



PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING MP INTERVIEW WITH FRAN KELLY, ABC RADIO 'AM', 8 JUNE 1995

Unedited version

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- FK:** Prime Minister, a minimalist position is the position you have put tonight, is that a concession then that what we now have actually works and doesn't really need to be changed much. Why bother if all we are doing is a minimalist change?
- PM:** Why bother is, it is entirely inappropriate that the Australian head of state should not be an Australian person. As I said last night, that person should be one of us and only an Australian can represent the aspirations of our people, of our nation and that it is, in the long run, intolerable for us to be represented and to have as our head of state the monarch of another country.
- FK:** You say that, but what is the pressing need for change? Most people in their daily lives wouldn't think, gosh we must have an Australian head of state.
- PM:** It makes us stronger. It makes us stronger as a country to know that we are independent in all respects including this one. That we are more complete. That we are more unified and that as a people we engage the rest of the world knowing exactly who we are and what we are. These things are tangible and real and it just has to change and what we propose the minimalist proposition proposal is not a concession, it is practical. What it is saying is our system of Government has worked, we don't want to change the system of government, but we do want to change the head of state and this is how we might do that, but still maintain the benefits that we have enjoyed from the system that we have developed.
- FK:** As you spoke last night, some members from the Opposition kept calling out 'yes, isn't Bill Hayden doing a good job. Yes Bill Hayden is

doing a great job'. What is the problem with the job currently being done with the Governor-General, isn't that in essence, doing the same job that you are proposing this person to do?

PM: But, the Governor-General in representing the Queen of Australia in, and in all practical respects, the Queen of Great Britain can never no matter who is Governor-General, represent Australia adequately. It is one of the reasons why, frankly, the Governor-General rarely travels because you might remember just a year or so ago, the Governor-General was going to some particular country, and the Government of that country rang the British Foreign Office to see whether they should receive him. I mean, what a disgrace.

FK: If we could just look at some of the essential parts of the plan you outlined last night. One of the key pieces of it that will attract a lot of attention is the proposal that says no popularly elected president. Why not?

PM: The answer is, that in our system of Government, the most democratic institution is the diffuse power of the House of Representatives. The diffuse democracy, representative democracy, that we see at the House of Representatives where every member of Parliament is elected from a constituency where they go home at weekends and relate to it, where they have an electorate office and where you see the great public issues come and go, where the parliamentary system responds to it, whether it be the preservation of our forests or Aboriginal health or whatever the issues you have seen in this last year, the Government respond to, change its position because we are all out there in a representative system feeling our way with our democratic process. But, if only one person in the system is elected and aggregates substantial power to that position the whole system changes. The House of Representatives is diminished.

FK: So, what you are saying is they have more votes than say the Prime Minister?

PM: No, no, not more votes just that diffuse power is better and more trustworthy for the country. More effective, more practical, more reliable, more sound than one person. That is one person being the embodiment of the nation invested with great powers. So, if we are going to vest considerable powers in such person, the source of the power should be constrained. That is why the Government accepted the Republican Advisory Committee Report's recommendation that the House of Representatives and the Senate sitting in joint session, should by two thirds majority elect such person.

- FK: Is there a danger in that position though for you electorally because it immediately alienates the 75 per cent or more people who currently say in the polls that they want to elect the president?
- PM: No, I don't think so because they say that when asked: "do you want to elect a president?" 'oh, yes'. But if you say to them 'well look, you realise if you elect such person that the whole system of government changes'. You see, I am the Prime Minister, but I was not elected Prime Minister by the public at large. I was elected Member for Blaxland. I was chosen by my party as the leader and appointed by the Governor-General to be Prime Minister. I was not elected Prime Minister and I could be unelected tomorrow morning. In the same way, for instance, as my predecessor Bob Hawke was or his predecessor. The same with Ministers. In other words, there is no one above the system, larger than the system, so larger or so far above it as to actually change it. As to make this representative democracy impractical or do substantially shift the power from the executive and the Parliament to one person.
- FK: You mention in your plan it would need a two thirds Parliamentary majority to elect the President. Some of your opponents have already pointed out the fact that Malcolm Fraser was only one vote off that in 1975 and it could be the case that we have a two third government majority.
- PM: Well, if he had a majority of two-thirds in 1975, he was entitled to say who the person was. I mean, if the Liberal and National Parties...
- FK: So it could be, in fact, if we had a Government majority of two-thirds that could just then go ahead and appoint the President of their wish?
- PM: Just like Prime Minister's in the past have exclusively appointed Governors-General by proposing to the Queen a certain person. Well, technically, the Queen appoints the Governor-General, but on the nomination of the Prime Minister. But frankly, if a party had two-thirds - but you understand, there has never been a case in the post-War years when any party has had a two-thirds majority.
- FK: One vote off though - that's pretty close.
- PM: Well, if Malcolm Fraser was one vote - in both Chambers - from a two-thirds majority, and he had let's say, 2 more votes, in my view he is entitled to make the nomination. I mean, what's so terrible about that?
- FK: You have also dismissed the idea of a people's convention - it's a notion that will sell well in the community - it sounds good.
- PM; Yes, but it's a fraud - you understand, it's fraudulent? Because the convention can't initiate the proposal. Under the Constitution, there is

