



PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING MP
INTERVIEW WITH PETER KENNEDY, RADIO 6WF, THURSDAY,
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KENNEDY: Mr Keating, Tom Jones is he your sort of singer?

PM: He is my sort of singer, not necessarily my sort of songs but he is my sort of singer.

KENNEDY: What is it about him?

PM: It's that huge bluesy voice big black bluesy voice and he was doing all this 30 years ago, that's what amazing about him. I mean he has still got the horsepower.

KENNEDY: Alright he has got the horsepower and I guess the question is he has been doing it for 30 years you have been doing it for 25 or 26 years. Have you still got the horsepower and the question I suppose associated with the fact there is no prime minister who has probably promoted Australia as a nation and our position in the world more than you have done in the past couple of years. But yet as far as Western Australia is concerned you are still a relative stranger. Why is that?

PM: I don't think that is right Peter. There is a conventional wisdom written by journalists, you know they go to polls and what have you and look at these things. Now when it comes to forecasting elections and forecasting popularity most journalists couldn't pick their nose frankly and they are all writing what's happened but very poor at writing about what is prospective. Remember this, the Labor Party has had a majority of seats here for most of the period of this Government, a majority of federal seats in Western Australia and we are not far away from that even now after last election. The conventional wisdom before the last election is that in some way you know for various reasons we wouldn't win the election and we did. So I just think the public are quite discerning, I mean the key thing to think about me and Western Australia is what policy changes are in the place, why is Western Australia growing at 10% a year, this year, 10% growth which is just a phenomenal figure and 6% employment growth and the answer is because of this Federal Labor Government's policies.

KENNEDY: Alright but it's undeniable that the state is growing very quickly, as fast as any other state in the country but yet as far as Western Australia is concerned you very rarely venture west. This is your first trip west in 11 months.

PM: But how many times have I been here in 20 years, dozens of occasions.

KENNEDY: But now you are Prime Minister.

PM: Yes I know, I was coming in August as you know, the Cabinet came in August but I picked up the flu for the first time in 5 years and it laid me down for about 10 days and so I missed the August thing but it's two days, a day over and a day back and I generally make it two or three if I can which really means blanketing out most of the week, most of the working week and in this job it's very hard to do that.

KENNEDY: But do you acknowledge the fact that Western Australia, a third of the continent feels somewhat miffed by the fact that you don't seem to be able to spend as much time here as they think you should?

PM: Look it's not a third of the continent, in terms of the people we don't go talking to bare hills we talk to people. It's an important constituent part of this country and for 12 years I have been a minister and most of the policies I have supported peeling away the tariff wall, opening the exchange markets, getting sort of best practice into Australian industry, competitiveness in other words. All of that has been in the main favoured Western Australia and Queensland. So in reality I don't think Western Australia has had any minister in key positions as I have been who has in fact favoured it more.

KENNEDY: Yet the same sort of message seems to be coming out of Queensland because only this morning your Attorney General was reported as having said that he believes that you should visit Queensland more often. Queensland and Western Australia the resources rich states and it appears you are neglecting them.

PM: That was a beat up I think and these things happen from time to time. That story we won't take too much notice of, I was in Queensland last week, week before last, last week in fact I was in Queensland, I am in Queensland quite often because it's the same time zone and the distance means that the time you fly over here you haven't lost a day but the important thing is, is Western Australia benefiting from the policies of the Government I lead? Why has it got 10% economic growth and 5% employment growth? Is it because of the policies of the state government or the Federal Government and there is only one answer to that? The Federal Government. It's competitiveness, the exchange rate, inflation, productivity, these are all the things that make all the bulk trader commodities of Western Australia competitive. They are the things that is giving Western Australian manufacturing base, they are the things which are giving a decent competitive service sector and that's what matters. Not whether I am over here doing radio programs or going from this place to that place. I come when I feel I have to and that is to pick up the issues and get a feel of the community but the core thing for West Australians is, does the Federal Government implement policies which are of benefit to Western Australia and the answer to that is very strongly in the affirmative.

KENNEDY: Prime Minister this is a very important year for you I think you would agree and you seem to have, given the crisis that you had just a week or two

ago in Canberra, you seem to have lost patience with the Greens over the woodchipping row?

PM: No not the Greens, I can't have any truck with the recitation of untruths which some of these people in the Wilderness Society have been saying. That is there is 1,300 compartments of forest which are pristine trees, that is just untrue. They say our objectives of such a high moral purpose we can actually, how dare you say that our spiel is wrong. I mean the day I actually accept the fact that 1,300 stands of trees are pristine when in fact less than 500 are we are all in trouble so we have to deal in facts and truths and a lot of people, I mean from my point of view there are two comparatives in this debate. One is like most Australians I want to see the important stands of native forest protected but where they have been logged through once or twice, where they are no longer pristine there is no point in pretending they are. So there is an imperative here to protect the native stands of trees but on the other hand make sure we have got a sustainable forest products industry. I think we have come right down the middle in that debate and all those Australians who want to see those trees protected have got to know that the Federal Government is doing the right thing in protecting them and much of the blurb, much of the rhetoric, much of the hysteria is basically factually wrong.

