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PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP,
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J: Prime Minister, is it the case you wanted to join the Navy once?

PM: As I said, I walked into the wrong recruiting door and joined the ALP instead, which is probably a bit tougher I think.

J: Prime Minister, you told a businessman today to put his money on you in the next election. The Liberals have already got some campaign ads out and they're focusing on you, saying you're a good bet to help them win. What's your reaction to that?

PM: They can focus on me and that's where the money will be as well I hope. But we'll leave the Liberal Party to its own devices, I'm quite happy to proselytise on the issues that matter to Australia, getting it regionally set up well, set up properly in the region in which we live with the neighbours to whom we trade and the places where people have a genuine interest in us. That's what matters and not foresaking substance for the shadow.

J: Are you concerned, however, that they're using your comments that this is the recession we had to have?

PM: Who cares about them? I mean, you know.

J: Will the Labor Party be running negative ads?

PM: There's not an election campaign on. Let them spend their money now, good on them.

J: So it's still next year for the election, no election before Christmas?

PM: It will be whenever it suits the Government.

J: ... speaking about the American defence presence in the Pacific. Do you think there's any real danger they are going to pull them back any further? Does this worry you?

PM: No, I think that the notion of American withdrawal from Subic Bay in the Phillipines means an American withdrawal from the region is not correct. Americans themselves have made the point about forward projections from Honolulu, from the West Coast of the United States, from the deployment of its Seventh Fleet. All that's true I think. But what we want is a closer commercial and institutional engagement by the United States in the region. And that's what's important, and I think that that brings automatically a continuing strategic engagement in an area to a level that people are comfortable with. Because the United States has provided a terribly stable environment for this region, has given a composure to the region it wouldn't have had. So that's why institutions like APEC are important to involve the United States to make it confident about itself in things other than defence, and to be here as people want them here.

J: Prime Minister, you repeated the message this morning that you gave in Japan and that is you want Asian business people in particular to update their image of Australia. Do you think that message is getting through to business people here?

PM: I think so. I think the people to people contact and the obvious business growth that is already occurring and most particularly the growth in trade, the exports to Singapore and the region and the imports to Australia, people now understand that Australia is an open place, that Australia made the change in the '80s. It's saved itself in the '80s from being an economy that was basically unproductive and couldn't pay for its imports. It has now made that change, it's now got to consolidate the change and they want to be part of the consolidation. They think we're stable, that we're good-natured, that we do things cleverly and productively, and we do, so this is the natural place for us to be.

J: Prime Minister, are you going to be talking to any Khmer Rouge representatives here?

PM: I don't think so.

J: How concerned are you about the peace process in Cambodia?

PM: I think the time to ask me about that is probably this time tomorrow after I've had some chance to talk to people there. But it's obviously a concern to us, it's the one great chance for a peaceful settlement in Cambodia, and obviously the faster the Khmer Rouge come on board the process in an enthusiastic way the better it will be accomplished, the better off everyone in Cambodia will be.

J: Prime Minister, you are having talks later with Singapore Airlines, and earlier this week Ralph Willis announced that the Government would be helping to buy up more of the debt. You're obviously concerned about the sale price?

PM: These are all commercial matters. Qantas is a great franchise and it will command an important price. But we want good strategic partnerships because we don't want it simply being just a regional carrier, we want to see it have a greater potential. So choosing one's partner in this respect is going to be important. And while the great body of stock will be held by the Australian people, the strategic airline partnerships are going to be terribly important to Qantas' future. So Singapore Airlines is interested, it's an obvious suitor, if I could put it that way. And we'll see what its pitch is.

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