only one place of initiation, and that's the Parliament. There is no power under the Constitution for a convention. You see, this is not the 1890s - when we had a convention in the 1890s, in the 1890s the convention's were the initiating body. There was no Constitution, there was no Commonwealth of Australia, and there was no Parliament. But now there is a Constitution, there is a Commonwealth of Australia, and there is a Parliament. Under that Constitution, only the Parliament can initiate referenda. So, that's why all of the Constitutional conventions have failed - they can only be, at best, advisory, and you heard what Mr Howard said, cynically, and his predecessor "oh yes, we would have a convention", "but Mr Howard, would you adopt that which the convention says?", "oh no, no - not necessarily".

FK: But it also allows Mr Howard to say that they would give...

PM: What do they think they are coming at?

FK: They say it gives them the opportunity for the people to have the Constitution they want, rather than the republic Keating wants? That's a very powerful line out in the electorate, isn't it?

PM: No - it's not a powerful line at all - it's completely fraudulent. The people - the greatest expression of the democracy of the people is by referendum. I mean, the people are quite conscientious about this thing - they know that their power is in the ballot box. They know that it is entirely their choice - you can't have a republic, or any other constitutional change, without securing the support of a majority of voters, in a majority of states, and a majority overall. So, it is the most democratic operation. But, a so-called people's convention - what, a state Government sending 10 MP's? Or a collection of their community interest groups? I mean, they are - of their essence - elitist. They are not people's conventions, and they never were.

FK; Well, you emphasised in your speech that their would be widespread public consultation...

PM: Indeed.

FK: Is that an attempt to offset this criticism, or this line...

PM: No - just to listen.

FK: ...that a people's convention is a more democratic way of going?

PM: I have demonstrated, I think to you, categorically, that it is not democratic. Because, for a start, under the Constitution, its decisions can't be implemented. What's democratic about that? What can be more democratic than a referendum and a vote by the Australian people...

FK: Well, after widespread.....

PM:just a sec, if the Government is then prepared - as it has been - to propose a model, and has listened now - after having the Turnbull Committee produce a report and adopted its principle recommendation - if after having done that - and remember that Committee did consult very widely, and was made up of a representative group of people, a couple of people who are members of the Coalition, Constitutional experts etc - in the course of the period between now and when a referendum is put, the Government will listen to community opinion. I mean, there is no doubt in my mind that the presentation of these proposals yesterday fall on much more receptive ears than say 18 months ago. There is no doubt that the vat is maturing.

FK: So you think the debate is happening out there in the community?

PM: We have got wine in there - we mightn't have Grange Hermitage, but we have got wine in there. And what we had was grape juice, 18 months or two years ago. I mean, the community opinion is forming, and maturing, and therefore I think they will receive these proposals well, and the Government will pay due regard to the shifts in opinion about this, just as it did, say, recently, on things like the timber industry, or the environment, or aboriginal health. In other words, we will be listening, and talking - but remembering that the Parliament is the initiating body of a referendum.

FK: Well, how much change would you wear to this plan, then?

PM: It's not immutable, and we will listen to what people have to say. But if, for instance, what the Coalition says - that we want to bog it down in an elitist Constitutional convention which has no powers, and for which they say will not accept the decisions of such a convention - because John Howard is utterly indecisive and into obfuscation. I mean, it's a very simple question, just by the way. The question is should an Australian be the Australian head of state? It's not a complex question.

FK: Isn't the next question - it is complex?

PM: Just a sec - why can't he say yes or no? I mean, I think what John Howard has to tell us tonight is where he stands on the simple question - does he believe an Australian - one of us - should be our head of state, or not? If he says, "I believe in a convention which discusses, I believe in the current Constitution, and I believe in a convention which will discuss the powers of the Senate, the external affairs power", you know that he has basically passed the parcel - he has copped out. But he is, completely and totally, indecisive. Now,

that's why, in this country, nothing happens unless the Labor Party gets it cracking, and we have done this again with the republic.

