



PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING MP
DOORSTOP, TULLY STREET PRIMARY SCHOOL, TOWNSVILLE,
WEDNESDAY, 20 JULY 1994

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J: Prime Minister, I believe you've been confronted by people about the Hinchinbrook development. Are you sympathetic to their concerns?

PM: Well, the Commonwealth has now a very long history of environmental concern for Far North Queensland. You know, most obviously with the Reef, the Daintree rainforest, we've now got a review going in Shoalwater Bay and I had the pleasure this morning of launching the strategic plan for the Reef which, of course, goes to questions such as development which effects us. So, Commonwealth interest in this is pretty manifest, pretty profound.

J: ... environmental impact study on ...

PM: Well, again, there are processes for considering these things and we'll give it appropriate ... it will have due process attached to it. That is, if there is a heritage issue here in terms of the World Heritage area and where the Commonwealth needs to make a decision, well then a process will ensue in the normal course of events it's not a Commonwealth matter.

J: How long will it take to get some answer ...

PM: I don't know, but I mean, again, the Commonwealth is only involved here on the basis that if there is in some way an area of the heritage area in which some authority by the Commonwealth is necessary which would bring the Commonwealth into it. I mean, because the Commonwealth has got such a great environmental record, every environmental issue that becomes a problem around Australia, everyone says 'oh, what can the Commonwealth government do for us?'. Well, the answer is we will do where it is appropriate for us to do.

- J: Changing tact on the Federal Airports Corporation, a lot has been said and written, but very little from yourself. I mean, what is the situation with the airports, are they going to be sold?
- PM: Well, they are in the Budget over the next few years - that we will sell the Authority or those assets which we deem are better serviced by private ownership. But, again, this will be a process. This is not going to happen immediately, it will happen over time.
- J: But is it shaping up as a battle at Federal Conference. You've got the Left unions lining up.
- PM: At every Federal Conference, there's always got to be one or two issues that people jockey around. It's part of the sport of it all.
- J: Can you tell me Prime Minister, when a decision will be made on the troops going to Rwanda?
- PM: We've sent a team to Rwanda to look at the position and see whether any plan by the United Nations is feasible and one which is safe for Australian service people and when we get that report we'll make a judgement about it.
- J: When do you envisage getting that?
- PM: It can't be far away.
- J: What sort of a role would you anticipate for the troops there?
- PM: Well, again, I'll have to see what comes back. If it's a role in protecting humanitarian efforts, well, it has to be a well defined, clearly articulated one by the UN and we would then consider that seriously.
- J: There is concern that the Rural Adjustment Scheme won't meet the drought relief needs of the north. Is more money forthcoming?
- PM: Well, I notice the National party running around saying I should be standing in a paddock in some drought affected area ... see, they are all show and no substance. I mean, the substance here is - is drought a recurring issue in Australia? And the answer is that it is. And, therefore, how should we treat it? Well, the Government's view is it should be treated under the Rural Adjustment Scheme programs rather than, say, natural disasters' relief because it is not an intermittent disaster. This is coming now quite regularly with climate change effects.
- J: The drought we have in Central Queensland at the moment isn't regular. It is the worst in history, there's never been one like it.

- PM: I know, but there was one the year before that and one the year before. I mean, drought is around now in Australia all the time so, we've said let's try and cover this as a normal recurrence of rural life and use the Rural Adjustment Scheme to manage it. Now, my colleague Senator Collins has made clear that we are now going to review the RAS scheme so that it can adequately deal with the problems of drought and so that there is rural recourse by the farm community to assistance there. That, I think, is what we should do - keep the review on the situation - and announce a change to the RAS arrangements between the Commonwealth and the States that actually does fit the bill.
- J: The State governments are saying that the Rural Adjustment Scheme doesn't address core debt that builds up over the years.
- PM: Well, it depends what interest rate it services. I mean, RAS, I think, from memory can involve subsidies of up to 100 per cent of the interest rate cost, so effectively it's carrying costs are being met and its real value declines over time.
- J: Prime Minister, the State government this week has appealed to the Commonwealth for some extra drought assistance. Is that likely to be met?
- PM: We do things systemically. I mean, that's the way ... if you want assistance from the Commonwealth it's got to be part of a systemic program and, I think again, I'm repeating myself, but I think that's where RAS comes in. But having National party politicians wandering around drought affected areas, crying crocodile tears about them is not going to help people. What's going to help is a proper program, well funded, that actually works.
- J: But, producers are saying similar things too. Are they crying crocodile tears?
- PM: No, no, producers are effected, producers have got a genuine interest in this and, of course, they will be treated genuinely.
- J: So, you see no need for you to visit drought affected areas?
- PM: No, I've been in drought affected areas all through my political life. I understand what ... there are drought affected areas perpetually in Australia. Now, I can go and visit them and see them and say 'yes, this is a problem', but what do you do about it? The answer is a systemic response.
- J: On the broader environment, last month John Faulkner sent out a broad response to issues like setting aside Tasmanian forests biodiversity, export wood chip licence controls. Given the criticism of that, do you support the thrust and aims of John Faulkner's statement?

PM: Well, we operate as a Cabinet and we develop, over time, forestry management plans with Tasmania and with New South Wales in particular, and we adjust these from time to time. Now, we have a policy on wood chips, we want to get to higher levels of processing and value added and we've put a requirement on companies in the industry to do this by a certain time. That is the general direction we are going in.

J: Prime Minister, the social justice package. Can you tell me when that is going to be implemented?

PM: Well, I think you had better decode that one. Which particular variant do you mean?

J: The social justice package itself - Mabo?

PM: Well, there isn't a social justice package itself. I mean, there is a Land Fund, which essentially ... Mabo is about land. It is not a catch all policy for an unlimited amount of funds for so-called social justice measures. It is about justice for Aboriginal people in their access to land particularly those who have been dispossessed of land and can't avail themselves of land under Mabo. Now, we have got the Land Fund legislation, I introduced it into the Parliament about two and a half weeks ago and that will lay on the table of both Houses of Parliament and be debated in the spring session of the Parliament. I am confident that it will pass notwithstanding the miserable opposition of the Liberal and National parties to it. Now, when it does pass that will be a great leap forward for social justice for Aboriginal people in this country because they'll have access to land via Mabo - where they can make traditional connections to the land - and where that traditional connection can't be made, owing to their dispossession, they can avail themselves of land under the land package.

Now, beyond that, there may be some other issues which the Commonwealth may involve itself in in respect of social justice or heritage issues for Aboriginal people, but that's down the track.

J: Just going back to privatisation, Brian Howe is skating on thin ice with the comments ...

PM: Well, he has made his comments in the context of the Cabinet's decision to do these things.

ends.