



PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP
INTERVIEW WITH PAUL LYNEHAM, SPECIAL EDITION 7.30 REPORT,
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PL: Prime Minister welcome.

PM: Paul.

PL: Now John Howard says that under your system we won't get what we the people want, we are going to get what you want in the end.

PM: I think his colleague Jeff Kennett said it very eloquently today. He answered Mr Howard's point that what can be more democratic than a referendum where everybody has a say. I mean the Government and the Parliament could propose, or put a proposal to the community, that every person in the community has a say, has a vote, and they can reject it, or accept it.

PL: But what happens between now and the referendum, we just all sort of mill around talking to each other do we?

PM: No, we will do what we have intelligently done since this debate began. That is, we will consider the prospects of an Australian person becoming our head of state, consider what it means for Constitutional change, how it might be approached, how the change might be made, what it will mean to the country. Now that's happened already. We have seen a lot of debate, where now all of us, I think, are better in touch with the issues than we were then. We commissioned the Republic Advisory Committee Report, they consulted widely, that was reported, that debate has been had. Now I have, on behalf of the Government, put a set of proposals. This is promoting this debate between you and me tonight, Mr Howard etc and that will go on.

- PL: But the Civic Experts Group presented you with a report recently that said there is a great deal of ignorance in the community about the very basics of our political system, isn't there?
- PM: That is probably right. But you'll never have perfection about that. But that is not to say that we are then incapable of changing anything. Look at the changes Australia has made, both economically and socially, over the last 12 years - they have been profound.
- PL: But how do we make sure that John Howard's fear that it is going to be divisive doesn't occur. I mean we wouldn't want to risk the
- PM: Well the thing is tonight, he squibbed the central question. There was only one question to answer and that was does he, forget the modalities, but does he believe an Australian should be our head of state. He wouldn't answer that question. He did everything to skate around that question, but he wouldn't come to the central question. In the final analysis he had to say "let's go to a peoples' convention" and then he had the temerity to say he would actually appoint half the people going to it. And so you would have a small cabal, half appointed by him, and in some way that supplants the rights of 18 million people, a nation of 18 million, of the electorate of this country, the people of this country, to vote on a set of proposals in the most democratic of acts.
- PL: Nevertheless I think many Australians would have agreed with him when he said that it ought to be as non-political as possible this debate.
- PM: Oh well I mean that is like saying we want the air outside to be as full of oxygen as we would like it. I mean who is going to disagree with that? What I said last night was that, and today, if we can get agreement on the central point, that an Australian should be our head of state, the rest of it will fall into place. But that requires some leadership and he wouldn't provide it. You see in some respects I have got more respect for the Leader of the National Party who says he believes in the Constitutional Monarchy. He believes in the Queen remaining the head of state of this country. What Mr Howard wouldn't do anything. He is basically in favour of the Monarchy, but he wouldn't come and say so because he thinks it will offend too much Republican sentiment.
- PL: He says the system is working quite well and you have got to prove to him why it should be if it isn't broke, why fix it?
- PM: In other words, if I have to lead and if I lead sufficiently he may follow. Well, in that case, why does he want to supplant me as the leader. Let me get on and go on keep on doing it.

PL: Today in Parliament it looked like a real red-hot partisan issue, didn't it though? I mean your side yes. Their side raising all doubts and questions. I mean if this is the flavour we are going to have ...

PM: No, it's like it has been for all the years I have been here, the Party of social attack. The Party of change, the Labor Party, keeps on advancing Australia, moving it forward and the lead weight is dragged along behind. Mr Howard always spotting the most conservative position he can adopt and you remember they said that, you know, we shouldn't have the Australia Act, appeals to the Privy Council should be maintained. All of that baggage has gone, we are the better for it. We will be the better for it for this change. I mean it is not just that those of us who want to see Australia's culture, identity perfectly reflected in this way should have to drag them along with us. But they should at least provide some leadership and say we believe. I mean here he was tonight talking about ... he said "I'm going to have a convention with 50 per cent appointed and I am going to put some people in there 18-25, young Australians". But he wouldn't let one of those young Australians become the President of the Commonwealth of Australia. He wants instead for Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain to be our head of state and not one of those young Australians.

PL: Well let's hear from some of these young Australians. While Mr Keating was delivering his speech to Parliament last night, Andrew Olle went to James Ruse High School in Sydney's North West to see what impact the Prime Minister had on the students and their parents.

(panel discussion)

PL: Well, pressured into it? Keating's personal baby?

PM: That's called leadership. That's what leadership is about - getting a country a choice, and that's what is involved here. The choice is to be exercised only by a majority of voters, in a majority of States, and a majority overall. I mean, the first person who spoke [in the panel discussion] talked about "Keating's cronies". Well, the "cronies" are the Australian people - they are the only people who can carry a Constitutional change. There's no way the Constitution can change, other than by a referendum provided for in the current Constitution.

PL: There seemed to be a belief in that statement that you and your cronies would be choosing this head of state, as distinct from the idea that they wanted to choose this person themselves?

PM: No. I thought more that the question was put "what difference does it make - he and his cronies are choosing?" Well, for a start, the public alone choose this, in the most democratic of acts, across the country - have a singular decision to make it, the point a referendum is put.