J: But are you being slightly less honest here by saying the only question is should we have an Australian head of state? Isn't the next question one that is going to cause quite a lot of confusion potentially, what will the powers of that person be? Don't we need to codify them, shouldn't we write them down?

PM: No, what we will say in the Constitution is that most of the things the Governor-General does now each day, the President of the Commonwealth of Australia will do on ministerial advice. There will be only those very few matters on those very rare occasions where these so called reserve powers have to be used. And let's take the history, we are five years off from the century and only once in the century has there been any controversy over these powers and that was in 1975.

J: In 1975 it was quite a vicious and divisive controversy ...

PM: And it was resolved.

J: Why are you allowing that situation to emerge again?

PM: Well because you can't get agreement about writing these powers down. I mean, you are saying why would I allow that? If I said to John Howard tomorrow morning that the President of the Commonwealth of Australia was not entitled to dismiss a Government, who could not guarantee supply through the Senate, he wouldn't agree. And, therefore, there will be substantial disagreements about these things. Better to leave the power on a contingent basis and it is I think no bad thing that in this country for the next 100 or 200 years, and that is what we are thinking of, that there is a power there because to try and write them down, how can you foresee what the powers might need to be? But let's make sure that the source of the power, that is the election of the head of state, is from the representative chambers - the House of Representatives and the proportional power of the Senate - and that way, nobody is walking around the system saying "I am the deputy of an English monarch, I am hearing voices from God, I have a higher duty". They are really getting the power from those chambers and that power can be taken back by the same two-thirds majority.

J: Talking about hearing voices of God, there are those who are opposed to your plan, who think that that is how you want to set yourself up and you want to do more than just a republic. You want to change the powers of the Senate, reduce the powers of the Senate, change the powers of the State.

- PM: Well I made it very clear last night that none of that is in the Government's proposal. I mean it just a matter of record. The Government's proposal doesn't go to any of those matters and you might know that in the speech I referred to the report of the West Australian Parliament, under the current Coalition Government of Western Australia, which looked at the minimalist option and said that it in no way changed the nature of the relationship between the Commonwealth and the States. So, in the end, red-herrings - sure, opponents of this will drag the red-herrings out, but they won't last a day those red-herrings.
- J: Mr Keating what do you say to those Australians who passionately don't want a republic, passionately are devoted to the English monarchy? What do you say to those people if they do get left behind?
- PM: The first thing I would say is, I understand very well the basis of those sentiments, but it can never be right that the Australian head of state is the monarch of another country. It must be an Australian person, it must be one of us.
- J: Does it mean, though, that we now hate Britain, that we now don't love the Queen?
- PM: But you are not entitled to ask that question when you saw the sentiments I expressed last night about our British heritage, the strength of the Parliamentary system that we have had from it, our affection for the Queen and our links with Britain, both in peace and war, Prime Minister Major's recent view of a year or so ago, that we should have a modern relationship. These are all things that I heartily endorse. I mean for my part, I have a very good relationship with Her Majesty and I wrote a letter to her yesterday, covering the speech, indicating to her that some of the proposals there were things that I discussed with her at Balmoral.
- J: Mr Keating, just finally, where does this process go from here? How, in your words, do you get this, turn this, into Grange Hermitage?
- PM: Well, I think, now there is a set of proposals. You see if you just go back a little bit, after the Republican Advisory Committee Report came down and I said a few things about it and a couple of other Ministers did, people said "oh look the politicians should stay out of this, leave this to the public, leave it to a public debate". We said okay, right. A year or so down the track, we have had Mr Turnbull and others coming out saying "what is the Government doing about our Report? It is time they responded." In other words, they needed a Government proposal. Well last night they got one and that Government proposal will now see the third stage of the debate. The first stage was the presentation by me, in the policy speech in 1993, saying that the

Labor Party believes we should have a republic before the turn of the century. The second stage was the commission of the Republic Advisory Committee Report. The second stage debate, finished last night. That was the beginning of the third stage. A set of proposals from the Government. Now there will be a process of consultation and listening by the Government to see in which way those proposals might be varied and how and when the Government proposes a referendum.

J: And have you heard back from the Queen?

PM: Oh no I haven't and I wouldn't expect to. But not only courtesy, but appreciation demands that she be treated entirely properly and taken into our confidence.

J: Mr Keating thank you.

PM: Thank you indeed.

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