



PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING MP
PRESS CONFERENCE, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA,
MONDAY, 11 JULY 1994**

E&OE PROOF COPY

PM: Well, we've had a real spectacle over the weekend, haven't we? Alexander Downer said he was going to take the fight up to the Government on the monarchy and before the bell goes for round one he is scurrying back to the seconds and throwing in the towel. And he says look, really, we don't really need this contest, both ideas are compatible, the Queen isn't really our head of state. To the monarchists he says look, I'll keep the Queen for you, tucked away, as long as you don't mind me labelling her quaint and irrelevant, and to the republicans he'll say, you don't really need a republic at all, our effective head of state is the Governor-General. It is not the Queen.

Now, can I just say that this is in contrast to a couple of things he said last month. He said the monarchy was a foundation stone of the Constitution - June 3, The Canberra Times - "...If you want to change to a republic you have to take away a foundation stone of our Constitution which is the monarchy." And, of course, over the weekend and under pressure, "Well, the monarchy doesn't matter at all - it's irrelevant," he says. He says the Governor-General is our effective head of state, so he is not simply just leaving us to borrow the monarchy of another country, but he wants to damn Australians to having as their head of state the deputy of a foreign monarch. In other words, the anachronism is good enough, we just keep on rolling along with the anachronism.

But, as I said this morning on radio, what this really reveals is how Alexander Downer would be under real pressure. Here he is on a debate on the republic and the monarchy, early in the piece, slipping and sliding around on the unarguable - that the Queen is our head of state. And you wonder on the big decisions in the economic and

social areas as the Government has conducted them in the past - the big buy down in fiscal policy in the 1980s, the removal of exchange control, the removal of tariffs, Mabo, the Uruguay Round. I mean, where would this sort of weakness and vacillation get us in terms of the prosecution of major national interests of Australians? As I said earlier today, Alexander Downer is a policy free zone. He is all words and no thoughts and no policies. And Mr Costello said, his deputy, after they were elected on 27 May, "In six weeks time we will be giving you a broad statement of principles and directions," and Mr Downer himself said "well, in a couple of months, I hope, a directional document which will make things quite clear." Well, they've been in office seven weeks and we haven't seen anything of the kind from either one of them.

So, the fact of the matter is ... and the other thing, of course, if you actually have an empirical argument with him where he says the Queen is not our head of state and I say well, I beg to differ - she is, she's central to our Constitution, he says I am personally abusing him and I am in the gutter. In other words, he will not even have a proper policy debate. If anyone crosses any of the policy lines ... I mean, he expects to go through life without being challenged on policy and once challenged says oh, this is shocking, I've been personally attacked by someone in the gutter.

So, what I say to Alexander Downer is, show us the colour of your polices and let us at least on this issue see you stand for something honest. If you believe in the monarchy, say so. You've said so, stand by it and understand what it means that you're saying to the Australian community that this generation and the next generation, that we will continue to borrow the monarch of another country and under a Coalition government the effective head of state of this country would be the deputy of a foreign monarch and that's good enough for Australians.

Now, that's where he stands. The Government stands four square against him on this and as I've said in the policy speech last year and subsequently, the Government believes that we owe it to Australians, to this generation, and particularly the next - to our children, that their aspirations and their ideals and their identity ought and can best be reflected by Australians taking full charge of their own affairs with an Australian person as our head of state.

- J: Prime Minister, why isn't Alexander Downer right that the Governor-General is the effective head of state. Can you name an instance where the Queen or King before her has actually stepped in and over turned a decision of the Australian government?

- PM: The head of state of this country is a monarch of another country. The head of state of Australia is the monarch of Great Britain. That's a simple, clear fact ...
- J: ... hasn't made any difference ... (inaudible)
- PM: And as the ... well, look, the fact has made all the difference in the world, it's made all the difference in the world because the powers of the monarch were the powers that were used on a number of occasions in this country and last, severely, in 1975.
- J: When he said no decisions made here are influenced at all by the royal family, that's not right?
- PM: ...The central question is, here, there's only one question here, whether Australia should and can continue with its head of state - Australia's head of state, the Queen of Australia, so called - being the monarch of Great Britain. And not an Australian person.
- J: Well, the decisions of December 1975 were taken at Yarralumla, they weren't taken at Buckingham Palace.
- PM: They were taken under the monarch's powers.
- J: Would you seek to limit those powers, then?
- PM: Well, that's a different question.
- J: But that goes to the heart of it...
- PM: Well, let me decide what goes to the heart of it, thank you very much - at least in this instance, seeing I'm giving the answers. The first thing is that the Government said that it would commission an expert group to look at these issues. It did. That expert group has now reported and the government is considering that report. And, in due time the cabinet will make a judgement about how such a shift to a republic ought best be executed.
- J: Prime Minister, Mr Beazley said yesterday that it would be a minimalist change; you, yourself have said that it is a simple proposition. If it is so simple why can't we see it?
- PM: Well, because, firstly, it hasn't been put together - the change. And why should it be? We've struggled along now for, until 1993 with the monarch of Great Britain as our head of state. And the Labor Party, at its national conference, said it should be an objective of a Labor government to see Australia become a republic by the centenary of our federation. So, it is on that basis that the government has said that we should move towards a republic and that we will exercise these, our

