



PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, PAUL KEATING,
INTERVIEW WITH JANA WENDT (A CURRENT AFFAIR) 20 JAN 1991

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JW: One month ago Paul Keating snatched from Bob Hawke the job he had always wanted, Prime Minister of Australia. But for the 1 million people who can't find work because of the recession Keating engineered it was an ironic achievement. The man they loved to hate promised to always tell Australians the truth and do his best to boost employment. But in his first opinion poll, Paul Keating got the thumbs down with only 25 per cent of voters approving of his leadership. The worst honeymoon ever for an incoming Prime Minister. I spoke to Paul Keating as he settled into his new home at the Lodge in Canberra.

JW: Mr Keating thank you very much for joining us.

PM: It is a pleasure Jana.

JW: The phrase 'Prime Minister Keating' still comes with difficulty from my lips, have you come to grips with the title?

PM: No, not really I don't think, no. But titles never mattered really, its the task which come with them. So you really don't listen to the titles.

JW: The night you won the Caucus vote, you looked if not overwhelmed then certainly humbled by what had happened to you.

PM: Yes, I felt humbled about it I must say. I think that it is a very big issue of trust any party puts in as leader.

JW: But in the lead up to that Caucus vote, whatever else background to it all was, you must have said "soon, soon this will be mine". When it finally happened what went through your mind?

- PM: Well it was a bit of an anti-climax I think. It's the truth, I mean when it finally happened it was a bit of an anti-climax because it had been on my mind for a number of years and I thought it was coming my way anyway by virtue of the arrangements I had made with Bob earlier.
- JW: You were privy to a deal, a private deal in the past, which was withheld from the rest of us, can you say now honestly, that there are no private deals in operation?
- PM: Oh yes, no private deals anywhere I am happy to say.
- JW: Anywhere at all?
- PM: Well, certainly not about positions and leadership and all those sorts of things, no.
- JW: What about then, if not about those?
- PM: Well, I have lost my faith in them, if nothing else.
- JW: Because you were duded on the first one.
- PM: Exactly.
- JW: Since you became Prime Minister it seems that your style has been noticeably subdued. Is there a reason for that?
- PM: Well, I used to carry a lot of the fight in the House of Representatives and what people always assumed was my style was the evening T.V. news and the segments out of the Parliamentary Question Time.
- JW: But the bits where you call the Opposition "mangy maggots", I mean are they the things that you are proud of now.
- PM: But I only said that once in 22 years.
- JW: But it was memorable wasn't it?
- PM: I know these things you can never, they never drop away but I did say it once in 22 years. Well it depends what they were up to at the time. They weren't always on their best behaviour. But I ...
- JW: And neither were you?
- PM: Well, I've often not been on my best behaviour.
- JW: But you are telling me that there is no degree of relish in what you do there, in what you did there?
- PM: No, I did not relish it, no. When I was younger I used to, when I was in the '70s I used to regard it as sport.

- JW: Do you think that it's true that people perhaps Australians particularly, spot a phony a mile off?
- PM: Absolutely, in a fog 3 miles off.
- JW: So, would you agree that refashioning yourself, restyling yourself could be dangerous in terms of the Australian public?
- PM: But I will not restyle myself or refashion myself - that's the point. I mean I don't think one should be into cosmetic packaging of oneself. I just think it is terribly phony and useless. So I will be as I am.
- JW: I mention this whole issue of remaking because in some people's eyes during that six months on the backbench, you were prepared to refashion yourself, even sell yourself to people who could help you to the top job. How do you respond to that?
- PM: Oh a little bit, but you do have to say to yourself, are there segments of the Labor movement or segments of the society I have passed over a bit, and should I be listening a bit more to them?
- JW: Like members of the extreme industrial Left in Victoria?
- PM: Well, I always had the Left with me, the industrial Left by and large in the 8 years I was Treasurer. I had a lot of loyalty from the Industrial Left.
- JW: But we saw you during that period sidling up to Wally Curren for instance, one of the most hardline members of the industrial Left, a war-horse if you like, comfortable with that?
- PM: Well I think that I can only take him as I found him and that was ...
- JW: But you had known about him. For years you knew his speed didn't you?
- PM: Yes but his speed ... he has been faithful to the people he has represented.
- JW: Sure, but let me put it to you that in the past you would not have helped Wally Curren out of a fire if you fell over him.
- PM: Oh no that's not true, it is just that he never particularly came my way.
- JW: But are you telling me that I am making an illegitimate point?

- PM: Well semi-illegitimate. To put it nicely and kindly, semi-illegitimate.
- JW: It's not meant to be nice and kind it really in some terms it was seen that you failed a significant test of your political morality.
- PM: Oh no I don't think, I rejected it entirely. I mean it's not a test of my political knowledge for me to be talking to trade unions on the Left. I did it all my life.
- JW: What promises did you make to the Left in return for their delivery of their votes?
- PM: No promises at all because I never got any votes from them, other than the people who wanted to vote for me.
- JW: Well did you promise anyone from the Left that Brian Howe would retain his position despite the fact that he'd bungled his attack on the Opposition's GST?
- PM: No.
- JW: Did you promise to abolish his Medicare co-payment fee?
- PM: I said I would examine it, but I did not promise the Left that.
- JW: Well they say you did.
- PM: Well I don't think so. No, there were other people who had spoken to me about it, like from the Centre Left.
- JW: ... to whom you promised?
- PM: Rosemary Crowley and people like that, but not a Victorian Left if you know what I mean. Basically, let's make this very simple, the Victorian Left, the organisation from their cell delivered me no votes, not one.
- JW: On the night of your victory, you pledged honesty to the Australian people, can you honestly say that your supporters, your proxys, did not wage a debilitating campaign against Bob Hawke in those six months that you were in the backbench?
- PM: No. I think that after I was defeated in that ballot and I was up in my backbench room, Bob had lightly seen me off a lot. If he could have changed the Government's stance in the face of changing events, he'd still be Prime Minister. I am only back because basically the events overwhelmed them?
- JW: You are saying that Hawke failed as Prime Minister in that period?

