



# PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP  
INTERVIEW WITH ANGELA CATTERNS, TRIPLE J, 8 JUNE 1995**

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**AC:** In the Morning Show with Angela Catterns, and joining us now from the Lodge, to fill us in more on his vision of an Australian republic, is the Prime Minister Paul Keating. Good morning, Mr Keating.

**PM:** Good morning, Angela.

**AC:** What sort of person do you think should be President?

**PM:** Well, someone I think who commands the broad respect of the community, who can be the embodiment of the nation while ever he or she holds the office, and who can secure the support of the major parties.

**AC:** Why should the Parliament choose the President, and not the people?

**PM:** Because I think that were we to go to a popular election, the President would be the only person in the Australian political system who is popularly elected, and enjoying wide powers. You see, at the 1993 election - where people think I was elected Prime Minister, in fact I wasn't. I was elected the Member for Blaxland. I was elected a member of the Labor Parliamentary Party. It's the parliamentary party who chose me to be Prime Minister, and it was the Governor-General who appointed me. And that goes for the Ministers - they were elected to their seats, and they were chosen by the Caucus of the Parliamentary Party, and then appointed by the Governor-General. So, the system is at the moment diffuse - it is wide, and there is no one person enjoying the preponderance of power. But if you elect somebody who has an election at large, who is there for say 5 years, and who can't be - if you like - unelected, and who also enjoys wide powers, the whole system of Government that we have - of representative democracy, of people voting in their constituencies, of

MP's relating to their communities, of shifts in public opinion becoming very manifest and obvious on various issues as you see now - that will become a thing of the past. And we would go to a far more Presidential system, such as France, where basically, the head of government is the head of state, and a President can just bring on and dismiss Prime Ministers as they see fit.

AC: But won't leaving the choosing to politicians mean that they will choose a politician for the job?

PM: No - I think the opposite of that is true. It has been left to politicians now, and we have rarely ever chosen politicians for the job, other than those who have distinguished themselves. But what I said last night was that sitting parliamentarians can't run for office - can't be considered - nor can MP's who haven't retired 5 years earlier. The most likely - because you would have to get the support of both major parties - the most likely situation would be that you would get people like Sir Ninian Stephen, or Sir Zelman Cowan - people who have long periods of distinguished service to the public and the community, who can command the support of say in this case, the Labor Party, the Coalition or the minor parties - that's the sort of person you would get. But if you have an election, you will have the Labor Candidate for President, you will have the Liberal Party Candidate for President, and then you will have party election campaigns, and a party politician will win it, probably.

AC: Mr Keating, so your suggestion is that the President be chosen by a two-thirds majority of parliament at a joint sitting. John Howard and Lloyd Waddy both pointed out past examples of where one party held a two-thirds majority of both Houses, had a joint sitting been held - how could a President remain politically neutral then?

PM: There has never been a situation - since the War - where one party has commanded a two-thirds majority.

AC: But that's not to say it might not happen in the future?

PM: It may not, and somebody made the point that if Malcolm Fraser had won one more seat in 1975, that Party would have had a two-thirds majority. Well, if the Liberal Party was then able to command such wide community support then, it was entirely appropriate then that that support be reflected in the choice of candidate for President. You see, I mean that if they are really saying that all of the rest of the political system didn't even add up to one-third - in other words they had the two-thirds - why should the one-third decide - less than one-third - decide who is to be the candidate?

AC: What about the idea of having a referendum to determine how we choose the head of state, so that everybody at least has had a say?

PM: Well, the problem about that is that it's not a simple matter if, for instance, were we to decide to have a popular election, we wouldn't be in a position to leave the so-called reserve powers with that person. That is, were we to have a popular election, we would have to decide what powers the President had, compared to the current Governor-General. Now, under the proposal I outlined last night, they are the same powers. So, we are leaving quite substantial powers with the President, but we are saying the source on authority for the President is constrained by the mode of his or her election by the two houses of Parliament. But if it's to be a public election, where the president would be above the Prime Minister and the Cabinet and the Parliament, then we would have to seriously consider delineating the powers. That means, by Constitutional change, so there can be no simple referendum. Your question was why don't you let the people decide what the nature of the appointment is, but it can't be say popular election, or non-popular election, because to say popular election comes with a heap of qualifiers. But who says...who is to say what the qualifiers are? I mean, for a start the Liberal Party won't agree, and remember this - that every word, every dot point, dotted "i" and crossed "t" that goes to a referendum, has to go through the Federal Parliament. And then to be agreed, it has to be agreed by a majority of voters in a majority of States. So, in this one, you have got to be fairly sure the first time around that you have got an adoptable proposal. Because if you are not, the history of referenda in Australia is a very poor one.

