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R E H A M E

E. & O.E.

DATE : 24TH FEBRUARY, 1994.

TRANSCRIPT OF BROADCAST ITEM :

3AW MARGARET FLETCHER 12.30PM 24TH
FEBRUARY, 1994.

INTERVIEW WITH PAUL KEATING, PRIME
MINISTER, WHO COMMENTS ON HIS MINISTER,
ROS KELLY'S, ALLEGED SPORTS RORTS AND
QUESTION TIME RESTRUCTURING :

MARGARET FLETCHER - PRESENTER:

But right now, as you probably just heard before, at fairly late notice so we couldn't give you too much warning, on the line is the Prime Minister of Australia, Paul Keating.

Prime Minister, welcome to you.

PAUL KEATING - PRIME MINISTER:

Hello Margaret. Nice to be here.

FLETCHER:

Well, it's nice to welcome you back to 3AW, 'cause you've been a bit quiet on the media in Melbourne. You haven't been on 3AW, I think, since the election?

KEATING:

Well, it's not exactly a Government cheer squad station,

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early morning. And so therefore, I don't necessarily patronise it but I'm hoping for a reasonable discussion with you, Margaret.

FLETCHER:

Are you saying my colleague in the morning is biased?

KEATING:

Well, I'd say that to say the least. Of course I do.

FLETCHER:

Isn't that more of a challenge? Don't you reckon that that's a really good time to come on a station?

KEATING:

It doesn't matter whether it's a challenge or a waste of time. I mean, I think that's what it's all about.

FLETCHER:

Is that that you can't take criticism though?

KEATING:

No, no ...

FLETCHER:

That could be said.

KEATING:

... no, it's just that there is a requirement on newscasters that they be impartial and open minded, so that when talking to a minister or head of government, at least you can elucidate issues. And I don't particularly want to

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waste my time arguing with people who've made their years ago.

FLETCHER:

Well, I suppose in fairness, that there are issues that have got to be taken up in a critical sense. I mean, if we could start on one, and that's the so-called sports rorts, Ros Kelly affair. And for the life of me, I'm intrigued as to why she's still there.

KEATING:

Well, do you know much about the issue? I mean, what's happened here is that there's a programme to provide grants to small sporting clubs. This is your amateur sporting clubs who can't put enough money together for a netball court or a basketball court, or refurbishing a green on a bowling club, or this sort of thing.

Now, what the Opposition are saying, they're saying we ca... we're not alleging fraud here, we're not alleging any corruption here. They've made that clear. They don't like the choices of Mrs Kelly, in respect of these particular grants. Now, what she's made clear is, that in Labor electorates, you're more likely to find an absence of these kind of facilities, and she's argued that case. But nobody's said, no one has argued, that this money hasn't been spent properly, because one of the criteria in this, Margaret, is that the money is first expended by the proponents and then reimbursed by the Commonwealth. So it's got to be spent first, before we actually pay it.

Now ... so the charge against Mrs Kelly is that the Liberal

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KEATING CONT/D:

Party doesn't like her choices. And they said, well, then on what basis did you choose it, and she said I've chosen it myself, as a minister.

FLETCHER:

On the white board.

KEATING:

Well, it doesn't matter how you do it. I mean, th... you see, because none of them ... as only now, John Howard and Andrew Peacock have held a ministerial job; the only ones who have held a ministerial job. There is ... there's no one held down a big job. They don't know what a minister's life is like. And a minister makes, you know, up to, you know, thirty, forty, some of the times, you know, decisions like that a day.

FLETCHER:

Yeah, but that's what you're paid for. In all fairness, that's the job.

KEATING:

Exactly. So that's what's she done.