- PM: Well I think, let me put it this way, that had he been doing his best for himself, it would have been to be more alert to what was happening in the economy in general and society and more dextrous than in fact I think in the end he was. I mean, in the end the GST, came along and it was the straw that broke the camels back.
- JW: So he was asleep on the job, is what you're saying?
- PM: Well it meant that while ever there wasn't the view, there was an effective counter to it, the Party was saying, should we go somewhere else, I mean that's what I am saying was the practical reasons why this changed not because of any campaign. Look, at one stage I called this thing right off for real. In a sense I was sort of brought back, and I was brought back because the view in the Party was that they were not going to make it.
- JW: Because of the weakness in the Government at the time?
- PM: Because of the Government's apparent failure to be as relevant as it should be.
- JW: Apparent and real in your view.
- PM: Real in my view, apparent outside. All I'm saying, if it was a show that had any real horsepower they would not have had to worry about me. I would of remained in room 101 up in the backbench. I was only sort of brought back because it had basically run out of puff.
- JW: Alright but there is still a perception, I wonder do you agree, that you ruthlessly killed, in a political sense, Labor's most successful Prime Minister.
- PM: No it is not true, it is just not true.
- JW: But obviously there is a whole lot of people who are listening to you now saying "come on, come on he instigated a campaign, he thrived on it, he encouraged it, now he's got the top job". There is a lot of bloodshed.
- PM: Not a lot of bloodshed that's the truth, I mean the truth of the matter not much bloodshed at all. From what we've seen, from what I've seen, 22 years, it was a relatively smooth change of power inside a party that knows all about power.
- JW: Here we are at the end of this struggle, however you describe it between two men, and we have a Prime Minister with a popularity rating of Billy McMahon in his bad days. Do you deserve the job?

- PM: Well, the incumbent was within a stroke of having the same popularity. But in the view I think of the Caucus not the capacity to turn the thing around.
- JW: So in terms of public opinion you are just about as unimpressive as each other?
- PM: Well, I don't think that either one of us would deny the fact that we were, have been governing Australia in difficult times, and the difficult times impact very, very, very much on the leader. It impacted on Bob and it impacted on me.
- JW: Bob Hawke said recently that part of the qualities of leadership or one of the qualities of leadership is to give Ministers free reign. That is not quite the way you see it?
- PM: Well I profoundly disagree with that, you see. This is where Bob and I have a totally different view. Bob's view was the essence of leadership, he said, was to let others lead, while I think the essence of leadership is for the leader to strike out and make the opinions, make the decisions, the directions and take the responsibility. I just think it is the antithesis of leadership to invite others to lead for you. It worked for Bob because others made it work and I just profoundly disagree with that view of leadership. It is a no risk view.
- JW: Given that's your view, tell me honestly how much respect you had for his alternative approach?
- PM: Well it worked for him.
- JW: Did it work for you?
- PM: It wouldn't have worked for me, I don't think. It wouldn't have worked for me but by any measure Bob was a good leader of the Party by any measure Bob was a good leader of the Labor Party.
- JW: Despite the fact that his view of leadership is diametrically opposed to you?
- PM: Well he was very lucky to inherit a very committed and I think conscientious and reasonably clever Cabinet, and, I think, that if it arrived at a different moment in time with a different Cabinet it would not have worked for 5 minutes.
- JW: There is little doubt I think that when you resigned from the Ministry that Bob Hawke's political effectiveness was undercut, diminished. Do you think that it's possible that you too are weakened now, that you don't have the support of the second member of that double act?

- PM: Well these things can't go on forever. We were an eight and half year old group or act, and events overhaul you. Really what was being asked of me that I should be Bob's Deputy, supporter, policy pal for a decade and a quarter, well that's just not a reasonable ask. In the end you have to say, "look fellas, I think you better get somebody else.
- JW: Yes but here you are now, Ginger without Fred.
- PM: No. It's very hard to make, I don't think the analogy sticks.
- JW: Why not?
- PM: Because Fred was at his best alone.
- JW: Are you Fred?
- PM: We'll see, we'll see. But I will be trying to be.
- JW: You're Prime Minister, your family has no official title, but in a sense they are drawn into the office. Is there anything about that that you regret?
- PM: I think that it was only my name on the ballot paper in then end and while it's a fact of life that families give some indication of how you live and what your relationships are and where your loyalties are and all the rest of it, by a large we are all assessed individually and that's as it should be. So I don't really think families should be part and parcel of the purse owner.
- JW: Except that your son today, I noticed, has a full page spread in a Sydney newspaper saying that he's a new pin-up.
- PM: He's not saying it though. I have told him you know that he should understand that he got sort of people on a desk looking after page 33 of the newspaper and they have got to put a bit of nonsense there to sort of fill up the space, and that he ought to distinguish between things of value and nonsense.
- JW: You said once that you did not owe the media all that much, you certainly did not owe them open heart surgery. Does that stand?
- PM: Well I like the media, and I think I have been given a fair go by the media. I am not a media basher.
- JW: What about the open heart surgery?
- PM: I think that they are entitled to certain things but beyond that they are not. You know I am sort of pretty private about those things, I think. Whether they let