



PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING MP
INTERVIEW WITH RADIOS 2UE, 2GB, ABC, TUESDAY, 6 JUNE 1995**

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PM: Well, in the end he had to come out and say something. He couldn't hide forever and we waited and what did we get? Nothing. Nothing. He is the same person he was in the late 1980s. There was nothing to him then and there is nothing to him now. So, the 'headland' speech: what was it about? The great changes in the internationalisation of Australia? The great change in our culture? The assertion of our identity? The shift into Asia? Nothing. It is about an independent auditor general or an independent speaker. So what. So what. What John Howard has proven ... and on television tonight he says with his most statesman-like voice that he could propose, he said 'I'm sure that the things that unite Australia is more important than things which divide us.' The very thing he said at his defeat at the election in 1987.

So, he has done the full circle. What we got tonight was a hollow collection of cliches, exposing his complete paucity of policies. He has got no policy structure. He even goes on to say '... after a week of us fighting for the interests of the Australian battler' - a week - the Australian Labor Party has been fighting for them for 100 years and this Government has been fighting for their interests for 12 years. He said '... people may not want government out of their lives, but they do want it off their backs'. That is an American republican line. It is Liberal Party code for cutting government spending on welfare payments, but you don't find any mention of spending cuts in there.

Then he talks about a pro-family industrial relations policy. In other words, you should appreciate the right to be sacked more easily. Very pro-family.

Then he says he would destroy the Commonwealth external affairs power. That means no Gordon-below-Franklins. That means no Daintrees. No Kakadu National Parks. He says the use of this is illicit.

On foreign policy there is not a single, solitary policy about Australia's engagement with the region. He says, and listen to this one '... the next Coalition government will continue the pattern.' Could you imagine anything weaker or more vacuous when this Government is threading together the largest, free trade agreement in the history of the Asia-Pacific area with APEC and making bi-lateral relationships with countries like Indonesia and Japan of a quality that we have never had in the past. What does he say? '... the next Coalition government will continue the pattern'. You would be ashamed to put a statement like that out.

Then he talks about the republic. But, he doesn't say whether he is for it or against it. He can't even say it. He is afraid to say what his position is because his position is against a republic. But now he thinks that a majority of opinion are in favour of it, he is not prepared to say, he is not prepared to say. Then he says '... a few interest groups are driving the government', but he declines to say who the interest groups are and to talk about them.

He talks about starting with economic honesty. This is the same person who, for one week before the 1983 election, decided not to tell the Australian public what the Secretary to the Treasury told him. That is, that the Budget deficit wasn't \$6 billion it was \$9.6 billion. This is the same person who talks about no more fiscal slight of hand while when he was Treasurer he never, ever, published forward estimates of receipts, ever. And, only forward estimates of outlays for one year. This Government publishes forward estimates of outlays and forward estimates of receipts and the budget or surplus balance.

He says he will '... provide a degree of predictability about the level and stability of tax rates'. Peter Costello says they won't rise. Apparently, he has now amended that upon more mature reflection because he has been caught out.

It is the most empty vacuous set of statements that I have seen from a major party leader. This is Fightback, the rhetoric of Fightback, without the policies and the mathematics.

J: Mr Howard said he made it quite clear that this speech was never going to include detailed policies.

PM: Because he doesn't have any. This was his big opportunity to tell us where he wants to take Australia. What do you get from this? You don't even get a direction from him. It is so vacuous there is not even a direction. All these people in the media who wanted a contest at the next election, I'm sorry you're not going to get one. You are not going to get one because they are not up to it. To have a contest you have got to have the other side with some policies. They are not in the hunt.

This is the weakest effort I have seen by an Opposition Leader in the 25 years I have been here.

J: You are very quick to jump on it.

PM: Because I am very quick to read it. You could get across it in 25 pages. You could read the thing in a couple of minutes.

J: Is it Mr Howard's "Things That Matter"?

PM: The "Things That Matter" - that is, Mr Downer's "Things That Matter" - looks positively solid compared to this dross. And, of course, Fightback! was an absolute mammoth of a document, compared to this rubbish.

