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PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH PHIL HURST, 2NR RADIO, GRAFTON
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HURST: This is really the first chance we've had to speak to you since your press conference last Friday and with events hotting up in the Middle East and Saddam Hussein's shock peace stir with Iran. How concerned are you at developments occurring there now?

PM: From the very first moment of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait I have been acutely aware of the dangers and the potential for a very serious conflict, Phil. I have consulted not only with Ministers and then had my decision endorsed by Cabinet, but we've consulted widely on this issue. While I have said, Phil, that this is the most serious decision I have had to take as Prime Minister, paradoxically in the end it was a very easy decision because the issues were very straightforward. What I want to see happen, of course, is the continuation of discussion between like-minded nations to bring about a situation where Saddam Hussein will realise that in the interests of his own people, let alone any other moral considerations, that the best thing to do, the only thing to do is to withdraw from Kuwait. If he has some issues with Kuwait, whether it be in regard to disputed territory or oil, then we're not denying the right of Iraq to have discussions and mediation on those issues. But for me and for my Government, and I believe for the overwhelming majority of Australian people, Phil, it is simply not acceptable that naked aggression should be unleashed by one country against a small neighbour and that they should then proceed to annex that territory into their own. If the world stands by and allows that to happen we are inviting a repetition of the disasters of the 1930s.

HURST: Mr Hawke there's been a lot of concern expressed in talk shows across Australia, certainly on this program and I understand Gough Whitlam has expressed now concern, that Australia leapt into the fray too quickly on the heels of President Bush rather than waiting to take a stand perhaps suggested by the United Nations.

PM: Well this of course is incorrect. We didn't leap in. It wasn't a question of me getting a phone call from George Bush on Friday morning and saying here we go. This matter had been raised a week earlier within the United States. We had seriously discussed it, looked at all the implications. We, of course, had given immediate support to the decision of the United Nations Security Council to impose

comprehensive sanctions upon Iraq. I received a direct personal communication, by letter, from the Amir of Kuwait requesting assistance and I know, and the best advice I have from our legal resources and from our Department of Foreign Affairs, those with the competence in this area, is that we have legal sanction for our action under Section 51 of the United Nations Charter which contemplates collective security action in the situation where there is a request from a member state. Having said that Phil, we have made it clear that we would like to see a situation where the United Nations moved to make a decision under Section 42 but we were not prepared, knowing that we had legal sanction for doing what we did, we were not prepared to wait for the drawn out processes that might be involved in getting such a decision. Because you can't sit by and see a small state gobbled up then another state threatened and saying oh well we'll sit by and wait and see what might happen. We weren't going to allow apprehension to become reality, to see Kuwait gone, to see Saudi Arabia gone.

HURST: There seems to be a lot of confusion about just how active a role Australia will take, for instance, Senator Evans suggesting Australia wouldn't physically interdict any ships, but would in the instance of Australia making surveillance of a ship then get the Americans to go in and do the action.

PM: I am glad you asked this question Phil and I want to take this opportunity of making quite clear to your listeners and through them to the rest of Australia precisely what the situation is. I know there is some quite muddled commentary in some quarters which says we've sent off our ships without knowing precisely what they'll be doing. Let me make it quite clear as Senator Evans very articulately has already done. At this stage what has been determined as being the role of the Australian ships is four categories of action: identification, we will see that what the ship is and then when there is identification you have contact and then interrogation and warning. Now those are important processes and I can say to you that they have been identified by the United States as constituting a very useful role. See there are really three sorts of types of action which you contemplate. Just being there and sailing around in circles, as it has been put, bristling, just here we are look at us. The second is the role I have just talked about. The third and the most active is the interdiction role that you've been talking about. The other is a need for the second role, the one that we are talking about. Let me make the point that this, firstly, that as I say that has been regarded and has been indicated to us by the United States as constituting a very useful role for our much smaller force in relation to the more massive power of others that's there. The second point I make is this, Phil, that we have some 19 days now between the time of our vessels leaving where they are now, they are on their way to Fremantle and getting to the Gulf region. Now there'll be a lot of time between now and then for further consultation and the Cabinet has made it clear that if in the light of

