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PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH JANA WENDT, A CURRENT AFFAIR
PARLIAMENT HOUSE - 6 JUNE 1990

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WENDT: Prime Minister, thank you very much for your time.

PM: Pleasure Jana.

WENDT: I have to ask you, how do you feel?

PM: I feel great.

WENDT: No problems?

PM: No problems.

WENDT: Cabinet met in your absence and made some important decisions. How much input were you able to have into all of that?

PM: All those issues that were decided in my absence had been a subject of discussion with me beforehand.

WENDT: So you were confident that you knew exactly what was going on in the Cabinet Room?

PM: Yes.

WENDT: There seems to be at the moment some questioning of your ability to keep on doing this job. Are you tired?

PM: No, I'm not tired. I've never felt better really. I feel on top of things mentally in a way I haven't before really. I mean I've always felt good mentally but I feel better than I have ever before. And physically I'm great.

WENDT: Dr Hewson has not so delicately suggested that you're too old for the job.

PM: I noticed that with a bit of amusement. I think it said more about Dr Hewson than it said about Bob Hawke.

WENDT: What do you think it does say about him?

PM: He's got a lot to learn.

WENDT: Do you think it was too rough a remark to make?

PM: No, no. In politics you've got to be prepared for rough stuff. I don't think it was rough. I thought it was stupid.

WENDT: Do you believe that you have a responsibility to your Party to bow out while you are still on top?

PM: No. The way they put it to me I have a responsibility to stay in, and for a considerable period of time. I mean this is in the ring now, the question of my leadership, so let me cast aside those very strong shackles of modesty which always chain me down and refer you to the recent research which talks about the last two elections and the Hawke factor. Now I don't want to spell them out but you know what that research shows.

WENDT: But do you think the time will come when you will have to, for the sake of the Party, say to yourself well now is the time to -

PM: No, the time will come when, not only for the sake of the Party but according to good sense, I will have to give it away. But that's not for a long time yet. I mean, I am not immortal, I'm not going to go on forever. Of course there'll come a time.

WENDT: The rumour mill about Paul Keating taking over is gaining momentum again. Do you believe that he is ready now ...?

PM: It's a very narrow-based rumour mill and it's one which causes amusement both to me and to Paul.

WENDT: Well let me put it to you this way. When do you think he might be ready to take on this job?

PM: If you take the bus syndrome, if I were to go under the bus, he would be ready now. I mean none of the comments I've made to this point imply that I don't think he's incapable of doing the job now. It's simply that the position won't arise.

WENDT: Why did Paul Keating take it upon himself to read the riot act to Ministers who supposedly had stepped out of line. Why ...?

PM: ... particularly did with John Button and as I've said, I have no problem about that at all. Because the question of economic management is very much within Paul's bailiwick although I am involved there too. It's

a joint effort between Paul and myself. He felt that he needed to say what he did. I had no problem with that.

WENDT: And you supported him in that?

PM: I did. I do.

WENDT: Mr Hawke, there's been some suggestion that it may be time for a reshuffle of your Ministers.

PM: I've never heard anything more ridiculous than this. I mean that is, you often hear me saying that things get shoved into the public arena which are legless. Well this is the thing that was amputated at birth.

WENDT: Well we were just talking about Mr Keating having bucketed Senator Button. I mean do you think it's time for Senator Button to move on?

PM: No, and neither does Paul.

WENDT: The other name that's been thrown into the ring is Ralph Willis. Is it time for him to move on ...?

PM: Certainly not.

WENDT: Mr Hawke, do you think there comes a time when you just get sick of the abuse, and you're copping it obviously from the Opposition, that's predictable, but you've copped it from within your own ranks from people like Peter Walsh. Do you get sick of that?

PM: No. If you looked at the question of the relationship between the Party and myself I think it has probably never been closer than it is now.

WENDT: Mr Hawke, you wouldn't be human would you if you didn't react to something like the 'old jellyback' line?

PM: It worries me not at all. I can assure you I lost not a moment's sleep about it. I'm the one who knows myself. I know the tough decisions I've had to take, I know the arses I've had to kick, the ears I've had to belt. But you see I don't do those things in a dramatic public way. I go about the business of running this Government by first of all indicating to my Ministers that I have confidence in them. I am not an interfering Prime Minister. In the more than seven years now of this Government in that Cabinet, in the end - not that it comes to this sort of thing normally - but in the end if there's a question and the Prime Minister says this is what's going to happen, that's what always happens.

