



PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP
PRESS CONFERENCE, CANBERRA, 18 MAY 1992

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PM: I am here to advise you that as Senator Richardson has said somewhat earlier this afternoon to you, that I have received his report and accepted his resignation. Naturally, I accept his resignation with regret, because as a Minister he has made quite a profound contribution to this country in all of the portfolios he has held, let alone his greater contribution to public life. The issues were about Senator Richardson, his Ministerial style and his relationship with Mr Symons and the state of his knowledge of Mr Symons' business affairs at the time he gave him references and introductions. His relationship with Mr Symons' was for Senator Richardson, I believe, an unfortunate one but not an improper one. I think the politics of the issues were such that there was going to be damage somewhere, that was either going to be to the Government's time and its standing, or to Senator Richardson's position. He took the admirable step of deciding the matter himself, by tendering his resignation to me. And in so doing, allows the public debate again to focus back to the main issues which will decide the future of the country, its economy, its society, and of course the next election. I will be pleased to take questions.

J: Mr Keating it was said on the news today that if he hadn't resigned you would have forced his resignation.

PM: Well the fact is, he did, he did resign. And I would have been required to consider the report, and its ramifications, including its political ramifications. As it turns out I didn't, I wasn't required to, I didn't need to. As I say,

Senator Richardson decided the matter himself in an admirable way.

J: ... Senator Sibraa.

PM: Well my judgement on Senator Sibraa was very much the same as the utterances to date from the Democrats. That was, that he was asked to do something, which he did, he didn't approach any foreign Governments he went through the channels of the Australian bureaucracy abroad, no further reference was made to him about the matter.

J: Prime Minister, Attachment 5, this memo, can you tell us anything more about that?

PM: No, just that it was uncovered in an investigation by the Departments at my request, and having discovered it I thought it was important that Senator Richardson know that it was in my possession, and given the fact that he was about to give me a report, to report upon it.

J: When did you discover it?

PM: On Friday afternoon.

J: And where was it discovered?

PM: The Department of Foreign Affairs, I understand.

J: Whereabouts? Was it the Washington Embassy?

PM: I don't know.

J: Prime Minister you'll need now to reshuffle the Cabinet, will you take the opportunity to make a wide ranging change?

PM: Well I haven't given that matter any thought, at all, at this stage.

J: What will happen to the package of broadcasting legislation the Senator was going to take to Cabinet on Wednesday?

PM: Well it will obviously have to be delayed.

J: When will that reshuffle be made, Mr Keating?

PM: Well I will have to think about it from now on, this evening and obviously in the course of the week.

J: Having seen Senator Richardson's report do you still accept that he did not mislead the Senate?

PM: Well I think that's in a sense academic. I am sure the Opposition would say he did. My view was that

he didn't, but it is about him and his Ministerial position in the Senate, a position he has now resigned.

- J: Mr Keating do you think you should have asked Senator Richardson questions earlier about this affair?
- PM: I asked him the question that mattered. That is I brought the matter to a head requiring him to produce a report to me when I first learned that Mr Symons had a scheme of arrangement with creditors. That is, the moment I knew that Senator Richardson may have given a reference to somebody who he may possibly have known was in this circumstance, I thought required me to ask of him that such a report be given. And that's when I did, when I found out.
- J: Prime Minister are you now convinced that Senator Richardson did not know anything about his cousin's business affairs?
- PM: Well as I say, I think that the relationship was, obviously Senator Richardson believed that with 20 years of background in this relationship he could with confidence provide a reference, it turns out to be confidence misplaced, but as I said I think the relationship has for him been an unfortunate one, but not an improper one.
- J: Mr Keating, have you ever met Mr Symons and has he ever asked you for any favours?
- PM: I met Mr Symons when he was at the Youth Council Labor Party, twenty odd years ago, I have not met him since. In fact, I couldn't recall his face until I saw an early picture of him in the Sydney Morning Herald.
- J: Not a bad scalp for John Hewson, is it?
- PM: Well the issue is, always the big issues, and Dr Hewson always talks about distractions and moving away from the main issues, but it suited the Opposition to engage in this issue as a distraction from the main issue. He now knows, as I know, that selling the Australian electorate on consumption tax adding 15 per cent to their goods and services is unpalatable, disruptive, and he will not like us returning to those issues.
- J: (inaudible)
- PM: Well that was what I was asked earlier and I gave an answer.
- J: Could you have continued to

- PM: Well, I mean, I would have considered the report now much more closely after having read it carefully this morning, its ramifications, including its political ramifications. In political terms this was always going to be a grey matter and as Senator Richardson himself said, impossible to be settled in black and white terms. And that would have been as much a matter for me as for him.
- J: Prime Minister can I just ask you two questions about Attachment 5. First of all given that it came from Foreign Affairs and that Gareth Evans had faced questioning in the Senate about Mr Symons' activities, particularly in relation to Washington, shouldn't he have known that Attachment 5 was residing within his department? And secondly, Senator Richardson says he was unaware that he had received this letter, it is unsigned and it seems to trail off in the middle. Are you convinced it is a bonafide document?
- PM: I can't comment on the status of the document and I don't want to be drawing judgement about the document because Mr Symons himself was in the invidious position of having to face charges about other documentation in another place.
- J: Would you like to see Senator Richardson returned to the front bench at some stage?
- PM: Well, Senator Richardson made his position clear, I think, to the public, to you today, by saying that he wouldn't be seeking a return to the front bench in this Parliament. That's all that matters I think.
- J: Senator Evans, Prime Minister, should he have known that this document was in the Department of Foreign Affairs?
- PM: We asked the Department to provide any reference whatsoever to any associations or dealings with Mr Symons. That turned up upon that extensive check. That's obviously taken some time and Senator Evans couldn't be aware of all these things from the moment the issue arose. I mean, the Senate has been up now well over a week.
- J: Wasn't Senator Evans cavalier initially though, Mr Keating, in telling the Senate that he wasn't prepared to investigate this issue?
- PM: I am not aware of every utterance Senator Evans made upon the subject, but in the initial phases of this I think his responses have been appropriate. And as time has gone on we have discovered these documents. But again, the process was there for the discovery: a) that Senator Richardson and the Government and I

