. But an amount of

(PM cont) the detail which is involved in that particular question but I'm not prepared to go to it in any detail. But let me simply say this in regard to fast tracking, that's one element that's on the table.

JOURNALIST: On another subject Prime Minister. What's the Government going to do about militant Muslims that are threatening Australians in Australia?

PM: The position - let me repeat the position Laurie. If any Australian citizen or group of Australian citizens infringes the law in terms of their attitudes to others in the position of my Government - and I'm sure it would be the position of the State Governments - and it does seem to have arisen more particularly in Sydney, I'm sure it would be the attitude of Mr Greiner and his Government, but if any citizen or group of citizens infringes the law then the law should take its course. You have the difficult and fine line position which I think you'll appreciate Laurie - and this is in the sense at the heart of the Rushdie affair itself - that what distinguishes our country from others, including Iran for that matter, is our total commitment to the right of free expression, and that expression of oral and written, provided as I say it's not infringing the law. Now provided that individual groups express their view on this issue without infringing the law then an essential part of our position is ... that that should be allowed.

JOURNALIST: What about the comments of Mr Javed Chaudry last night? How do you react to those -

PM: Well I must say I was offended by them, reading them this morning. It would be a question however of the law. Simply because I'm offended by what someone says is not a basis for action. After all, if that was the case, half of you wouldn't be here because you've offended me at times. But to be offended is not a cause for legal action. I mean God where would we finish up?

JOURNALIST: Is there clause to protect the booksellers who have been threatened by

PM: Well look Laurie, I mean there's obviously the legal question involved here. I can't pretend just standing here at the forum in answer to a very legitimate question that you put, to answer whether there has been an infringement of law, it ought to be looked at. If there is an infringement of law, action ought to be taken.

JOURNALIST: But there has been a threat. Are you going to

PM: Well obviously in the area involved here it is more probably a matter of State jurisdiction and that's not said to avoid the issue. If there is any infringement of a Federal law which could involve Federal action, then that should be taken. I'll obviously, when these things happen, I get reports coming to me. There'll be a report to me today no doubt and I can say to you quite clearly, if I was advised that there is an infringement of Federal law then I would expect action to be taken. Similarly, Laurie, I would expect that if there is an infringement of a State law, I would expect action to be taken. We are in this area of fine line where expressions of view are not necessarily an infringement of the law. I mean probably you - it may not have happened in your case - but you at times may have said things which of course thump you in the bloody nose. I'd be surprised if they had because you're such a reasonable bloke in what you say. But threats can be made which don't necessarily involve a breaking of the law. But I repeat, because this is a matter of fundamental importance, the right of Australians themselves to have, to be able to speak freely, to write freely and to disseminate freely. I mean that is something that I regard as fundamental. If anything has happened against the law in that respect then I would want action to be taken.

JOURNALIST: Just looking beyond the law for a moment to the immigration program are you concerned at all that you may be recruiting people to come to this country who have very very different sets of values and that this may pose some sort of problem?

PM: Well the question of different sets of values of course of itself is a difficult thing because this country is not going to become one under this Government in which we are demanding adherence to one set of values. I mean, the majority of people in this country would be adherents to the Judean-Christian ethic and practice and beliefs. A very significant proportion of this country have either none or different so we are not going to have uniformity. The critical test Paul is this, that if there was an evidence of recruitment of people committed to the processes of violence, then that would not be acceptable. If I had such evidence I would require action to be taken to see that that sort was stopped.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister would you adopt Mr Saunderson's suggestion that in anticipation of any ruling by the ABC next week about transition legislation to the Bond network?

PM: No this Government hasn't operated on the basis of moving legislation following speeches made by backbenchers. That's not the way we go about forming legislation.

JOURNALIST: Could it be a problem though Sir if Mr

PM: Well that's a different question. It's a hypothetical one which I'm not going -

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister you've had a chance now to Senate report on the ATsIC legislation, will the Government go ahead with that body, do you anticipate the changes that will be made to the Bill to be major changes or minor changes and when do you think those decisions will be taken?

PM: I have had a chance to have a preliminary look, but I still to have discussions in detail with the Minister, Michelle, and I am not going to make any statement or foreshadow any positions until I've had that opportunity of both discussing it with him and with other Ministers. But let me say this, it would be my presumption and intention that the legislation should proceed with whatever amendments we, as a Government, decide are appropriate in the circumstances. After whatever consultation may in the circumstances, further consultation, it may be necessary with the Aboriginal community.

JOURNALIST: Do you think another major round may be necessary?

PM: I'm not sure at this stage. I simply repeat I haven't yet had detailed discussions with the Minister and I can't answer that until I've done that.

JOURNALIST: Are you concerned about the very strong criticism in the majority report about the lack of adequate consultation?

PM: Yes, one must be concerned. I must say that on the basis of my knowledge the consultations were extensive. I mean the Minister reported to me on a number of occasions, both on the number and the nature of the consultations and I certainly form the impression from those discussions and from the comments of others who are involved in them that they had been extensive. There does seem to be some difference of view on this but I find it very difficult, on the basis of my knowledge, to be critical of the Minister as to the extent and nature of the consultations on the knowledge that I have. They were both extensive and, as far as I could judge, effective.