KENNEDY: You might say you haven't lost patience with the Greens but what about the report that you refer to the Greens because of ceaseless demands, you refer to them privately as neo fascists.

PM: Not even privately I am just saying some of this sort of bald recitation of untruths by some people in the Wilderness Society is sort of, you know as I said Goebbels like behaviour. The sort of recitation of basically untruths and how is that going to help the debate? I mean how can we pretend that 800 stands of trees are pristine when in fact they are not. How can you have a debate when people, now what happened in the past we have always had the leadership of the environment movement with the conservation society where you got more weight and gravity and gravitas and people got a lead. People interested in environmental issues got a lead, now the noisiest have taken over and some of the most extreme elements of the Wilderness Society and remember this that Bob Brown is running for a Senate seat. It's not as if he is any more campaigning just for the preservation of forests, he is competing with other Liberal and Labor candidates for a Senate vacancy, a Senate seat, a Senate quota. So what is happening of course the rhetoric has changed to suit his political ambitions and the ambitions of the Wilderness Society which has become a political party.

KENNEDY: Well the Green's rhetoric certainly seems to have hardened towards your government?

PM: No the Wilderness Society not the Greens, the Greens is a very large expression. Green means the people interested in green. Could I just say last year, do you want me to say this Peter, last year without any real pressure from the environment movement this Government put aside Shoalwater Bay in Queensland for ever, Jervis Bay in NSW for ever, and put \$20 million of the budget to buy back the whole and the heart of the Daintree. How much have we heard about that? Not a word.

KENNEDY: Are you confident that you will get Green's preferences at the federal election similar to what former Senator Richardson achieved in 89?

PM: Look at what we saw yesterday from the Liberal and National Party. There is the leader of the National Party saying that he disagrees with Mr McLachlan he will not support the abolition, the abandonment of the policy of clear felling of trees. McLachlan came and said that they the Liberal Party and the Coalition wouldn't support clear felling. Fischer came out and said we would, I haven't got his exact expression in front of me but we would not support that policy and we won't support that policy, so if you look at the people who are interested in the preservation of the Australian environment and forests, I mean obviously the tail of the National Party has always wagged the dog but if Fischer comes out and says we are still in favour of clear felling you can bet pounds to peanuts that's the way Coalition policy would go in office.

KENNEDY: So you would expect to get Greens preferences?

PM: We are the major party that can form a Government in this country, we also happen to be the major party that has the environment up there as one of the main core issues. Of course I expect that.

KENNEDY: The fight between the media giants for the lucrative Fairfax media group in Sydney obviously is going to test your media ownership rules. Would you consider letting the current major shareholder, that is the Canadian Conrad Black, increase his stake from 25 to 35%?

PM: That's a matter for policy and we will think about it as we do in any of these processes. If he applies for it we will think about it.

KENNEDY: On the other hand do you have a preference for Australia's media being controlled by Australians?

PM: The nationalist in me always has that preference but we have already allowed Mr Black's company to buy Telegraph newspapers, to buy 25% of John Fairfax and Sons.

KENNEDY: Now Kerry Packer has been interviewed on A Current Affair this evening and during that interview he said in part with regard to the Opposition Leader John Howard, he said John Howard is a good honest man who has learned from the mistakes of the past and he added he believes Australia needs a changing of the guard.

PM: Well that's the opinion of one, I mean so what.

KENNEDY: Just one, not an influential one?

PM: Just one. I mean last time Kerry Packer would tell anybody who listened that we had no chance of winning the 1993 election. He told me personally we had no chance of winning the 1987 election and as far as I can recollect his view was the Labor Party wouldn't win the 1990 election. So what more need I say?

KENNEDY: You don't attach any significance to those comments?

PM: Not really no.

KENNEDY: You are not suggesting or seeing that perhaps he might be putting a little bit of pressure on you in his bid for control of John Fairfax?

PM: I am in the pressure business I am in the conflict business Peter, it would take more than a dozen Kerry Packers to put any pressure on me.

KENNEDY: But I mean he has been friendly to Labor over the last 10 years hasn't he?

PM: Not in news management or media terms he hasn't, no. But you know is he somebody who believes the Government has done a reasonable job, I think that is right but is the Channel 9 network programmed to support the Government. It never has been. I mean are the current affairs programs set up, never has been. So is he a friend of the Government in news management terms, no he is not.

KENNEDY: So with regard to Fairfax you wouldn't rule out any attempt by or any attempt by Conrad Black to come to you, to come to the Government and say we would like you to lift the percentage limit that we can take in John Fairfax to 35%.

PM: I think the important thing here is process, I mean we are seeing a tremendous change in media policy with convergence and cross media and I think process is important that governments have a right to consider these issues, properly consider them.

KENNEDY: Will you be bringing forward your planned review of the government's media policy because of this?

PM: No I don't think so, no.