consideration of these issues. But, the question minimalist, and the change, is not about a change to the way our system of government works. It is not about a change to the states, it is not about a change to the Senate, it's not about these things at all. It's about a change to an Australian head of state.

J: Prime Minister, the Turnbull Committee saw all sorts of problems in a popularly elected president, accepting that the government is yet to take a final position, do you have a personal view on this? Would you be prepared to allow the Australian people to elect their own?

PM: My personal view at this point doesn't matter very much because the cabinet is in the process of considering all of these issues and that is not the point. You've got here, the leader of the Opposition arguing weakly, the unarguable, that the Queen is not our head of state.

J: But, Mr Downer did challenge you last week to rule out the possibility that you wanted to appoint the President?

PM: I gave you the answer then and I'll give it to you now. There are two questions to be asked here. Do you believe in an Australian republic or do you believe in the monarchy? If the answer to the first question is in the affirmative, you move to question two. That is, how such a change should be executed and what the modalities might be. But, if you say in answer to question one, "No, I believe in the monarchy", you are disqualified from a debate about question two.

J: You have signalled in the past being personally more disposed towards the idea of parliament electing a head of state rather than a popular election, is that still your inclination?

PM: Well, this is a matter for the cabinet, not for here. But, Laurie Oakes wrote a column on my view about this some months ago and how I see it. But, again, these are preliminary thoughts. But, can I say this, no debate about this is going to save Alexander Downer slipping and sliding in his weakness all over the landscape, trying to say to his party and to the country, "Look, if you want the monarchy, I can keep it as long as I can brand it as quaint and irrelevant." And to the republicans he'll say, "You don't really need a republic at all, a monarchy is good enough.

J: Those preliminary thoughts which favour the Parliament over popular election haven't changed, have they?

PM: Well, that's a matter for the cabinet, not for here.

J: Is it a matter for the people, ultimately, will they be given that choice to make?

- PM: Well, this is all going to be by referendum, that is the key point. This is a matter for the Australian people, in the end, to decide. This is why all this stuff about the constitution and how its... I've never seen more cowardly references to the constitution than from Mr Downer. And, then, we find on ABC radio today, he says, "Written constitutions aren't the be all and end all at all. It is the conventions."
- J: Do you think it is a fair enough question for people to say, if we're going to have a republic, if they ask what sort of republic?
- PM: No, I think the key question is whether Mr Downer's assertion can be sustained in Australian political life. That is, whether or not the Queen of Great Britain is or is not the head of state of this country. That is the central question.
- J: ...(inaudible)... what sort of republic?
- PM: Well, just wait your turn, Tom. I mean, it's all there in the report. Go and pick up the Turnbull report and have a read through it.
- J: Can you give them a reassurance that what we're talking about is something as simple as whether or not we have an Australian as a head of state and they'll be able to decide the rest?
- PM: Between now and the year 2001, or certainly between now and the time a referendum will be put, the Government will make its position abundantly clear on all of these things. As I said a week or two ago, forensically clear.
- J: Will it be clear before the next election?
- PM: Well, that's a matter for the cabinet to think about.
- J: Will there be a referendum about whether or not the President should be elected?
- PM: You weren't listening, David, I just told you, there will be a referendum put to the Australian people in due time so that Australia may become a republic by the year 2001.
- J: You also said, Mr Keating, that it's all going to be decided by referendum. Do you think that the question of how a president would be elected would actually be put to the people at a referendum, so they'd have the choice?
- PM: Well the Parliament will decide what referendum proposals go to the public. There's a very democratic process here. There are first of all referendum proposals that are put to parliament, parliament then carries them and they are put to the public.