changing circumstances and further consultation which go to the question of ensuring effectiveness of our forces, if it becomes clear that it is desirable to enhance this specific role which I have identified now then we will be prepared to consider that. And Cabinet has made the decision that if there is a perception of the need to heighten the role then Cabinet will consider that and then be prepared to see whether such a decision is required. In other words, and I don't apologise for the length of the answer because it is a very important question you've raised. In other words, the decision that has been taken is the eminently sensible decision, well thought through, appropriate, regarded as such by the United States which has the major force in the area and is capable of change if circumstances necessitate that change.

HURST: Mr Hawke, on another issue, a budget being handed down next Tuesday night. There are rumours coming out of Canberra that it is going to be a tough one particularly with rumoured cuts in pharmaceutical benefit schemes for pensioners. Have you got any comment on that?

PM: Phil, this is now my eighth year as Prime Minister and I can say that nothing is new in the sense that in every previous occasion I have seen the rumour mills running hot and all sorts of things being suggested that will be done. Now quite clearly, Phil, you know that I can't disclose, and will not disclose what will be in the Budget. But let me say these things. There will be some decisions that will be relatively tough but they will be fair decisions. I have not spent all my life so far, most of it in public life, and with a commitment to the future of this country to avoid taking decisions which I and my colleagues believe are necessary and are proper and in the best interests of this country. If as Prime Minister I had avoided decisions because there would be some suggestion of criticism then we would have done nothing. Certainly for instance we wouldn't have brought in the assets test. Now remember the nationwide campaign of villification against me and my Government when that was brought in. This was going to be the end of civilisation as we knew it. If we'd listened to that we would have done nothing. But now it is accepted across the board as a sensible and fair and proper decision. The Budget will be tough in some respects but it will be fair. But above all it will be appropriate to the overall challenging task which we have got as a nation and that is to make sure that we create a competitive economy which is going to put us in the position to do the things that we need to do to look after those most in need in the community.

HURST: The Libs, or the Opposition, seems to have started a march on Labor by going for full privatisation of Telecom. The Government seems to have a confused position now with a paper put out by Kim Beazley, a document revealed by him -

PM: Not revealed by him, to be fair, I am sorry to interrupt Phil but, it's certainly a proposed submission of the Minister. But he didn't reveal it.

HURST: Well, there are two separate positions, Mr Beazley's and Mr Keating's. I mean, which position do you favour?

PM: Before coming to the specific question let me say this quite straightforwardly that not only within the Labor Party but within the community generally there is legitimate room for differences of opinion as to what is the ideal course of action to make our telecommunications industry as efficient and as competitive as possible. It is true I don't seek, because it would be stupid and dishonest to try and do so, I don't seek to deny that there have been differences of emphasis between some of the Ministers and particularly between Mr Beazley and the Treasurer, Paul Keating. There have been differences of emphasis. What I'm doing, as is my responsibility as Prime Minister, is to have discussions with both the Ministers and between the Ministers and I feel confident that by the time the Government in Cabinet comes to make a decision on this and to make clear not merely to my Party but to the community what the appropriate course of action is, that we will have an agreed position. This is not something to be ashamed of or frightened of that there are differences of opinion, arguments. Because when you're dealing with a critically important issue like this it would be absurd to believe that there is some revealed wisdom and only one revealed wisdom to which everyone would accede.

HURST: But this seems potentially one of the most divisive issues in Labor's eight year rule. I mean we're talking about backbenchers, Party members and union members opposed to it very decisively.

