



PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP
INTERVIEW WITH PAUL LYNEHAM, 7:30 REPORT, 13 MARCH 1992

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PL: Prime Minister, welcome again to the program.

PM: Thank you Paul.

PL: At your news conference this morning you talked directly to the Australian people and you linked race relations with the question of our national identity. What were you getting at there?

PM: Just that I don't think that we are going to be certain who we are and be able to describe ourselves as 'One Nation' until we come to terms with this problem of the relations between Aboriginal Australians and non-Aboriginal Australians.

PL: Why not? Surely white Australia has got a pretty good idea who and what it is.

PM: It hasn't got a good enough idea to understand that the indigenous people of this country still live in poverty, still lack opportunity, still feel aggrieved and that I think does permeate Australian society and unsettles it as it ought to.

P: But isn't it uncomfortable but true to say that Australia was in fact founded on the basis of racism? We snatched this land off the Aborigines, we raped them, we murdered them, we pushed them into the back blocks and we haven't given them much of a go ever since.

PM: I think there has been a conscientious view amongst Australians from the time, at least of the adoption of the Constitutional Amendment back in the late '60s, that there should be, at least the financial power of the Commonwealth, ought to be brought to bear upon this problem. I think what's happened since is we've seen a greater level of understanding by Australians about Aboriginal culture, about the problems of Aboriginal

life and a willingness on the part of the Australian community, in general, to try to solve it.

PL: Yes, but which part of the Australian community? I mean changing attitudes in Balmain or Carlton may be one thing, in a lot of the out back towns its quite a different thing isn't it?

PM: Probably that's true, but it's not as different as it was. I think we ought to use this opportunity again, this exercise as a turning point and just reflect upon what this must mean to the families of the people involved and to ponder if that were the position of anyone else's family.

PL: A turning point, you have also suggested that this was a critical time in Australian race relations. Why is now so critical?

PM: It comes at the end of this long Royal Commission, 3 or 4 years of Aboriginal deaths in custody. It is, I think an opportunity, probably the last opportunity in this decade to come to terms with this problem. That's why the Government is now working its way through these recommendations and will respond fulsomely to them. But again, it's as much in the mind as it is in Commonwealth Budgetary programs or program delivery. It has to be a willingness, I think, on the part of the country of non-Aboriginal Australians to come to terms with these problems, to give Aboriginal people opportunities to take away this kind of attitude which this incident has evoked.

PL: I heard that you said in Cabinet that this was a last chance to get it right this decade?

PM: I did and I think it is. I think it deserves careful and serious consideration and as well as that, consultation with the States because I think the States have got to be in this. A lot of the delivery of these programs are with States and State governments. While we will be responding to the law and justice issues of the recommendations of the Commission in the first instance, and they will be substantial, the underlying causes of the problem about lack of job opportunities, lack of fulfilment and the general living standards of Aboriginal people, is an opportunity I think which the second part of our response will provide.

PL: But if it's as much attitudes as money, what of the argument that despite all the fine words and the tears, Federal Labor has basically failed the Aboriginal people since 1983?

PM: We have dramatically increased funding to the area.

PL: There are still people without taps, without basic health services, all that money, all that rhetoric, all that drama and you still have to walk 100 yards to get cold water.

PM: Well this in some places is obviously true. But there has been progress made and part of that has been while we've been cutting the Commonwealth Budget back dramatically through the '80s. We dramatically increased funding to Aboriginal programs.

PL: We saw a hell of a lot of hair-brained schemes too didn't we in recent years?

PM: I don't think so.

PL: Properties failing, Aboriginal motels failing.

PM: No, what about the Community Development and Employment Program - CDEP - I think that has been a very good program, it's working, it's working well, we will probably expand it when we respond in the second part of our response. There has been, in terms of education opportunities, there has been I think a lot of successes in the 1980s.

PL: Still no treaty though or anything like it?

PM: No, but the reconciliation process is I think important. The work of that body will be both in attitudes and in program delivery, I think will be important. Again, ATSIC is now set up so that that distribution is made on the basis of the priorities of Aboriginal people and management by Aboriginal people. So I think there has been quite a lot of progress, but again not enough.

PL: Even the latest submission to Cabinet in response to the Deaths in Custody Royal Commission, can you honestly say that it contains this sort of creative vision with programs that really are going to stand a change of breaking through, of breaking the cycle?