set up the process, that he should report to me. And this is what has in fact brought these events to a head. And also it was upon my initiative that Departments were asked to go back through their files.

- J: Prime Minister you referred to Senator Richardsons' Ministerial style. Do you think it has always been an appropriate style?
- PM: Well, everyone has a style in public life. I suppose some people display more reserve, caution, guile perhaps, in their dealings with people, don't take them at face value as he has believed he can take a long-standing personal relationship at face value. They are very tough judgements. But I think it is important for Ministers to be always aware of relationships in relation to the kinds of issues which Mr Symons has raised with Senator Richardson.
- J: Do you regret being so strongly supportive of Senator Richardson in the initial phases and not asking him for a full report earlier in the controversy?
- PM: No, because in the House of Representatives the questions were about his call to the Marshall Islands which were about not going to the issue, but which were about him seeking for Mr Symons a right to prepare himself a trial.
- J: ... a meeting with Symons and Finch on the Marshall Island Scheme?
- PM: First let me deal with this ... and in that sense, and his inquiry to Senator Evans, and Senator Evans specifying the terms of his phone call I found to be no problem.
- J: Mr Keating, do you support the practice of Ministers giving letters of introduction to business friends or personal friends? Do you do so? And in the light of what's happened, if you do support it do you think maybe you might take a different attitude from now on?
- PM: All Members of Parliament, House of Representatives and Senate are all the time required to provide references to people. Now some people they know exceptionally well, others by association. And I think a reference of that variety always carries with it, at least the knowledge, certainly in this country I think, that people in public life are prevailed upon to provide references.
- J: Do you do it?

- PM: Yes, I do. Have done but not extensively, but I've done it.
- J: Is there a need for guidelines in this area?
- PM: I don't know, I think commonsense is the best guideline.
- J: Senator Richardson said you were surprised by his decision. Did you try and talk him out of it today?
- PM: He was fairly clear about his intentions. He arrived, he gave me the report, I read it. Upon the completion he said he intended to resign and he had the letter of resignation there, and we discussed the issues and later in the conversation I actually opened and read the letter itself.
- J: Do you see any prospect of Senator Richardson returning to a senior role in the Government sometime in the future?
- PM: It's not sensible or politic for any of us to contemplate our positions, unless in the course of each Parliament. The Government will be seeking its re-election at an election and then, and only then, after the public have supported the Government again in a poll is a question of any persons prerogatives within the Ministry or within the Caucus open of discussion. I don't think it's relevant and it's not open for discussion now, as I think Senator Richardson himself has indicated.
- J: What were your personal feelings about seeing a close colleague's demise?
- PM: As I said, I accepted his resignation with regret. Graham and I go back now to our youth, in reality, certainly to our early 20s and he has made a tremendous contribution. He will be remembered for his quite milestone performances in the environment portfolio in this country, for his substantial stewardship of the Department of Social Security. And, while less so for his work now because he's only in the course of doing it in his current portfolio, but across that period and, need I say, as a rank and file Senator and member of the Caucus, his involvement in many issues of substance, good things for Australia. Good things where he went through that Caucus with people raising with them issues to support the Government and the Cabinet on matters of substance which have certainly moved the debate along. He has been a very positive force for good Government, good policy, social change in Australia.
- J: Did Senator Richardson do anything wrong Mr Keating?

PM: Senator Richardson, as I said, decided the issue himself. He decided, as he said I think to you, that there would be a protracted debate about his role, that the Opposition were not prone to believe him saying that he provided this reference free of any knowledge that the person who he was providing the reference for was subject to a scheme of credit arrangements et cetera and that there would be a protracted debate, and that there would be damage to either himself and the Government or both. So in a sense he did decide the issue.

J: Mr Keating do you believe that this issue has done long term damage to the Government?

PM: I don't think so. I agree with his assessment of the damage. These issues have come and gone over the years. In the Fraser ministry, this was the fate of very many Ministers and yet that Government won successive elections.

J: Mr Keating would you expect pay TV to be considered now?

PM: I don't know, but obviously it will not be managed under the stewardship of Senator Richardson therefore which ever Minister is managing it will have to immerse themselves in the issue and be in a position to competently take the matter forward to Cabinet. That's obviously not now.

J: When will you plan to start considering replacements?

PM: Well I will from now on.

J: Prime Minister, are you disposed to keeping the reshuffle relatively minimal?

PM: Well I'll consider the issue myself for the moment. If you've got any tips Glenn (Milne), you can ring me down or leave them on a note and Mark (Ryan) will bring them into me, but in the meantime I'll just think about them myself. Thank you very much.

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