PM: There are some who in my view take a quite unacceptable position and that is that there should be no change at all. I regard that as antideluvian. As I said last night at this great meeting we had here in Grafton, I said to the people there, and it's a message I will be giving to all Australians. We live at a time of the most dramatic and rapid change in the whole of recorded human history and for a people to make the assumption that the practices and attitude of the past are sufficient for this new and challenging future is a derogation of duty. We must not be afraid of change. We must ask ourselves what is the best form of change? And once you get yourself into that mode of thinking, then it is true that people can have legitimate differences about what's the best form of change but change there must be and change there will be.

HURST: Mr Hawke you said last night Labor can and has matched the need for growth with a responsible approach and a sustainable economy, yet four major conservation groups say in a joint submission published today that Labor has allowed green issues to fall off the political agenda since the March election.

PM: They are wrong. A simple statement. Wrong. And they could not be more abundantly wrong. Because they seem to equate noise and statements with action. Now that may be the credo of some within the environmental movement but it's a wrong assumption. Because in the period since the election my responsible Ministers, which includes Mrs Kelly who has a direct environmental responsibility, but others including John Kerin, we have been very much involved in developing the processes for a proper consideration of these issues. Just let me make these points which I think are relevant. Again I alluded briefly to them last night. There must not be the mistake made, in this country or elsewhere for that matter, that the responsible approach is to say it's either development or the environment. The challenge for Government is to make sure that you get an appropriate balance between growth considerations and the responsibility we have to future generations. Now to do that - that's a very simple thing to say - but what we have been doing in the period both before and very much since the election is to give effect to the commitment I made that we would establish processes, effective processes to enable that balance to be best achieved. The first step they'd taken, which was of course before the election, was the establishment of the Resource Assessment Commission under the chairmanship of Mr Justice Stewart. And that will enable the environmental movement and industry, State governments, people with a concern, to go before the Resource Assessment Commission on specific issues and argue the case. Now in addition to that, what I promised before the election and what we have been doing since the election is to establish processes to give effect to the concept of sustainable development. By that, we've put out a paper which fleshes out the concept of sustainable development and we're going to apply that within different sectors so that we will have representatives of industry and of the environmental movement and trade unions. They will be sitting there working together under independent chairpersons to examine how the concept of sustainable development should be applied in different sectors of our industry. Since the election we've been working assiduously on establishing those processes. Now that's not dramatic. It doesn't involve the Prime Minister getting up and shouting from rooftops. To say because the Prime Minister hasn't been shouting from rooftops we've given these issues away is absurdly wrong and, if I may say so with respect to my friends in the environmental movement, a very irresponsible statement.

HURST: Well finally Mr Hawke, Labor's victory in Richmond at least depended significantly on a swag of votes for Independent Helen Caldicott and issues arising out of the ICAC inquiry among others. Can Labor stand on its own two feet in one of Australia's fastest-growing regions?

PM: We can certainly stand on our own two feet. Let me make this point however Phil, that if you look at politics in Australia and in the rest of the world, we have to acknowledge the fact, and it's not a fact of which I'm

frightened, but the nature of politics has changed in this last decade. One of the significant elements in change has been the emergence of environmental issues. That is true in Australia, it's true in Europe, the United States, and the established parties, including my own, have to understand that fact and recognise there may not be the same cemented realities of the past where the two major parties just gobbled up all the votes between them. Now as far as I'm concerned, I believe that we have one of the most environmentally responsible governments in the world, but it's also one which has had twice the rate of employment growth of the rest of the industrialised world. I will stand on both the record of achievement but also on the principles that we adopt. I'm more than happy to continue to go to the Australian people and particularly those who have a legitimate concern with the environment and say look at our record, look at our principles, look at our processes. I would like to get their first preference vote. If I can't get that, I am convinced that on the basis of both record, principle and processes, that we deserve their second vote. And if it's the second vote we get, so be it.

HURST: Mr Hawke, thanks very much for your time this morning.

PM: It's been my pleasure Phil. Thank you very much.

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