FLETCHER:

But it's ... well, I mean, even the parliamentary ... the draft parliamentary inquiry results say that all their questioning - according to The Financial Review's (sic) - ministerial competence and damning her role is totally inadequate. I mean, I'm not suggesting fraud either, but you would know the perception is also something in politics, and she's perceived to be incompetent, to say the

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FLETCHER CONT/D:

least. I mean, we even broadcast from a white board on 3AW, at one stage. We just sort of ... it's so outrageous.

KEATING:

Well, the point is if you've got to make a decision as a minister ... see, this idea that a minister has recommendations from a department which says box A, tick if you agree; box B, tick if you don't agree; and box B, maybe, and the minister sits up there like some kind of dummy that just ticks one box or another, and if they don't have a piece of paper recommending that therefore they're not administering properly, no ... anyone who thinks that, knows nothing about the Government of the Commonwealth.

FLETCHER:

But it's thirty million dollars of my money.

KEATING:

Mmm

FLETCHER:

I mean, it's not exactly mine. I'd love to have thirty million.

KEATING:

... where has it gone? It's gone to sports facilities for the people I'm sure, you know, your're broadcasting to. That is, amateur sporting clubs ...

FLETCHER:

Yes. Look, I don't go against the philosophy, and

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FLETCHER CONT/D:

everybody's ... I mean pork barrelling has been part of politics forever. It's just the way that she's gone about it, and apparently making decisions on the run to up programmes. I also know of programmes that were ratcd in those categories that didn't get the money when she should (sic), but again I would get back to the fact that this is not going to away. I mean, the Opposition won't let it go. Isn't it better to cut your losses.

KEATING:

Oh well, it's case of ... so, in other words, if the Opposition keep asking questions, we have a minister resign. Now, what if they ask another minister a series of questions about some matter, and if gets past two weeks of questions, we say, well that minister better resign too.

I mean, I don't remember ... I mean, John Howard was up there yesterday with all the fury in the world, saying Mrs Kelly should resign. I don't remember him resigning when the McCabe Lanfranchi report came down in Victoria, about the criminal evasion of the tax system. He just sat there as if he were glued to the seat with araldyte.

So I mean, frankly, you've got to be around here a long time to see a big issue ... and that was the biggest ... the biggest scandal in public administration in the post-war years was the evasion of the bottom-of-the-harbour schemes in the 1980s. And you've got Mr Howard up here saying to Ros Kelly, who's handing money to a band hall, that she should resign and sh... he said this morning, and never come back for life. In other words, resign ...

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FLETCHER:

Yes. Well, I mean, some of the language is a smidge (sic) colourful.

KEATING:

... characters. I mean, you know. So, what you've got to do is separate out here a lot of the hyperbole from the value of the programmes. And wha...

FLETCHER:

The public perception still is, Prime Minister, that she is incompetent, that she has not done this in what we would see as a businesslike way. It's thirty million dollars. And I would have thought that it's damaging you and your party. I mean, I would have thought that there would be a lot of people in ... within the Government who would be very uneasy about Ros Kelly. It won't go away.

KEATING:

Well, it won't go away while the Opposition keep asking questions.

FLETCHER:

But they will keep asking them.

KEATING:

We've ourselves established a House of Representatives inquiry into this, and that will report next week. And that is the appropriate process.

Now, in your remarks a few moments ago, Margaret, you said that the draft report. Well, there's already been a breach of privilege matter raised about this report. A

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minister ... a report is not presented. You can't take any indication that what is notionally a draft recommendation from this report of findings, are in fact the report's findings at all. We'll know that next week. And we've had ... established a House of Representatives Committee look at that, and I'll take notice of, obviously, of those ... of that report.

FLETCHER:

But you see what I'm saying. It's obvious that the ... as you say, the Opposition's going to go on. Therefore, the issue won't go away. In a public sense, we're looking at this brawling going on, and I would have thought, in a political sense, it would be just as easy to chop.

KEATING:

Well okay, but let's ... you chop people when they have actually done something which is either ... there's always questions about magnitude; form and substance, magnitude. Now, if there was fraud here, if there was some obvious problem of that dimension, that becomes a v... you know, a much more obvious matter. But this is not the case here. See, nobody, even the opponents - Mrs Kelly's opponents - nobody alleging fraud here.