- J: Do you agree that until you've got your position, or the government's position, in the open, you are vulnerable to...(inaudible)...?
- PM: Not at all, not at all. I've got a mandate for my position. I stood up in a national election, and a tightly fought one - one where, in fact, at the time, everybody believed that the Government was behind - and said I believe that Australia should become a republic, my party believes that, and we will set up an expert group to look at the machinery, we'll get some documentation there doesn't currently exist, we'll have a national debate. That's my position. I stand here with a mandate for that.
- J: But Mr Downer says you're plotting, that you're seeking toI mean, can you say that
- PM: Well, Mr Downer's even...
- J: Can you say now that something as simple ...
- PM: Well, take.. let's just..
- J: ...can you say something as simple...
- PM: Well, lets just cast Mr Downer's view to one side by his weak assertion that the Queen of Great Britain isn't our head of state. I mean, that's the state of him.
- J: But nevertheless, can you reassure people now that the change you're looking at is as simple as whether Australia has an Australian as head of state? Just that - no more, no less.
- PM: I'm here giving full expression to the Government's mandate. And the Government's mandate is to look forward to a republic by the year 2001, to have a public debate - which we've already generated - I mean, we're having it, aren't we? By having the documents, quite voluminous and tightly-written documents, in the political market place for the first time ever, and the Government has undertaken, and I repeat the undertaking, to have referendum proposals, in due time, proposals passed by the parliament. See the thing is this about Mr Downer. He thinks he can skate through life without policies and the country, the Australian community, can't get a move on, can't get a kick along without leadership. It can't get a kick along without decisions. It can't get a kick along without victories. And it is the victories, whether they be in Mabo or in the Uruguay Round, or in opening the economy up, we move ahead by decisions and leadership. You don't move ahead by vacillation and trying to please everybody at once, shillyshallying and compromising, as he's seeking to do. I mean, if that's the best the Liberals have to offer, after now 7 weeks in office, a

leader who can't even stand to defend a position he's taken on the monarchy, then the Liberal Party has, as I've said before; from Peacock to Howard to Peacock to Hewson to Downer, soft to hard to soft to hard to soft.

J: Mr Keating, later this year when Cabinet gives it's response to the Turnbull Committee, do you expect it will indicate a preference to the way in which the present...

PM: Look, in due time, the Government will make its thoughts on this subject known. I mean, this has been on for, now, a debate about our future has been on for over a century. And given that the government has said in 1993 that it considers that the full expression of Australian sovereignty can't be achieved and our aspirations can't be met by other than an Australian head of state, it's doing that which it has a mandate to do, that is embark upon a process where there is a debate and a set of proposals put and that will happen.

J: By refusing to rule out the possibility of personal benefit...inaudible...

PM: Well, look, I'm not going to, look, look, let me tell you this. I'm not going to argue Alexander Downer's case for him, and nor should you. The key point is this- that you've got, I mean this must be, I can't imagine any other Western world leader in a democracy, particularly a Westminster style one, where you have the leader of the alternative government saying that the head of state isn't as the constitution says it is.

J: I was..

PM: I mean that's where we are.

J: I was going to put Graeme Campbell's view to you that you're doing this as a power grab?

PM: Well, let me tell you this. There's, let me tell you this. Seriously and jocularly, there would be no way, no way whatsoever, no matter what the outcome is, that there is more power for the government or for me in this. But what I want to see is young Australians, in the main our children, have the chance to grow their own society with a full expression of Australian sovereignty and the full, and their full aspirations, and not have it compromised by an anachronism of having the deputy to a borrowed foreign monarch. OK, I'll take one more...

J: You talked earlier about leadership, and also about what's owed to future generations of Australians - in those terms, shouldn't the revamp of the Australian constitution, a 19th Century document as you said, written in the British foreign office, shouldn't it involve more than simply the head of sate...

PM: Well, the constitutional...

J: ..shouldn't it involve things like four year terms and updating things like relations between the states and the Commonwealth....

PM: Well, these things are all.. .

J: ..inaudible...

PM: well look, it's a matter of how one prioritises any such thing. There's a constitutional centenary foundation, a bi-partisan group, which is engendering now a discussion about the constitution and all of its parts, fine. The Government supports that, it thinks its a good thing. But there is a central question, and in the Government's terms, a priority question, and that is should the Australian head of state be an Australian person? Now the Governments answered that question in the affirmative.

J: Prime Minister.

PM: Thank you.

J: Prime Minister, ...inaudible...the situation in North Korea?

PM: Well, I'd just say that we're watching developments there closely. It seems by early signs that Kim Jong Il is succeeding to the leadership of North Korea. It seems, also, that the third round of talks between the United States and North Korea and the North-South Leaders Summit, is going to continue, if with a delay. So, I think there's a choice here for North Korea that's one of greater openness, or taking the uncertain path of developing a nuclear capability and isolating itself from world opinion. So I hope they see advantages in the former rather than the latter.

ends.