



PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP
PRESS CONFERENCE, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA,
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PM: I'm very pleased to announce that the Government has decided to reopen the Australian Embassy in Beirut and to reopen it by June 1995. As you may recall the Embassy was closed in 1984 because of the deteriorating security position at that time, but the Government did take the option of opening a non-diplomatic office particularly for migration and visa clearances in 1993 and we took that decision after the circumstance and situation in Lebanon had changed from the time of the Accords.

We now believe the security situation, although by no means perfect, has improved to the point where re-opening is possible, and of course, we'll be taking every precaution to protect the staff who will be there.

I think this is going to be an important decision and an important facility for the 250,000 Australians of Lebanese origin who have a strong interest in the ease of communications between Australia and Lebanon and the other thing, I think it does is it gives us a natural opportunity to grow the linkages between Australia and Lebanon which have been growing, though small, growing quite smartly from an almost non-existent trade of \$3 million in 1991 to \$13 million in 1993. We have got Austrade and a number of Australian companies there at a trade exhibition in Beirut for the first week of October of this year. We have recently signed an air services agreement with Lebanon which will help commercial and people to people links.

So, I think, the decision represents confidence in Lebanon's future, a desire by Australia to provide an ease in the relations, particularly for those, as I say, quarter of a million of Australians of Lebanese origin and to underpin the fact that we want to see better commercial and

trade relationships with Lebanon and, of course, this will be perhaps facilitated by the fact that we have a full mission there.

So, there has been, as you know, much lobbying in the Lebanese community over time for this. The Government has taken note of those concerns and we said, always, that in due time we would act upon them and we think that due time is now.

I'd be happy to take questions.

J: Does this move suggest that we might be increasing pressure on Israel regarding their occupation of Southern Lebanon?

PM: No. I think, since 1989 when the TAIF Accords were signed we've seen a very marked change in the fortunes of Lebanon and, of course, more recently with the Middle East Accords between the PLO and Israel - a change there as well and I think that I would like to see Lebanon take part in that peace process and that negotiation with Israel and to extend the whole co-operative climate throughout the region.

J: Have you chosen who will be the Ambassador?

PM: No, we haven't not yet.

J: Would the Ambassador be residing in Beirut?

PM: The Ambassador will be residing in Beirut.

J: So, there will be two Embassies - one in Damascus and one in Beirut?

PM: That's right. One in Syria and one in Lebanon.

J: Has anybody's Government guaranteed the safety of personnel there?

PM: Well, we will as we do, I mean, missions in this country rely upon the Australian Government to provide the protection. In the same terms we open up such discussions with any country where we have a mission or where we are about to have a mission. So, we'll have discussions with the Government of Lebanon to see that every protection and every consideration is extended to the enhanced security of any staff who are based there.

J: Why did it take so long to reopen given that a lot of other western nations reopened their embassies some time ago?

PM: Well, I think, they are all judgements about the environment and also, I think, in opening in January 1993 a lot of the immigration work was

effectively being done, anyway, through that office. So, in a sense, we've had a staged process.

J: Prime Minister, it's not usual for you to make an announcement personally of this nature, do you feel the need to increase your profile amongst Australia's ethnic community?

PM: No, it is just that I have had a long association with the ethnic communities and particularly a long association with the Lebanese community. Particularly in Western Sydney and I have had many, many hundreds of representations on this issue over time. The Lebanese community in Australia, those of Lebanese origin, are a fair proportion of our country and something as central to their interests as this, I think, deserves an announcement by the Government and, in this case, by me.

J: Mr Prime Minister, would you be yourself opening the Embassy in Beirut?

PM: I wouldn't make that commitment, but it will be opened with some aplomb I can assure you.

J: Is it your decision to ... (inaudible) Accords, Prime Minister?

PM: I don't think so. I think the Syrian Government, on the contrary, I think the Syrian Government, the whole point of the Accords and the sovereignty of Lebanon which has arisen from it is best recognised by diplomatic recognition.