KENNEDY: So no reviews planned or what, until after the election?

PM: I am not sure when we would expect this review to be considered by Cabinet.

KENNEDY: Can I just ask you about Mabo and Aboriginal land rights? Of course they are back in the news with the president of the national Native Title Tribunal saying this week there was significant moral shortcomings in the principles by which native title was recognised. An observation I would imagine which would concern you?

PM: Observations by judges, I obviously read and take some notice of but I think what led to the point, led to the remark being made was that if some parcel of land has in the past had some sort of title over it, it has the potential to extinguish native title. Well that's in the preamble of the Commonwealth Act we have always understood that, the High Court made that clear. I think any suggestion that in some way land which might otherwise have been native title land but for the fact for a couple of year it might have had some other lease or something over it is really about a statutory base for the granting of native title in the broad. We used to call that land rights so if the remark is to be taken to mean that we should move the Mabo native title legislation to statutory land rights I don't support that and that's what I took the remark to mean.

KENNEDY: He is the president though of the Native Title Tribunal -

PM: Yes and I am the Prime Minister.

KENNEDY: And pointing out what he believes to be moral shortcomings in the legislation.

PM: Well in that case he has got a point to make to his fellow judges on the High Court bench. It may be that a parcel of land which has had if you like habitation by indigenes but which for a period had through just a quirk of history a lease of say 6 years or 10 years or 12 years, that may have extinguished the native title. The important thing is to get the land fund bill through because the Government's policy was never all about native title, it was all about a combination of the two. That is where a grant of interest in land, where a grant of interest in land has extinguished the native title and there is a pastoral lease in this very large fund which the Government is now proposing that the Parliament should agree to and which of course was emasculated by the Greens and the Liberal Party in the Senate last year, would allow Aboriginal people to buy that pastoral lease, you see. So what Justice French is saying, he is making a comment about the impact of the vagaries of native title but to make a social comment you have got to look at the land fund because the land fund has such a complementary purpose in being able to provide in buying land and seeing that go to a synthesised native title.

KENNEDY: You have said that you will be looking at amendments to the native title legislation just after it's been in operation for a while, when is that likely to be?

PM: Operational amendments, not go to the heart of its principles. You know what the Australian media is like Peter it's all blacks and whites and no greys, well when you are in Government and you are running a Parliament, running a Government and you have got to legislate, one has to look at the greys and all the subtle colours. We are not just blacks and whites, amendments do not mean gutting the native title legislation. What they mean are process issues.

KENNEDY: Well you managed to get the national farmers federal support of course for the legislation on the basis that the pastoral lease grant didn't extinguish native title. So what you are saying is you wouldn't want to consider changing the bill to change that?

PM: In the preamble of the bill the presumption is that pastoral leases have extinguished native title. Now I think what Justice French's ruling has said is that in this case with the Century Mine it did extinguish the native title. He perhaps is musing about the fact it may be shouldn't have. Well that point I understand the remedy we think is for the land fund to be buying land, do you understand? In other words if you want perfection here you go back to 1788 and invest title across the country in the names of the Aboriginal traditional owners, then you work backwards. Now none of us are in that position. The High Court made a decision 200 years after first settlement and that may not suit the indigenes obviously but what we sort to do is to legislate so that they could get the maximum certainty from that legislation. Notwithstanding the fact that the High Court pretty well made it clear although no doubt this matter will be tested whether in fact a pastoral lease extinguishes native title.

KENNEDY: Prime Minister how do you think Labor is travelling in the west?

PM: I made the point to you earlier Peter we have had a majority of seats in Western Australia pretty much most of the way through since 1983 and if it's all a matter of delivering the jobs, I mean what was the primary issue upon which the Government was elected at the last election. It was unemployment. Growth and

employment growth and unemployment. The Government has taken that issue up, adjusted its policies and we are now growing faster than any other western world economy with very low inflation and in Western Australia, Western Australia is actually growing much faster than the national average with low inflation and with very strong employment growth so on the basis of what we said we would do, what we were elected to do and what we have done, why wouldn't Western Australians return the Government again?

KENNEDY: You take the credit for that, Premier Richard Court said today Western Australian people should take the credit for that, it's not being reflected in support for -

PM: The policy framework comes from the Federal Government. Of course it's done by people and by the West Australian people and business and others but the framework is what makes the difference and it's like wandering around a casino with your pockets full and saying but where did it come from. I mean where did the growth come from, it came from the right cast of national policies from the Labor Government that's where it came from.

KENNEDY: When will we see you back in the west?

PM: I don't know Peter, but I always like seeing you.

KENNEDY: Won't be 11 months?

PM: Probably not but I mean go back over 25 years. I mean let's not go on about this too much. This silly game that Premier Court plays and the rest, I have been coming to this state for 25 years and I didn't see anybody saying Mr Keating has been here 3 times this year or 4 times this year as I have in some other years. It just depends on the load of business and how you can manage your engagements.

KENNEDY: When you make it back look forward to talking to you again.

PM: Thank you Peter.

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