

(2)



## **PRIME MINISTER**

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP  
PRESS CONFERENCE, PARLIAMENT HOUSE  
5 OCTOBER 1993**

### **E&OE PROOF COPY**

I will just make a short statement before taking a couple of questions. Today I placed the Opposition on notice in regard to their conduct during Question Time. Anyone watching the proceedings could be left in no doubt that the Opposition is engaging in a deliberate and wilful tactic of disruption. Ministers' answers could not be heard and the Speaker was placed in an impossible position. And while the Opposition treats the forms of Parliament with such utter disregard in Question Time and in the Senate the Government will respond emphatically.

The Government will not be bending to this deliberate assault, and that's why I cut short Question Time today.

As you know I believe that Question Time should allow for robust and vigorous exchanges, I have always approached Question Time in that way. I have been in Parliament long enough to know to, that on some occasions these exchanges go further than the public would approve, or even convention permits. But today's tactic constituted a deliberate tactic to disrupt the continuity of Ministers answers and where the Opposition felt like it simply to drown them out.

I hope this unusual action will focus attention on the Opposition's attitude to this Parliament, and in particular the behaviour in the Senate. There is a common link between their behaviour in the House of Representatives today and in the Senate, both of which are calculated to tear away at the Government's legitimacy.

The Government convincingly won the election just six months ago, the Opposition is behaving as though the Government is not legitimate, that it has a right to disrupt the House of Representatives and the Senate to curtail the House of Representatives capacity to do business until the end of October. All these things hold the parliamentary process and the political mandate of the Government in contempt.

I am happy to take questions from you.

J: ..will there be a Question Time tomorrow?

PM: Yes. But again, we've had the Opposition's Question Time tactics under notice now for some time. Now I noticed today the West Australian Speaker was in the Chamber apparently, and he cut Question Time off in Western Australia after four minutes last week, I am told. Now, the fact is we have a robust Question Time and nobody complains. But Ministers have got a right to give answers so that the continuity of their answers is maintained and that they can be heard. It is an awfully difficult thing to try and concentrate on a technical answer, often when there is a barrage of abuse coming your way. And that was happening today and it is not something that is going to be easily dealt with by a Speaker when the whole of the Opposition take this on as a tactic.

J: Prime Minister, aren't you rather falling for the Opposition's trick? I mean aren't you, you are accusing them of breaching convention, but here you are breaching convention as far as Question Time is concerned?

PM: No. Look, the convention is to treat the standing orders appropriately, there's where the convention lies, to let the process proceed appropriately and to not approach it disruptively. Now, as a Government our record on this is, I think, very clear. But again, Question Time is there for the information of honourable Members, it is not there for these disruptive tactics.

J: Haven't you contributed to the mood of Question Time today when the second question today went from 2.08 to 2.23? It was 15 minutes.

PM: We have an Opposition blocking the revenue measures, the major revenue measures of a Budget. This is a matter of high and legitimate comment, in the House of Representatives at Question Time, and I chose to make these points and also to quote in a very specific way, Sir Robert Menzies, on the same subject. Now, the Opposition were irked at me referring to one of their own, in such precise terms, about a very similar circumstance of a Government just having been re-elected with a majority, with a popular mandate, with a contemporaneously elected Parliament, and these things needed to be said. The promotion of problems here is the unprincipled tactic of the Opposition. As I said in the House, John Hewson will try and present himself in two and a half years time as the Leader of the Coalition and seek a majority to form a Government in the House of Representatives. But does he expect to be able to say, I expect any Government that I would lead to enjoy the passage of financial legislation in the Senate. Now, he is making it very clear that as far as he is concerned there are no rules any more about a States House, disruptive to the point of

refusing the passage of major budgetary measures, the financial legislation of the peoples' House, the House of Representatives.

J: .... the fact is that the Labor Party has blocked the financial Bills in the Senate, is that not right?

PM: I have had the Opposition and the Democrats stand up legislation I piloted through the Parliament as Treasurer time after time after time, on capital gains tax, on fringe benefits tax, on the abolition of entertainment as a deduction, one thing after another. And those things were dealt with in the spirit in a sense that one can never get complete unanimity of opinion from a Senate. But again, there is a line beyond which Oppositions don't go. In 1981 a measure of \$132 million was refused, \$132 million compared to \$3 billion. This is the refusal of major revenue measures of a Budget. So let's not for a second try and diminish what John Hewson is up to. He is in about standing the conventions of Australian public life on their head. He is into the conventions I said yesterday with a pick axe.

J: You, by walking out of Question Time, by closing Question Time and walking out, made your behaviour the issue, rather than the Oppositions.