PM: I think you will have to wait and see what the Government produces, Paul, and when it does it will have that creativity.

PL: But many Australians with the best will in the world think there has been a lot of money shovelled at this problem over the years with very disappointing results.

PM: Well, there has been in absolute terms a lot of money, but it is still less than \$5,000 per head of the Aboriginal population. I mean, it is not as many Australians imagine it to be. And therefore money is still rather thinly spread and has to be sensibly spent, and programs have to be well-designed and well-

delivered. Where we are guaranteeing, I'll guarantee you this - that at least in the response by the Government to the recommendations of the Royal Commission, the program design and delivery will be carefully thought over, carefully evaluated, and therefore our response, I hope and believe, will meet many of these problems.

PL: You talk about the need for attitudes to change, Prime Minister, what about the argument that it is about time the Aborigines took stock of themselves as well? Charlie Perkins says they should be doing a lot more to look after themselves in terms of personal health, skills, opening up more opportunities on their own behalf.

PM: Part of that comes with opportunity. It comes with being part of society, having ones own wealth level and the self esteem which comes from having that self provision, if you like. I think one thing feeds upon another, and obviously success in this area must improve the lot of Aboriginal Australians. So, as they become as individuals more self reliant, these things will occur, no doubt. But this is not generally true, there is not the private provision by Aborigines for themselves as, say, commercial operators and ventures, although this is true in some places. It is not widespread. And giving them the opportunity to do things in their own right, successfully, I think is going to be very important.

PL: But you said the other day you were a conservative family man. How would you like to be, say, walking with your kids through an outback town to find the local park full of drunken Aborigines, screaming abuse, smashing bottles? A lot of people who watch this program have rung up with those sorts of stories. Now, they've got as much right to tell us what's happening in their community as anyone else, and it's not a pleasant sight.

PM: No, but why are they like that? Because quite often they don't know who they are, that society has cast them off, it doesn't want to know them, doesn't want to employ them, they don't have a serious role in life.

PL: So they just spend the welfare checks down the pub?

PM: They just wonder who they are. So that's why I think it is important to get education there. On the basic things - education, health care, and the opportunity through employment, employment experience, and wider employment opportunities in enterprises which are run by Aborigines.

PL: But if we can still say this in '92 after Labor has been in power for nearly a decade, it does suggest that Labor hasn't grasped the nettle on this doesn't it?

- PM: This has been a long standing problem. We've tried to grasp it in terms of a monetary way, whether we've succeeded in grasping in an attitudinal or an effective way, I don't think we'd claim that. I think the Royal Commission recommendations make that pretty obvious, but what we will be doing is trying to meet those recommendations and to measure up to the expectations of the Aboriginal community in these respects.
- PL: How much of a racist do you reckon the average Aussie is these days?
- PM: There are many Australians that are not racist at all and racism I think is a diminishing thing in Australia. I think this is a tolerant country and racism in this country is I think less than other countries and there is a willingness I think in this country to get along, to understanding other peoples attitudes and problems and to have regard for their ethnic backgrounds.
- PL: Those who support the police in this situation, they say they're the ones that have to pick them up off the streets every Saturday night and fight them into the cells and have a very unpleasant time of it, that it's understandable perhaps that they should feel certain negative attitudes towards black people in some communities.
- PM: It's not understandable that somebody who died the way that David Gundy did or Lloyd Boney out of abject depression should be depicted in the cruel way that they were and in a way which must have brought tremendous sadness and grief to their families. I'm not sure many non-Aboriginal Australian families would like that done to them.
- PL: And should those two policemen still be in the police force do you think?
- PM: That's a matter for the NSW Government. The Minister for Aboriginal Affairs told me this morning that the Police Minister in NSW and the Commissioner of Police in NSW were taking action against the 2 officers concerned and they will make a judgement about it. But they also told Robert Tickner that NSW will be responding seriously to the Deaths in Custody Royal Commission.
- PL: And will the other States do you think?
- PM: I think so, I certainly will be engaging them on the problem.
- PL: Urgent and top level talks?
- PM: That was decided a week ago in Cabinet here, before this matter arose.

PL: And what if they say look, the Keating recession, you've been squeezing us, we haven't got the money for this?

PM: Well it's a matter of priorities. All Governments have got monies, it's a matter of where their priorities are and there can be, I think, no greater priority than coming to terms with this real problem for us.

PL: Prime Minister, thank you.

PM: Thank you Paul.

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