J: Mr Keating, are you satisfied with the way the Cambodian authorities are handling the hostage situation in Cambodia and what was your reaction to the Australian hostage asking for Australian authorities to take over negotiations?

PM: Well I think that this has been a difficult issue for us and any of these hostage situations are difficult, particularly in the context of the discussion we're having. The tensions between the interests of the Khmer Rouge and the Government of Cambodia and negotiations between Australia and Cambodia over other different issues. I mean, I think we can only rely upon their best endeavours to see that we can get the hostages free.

J: Mr Keating, do you see the Government's decision to override Tasmania on the gay laws issue as some sort of test for Alexander Downer in terms of his policy position on the family and those sorts of liberty issues?

PM: Well, I think that we have to come back to an essential truth here. And what the coalition are always trying to speak of is the rights of the

States and sovereignty for the States. This is the right of a Tasmanian cabinet to decide a matter like this, in the face of an international treaty. Now, this is a treaty that Australia relies upon when it makes remarks around the world about human rights, and rights and liberties of people. One can't invoke it in those circumstances and not invoke it at home. So therefore, the Commonwealth has - particularly after the UN's action - an obligation here. And it's an obligation under an international treaty. Now, there is this notion afoot within the coalition that there is something illegitimate about international treaties, and the Commonwealth role. The foreign affairs power was given to the Commonwealth at Federation. And we have to keep, I mean, I think, we have to remind people - particularly in the Liberal Party, and in the States - that Federation was an act of creation of the nation. It was not a set of protections for the States. I mean, the debate is now so warped, people think that Federation is in some way - in the mouths of self-serving arguments by Premiers - a set of protections for the States, that they are the foundation stones on which the nation is built. This is not so. The Federation was an act of creation of the nation, and these powers are powers given to the operation of the nation, and that's why, you know, phoney calls for sovereignty for States, and trying to hide behind them, Mr Downer trying to hide behind them, given his expressed views on this subject, is going to, I think, again test whether he has any policy substance.

J: Mr Keating, on one other matter, Mr Jones position in Victoria - do you support Mr Jones attempts to stay in the seat of Lalor, and retain the Presidency?

PM: In every boundary change, set of boundary changes, there is always a reshuffling of interests. And this has happened to all of us over the years. Nobody is immune from a change in these things. Senator Evans has expressed an interest, I think, in seeing whether he should make the transition to the Lower House. That's his perfect right. He's a senior Minister, he's a major contributor to the Government and to the country, and he will do what I am sure everyone in the political process does, and that is, find themselves a spot. Now whether that spot is Mr Jones' spot or another, remains to be seen. But I don't think any MP has immunity from the pressures - the day to day real world pressures of their party at these particular moments.

J: So, if it came to a choice between Senator Evans...

PM: OK. I think.....

J: ..Mr Jones...

PM: Let me just say.

J: ...you'd be prepared to see Mr Jones...

PM: ...I'm not here to be giving you Labor Party open-heart surgery, even though I know you think if I cross the threshold - a footpath, a doorway - then one should open one's heart to the media. Now you know I'm generally a kindly person, and I open it more often than I should.

J: Prime Minister....

PM: But the thing is I don't think I can be,...except let me just repeat the point. That these are a real-world set of pressures in what Senator Evans sees - and which I would concur in - some legitimate aspiration by him to move to the central cockpit of Australian politics, the House of Representatives. Now, whether in fact, how this is accommodated in the Victorian scene you know, time will tell.

J: But you understand that those comments will be interpreted as support for Senator Evans, vis a vis Mr Jones?

PM: No. Well, I don't think they are entitled to be interpreted that way, but I..let me make very clear my support for the senior Minister's of the Government and in Senator Evans' case, you know, very obvious and clear support for his continuation in a very central position in Australian public life. Thank you.

ends.