PM: I don't think so. By what warped basis of observation would that be so? When the place was in mayhem on the Opposition side. Let me just tell you about conventions. The number of question days cancelled by the former Government in 1976, for six days, 1977, 7 days, 1978, 7 days, 1979, 5 days, 1980, 1 day, 1981, 4 days, 1982, 7 days. This is not our record. I have seen the Opposition come in, move censures of Labor Members, to through the night, suspend the following days Question Time and keep on going. I have been here long enough to see these things. I remember all these days when the Opposition, which I served in, was given no Question Time. This was not our intention, they had a Question Time today which they had connived in disrupting. And there is no point in Ministers seeking to try and give an answer with a barrage of hostile abuse coming our way. And if that is not apparent to you, I think you ought to sharpen your powers of observation.

J: (inaudible)

PM: Well, it is only recently, dare I have the temerity to say, that there is a bit of focus on the fact that the Opposition is seeking to refuse the passage of the Budget in the Senate. This has moment, doesn't it? It has moment, and the points I made today which Sir Robert Menzies made on that occasion in 1968 were, I thought, pretty much to the point.

J: (inaudible)

- PM: Well, again, Ministers have got to give the answers, they are the ones who have got to try and give the answers in the face of this barrage. And it may well be that when you are standing looking at this it is not quite like being there. That is, that trying to keep the structure of an answer in ones mind and deliver it while this hostility is coming your way is very difficult indeed.
- J: So is Speaker Martin failing to do his job properly?
- PM: He would have had to have dealt with the whole front bench, as it turns out, to have been able to do that. And of course, that was untenable for him. They made Question Time today untenable.
- J: Is Speaker Martin failing to do his job effectively?
- PM: No. The parties in the Parliament have got to comply with the conventions and decencies in place.
- J: You invited Speaker Martin to turn some of them out though?
- PM: Because I don't believe that someone should be able to walk up to take a point of order and then shout. Take a point of order which we know is frivolous and has no basis to it, the Leader of the National Party standing up getting the privilege of a point of order and then taking a political point. If that sort of tactic continues the way to deal with them is basically suspend them. But be that as it may, no one was suspended, but the Opposition decided that they would disrupt the place anyway. So, they made the Question period untenable.
- J: Would you put Question Time off again if they behaved in the same way?
- PM: Of course.
- J: Mr Keating, after the Budget when you refused to attend Dr Hewson's address in reply, the issue to many people in the community became the fact that you didn't go to his address in reply rather than what he actually had to say. Aren't you doing the same thing here, you are making ...
- PM: Listen, look, get orders of magnitude about you please. This is a man who connived in the passage of changes in the Senate so that the Chamber he actually occupies, the peoples house - the House of Representatives - cannot pass legislation after the end of October. In other words, he is party to the disruption of the smooth passage and work of the House of Representatives in the Senate. He has joined with Opposition and Green Senators to pass those procedural motions. You can't take the prerogatives of the House of Representatives, put

them asunder - that is, disenfranchise the place from doing its business - and then call upon the conventions and expect, in my case, the Prime Minister to turn up on time and obey all the conventions and at the other time receive another abusive reply.

You see, Dr Hewson broke the conventions in 1992 of giving an off-the-cuff abusive Budget reply. It didn't go to the issues, it was simply a political statement for which he got a lot of kudos in the media. It was probably on that occasion, at about that time, I decided that there was no way we would let him maintain himself as a viable Opposition leader.

Can I say I was not about turning up for a repeat of that. The Government's Budget was delivered analytically, courteously and to be standing there to take three quarters of an hour of public abuse from a person who has put asunder the imperatives of the House of Representatives and its prerogatives in motions of the previous week in the Senate was basically not to be encouraged.

- J: ... creating an impression that you can dish it out, but not take it?
- PM: Look, I don't think anyone in the great public out there of Australia thinks I can't dish it out and take it. This is nothing about taking it. This is about the right of people to have questions asked and to be heard, Ministers to be heard, and to be able to reply.
- J: Mr Keating, before trying to mount the case as you have been doing aggressively over the last few days, trying to draw attention to what the Opposition is doing in the Senate, aren't you just distracting people by your actions today?
- PM: No, because what was the action about? I mean what was the cacophony of noise about? It was the point of objection raised principally against me about the rights of the House of Representatives and the government that commands a majority in it to pass its financial legislation and not for a States House to refuse the passage. Just remember what is happening here. It is not a review, it is not a tinkering at the edge, it is the refusal of the passage of major budgetary measures. Dr Hewson has got to explain how he believes he can present himself again as a prospective Prime Minister and leader of the majority party in the House of Representatives while expecting, after having disrupted or sought to disrupt this Government's Budget, expecting the passage of a Coalition government's financial legislation. What you are seeing here is the tearing up of nearly a century old convention.
- J: ... part of it at least of what happened today is simply frustration on the part of the Opposition in having to listen to you abuse them for fifteen minutes.