J: Mr Keating, Mr Howard said he was going to do a series of headland speeches - this is only the first, doesn't he...shouldn't he be able to take the chance to have a series of speeches outlining the broad detail of where he wants to go?

PM: This is his first - this was the one that was going to tell us the directions. This was the one that was going to give us an indication about the sort of government he would have, and you have got no idea from him, about the sort of government he would have. And when it comes to the hard things, about how would he cut \$10,000 million out of outlays? I mean, who would be cut? Payments to pensioners? Payments to schools? Payments to the low-paid? And here he is talking about supporting battlers, and during his period of office, low-paid people suffered enormously - he has not supported any wage increase for Australian workers since 1981, bar the last 2. That was 2 lots of \$8. So, he supported \$16 wage increase in 14 years.

J: Does this strategy make it harder for you - for the Government - to pin him down, to attack him, because he isn't presenting his policies until closer to the election, and you are relying on attacking him from when he was last in Government - that was 12 years ago?

PM: No. I'm relying on attacking him for the fact that he wants to replace - to supplant - this Government as the Government of Australia. He has no right with rubbish like this. And though the media might want a contest, they have no right in supporting rubbish like this.

J: He has challenged you to set out what you think the reserve powers of a President should be under an Australian republic in your major speech - will you?

PM: My challenge to him is to say whether he is for a republic or not - simple enough question. Forget the modalities for the moment - is he in favour? I mean, it's not much of an ask, is it, to say "is it not

unreasonable to ask the alternative Prime Minister whether he believes an Australian should be our Head of State?"

J: But what about...

PM: And he won't answer it.

J: But what about his challenge to you?

PM: Just a second - he will not answer that simple question - it's not his challenge to mine - that is the core matter. Unless he says he is in favour of an Australian republic, he disqualifies himself from having any part in the debate for a shift to a republic. And, of course, tomorrow night I will be saying precisely where the Government stands on this issue.

J: So you believe Mr Howard has missed his opportunity to talk to Australians?

PM: He missed his opportunity in the middle 1970s, when he left us with double-digit inflation, double-digit unemployment, and the highest Government spending in our history - he should have been drummed out of the regiment of Australian politics. He has hung around, and waited to see all of his rivals retire, and in their paucity - remember, he is their third choice in this term: he is their third choice after Hewson and Downer, and now you can see why he was their third choice. He is recycled, empty and vacuous.

J: So, does seeing this make you want to call an election soon?

PM: To see it makes me a little bit sad about the state of the Liberal Party and the alternative government. I mean, as an Australian, I have always believed that it is in the nation's best interests - always - to keep on the boil, two competent parties of government. What this speech proves is that there is only one - the Australian Labor Party.

J: Would you like to see a real contest?

PM: The media will, but how are you going to get one when you have got a candidate such as Howard, who has got no policies? I mean, how can you get a contest when you have got someone without any substance?

J: You say the journalists can't read opinion polls...

PM: I think the last election proved that.

J: Can you give us your reading of the 2 conflicting polls that came out today?

PM: I told you - I think the Government is strengthening its underlying vote. We have now got the country growing at a consistent and sustainable rate, we have low inflation, we have the Budget back to surplus, we are seeing the Government now continuing on its big social policies - such as *Working Nation*. We are having success with the long-term unemployed, the Government is about to announce its response on the republic, I have just come back from Japan building that bilateral relationship, we are working again on the strength and growth of APEC. I mean, these are the things from a Government of substance. After having just passed the Land Fund, and the year before last, Mabo. How could you compare a Government that is doing these things, with this worn out Liberal party?

J: Well, how do you explain the poll that shows John Howard and the Coalition streaking ahead?

PM: I think the public have always got a little needle into governments - they want you to earn your freight. They say "how are you going to vote?", [and they reply] "oh well, I don't know - I might throw a vote to the Coalition", and that's to put a bit of ginger in the system. That's probably always been there, but we're in the position where we want to be right now, and that is one out and one back - the best position to be in Australian politics.

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