WENDT: Mr Hawke, I'd like to move on to something very different. The events that took place in Beijing twelve months ago -

PM: Yes.

WENDT: - are now the subject of intense debate. In fact there is a point of view that there never was a massacre in Tiananmen Square, for instance.

PM: That's nonsense. I know there's a view, but it's a nonsense view.

WENDT: Why do you say that?

PM: Because, let me say this, I have access to intelligence and information as well as the public information which simply doesn't sustain that.

WENDT: There's also an echo of those events in our own country obviously with thousands of Chinese -

PM: Yes.

WENDT: - students here -

PM: Yes.

WENDT: - seeking refugee status. What are you inclined to do with that problem?

PM: There'll be an announcement about that very soon. In fact just yesterday I was having lengthy discussions with Mr Hand about this.

WENDT: Your current immigration program allows for something like 12,000 refugee places in this country. Are you prepared to stretch that for those people?

PM: I think that we've got to have a, a separate category for these people. I mean, this is a situation which is unique and we will deal with it on those terms.

WENDT: I understand there's something like 8,000 applications for refugee status. If your quota is 12,000, there is going to be a blowout there, isn't there, albeit in a special category?

PM: I'm saying there'll be, there'll be a separate category. I don't think anyone's going to argue that - you see we've got more than 20,000, more than 20,000, who are here who were pre-Tiananmen Square. Now for, for those in particular, we have to have a special approach and, of course, in regard to those who came post-Tiananmen, we'll make the cut off point there of probably about the 20th of June last year.

WENDT: We woke up this morning to read that we're asking the Cambodian Government to take back some of the Cambodian boat people who came to our shores. Why are we doing that?

PM: For the obvious reason. I mean, we have ... a compassionate humanitarian policy which will stand comparison with any other country in the world. But we're not here with an open door policy saying anyone who wants to come to Australia can come. These people are not political refugees.

WENDT: How can you be sure of that, Mr Hawke?

PM: Simply there is not a regime now in Cambodia which is exercising terror, political terror, upon its population.

WENDT: What do you make then of these hundreds of people -

PM: What we make -

WENDT: - who get on their tin boats and travel across ...

PM: What we make of it is that there is obviously a combination of economic refugeeism, if you like. People saying they don't like a particular regime or they don't like their economic circumstances, therefore they're going to up, pull up stumps, get in a boat and lob in Australia. Well that's not on.

WENDT: And risk their lives to do it?

PM: Well, risk their lives is not, I mean, we have an orderly migration program. We're not going to allow people just to jump that queue by saying we'll jump into a boat, here we are, bugger the people who've been around the world. We have a ratio of more than 10 to 1 of people who want to come to this country compared to the numbers that we take in.

WENDT: And you personally have no qualms about that?

PM: Not only no qualms about it, but I will be forceful in ensuring that that is what's followed?

WENDT: Mr Hawke, the 20 percent foreign ownership limits on Australian television networks, do you accept that your Government's decision on that led directly to the re-entry of Kerry Packer into the television game, if you like?

PM: No. I do accept that it probably made it easier but, if you like, we were in a dilemma then if you're going to look at it in terms of the judgement that people made about who you helped. If we'd gone another way we would have been Bond's mate. This way I was Packer's mate. The fact is that we didn't make the decision in terms of Packer's mate or Bond's mate, but being the peoples' mate if I can put it that way. You had to make

a decision which, in the end, you thought was the best for Australia.

WENDT: Do you worry about the fact that your move may now restrict competition in the Australian television market to the extent that we today hear that the Seven and Ten Networks may become one?

PM: Well, again, you see, there's a speculation that there might be a swallowing of Seven by Ten and it's totally hypothetical and I wouldn't believe it would happen.

WENDT: Would it disturb you, Prime Minister, if in fact that did occur?

PM: Well, you couldn't have a situation where one ownership entity could have two stations, as you appreciate. That wouldn't be allowed under the law. I think it is true to say that we have a good television system in this country and it's good for people like you - not that you have lots of potential employers - it's very good for the, for your bargaining position. I'd hate you to see a position, Jana, where you and all the good people who are performing on television would have a lesser number of people clamouring for your services and in the process, providing us with a smaller range of, of choice. I don't believe that will happen.

WENDT: Mr Hawke, thanks for your time.

PM: Thanks very much, Jana.

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