PM: I didn't abuse them.

J: Are you saying that in the same circumstances, if the boot was on the other foot, that the Labor party wouldn't react the same way?

PM: I don't regard quoting from an article specifically written to the subject by Sir Robert Menzies as in any way abuse. I reject that term absolutely. They were not prepared to hear from the founder of their party such things as he said - a Senate Opposition whose party had been completely defeated at a general election would be in command of the government of the nation. This would be absurd as a denial of popular democracy. Inconvenient for John Hewson may be, but certainly I have got every right as the leader of the Government to defend not just the Budget, but the conventions.

J: And you don't think that if the Opposition were to quote Chifley at you for fifteen minutes, that you mightn't get a bit restive too?

PM: Look, we all quote who we like at each other in this period, but there is not case ... you can't make out any case, any respectable case for Opposition induced mayhem and that is what we saw today.

J: Mr Keating, what is the difference in principle between the Coalition's decision to try and block that 1.5 per cent of revenues this year and Labor's decision in 1981 to try and block about 1.4 per cent of revenues. What is the difference in principle between those two?

PM: The difference in principle is and I dispute your figures, the difference in principle is that at no stage did a Labor opposition seek to put asunder a governments budget. That is what is happening here.

J: ... (inaudible)

PM: Well, do I look under pressure. Even for a navel gazer like you I wouldn't of thought I looked under pressure.

J: Mr Willis said in Sydney this morning that the investment community was getting increasingly concerned about the Budget's passage through Parliament and the state of government generally. How do you think they will feel this afternoon?

PM: Who said this?

J: Mr Willis, this morning.

PM: He told me that he had a number of questions in New York about the passage of the Government's Budget - that people were worried about it, they saw it as something like a hiatus, something of the United

States variety. The very point Malcolm Fraser made last week. Look, there is a real debate here, there is a real decision being made by the Opposition spiting and smarting under the fact that they lost the last election to try and wreck the Government's Budget. You have got a number of conservative people on the conservative side of politics calling the tactic into question, saying it is unwise - primarily Malcolm Fraser, a former leader of seven years standing as Prime Minister; the leader of the National Farmers' Federation, a large rural conservative lobby; Senator Vanstone amongst others and more recently conservative commentators and a number of editorial writers. This is a real matter and the notion that it can not be debated in the House of Representatives without a cacophony of noise and abuse or for it to be debated is somehow illegitimate is of course, very strange indeed.

J: How would depriving them of Question Time force them to toe the line?

PM: It is not a matter of depriving them of Question Time, it is simply that there is no point in completing a Question Time with that kind of mayhem.

J: Well, what is an appropriate level ...

PM: What is the point of Question Time? It's to give answers and provide information and have debate. If in the end it is just disruption and noise, what is the point?

J: What is an appropriate level of noise for the future then?

PM: That which is not disruptive of the capacity of Question Time to fulfil that section of the standing orders.

J: ... decide it on the spur?

PM: No, no the Leader of the House and I discussed this in the past and discussed it again today.

J: Have you spoken to the Speaker?

PM: No, I haven't.

J: If Mr Martin can't control the House, should he be replaced as Speaker?

PM: You are making the point about not controlling the House. No Speaker can control the Parliament when one side of the Parliament is set upon such a course of disruption.

J: Do you think he should name Mr Fischer or Mr Tuckey ...

- PM: I believe that points of order which have no point to them and in the end are disruptive of continuity, if they are persisted with should be dealt with. I have made that position clear over the years
- J: But it is not actually up to you to run the House is it, it is up to the Speaker? If he can't control it ...
- PM: No, but it is up to me to say whether Ministers wish to battle the noise to try and get an answer out. In the end, after all, Question Time has to work.
- J: ... discuss this with Mr Beazley prior to Question Time today did you?
- PM: No, no at other times. Sometime ago and on the spur of the moment today.
- J: Have you told Steve Martin he has got to be tougher?
- PM: No, I haven't spoken to the Speaker. But no Speaker can reasonably deal with that kind of tactic - it is disruptive, but the disruption all comes from one place - a failure to accept the last election result, smarting over the result, an unwillingness to look at the cause of the Liberal and National Parties defeat and now wrecking and stalling tactics between the House and the Senate and of course, the putting asunder of the Government's Budget in the States House, at the hands of the Liberal and National Parties. That is at the root of the problem between the Houses and today's Question Time.

ends