



**PRIME MINISTER**

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP  
INTERVIEW WITH JULIE FLYNN, RADIO 2UE  
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**JF:** Prime Minister, how do you intend to handle the sensitive human rights issues on this trip?

**PM:** Well, look, I think, more particularly, how do I want to handle the trip, I think, is the real issue. And that is, I see the visit, it is to Thailand, the second largest ASEAN economy, Laos and Vietnam within Indo-China. This is a part of the world where dramatic changes have been happening, particularly with the end of the Cold War not so long ago, we have seen the settlement in Cambodia, economic reforms in Laos and in Vietnam and dramatic growth in Thailand, and I am visiting the area, in a sense, to consolidate some of our interests there, to see at first hand what is happening there, and of course being there at the opening of this bridge which Australia has built and funded across the Mekong River, joining for the first time Thailand and Laos. So, it is part of the general development of our relationship with Asia, South-East Asia and the Asia-Pacific. And that is the key matter. Now, human rights will arise, discussions invariably do wherever there have been human rights violations in countries. We will be, I will be as forthright in putting our views about that .... as I was more recently in China.

**JF:** Don't we have a problem with our own standing in the region given that we have had boat people in detention here for up to three or four years?

**PM:** All the people in detention here have chosen to exercise their rights for further appeals under our court system. They have all been given the offer of being able to return to their countries and apply for permanent residence. They have not taken it up. There is no analogy here between human rights violations in this part of world, and Australia.

- JF: What do you see as the major benefits for Australia from the bridge itself?
- PM: Well, I think it shows that Australia's engaged with the area in a constructive way. That is, we have now seen great changes in Australia in the '80s. Australia has become an open modern trading economy, we are engaged with these countries, we are seeing many Australian companies invest in these countries. It is part of what is going to set Australia up in the 21st century, to provide jobs for Australians. The bridge, I think, is, in a sense, exemplifies Australia's interest and role in these countries, and I hope indicates to their Governments and their communities that we see them as not simply a commercial relationship, but a broader one where Australia can play a role, of course, as we did very tellingly in Cambodia.
- JF: Some of our Aid organisations have expressed concerns that the bridge will actually bring some negative things with it. I think one of them has referred to the fact that AIDS is spread along major transport lines and that not all necessarily the transport in and out of the region will be good. Is that a concern you share?
- PM: Well there is a concern there, but do I share the concern, no I don't. I think it is a pretty high handed attitude to take to say to a country like Laos which has got a per capita income of \$200 a year, \$4.00 a week to say that is ok you can stay on \$4.00 a week, providing our consciences are clear, and there is no complicating factors of any growth in your economy and society we, you know, some of middle class moralisers of Australia, will be happy and contented. I think these countries want to see themselves grow, they want to see their economies participate in the growth in the area, and how can they do that when they don't even have primary infrastructure. So, this is a piece of valuable primary infrastructure which both countries want, and which Australia has been happy to provide. Now, can I just say on this question of AIDS. Australia does run now a program between ourselves and Thailand about AIDS, education and management. But that is really not the issue, I think, here. The issue here is Australia's forthright sensible engagement with the area manifesting itself in this case in the building of some primary infrastructure funded by us and built by an Australian construction firm. That rounding further the engagement we had politically and socially with these countries.
- JF: Thailand and Laos have had a disagreement about who will manage the bridge. They seem to have come up with a resolution to that problem, do you think that will be a permanent solution?
- PM: I don't know, it is up to them to make decisions about these things. Thailand is somewhat taken for granted in Australia. This is the second largest ASEAN economy after Indonesia. It is growing very rapidly. Because we don't have any problems with it there is a bit of

view around Australia that we don't need to tend to the relationship. Well, I think we do. I think there are tremendous opportunities there, we have got many many companies operating there and the same opportunities I think are opening up in Vietnam and also in Laos. BHP, for instance, is in Vietnam, we have got many hundreds of companies now operating up there and I hope that some of the growth that exists in, say, Indonesia and particularly in Thailand through this bridge can sort of start to avail itself, or to be made available to these other economies in Indo-China; Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Australia's concern for these countries beyond simply the commercial relationship to the political, the civil, strategic, the .... I think stands us in good stead.

JF: You will be holding talks with the Thailand Government, what regional security issues do you expect to come to the fore, given that we are in a post Cold War era?

PM: Well I think we have seen a lot of developments in that area together. I mean the Cambodian settlement was something which I think has cheered people up in the region no end. They have shown us all what we can do together. The Post ASEAN Ministerial Council Meeting, which is a strategic meeting on defence and security issues is now attended by us, by the United States. So, we now have a regular dialogue on security issues with the region and I think these countries are interested in the broader security issues. That is, you know, what is the region going to look like into the future with the Cold War overlay removed, concern about the maintenance of the American military presence in the area. Australia playing, if you like, a larger role in foreign policy and also in defence cooperation terms. These are the sort of things that I think people will wish to discuss.

JF: Do you think that North Korea is a problem in this particular region?

PM: Well it is a problem. It is a problem, and we have been urging North Koreans to open themselves up to inspection by the IAEA, the International Atomic Energy Agency inspections, and to date, of course, this has been an on again off again matter with them. Largely this relationship is managed or North Korea's behaviour is examined by, obviously, South Korea and the United States. I hope that the North Koreans see the sense of putting their nuclear installations under international safe guards and abide with them.

JF: While you are away, of course, the Government will still be going ahead with Budget and Employment statement preparation, do you accept the Governor of the Reserve Bank concerns about the need to keep the budget deficit down?

PM: Well I think the Government is doing that, and we have been preaching this for years, I think. In the '80s Australia led the world in the fiscal consolidation which it introduced. It was because of that we

were able to expand the budget when we needed to in the recession. Something, for instance, that the United States couldn't do. Now is the time, I think, to pull the budget imbalance back, and the notion that the Government is basically going to be spending the proceeds of growth ... I mean, it will have that deficit heading down, as it should, as private investment picks up.

JF: Thank you very much

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