AC: You said you would let each State decide if they want to have an Australian head of state. Couldn't that lead to a ridiculous situation where the Commonwealth might be a republic, but certain States still keep the Queen as their head of state?

PM: It would mean any State government that so decided that would have to run the gamut of public opinion. I mean, we would have the president of the Commonwealth of Australia and we would have the governor equivalent position in a number of States and then we would have somebody who was a representative of Queen Elizabeth the Second. Now, I think, most States, all States, would probably once the country decided to have a republic that they would quit on the idea. But you never know, but it would only last until the next Labor government came along and it would change anyway.

AC: Mr Keating, should we have the right perhaps as suggested by the Democrats to at least make nominations for our president?

PM: Well, the Democrats and the Liberal and National parties with this Government for instance, would have a right of consultation because it would be intolerable for a candidate to have the government of the day saying 'well look, we won't consult you, we will just propose at a joint

sitting your name, we won't consult the parties, we will just propose your name at a joint sitting'. What would happen is that person would be defeated. So, it will mean that the government of the day, if we are speaking of now, as Prime Minister I would need to approach the Coalition parties and the Democrats and say 'look, this is what we have in mind'. And so, that is the best form of consultation, I think. If they say 'oh no, we don't think that is the right person, will you come back with another person?' That is how a process like this would work. At the moment, the Prime Minister alone can at his or her nomination propose to the Queen the name of a person. For instance, as you know the current Governor-General is reaching the end of his term. Very shortly, I will open a process up with Queen Elizabeth about his replacement, but I have to secure no support from the Coalition or any other party. In this proposal it is a complete change. It would mean that the government's nominee has to have the support also of the other parties.

AC: What would the referendum ask in 1998 or 1999?

PM: It would be framed so as to competently make a constitutional shift to the republic. I don't think I am in a position now to give you the words, but the sense of it would be that the position of Governor-General would be removed from the Constitution and in place thereof the words 'President of the Commonwealth of Australia' and there would be a change to the Constitution saying that that person should act primarily on ministerial advice and it would be framed pretty much as I said last night.

AC: What is your reluctance about having a constitutional convention?

PM: Because they are basically just elitist and they are not the initiating body. You see, the Constitutional Conventions - nearly everyone in Australia who doesn't want to do anything says 'let's have a convention' because that is the great black hole of constitutional proposals. They are the dark holes of constitutional reform. They have nearly all failed since the war and we have held over a dozen of the things and as a consequence we have to face this fact: that we now have a Constitution - this is not the 1890s - in the 1890s the convention was the proponent of the Constitutional proposal. But once we adopted a Constitution and a Commonwealth of Australia, once we had the Constitution the Parliament and the Parliament only is the initiating body for a referendum. John Howard has been running around saying 'oh, let's have a People's Convention', but the greatest Peoples Convention is a referendum. We have got to get a majority of electors in a majority of States and a majority overall. There is the public expression, the democratic expression. But, to have a little elite group of 10 or 12 parliamentarians from each State, a representative sprinkle of the community groups, that is not a peoples convention, it is just an elite discussion group.

AC: But, if it transpires that that is what most Australians want, are you open minded about the way that this republic might come about?

PM: Want, in which sense do you mean?

AC: Well, if it transpires that during the debate now, that most people do want to have some kind of a convention, that they want to get together and discuss it more in more formal ways, are you open minded about they way it will come about?

