



PRIME MINISTER

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JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke, did you lose your cool last night in Parliament?

PM: I wasn't in Parliament last night.

JOURNALIST: The 'recycled dunderhead' remark has been reported, do you have any ... thinking on that?

PM: No, no, I don't have any regrets about a little bit of tough language. The fact is that we have a leader who is recycled but that's no reflection on Andrew, it's rather a reflection on the Liberal Party. He's been there and it's a reflection on the absence of a range of talent, there's no-one else that they can go to, they've got to go back to someone who's been there before and failed. I'm not trying to make a personal attack on Andrew, there's no point in doing that, but it does really involve a reflection on the very very shallow pool of talent in the conservative ranks in the Federal Parliament.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, it appears that the former Liberal leader Mr Howard is now destined to the backbench. Do you think that's an appropriate spot for him?

PM: Well, it means that Mr Peacock is having a great deal of difficulty in getting his front bench together. Apparently they've been negotiating for some time, Mr Howard suggested two portfolios, one of two portfolios that he wanted, Mr Peacock wasn't prepared to give them to him. I think that is probably not a reflection of his judgement as to the lack of capacity of Mr Howard for either of those two portfolios but rather he's got a lot of bills out. I mean he owes a lot. You've got a situation where if you've promised 40 and there's only 30, you know 40 into 30 won't go and particularly if you've made some special promises. So I think that there is just simply no doubt that in any current Opposition front bench John Howard ought to be part of it. There's no way he oughtn't to be part of it. What is certain is that it will be less than their best front bench if he's not in it and that's quite clearly the case now.

JOURNALIST: But doesn't it also give Mr Peacock a completely fresh start, a chance to start all over again?

PM: How can - it's hardly a fresh start all over again when you're having a recycled leader. That's hardly a fresh start all over again is it? I mean it's the same players as before so how can it. Mr Peacock is the last person who can be having a completely fresh start. It just is indisputable. Wherever you are in the political spectrum it's indisputably true that the Opposition front bench is going to be less than at its optimum, whatever that level is, it's going to be less than its optimum if John Howard is not part. Why is John Howard not a part of it? Because Andrew Peacock refuses to give him one of the two portfolios that he wants.

JOURNALIST: So do the events of this week give you the new opportunity for an early election?

PM: That really is old hat. I was never going to call an early election. You know who it was that started the story of an early election? It was a bloke called John Howard. John Howard was a bloke who was talking about an early election. Why? Because he was frightened there was going to be a challenge to his leadership so he thought if he talked about an early election that would stave off a challenge to him. Now like in most things John Howard was involved in, he made a mess of it. Bob Hawke was not talking about an early election, Bob Hawke delivered the tax cuts as the delivery of a promise he made 12 months ago. So I don't know why you go on with this talk about an early election. The bloke who put the story around has just had his throat cut.

JOURNALIST: Will Mr Peacock be more difficult to handle though as an opponent than John Howard?

PM: No, I don't think so. I think it's obviously the case, I would expect it to be the case that Andrew will get a bit of a honeymoon from the electorate and in the polls. I mean that's always the case, you get a new bloke in, I would expect that to be the case but then he will have to face up to - he's had to face up to it before - the question of a) preparing policies, b) understanding them, c) being able to talk about all the details of those policies both within the Parliament and through the public gaze. We're confident that we've got the superior policies and the superior record.

JOURNALIST: The souffle not only rose again, do you think it will fall again?

PM: Oh well, that's Paul's, I mean Paul's got a copyright on that one. I think it was a pretty good line actually, I wished I'd thought of it myself. But it's Paul's and I don't want to intrude into that area of analogy. I'll leave the development of that to Paul.

JOURNALIST: Do you think Mr Peacock got the better of you in that clash yesterday in Parliament?

PM: No, what simply happened in the Parliament yesterday was he tried to make a big issue out of the fact that there'd been a slip that I'd made, eight per cent per annum that I'd apparently said, as though I'd meant it. Obviously it was eight per cent over the period since '83. All I can say now is as I said then, if he thinks that's a big deal, as I said, 'bung on boyo', because if that's the measure of the importance of your first question. The second one which didn't involve Mr Peacock, as I said, I simply made a mistake in terms of assuming that a particular item was in the \$17 million that had been raised in the question by one of the Members and I readily conceded that it was mistaken.

JOURNALIST: You don't think you overreacted ...?

PM: No, I mean you oughtn't to be around Parliament if you think what I said is something to be upset about. That was pretty tender stuff really.

JOURNALIST: So what's Mr Peacock's future now?

PM: Well he's got his second time around as Leader of the Opposition and if we are to believe what's in the paper - and I'm always a little bit doubtful about believing everything I read in the press, I've been around a long time and they do make mistakes - but if we are to believe what's in the press we're told that those who supported him said he's got it on two conditions. One, that he's got one shot, if he loses the next time, as he will, then he's finished and secondly - which I thought was very strange people saying this - that he's got to be non-controversial and lead an impeccable public and private life. That's nonsense that sort of stuff, but they are the sort of conditions that were laid down. Nonsense.

JOURNALIST: Who would you have preferred to face coming up to an election, Hawke or -

PM: Hawke?

JOURNALIST: No, sorry not Hawke, Peacock or Howard?

PM: I am quite relaxed about it, I really am. I suppose what you can say is this, that the people had sort of got used to John Howard and seemed to be giving a thumbs down. As I said before, I think that Andrew will get a little bit of a honeymoon. That's exactly what you'd expect so in that sense there'll be a bit of an advantage for the Opposition for a while. But there's a long time to go to the next election and the inadequacies of the Opposition will come through. This is not just a personality thing I'm talking about in regards to Andrew. What will be on issue is firstly the comparative record of this Government in our

PM (cont): seven years in office and their abysmal seven years, and secondly the question of policies and relevance of policies. We'll beat the hell out of them on both record and policies.

JOURNALIST: So you're in a stronger position now than you were this time last week?

PM: No, I think initially, as I say, there'll be a honeymoon period for Andrew Peacock and the Opposition. I'd be very surprised if there wasn't a bit of a honeymoon. But you see the fundamentals haven't changed. The fundamentals simply are that this mob have been in Opposition for six years and they haven't got their policies out on fundamentals yet, like tax for instance. That reflects their incompetence, their laziness, their internal divisions and that's not going to change because they've swapped leaders and put back a bloke who's been there before.

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke, a Melbourne paper has the Liberals in an opinion poll well ahead of the Labor Party. Is that part of their honeymoon period too?

PM: I would expect, I haven't seen this, is it out today is it? Whose is it, whose poll?

JOURNALIST: It's a Herald poll.

PM: It's a Herald poll is it. Well I'm not entirely surprised. I've just been saying I expect them to get a bit of a honeymoon but that won't last long.

JOURNALIST: Are you prepared to debate with Andrew Peacock on your policies ...?

PM: ... Parliament that we do that, ... happening, I hope that he'll want to debate policies. I hope he'll give me the opportunity of debating his policies in the Parliament. But to have a debate about policies, about their policies, they've got to have some. So the sine qua none for having a debate with Andrew Peacock in the Parliament about his policies is that he gets them.

JOURNALIST: What about a television debate Mr Hawke? Would you have a debate with him on national television?

PM: What's this gimmick business of getting into television debates now? There's no election on.

JOURNALIST: ... charisma factor that Mr Peacock's ... Do you feel threatened by that electorally?

PM: No, not at all.

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