FLETCHER:

No. Well, I'm not either. But I tell you what, if I was incompetent, I'd be out of a job.

KEATING:

They don't like the choices. And therefore, I think the best thing to do is to wait until the committee reports and

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KEATING CONT/D:

see what it has to say.

FLETCHER:

Okay. Well, we'll move onto another subject perhaps, and that is question time this afternoon, and the changes in the rules there. Again, I would talk as a voter; and it really annoys me that you're rostering people and that question time has moved, and even the ABC's putting on the kid's programmes in front of question time.

KEATING:

... the ABC. That's nothing to do with me.

FLETCHER:

No, I know it's up to the ABC. But it's because of the time changes, etcetera. I mean, we don't ... I wonder about the accountability now. What chance have we, as a public, have to ... there a lot of people who listen to question time, or who watch question time. They won't have that opportunity, and nor will you be there very often.

KEATING:

I'll be there two days a week. I'll be there this afternoon, as I was on Monday afternoon.

FLETCHER:

But that's a ... it's such ... I mean question time is the one time when the Opposition gets a chance to question the government.

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KEATING:

And they now get a better chance, in a sense, because they'll have a smaller group of ministers each day ...

FLETCHER:

You're not seriously telling me this.

KEATING:

Yes, if you actually ...

FLETCHER:

(Laughs).

KEATING:

See ... well, you're ob... you may be a question time listener, but you're not a question time watcher, here. Now, let me tell you what's happened here over the years.

When I first came here, twenty-five years ago, an ordinary backbench member could ask a minister a matter about his or her electorate, and matters of substance. Now, all the questions are picked by the Opposition Whip, with the Leader of the Opposition, for maximum political effect. An ordinary backbench member gets no question and no chance to ask a question. And ninety per cent of the answers are given by three or four ministers.

So in other words, largely, the Government goes unscrutinised and, largely, backbench members can't raise electorate or other policy issues in their own right.

In other words, what's happened with question time, it's become a very stylised leader-to-leader, first two or three

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KEATING CONT/D:

on the front bench to first two or three on the front bench, on either side, contest. And therefore, I believe, it's not serving accountability well, it's not serving information well, and it's not serving the public debate well.

FLETCHER:

Well surely there are some rules and regulations that could be changed to improve question time, rather than take the main players out of it.

KEATING:

Well, I don't ... I mean ... see, to be accountable to ... for the Government to be accountable twice a week on each sitting week, is a lot of accountability, particularly when on ... every other day, ministers are present. So for four days a week ... and remember in this arrangement, we're giving the Opposition an extra sitting day each week - so, instead of three days and four days, it's four days and four days - and a second chamber for further debate, where we can elucidate things. That is, where people may wish to speak in committee stages on bills, can now go to a second chamber, where that time would be truncated in the House of Representatives.

The reform, overall ... I mean, if you were able to see the first half an hour of question time yesterday, I think you would have seen question time working well. For instance, on Monday ...

FLETCHER:

What, becau...

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KEATING:

Can I tell you this: I used to get one question a week from Dr Hewson, on average. One a week. I got seven from the c...g... from the Opposition on Monday ...

FLETCHER:

Mmm.

KEATING:

... and three from him.

FLETCHER:

And none yesterday.

Look, you know, I think that's stupidity on the Opposition's part, to be perfectly honest. They should, too, take that opportunity. But if you're not there, they can't anyway. I mean, with the sports rorts affair and Ros Kelly, she'll be there today and you will be ...

KEATING:

Mmm.

FLETCHER:

... but not yesterday. I mean, I would have thought that there was con...

KEATING:

But she was ... she was not there yesterday, but she was there the day before.