PM: I don't think people will want to be in a ruse. That is, the notion that a convention can propose a constitutional amendment when it can't. Do you understand? We have a Constitution which says the only initiating body is the Parliament. So no convention and no party leader - not me, not John Howard, not anybody - can give a convention that power. The power only resides with the Parliament. You see when pressed ... you have got to read Mr Howard's text finely, ... someone said to him the other day - and certainly to his predecessor - 'does that mean that if you had a convention, you would then adopt the outcome of the convention?' 'oh, no, no, we would only take it as some advice to us. We wouldn't be under an obligation to actually put it into place'. In other words, what he wants is a talkshop. What he really wants is not to say where he stands. You see, I put the simple question to Mr Howard a number of times: does he believe an Australian person, an Australian, should be the Australian head of State? It is not a complex question. It is a very simple issue. He has a chance tonight to tell us. He is more likely to tell us, on his record of the last couple of days, he is more likely to tell us that he will have a constitutional convention which will discuss the Senate powers or discuss the external affairs power. In other words, he will do anything but say that he believes in the monarchy which is what, I believe, he still believes in. He believes in having the English Monarch as the Australian head of state and the only way he can dispel that notion of belief in that system is to say he stands for an Australian being our head of state.

AC: Mr Keating, how will you gauge public reaction and opinion and debate about your proposals. How will you keep your ear to the ground?

PM: You can tell with these debates, all of us, you are in the broadcasting business Angela, and you can feel the opinion change on your program you can talk to people, you can say 'look, that's going poorly' or 'that's going well' and if you look at the debate today, the ambient climate within which this proposal has been launched compared to, say, two and half years ago when I first mentioned it in the policy speech at the election. It is a completely different climate. And, what we are saying is from here to 1998 or 1999 which is a number of years away, there is an adequate opportunity to debate for the first time a set of proposals. Last night I gave the nation a set of proposals to debate.

Not just a waffly idea about a republic, but actually saying what the modalities of such a change would be. What the mode of such a change might be. What we will do is listen to the debate, hear what people say and cut our cloth accordingly. But, I bring you back to that central point, the only body in the Constitution able to propose a constitutional amendment is the Parliament. So, it must come back to the Government in the House of Representatives.

AC: Mr Keating, was that an exciting thing to do, to give that speech in Parliament last night? It was quite exciting to watch.

PM: I think it was a great pity, in a sense, that in the telecast the ABC completed it the moment I stopped speaking, because they wouldn't have seen the public galleries break out in spontaneous applause which was very surprising and pleasing to me. Normally the public galleries are very restrained in the Parliament, but as far as I could see, it was unanimous. There would have been 700 or 800 people there. So, it was a fair test, I thought, of whether the proposals in the speech were capable of engendering, as I have said before, a touch of excitement. I think, it probably did.

AC: Who do you think will be most resistant to change?

PM: I think John Howard. The reason I do is because I think he is a 1970s politician with a 1950's view of the world.

AC: Mr Keating, you said no former politician can run for five years after leaving politics if they were to run for the position of president. If you stepped down next year, that means you could be up for the post in 2001, is that an attractive career option for you?

PM: No, and I would never nominate for it, ever. Not ever.

AC: Why not?

PM: No, because, I think, this [PM] is the paramount political job in terms of the capacity to effectively change and reform an economy and society and I also don't believe that anybody so associated with a constitutional change like this should, in some way, exploit it or take advantage of it. So, for my part, I would never consider the position. This is not about me. This is about Australia being able to adequately represent the country we have become. The people we are and the clear notion that the head of state could only, really, represent Australia well when that person is one of us.

AC: Mr Keating, just finally, who do you think might be the last Governor-General, given that your model is accepted and goes ahead?

PM: That is something the Government has got to think about in the next few months.

AC: And assuming that there is an election before his term is up, might you take into account Mr Howard's views and wishes regarding who would be the Governor-General?

PM: If I asked Mr Howard or Mr Fraser in the last period of their office, would they desist from making an appointment of Governor-General or a legitimate appointment of that government within the capacity of that government, within the gift of that government. They would reject such a proposal out of hand. This is an appointment which the Government will soon have to put into motion. Normally, the protocols are that the Prime Minister starts to enter into a discussion with Her Majesty about six months before the appointment is made and the position changes and that period is coming up now and were Mr Howard to be Prime Minister and were I to ask him to delay this into the next Parliament, he would laugh at me.

AC: Mr Keating, thank you so much for your time this morning. It has been terrific to have you on the morning show.

PM: Good Angela, thank you indeed.

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