JOURNALIST: Do you see any need for consultation with the States on this legislation?

PM: Well there has been forms of consultation. The Minister discussed a whole range of matters with his counterparts in the States. As to whether further consultation is necessary that would be something that I would need to, conclusion which I'd need to come on the basis of further discussions with him. I can't answer the question, authoritatively, until I have discussed the matter with the Minister.

JOURNALIST: Have you told Paul Keating not to dispute rulings by the Speaker?

PM: No I haven't told Paul Keating how to behave himself in the Parliament.

JOURNALIST: If there was a situation such as the Cope situation and one of your Ministers was named, would you back the Speaker?

PM: That seems to me, just prima facie, to be a very, very hypothetical question Laurie.

JOURNALIST: Not too hypothetical after yesterday is it Prime Minister?

PM: Well I don't know. Let me just, as yesterday's events have been raised, let me just make this point which I think is appreciated by those of you who have watched the affairs of this Parliament now over some period of time. The fundamental point that has to be understood is that by deliberate decision, by deliberate decision, the Opposition has decided to attempt to create a different form of Parliamentary proceedings. I am not a member of the Parliament for an extraordinarily long time, others are, but I have been a close follower, listener to Parliamentary proceedings for a very long time, and to the best of my knowledge there has never been a situation as that which the Opposition has attempted to create. They are totally incapable of handling Question Time as all preceding oppositions have been capable of handling it. That is that all preceding oppositions have been able to use Question Time effectively to probe Ministers by asking questions about policies based upon the fact that they themselves have policy positions. Oppositions have said 'well here's our position, there's the Government position, we're going to hammer the Government on questions of policy from a basis of our own policy position'. Now that's been the basis of the way in which Question Time has operated in this place from day one. But now we have, for the first time, an Opposition which has demonstrably proved itself incapable of operating as every other opposition before it has. Why? The simple reason is, it has no policy positions. None. Let's look at the existing critically important area of economic policy. What's the essence of economic policy? When you get down to the guts of it, it's a question of what's your fiscal policy, what are you going to raise from the public either for personal tax, company tax or other forms of tax and how are you going to spend it and how are you going to adjust the relationship between the two? That's the very guts of Government. Now on that critical area, not only do you have no policy on the part of the Opposition, but more importantly than that you have now exposed a fundamental difference of view within the Opposition. You have the Shadow Treasurer who seems to be really a Shadow, Shadow, Shadow Treasurer because you have Hewson, the Shadow Finance Minister saying 'well we' with the obvious compliance of his leader, 'we probably won't really reach our position, final position on tax or on what we do on the outlay side. We'll

(PM cont) probably leave all that in some sort of a limbo until after the election'. But the Shadow Treasurer who presumably in these matters should have the real running, saying 'well that's not right, don't talk to Hewson, talk to me'. So there you have the public indication of their unreadiness, their lack of preparation, compare it with what was being said last year, both by their leader and by their external Party President Elliott. Unequivocal commitments last year to have their positions publicly stated by August of last year, August of 1988. We're now March of 1989, no further down the track. Indeed, regressed because now saying 'well we mightn't have our policies prepared at all before the election'. So there is the core of the problem which differentiates this Opposition from every previous opposition. Having no policy position themselves, they have no basis, no basis whatsoever to do what every previous opposition has done. To question the Government from their policy position, probe weaknesses. What have they decided to put in its place? For the first time ever, they have decided to put in place, not being able to do or perform the traditional function of an opposition, organised pandemonium. Ministers can hardly start an answer before the cacophony of hee-haws and mindless laughter, giggles based on ignorance start. Points of order, manifestly not wellfounded. Now obviously that position places strains on the rest of the organisation and not least upon Madam Speaker. I accept that our behaviour in six years of Government hasn't been perfect and you know I'm always prepared to say that we're not perfect, we make mistakes. We have made mistakes including myself, but what I want to say is that those mistakes are made within an historically unique situation and may I say, I want to say in regard to the Speaker that I feel very sorry for her that she is, in a sense, the victim of the basic inadequacy, incompetence and historically unrivalled incompetence and unprincipled nature of this Opposition.

JOURNALIST: I'm not trying to do a Tuckey and harp on relevance but you haven't really answered the question. Will you give a guarantee that you will back the Speaker even if she felt it necessary to discipline one of your ministers?

PM: I believe that that would be the appropriate course of action.

JOURNALIST: That's a guarantee?

PM: I don't in advance Laurie answer hypothetical questions and I don't really think that you would expect me to. I would need to know every circumstance that was involved at the time but certainly what you put is what I would expect to happen.

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke, did your Government receive representations from either Mr Kelty or Justice Maddern about Justice Staples and if judges of the Industrial Relations Commission aren't really judges as you said last week are you still going to continue to pay them the same salary and allowance as Federal Court judges?

