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PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP,
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J: Prime Minister, today was to be the day, is it to be today?

PM: One of you asked earlier if I've got any plans to see Mr Hayden today in Brisbane - no I haven't, I'm going to fly from here to Western Australia. So those events will take care of themselves.

J: There'll be no election this year?

PM: This is about the last day you could do it this year.

J: Why not go now, Prime Minister, the polls are getting better each day and each day there are new interest groups jumping all over the GST?

PM: The GST is a very ugly policy, there's no doubt about that, and I think that people now realise that what the Liberals marketed as a plan for Australia is not a plan at all - it's a second-grade tax switch which makes ordinary people pay the tax and the benefits go basically to higher income groups and to companies. And the other part of their policy, industrial relations, is basically to try to take away from people things which they've put together over a century without negotiation. So there's not much there for the public with the Liberal Party, and I think that's becoming apparent now. But all the same, that can always be better understood and I think that people are only just starting to understand about the GST, and the longer from our point of view the better, and the Parliament of course can run to just about the middle of next year.

J: The unemployment figure released at the end of last week is not part of your thoughts on that?

- PM: We've had 11 plus numbers earlier in the year and I think that people know that there is now employment growth but workforce growth is bigger - there are more people joining the workforce than there are new jobs being created, although we had 26,000 job growth last month, which was quite strong. It's going to take a while to get unemployment down but we can only do it by getting growth, and again I want to see the fiscal impact of the stimulatory spending we've done in the Budget and the One Nation package actually bear its fruit in the economy.
- J: Are you going to wait for unemployment to drop some?
- PM: No, it's not a matter of waiting, the Parliament runs out in the middle of next year anyway, so it's not waiting for the rest of us. But again, the longer the stimulus has to work the better.
- J: So you'll have more time to make the coalition hurt over GST?
- PM: I think the longer it goes people better understand the limitations. What have the Liberals got? They've got a second quality tax switch from income to expenditure with a lot of people getting hurt on the way through, and they've got a savage industrial relations policy which knock benefits off people. This is not the way Australia should go, it should go cooperatively, it should go with business and its workforce working together, as we're seeing now under these enterprise agreements right across the country. That's the way to go. The American people have just voted, 180 million of them, for the same sort of policy - a policy of inclusion, a policy of keeping a country together, not splitting it up and creating under-classes. So therefore, I think the more that becomes apparent the better for us.
- J: With the polls going your way and the eroding of that support group of Hewson and the Coalition, did you give today any thought at all for an election this year, and how seriously was it?
- PM: There's so much in the public debate that of course these things get thought about. But again, in this system the Prime Minister has the option of deciding the termination of the Parliament, and therefore it's something that one should in this job keep under notice. But my view is that the greater opportunity the economy is given to grow the better, and the longer people get a chance to size up the Liberal Party's, what I think are, inadequate policies the better for us.
- J: You've spoken to a cane growers' executive in Bundaberg this morning, any good news or announcements for the sugar industry?
- PM: I found it very interesting and there is always, again, the value of discussion and cooperation. Trying to govern by press release from Parliament House like the Liberal Party is now doing in Victoria, or Mr Howard and Dr Hewson would do in Canberra, is not the way to go. You do learn things by talking to people, you do get a better perspective. Now I'm much better informed about this industry and

what worries people than I was two hours ago. As you know, Brian Courtice is heading up a task force to report to the Government about the sugar industry. I didn't think that one could just receive that without having some feel of the industry myself. So I've been very grateful for the opportunity. For those cane-growers who have come along this morning, I've appreciated their point of view, and the fact that they've put it lucidly, and unemotionally, just put it in a very dispassionate way which I think is very useful.

J: Does that mean the Taskforce Report will get a favourable hearing?

PM: It means at least whenever Brian gives it to us, it's going to mean more, we'll be able to decipher a lot of the things in it that I'm sure otherwise would ~~simply go~~ straight over our shoulder. It's given me a feel of the industry, I've had associations with some rural industries and I've always kept a feel of the land and the countryside, rural industry, but this has given me a good opportunity with sugar.

J: Were you able to give them any indication on what you'll be doing in as far as tariffs go?

PM: No, because I think that should properly be left for consideration of the report by the Government. But there's no doubt that the industry does see tariffs as important, not just for deflecting imports but also in a defacto price support for sales in the domestic industry. At this stage it probably means more in that sense than the deflection of imports.

J: When can cane-growers expect some sort of decision on this matter?

PM: Brian is going to report quite soon, hopefully before Christmas.

J: So before the next election?

PM: Certainly.

J: Just one other matter, Prime Minister, any wedding wish or message for Tim Fischer today?

PM: I think Tim planned his wedding around what he thought were election dates. I wish him the best. I've met his fiancée and she's a very nice person. I hope they have a very happy marriage.

J: So I guess he can go away and enjoy his honeymoon then?

PM: Yes, I don't wish him well politically, but I do wish him well personally, he's a very nice chap.

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