That referendum will be some years from now, so some of these concepts will be much better understood. But when it is put, then there will be a process whereby a head of state will be selected. That head of state - it would be my wish - that head of state is not a political person. But, if it is, by the way by popular election, it has to be a political person, because the candidate on the Labor side would be chosen by the National Conference, or the Executive of the Labor Party, and the same would go for the Coalition. Now, it is not necessarily to say that they would win, but both parties have demonstrated a capacity to out organise anyone else that has come along. So, if people want a non-partisan, if you like, non-political head of state of the kind of the last, say, numbers of Governors-General - Sir Zelman Cowan, Sir Ninian Stephen - then the proposal that I have put on behalf of the Government is the best way of getting that.

PL: There does seem to be some discomfort about appearing to reject or deny the Queen, who, of course, has wide respect in the community?

PM: That's true. But somebody said "the Queen is not seen by anybody as representing Australia" - well, that is exactly right. That's part of the problem. When the Queen travels abroad, she travels as Queen of England, and the Monarch of Great Britain. She never travels as Queen of Australia, other than to Australia. So, if the Queen goes to Europe or North America, she doesn't go there as Queen of Australia, she goes as Queen of Great Britain. But if an Australian head of state were to go to Asia or to Europe - the same as we have seen in Australia [where] the Irish President, or the German President come here - the whole embodiment of the country comes with them. And that's the point, we lose that opportunity. When Governments or Prime Ministers or Ministers travel abroad, they are there to represent Australia and do the business, but they are not there to embody the nation the way in which the head of state is able to do.

PL: All right. Let's go back to school for a few minutes. According to the opinion polls, Australians overwhelmingly prefer to elect the proposed President directly. It's one issue on which nearly all politicians agree to disagree with their electors. The students of James Ruse High School and their parents are no different. As Andrew Olle found, they seem to be deeply suspicious of politicians.

(panel discussion)

PL: Well, what happens, if at the end of this whole process, you find the people still saying we want to make this a direct election?

PM: Let's wait and see. The Government has put a proposal down and we have put it down for good reasons and that is that ... you can see by those comments Paul, people are saying they are suspicious of the political process. One person there insisting that politicians are not

to be trusted et cetera. But, there are in the Parliament roughly 200 people representing the constituencies of this country. It is a very diffuse Parliament. Therefore it is a safe power. Diffuse power is safe power. That is why the representative nature of the House of Representatives and the proportional nature of the Senate, electing Senators for a state at large, gives the people of this country a system where no one is above it. The Prime Minister is not elected Prime Minister by the people, but appointed by the Parliament, by the Caucus. That is why the Government is saying don't elect a head of state, that is not the preferred model because to do it you lose that diffusion of power and you have one person only who becomes - one person - who becomes the embodiment of the nation and is potentially vested with substantial powers.

PL: Far more political clout than the Prime Minister of the day?

PM: Well, if you have an elected President and you were not to seriously delineate the powers, you would have a complete change of government. You would have a French presidential style system on your hands and the power would move from the Westminster style Cabinet and Prime Ministership and Parliament to that single person, because that person would be the only person in the system who is elected to it. I don't know whether it is generally understood. On election night 1993, I wasn't elected Prime Minister, I was elected Member for Blaxland. I was appointed Party leader at the subsequent meeting of the Parliamentary Party which had a majority in the House of Representatives and I was appointed Prime Minister by the Governor-General. I could be unappointed. Ministers could be unappointed. Opposition leaders could be unappointed. In other words, one has to be relevant and at the same time there is a test on you perpetually. But once one person and one person only is popularly elected across the nation for, say, a five year period, they are beyond the reach of the community and the power will gravitate from the representative system we now have to that person.

PL: And you can only get rid of them by a vote of two-thirds of the joint sitting of Parliament.

PM: Well, if they were elected you couldn't be rid of them other than through a process of impeachment. As President Nixon had to ...

PL: Does this mean that we really ought to be writing down these powers, spelling them out and isn't it really a political problem rather than a legal one? If we sat down with goodwill couldn't Australians do this in a weekend?

PM: No, I don't think so. Can we do it in a weekend? No. Could we do it? Possibly, but you then have to understand, Paul, that we are writing for the next 100 or 200 years, could you and I, in our crystal ball, see what

contingency may arise, that some person in the system should have power to address. I don't think it is necessarily a bad thing that that power exists.

PL: But if they are not explicit, don't you become vulnerable to what Professor Donald Horne has called the 'Queen Mother of all scare campaigns'?

PM: I don't think so, no, because that is why we have proposed, last night, that by providing some of these powers, not written, in other words, reserve powers to the head of state, but where the source of the power comes from the two Chambers of Parliament. No head of state can wander around saying 'I am here by virtue of being blessed by hereditary monarchy' or 'I am here, by the grace of God go I'. It is only by the grace of the House of Representatives and the Senate and the House of Representatives and the Senate can unmake them. In other words, there is a limited basis and source for the power, but there is a substantial useful power there. But, if it is abused, they can be unmade.

PL: And you can't be a candidate if you have been a politician within the previous five years. Does that really, do you think, rule out the prospects of President Keating?

PM: Well, it certainly rules me out. I have always, in this, ruled myself out. This is not about me and it never will be. I would never ever contest such a post however it was available. But, the important thing is, I think, what we are seeking in the proposal that I have put on behalf of the Government is basically people who have served the community with distinction and who can enjoy the support of both major parties, but there is no doubt as one of the younger members of that audience made clear, if that person is elected you will have election campaigns for President, just like you have in the United States and it is pounds to peanuts that a politician will win. Whereas under the proposal that I have put on behalf of the Government it will be a Ninian Stephen or a Zelman Cowan or someone of that variety.

PL: Prime Minister, thanks for your time.

PM: Thank you, Paul.

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