



PRIME MINISTER

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JOURNALIST: How much of a loss to the Ministry is Gary Punch's resignation?

PM: Well it's a loss. How do you quantify it? I can't quantify it. It's a loss. The Government is in the fortunate position of course of having a very considerable reservoir of talent on the backbench and I'm confident that from that reservoir of talent they will elect a very competent replacement.

JOURNALIST: Were you surprised by his decision?

PM: A little but I could understand it. He could take the view that he's in a better position in his constituency to advance his beliefs on the particular issue of the third runway at Mascot from the backbench. I can understand that.

JOURNALIST: Are you worried that may be an embarrassment to the Cabinet now, the fact that he'll be fighting that decision?

PM: No. Do I look worried?

JOURNALIST: Is the meeting of Labor MPs in Sydney today to discuss the airport matter helpful?

PM: I don't know whether it's helpful or not. I mean again I'm totally relaxed about it. Let me get these things in perspective - not just this issue - but you look back over politics. I mean we have great big gatherings about this, like this, about an issue, you get your collective knickers in collective knots and think that the end of the world is about to descend upon us. In a few months time, what was that all about. I mean get things in perspective.

JOURNALIST: Are you quite happy for him to be replaced by a New South Wales right winger?

PM: I'll be happy with the decision of the Caucus because as I say we have so much talent there that I'm sure a very capable replacement will emerge.

JOURNALIST: Are you confident that the best replacement will be made because of a factional deal?

PM: Well I've talked about this before, the factional position. There are some minuses about the way the factional system operates, but there are very many pluses. I've said quite clearly on balance I think that the pluses outway the minuses. I mean if you want to look at the two major forces in Australian politics - the Labor Party, the one Labor Party - and the hotch-potch of interest groups that make up the National Party and the Liberal Party there's just no doubt which is the more efficient in producing talent. I mean it's just not a proud Labor Prime Minister talking about the talent we've got, it's the unanimous position of all commentators that there is very, very little talent on the other side because they haven't gone about the business of preselection in a sensible way. They've allowed safe seats to go to nonentities. They have no talent there at all really and that's you know a common view. Now in New South Wales they are going along the factional route in a sense further than we have. In the Liberal Party they've got to the stage they've actually registered one of their - what is it centre right or centre unity or something, I'm not quite sure - but they've actually taken steps to register it with the Corporate Affairs Commission. Well it's a funny sort of way of going about things. In the Labor Party different groups with different emphases of now over a period of time tend to coalesce. But if you look at the way they're operating in the Parliament they've never been more cohesive than they are now. They have their differences and that's fair enough - it will always happen in social democratic parties - but they come together on the important issues and I think on balance it's worked very, very well. It's been reflected in the decisions that have been taken by the Australian people. If you look at all the federal and state elections over the last few years by and large the Australian electorate is rejecting the conservatives because the thing is they have their divisions, they are enormously divided within the Liberal, within the National Party, between the Liberal Party and the National Party. Their divisions are deep, profound in terms of stopping them producing policies. We have some differences but they don't operate to prevent the sensible and relevant formulations of policy. That's the difference.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister what's your response to the America's Cup ruling?

PM: I have to confess I haven't heard the America's Cup ruling. Please tell me.

JOURNALIST: Well the Americans have been found to be cheating -

PM: When? In Fremantle?

JOURNALIST: In New Zealand. The Cup has been returned to its rightful owners -

PM: What's this New Zealand background that's coming out here?

JOURNALIST: inaudible

PM: It has has it?

JOURNALIST: Yes it has.

PM: Were they cheating before in Fremantle?

JOURNALIST: No, no.

PM: I mean we probably should bring it back to Fremantle and then the New Zealanders could challenge us.

JOURNALIST: Make it retrospective?

PM: At least to Fremantle, at least to Fremantle.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister are you happy that everything's being done by the Federal Government that could be to safeguard taxpayers money in relation to the NSC and other -

PM: Thanks for that question. I've of course asked for a report on this issue, it was furnished to me yesterday, and I believe that the Commonwealth is in a position where it is clear of any possibility of charge that we haven't acted appropriately. There have been so many fanciful claims made, including that this missing person is a CIA agent and has got intelligence connections. I've had all these things checked out and I'm assured that there is no substance in those things.

JOURNALIST: There's no substance to those at all? ...

PM: As I'm informed.

JOURNALIST: Well how concerned are you that something like this can happen even if the Government -

PM: Well this is not a Commonwealth responsibility, this matter, and it's quite clearly not a Commonwealth responsibility. If there is anything to be pursued it's at a state level, not at the Commonwealth level.

JOURNALIST: The Chairman of the National Crime Authority Committee wants the NCA to look at it. Do you think that's perhaps an over-reaction given what you've just said?

PM: ... on the evidence available to me ...

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