FLETCHER:

Yeah, but why ... I mean, we pay you to be there all the

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FLETCHER CONT/D:

time. I mean, we're asking an hour a day when the Parliament's sitting.

KEATING:

You pay me to manage the Government of the Commonwealth.

FLETCHER:

And to be answerable to us.

KEATING:

Well, but understand what the Government is. The Government is the business of the country. Accountability in Parliament - important - is another thing. It's a matter of how one exercises the opportunities of that accountability. The track record is I used to get one question a week from the leader of the Opposition over the last year. One a week. So now, I got more ... in fact, I got more questions on the first day, on Monday. And yesterday, for instance, Mr Beazley, who's Minister for Finance, was getting questioned about genuine Finance Department issues, which he would never have got in the old format.

So the f... the new format's working quite well. In fact, the Opposition's claiming yesterday, it's because Mrs Kelly was in there on Tuesday in the new format, that they were able to ask the question that they did.

FLETCHER:

I just think it's really not a lot to ask. I don't really understand what the problem you have is with an hour a

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FLETCHER CONT/D:

day, when the House is sitting.

KEATING:

Well, the problem is it's become a very stale format, which is basically ...

FLETCHER:

Well, change the format.

KEATING:

Well, we did. That's exactly what we did.

FLETCHER:

No. But I mean, you can make rules to make question time more productive.

KEATING:

No, not if in fact it's all head-to-head stuff between the two leaders and the first two or three members of the frontbench. You've got to have a break in the way the format runs.

I mean, after all, take the mother of parliaments in Britain; the Prime Minister goes to question time twice a week and ministers are asked questions at other times. It's exactly what we're doing here.

FLETCHER:

I just ... well, we'll agree to disagree. I just think it's one of the traditions that I actually found really rather precious in Parliament.

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KEATING:

It's become a stale tradition, and not an interesting one. And one where, what you're getting is basically a twenty-second clip on the fourth item of the commercial news services, which doesn't take most of us anywhere.

FLETCHER:

Well as I said, we'll agree to disagree, 'cause I know you're just out of time. I did say that at quarter to one, we would free up your time. But I just wanted to ask, on the Russian spies, could you tell me why we don't know what happened there? Why it's only now that we've found out?

KEATING:

This is with the US, you mean?

FLETCHER:

With the five Russians. No, it was the Russians being expelled from Australia.

KEATING:

Well, I'm not sure I can be as informative about this as you might like me to be. I think we might take that one on notice. Well, I mean, I can talk to you about that again.

FLETCHER:

Okay. Well, I thank you for your time, and I hope that you won't leave it as long next time that you'll come back on 3AW.

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KEATING:

No. Well, I'm ... look, I'm quite happy. Let me ... I've got no superstitions about 3AW. But it's got to be in the news and information business. It can't be in the political pamphleteering business.

FLETCHER:

But, you see, I had lots to talk to you about today, but we're out of time now.

KEATING:

You and I are not on the breakfast programme, or the mid-morning programme.

FLETCHER:

All right. Well, will you come back on my programme?

KEATING:

Well, I think I will.

FLETCHER:

Good. Well, that'd be lovely, Prime Minister. And I've got a number of things to talk to you about.

KEATING:

Righto Margaret.

FLETCHER:

Thank you. Thank you for your time.

That's the Prime Minister, Paul Keating. And the... having a bit of a slammo (sic) there at my colleagues here. I wouldn't ever accuse them of bias, competence

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FLETCHER CONT'D:

perhaps, which is really more than I can say, in a personal sense, than about Ros Kelly.

But nevertheless, the Prime Minister has said he'll come back on the programme. Next time, we might ask more things, like the jobs situation and the levy, etcetera. I didn't get a chance to ask him about the Opposition, but my undertaking was that we would have the Prime Minister for quarter of an hour, and therefore that's what we've done.

But nevertheless, hopefully the Prime Minister will be back on the programme very soon.

END OF SEGMENT

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