



# PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON PJ KEATING, MP  
INTERVIEW WITH GRAHAM DOBELL, RADIO AUSTRALIA  
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**GD:** Prime Minister, what will you be saying to the Indonesians about the closure of the three news magazines?

**PM:** Well, I'm not going there, principally, to talk about the closure of the three news magazines. I'm going to Indonesia as part of a visit to participate in the Australia Today trade forum - the largest international exhibition Australia has had. And, as this will be my third visit, to take the opportunity, in a fairly informal way, of going back over some of the progress we've made already in respect of our relationship and the progress we've made jointly in APEC and focusing on the fact that President Soeharto will be chairing the APEC Leaders' meeting later this year.

**GD:** What does the ban, though, do you think, say about the feelings at the top in Jakarta, about the pace of change that they're confronting?

**PM:** Well, I think, Indonesia is like many countries in the region; its in a state of constant change where there are many imperatives starting to impact on their country - the growth imperative and all that it brings with it for change - and diversity and plurality of opinion. I don't doubt that these are pressures which haven't been as evident in bygone days as they are now. For our part, Gareth Evans, as Foreign Minister, has made clear Australia's disappointment about the fact that these organs have been changed. But, again, from our point of view there are similar things... there is press control in China and we still deal and trade with China, there is fairly tight control of the press in Malaysia and we still deal and trade with Malaysia. And, I think, this relationship now has many legs to it and it does give us the opportunity, I think, to maintain a working relationship despite some of these things which are disappointments to us.

- GD: Does it symbolise though, some effort to put on the brakes? Is it a step back from the policy of openness that President Soeharto has been talking about?
- PM: Well, I think it may be that we will witness in many countries similar to Indonesia - such as Indonesia and similar to Indonesia - that there will be sort of, four steps forward and one back, and four forward and one back. I think we'll see a bit of this. But, there's also strong public opinion and reactions about this, about any crimp on information wherever it occurs, in most places, and I understand this to be the case in Indonesia as well.
- GD: One of the comments from Jakarta has been from the head of Indonesia's largest Muslim organisation, Abdul Rachman Mahid (sp?). He said he thought you, as a friend, should speak to the President on this. Do you have a duty, perhaps, as a friend, to speak to Soeharto on this?
- PM: Australia is not the international news and media plurality policeman. Now, there is a sort of view around that because we have a very free press we ought to be arguing for a press similar to ours wherever we go. Well, we are an open and plural country and that's part of our strength and we're also very forthright. But, I could make my next visit to China, the first item on the agenda, press freedom and plurality. Would this be the first agenda item, though, one should choose?
- GD: How close do you think Australia should be seeking to get to the Soeharto leadership and how will it be positioning itself for the leadership which will follow Soeharto? Do you draw that distinction?
- PM: No, because I think that what Australia has done is develop a relationship with the government of Indonesia in the broad, in the bureaucracy as well. So, it's a very wide relationship and now that's extending into the institutions and into industrial companies. And, the Australia-Indonesia Ministerial forum is an indication of that, minister to minister contacts. This was say, evidently true with Malaysia in the difficulties we had with Malaysia less than a year ago. On that occasion the relationship between Australian ministers and Malaysian ministers, I think, mattered. In the same way, though, I've developed, I think, a very competent working relationship with President Soeharto. I've also, I think, got a reasonable relationship with some Indonesian ministers and some of the ministers in this government have an even better relationship with them.
- GD: In terms of the trends you're talking about, though, must it be ultimately a commitment to Indonesia and not to the Soeharto leadership?
- PM: Well, it is. It is exactly that, it is a commitment to Indonesia - to what Indonesia is, what it has become, to the people of Indonesia. I mean,

that's the nature of the relationship, I think, Australia has. But, I don't think anyone should underestimate, though, the sense of peace and stability which President Soeharto's administration has brought to the archipelago and to the region.

GD: You said in March that no country mattered more to Australia than Indonesia, does that mean that your policy in Asia has to reflect to some extent what is happening in Indonesia, the pace of change in Indonesia?

PM: Well, I think there is a certain geographical and economic imperative in that, and particularly since the change in the end of the Cold War where we have seen a change in the bi-polarity of the world, where regional, a regional focus becomes more important. I almost think it's self-evident that Indonesia emerges as the most important relationship for Australia.

GD: How much of a veto power almost does that give Indonesia. Do we have to have Indonesia to get the sorts of things you want, for instance, in APEC?

PM: No. I don't think it gives them veto powers at all. But I think it means that we're stripping away some of the perceived difficulties in this relationship and going to the core basis of it, that is, is there a basis in the Indonesian/Australian relationship which is one where trust can be built in terms of Indonesia's view of Australia, and Australian interests, and vice versa. Is there a basis of mutual respect here? Is there a basis of going on to build something bigger? Now, I think the answer is in the affirmative in all three things.

GD: If this massive trade push that we're making into Indonesia, that you're going for, if that succeeds, how would Indonesians, do you think, think differently about Australia?

PM: Well, I think the relationship with Indonesia has changed enormously in the last few years. Indonesia is now much more open to Australia than it has probably ever been. It's institutions are more open. It's Government is more open. It's companies, it's business organisations are more open. And as that happens I think that the understanding about Australia, and respect for Australia, will improve. I mean, the ABC's international television agency, ATVI, is now a free-to-air provider of news and information in Indonesia and is now gathering, so I understand it, substantial support amongst the Indonesian elite, those who make policy and make investment decisions they find it an important source of news and information. So, we're injecting more of Australia, all the time, into Indonesia, and we're getting a response.

GD: However close that relationship can become, must it always be at some levels uncomfortable, perhaps symbolised most significantly by the fact that it's been twenty years now since President Soeharto

actually set foot in Australia. Is that a symbol of the problems that will continue?

PM: Well, I don't think so. There's a core question here, whether Indonesia has any strategic designs on Australia, and I don't think it has and the other question is do we on Indonesia? I don't think we have. We haven't. So therefore there is nothing but a basis for friendship here. There's no disputed territory, there's no shared borders, there's none of this sort of thing. So it brings us to a position where we say, well, this archipelago has been brought together as a nation, held together, it's growing, there's income re-distribution going on, there are good things happening here. How can we be involved in it, how can we support it, how can we make it better?

GD: But two countries that probably hard to think of two countries, two neighbours in the world that have less in common. How far can you go, in terms of achieving that comfort level?

PM: Well, as far as you can try, I think, I mean, one will never end up with perfection in any relationship, and we won't with this. But I think Australia should try and make it as good as we can. Just as we dutifully try, I think, ambitiously try, to do the same with other countries in the region.

GD: Thank you Prime Minister

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