PM: I didn't receive any submissions from Kelty or the Commission about Staples. I don't know whether any of my Ministers did, I certainly personally didn't receive any. Let's make it quite clear, don't let's have the discussion muddled in any way Milton by the use of the word 'judge' implying that he held a judicial position. He didn't, and he doesn't, never held a judicial position, not a judicial body. So don't let's muddy the waters by reference to judicial positions. Secondly let's make it clear, the fact that Staples was, as it were, unemployed was not a decision of this Government or of the previous government. It was as a result of successive decisions by successive presidents of the tribunal. It was their decision and as you know and as I said in my answer in the Parliament, the previous government had not only acknowledged but facilitated these positions, first of all by sending him off on some overseas trip and then secondly by an amendment of the legislation to facilitate the action of the president of the commission in making the decisions affecting Staples. So those are the facts. Not judicial and not action of the Government - decisions of the Commission. In those circumstances we took the legislative action that's been involved and out of which comes this controversy. Now in those circumstances the results are automatic.

JOURNALIST: The others aren't judges either - that follows from what you said. Will you continue to pay them the same rate of pay as Federal Court judges?

PM: The question of the remuneration of High Court judges, Federal Court judges and members of these other tribunals is something that will be decided by the Cabinet in the relatively near future.

JOURNALIST: You've emphasised Mr Hawke that your tax package is particularly directed at families. Is it possible that you could look at, in this context, family allowances as well as the tax structure itself?

PM: Yes, it's conceivable it will have to be looked at Michelle but I'm obviously not going to say in advance what it is we're going to do. But the answer to your question is yes it's conceivable that that can be looked at as well.

JOURNALIST: Have you had a chance to look at yet and do you have an opinion on the Industrial Relations blueprint released last Friday by the Greiner government?

PM: No, it probably doesn't come as any surprise to you Paul that in the massive material that I have to read that decisions of the Greiner government don't come very high on the list and it hasn't quite got onto the agenda yet.

JOURNALIST: Do you accept that the self government system that your Government has put in place in Canberra has now become a joke?

PM: The which?

JOURNALIST: The self government system here. Do you accept it's now a joke. Is there anything that can be done about it?

PM: I don't accept that it's a joke. I must say it's becoming rather difficult to foretell the outcome of the electoral processes.

JOURNALIST: Will you do anything about it? ...

PM: No, I don't think that point's been reached. Let's wait until you get the outcome of the vote and the discussions between the parties and non-parties. ... going to happen.

JOURNALIST: On another parliamentary question Prime Minister, how soon can the television audiences of Australia expect to see what you say in Parliament as well as hear?

PM: I don't know the answer to that question. I haven't got anything before me at the moment, any proposals before me on this issue. Just expressing a personal view and that's all I'm doing, not a Government view -

JOURNALIST: Would you like us to give you a proposal?

PM: I'm not quite sure what Cabinet ... Laurie but I'd be more than happy to receive one - but I'm expressing a personal view. I think it would make sense for it to be televised but not imposed. If people want to watch us in action, and I think there are probably a lot of people who would like to, then that's a decision which stations ought to be free to take. This is purely a personal view but I don't think it's something that ought to be imposed on an unwilling public.

JOURNALIST: What do you think of yesterday's Senate Education report that most Australians don't know how this place works, and does it matter so long as they're kept in touch with the issues?

PM: That doesn't distinguish them from some people who are here all the time. I mean when I read some of the things that some of you reporters say about what has happened, which hasn't happened, what hope is there? The answer to your question is it's disappointing but I have no doubt that you've seen material in regard to the United States, the lack of knowledge in the United States about their governmental processes, the institutions, even names of presidents and senior positions like this. It just does seem to be a feature of political life in most countries that the people don't attach the same importance to us as we attach to ourselves.

JOURNALIST: Just getting back to the Speaker Mr Hawke, when you said the Government has made some mistakes in the Parliament over the last six years, has Mrs Child also made some mistakes and have you and other members of the Government ever had any doubts about her ability to handle the position?

PM: Mrs Child would admit she's made some mistakes. I suppose she would be upset that on a particular occasion she hasn't readily identified a member and his constituency, his or her constituency. I don't think that that's something to get terribly excited about but she may regard it as a mistake. No, in regard to Mrs Child I've regarded her as a good Speaker.

JOURNALIST: Do you think there's a case to follow the British system where the Speaker is removed from a political role and doesn't need to belong to the party or go to Caucus meetings or whatever to politically neutralise the role?

PM: It sounds good, easier to do in a House of Commons of the best part of 600 members. Not so easy to do in Australia I would think. Conceptually it sounds attractive but I doubt given the relatively much smaller size of our House of Representatives that parties would be able to come to an accommodation on it.

JOURNALIST: Was it premature to disallow Japanese involvement in the Woolloomooloo Bay redevelopment project?

PM: There wasn't a disallowance of Japanese investment as such. It was a disallowance made on environmental grounds. I'm glad you asked that question because it gives me the opportunity of affirming once again my own and the Government's very strong position. We will not be party to any discrimination in investment on grounds of race or of nation and it wasn't the case in the particular project to which you refer. It was a decision on environmental grounds.

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