



PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP
INTERVIEW WITH PRU GOWARD, "DAYBREAK", RADIO NATIONAL
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PG: Mr Keating, Mr Howard makes the point that a referendum for a republic will only succeed if it has bi-partisan political support - how likely do you think that is?

PM: Well, I did hope that tonight John Howard would answer the essential question - does he believe an Australian should be the Australian Head of State? Now, if he had answered that in any way - if he had said yes, then we are in agreement and we could then sort out between us, at least, as political parties, how that might best be done. If he said "no, I believe Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain should be the Australian Head of State", we could have then made clear where both parties stood. What we had from him, in the event, was a discussion about some process. That is, whether he would have a People's Convention, and then he went on to tell us he would appoint half the people. So, he's not going to make it easy - he's not going to make it easy. He's opposed to an Australian being head of state, and he's going to rough it up - I think - in terms of having a debate about process, within which he discusses not only whether Australia should be a republic, but also the power of the States, Commonwealth-State relations, 4 year terms, external affairs power, and all the other bits and pieces.

PG: So in other words, so long as he refuses to take a position one way or the other, the republic is doomed?

PM: No. I just think that the Liberal Party has got to take another defeat before they come to their senses.

PG: So, can you win a referendum without Mr Howard taking a position?

PM: Mr Howard won't be the Leader of the Parliamentary Liberal Party if he loses the next election, and I think that's the key point. It will take another election defeat for them to understand that the well-spring of

Australian sentiment in favour of us being independent - truly independent in every respect - has to be satisfied, and it won't be satisfied by obfuscation, indecision by the Liberal Party.

PG: Now, do you agree, though, that the worst outcome for a referendum - as John Howard says, - would be a narrow win, or a narrow loss - this must be decisive?

PM: I think you can have a better gauge of that in a couple of years time. If we were having this discussion two and a half years ago, you wouldn't have given - probably - those in favour of a change as much chance as they have in fact had, and come as far as they have been able, in this time. In a couple more years, the debate and the mood of the debate, I think is going to change dramatically. And I think...you know, what I think is a pity - a pity for him, his Party, and the country - is that it's like pulling teeth out. You know, they have got to be dragged along to everything. They believe that the Australia Act shouldn't have been introduced. They believe that, you know, appeals to the Privy Council - that was a dreadful thing when that was dropped. Of course, all of these changes have now gone on unremarked, and no-one would go back on them. As no-one in fact will ever go back when we have an Australian Head of State.

PG: So you are saying that you think it will be, in the end, overwhelming?

PM: I think so, because how can we go on with our Head of State being the Monarch of another country, and yet try and say to ourselves seriously "here we are, independent, representing that sense of ourselves, you know, what we have become"?

PG: I guess what Mr Howard is saying, though, is that if you want an overwhelming result, you are not doing the debate a service by pushing it into a three year time frame - too much too soon?

PM: No. I don't think it is. And you see, there's another important point here too, Pru - the proposal I put last night was the minimalist change. That's the minimal change - that is, you virtually cross out the word Governor-General, write in the word President, the system of Government functions as it does now. What could a Convention do that is more simple than that? What a Convention could only do is something more complex than that, and that is what Mr Howard said tonight. He said, "what we ought to look at, too, is Commonwealth relations with the States, the external affairs power - it's been abused - 4 year terms" - having voted against that a few years ago himself. Whereas at the same time he says "oh, hang on - this proposal of yours is, you know, not going to be well understood". Yet, it is the most simple one - the most simple proposal. So, there is going to be no process which is more simple than this, because any other proposition must be more complex. I mean, if the head of state is to be elected, and the reserve powers codified - far more complex. You know, almost any other modality of change - any other mode of change - will be far more complex. Therefore, the notion that you have a

Convention which makes it simple and better understood is, of course, nonsense.

PG: So, in other words, you are saying you think that if you keep it simple, you can get it up in three years?

PM: Yes. And the important value in keeping it simple is that it doesn't change the relationships within our system of Government.

PG: Well, let's look at that because, of course, he argues that it will - that the reserve powers that you say can be just transferred to a republic, he argues are vested in the Monarchy, not in a person?

PM: This is a sort of, what I think is, essentially a silly argument. That there is some sort of mystical power - there is a mystic transfer, you know. Where, in fact, the Republic Advisory Committee report - which I have with me - covered the point, I thought, very well. It said, in discussing it, it had some proposed words. It had "the head of state shall exercise his or her powers, and perform his or her functions, in accordance with the constitutional conventions which related to the exercise of the powers of performance of the functions of the Governor-General". In other words, we say that expressly in new words to be inserted. And, let me just remind your listeners, that a similar provision was included in the South African Constitution in 1961 as the Republic Advisory Committee Report reminds us. Where it became a republic with the Westminster system and then it had this to say in their Constitution '... the Constitutional Conventions which existed immediately prior to the commencement of this Act, shall not be affected by the provisions of this Act ...'. In other words, those Conventions which existed while South Africa had the Monarch of Great Britain as the Head of State, those Conventions will not be affected by this change.

Now, as far as I know, Mr Mandela is motoring along quite well as President of the Republic of South Africa. He didn't need some mystical transfer from Westminster. That was just John Howard at his manipulative worst trying to put a red herring legal argument across the trail.

PG: But, of course, he says it George Winterton's, who is a republican.

PM: Yes, that is fair enough, but he did sign this report and in that report - he was party to the report - he might have also been party to the argument, but they suggest here that words '... the sort of constitutional provisions which might be included ...' Now, those words came from the acting Solicitor General, the Commonwealth Crown Solicitor who is our best, those words were his suggestion. So, we can all pull our lawyers out and say he says this and someone else says that, but in the end if Australia decides that the head of state shall have the same powers as the Governor-General formerly had and enjoyed and excised then we could do that.

PG: But, it is divisive isn't it. The community isn't yet set on a course, there is a range of views.

PM: I think they are very interested.

PG: They are interested.

PM: They are interested, I don't think it is divisive.

PG: There are a lot of people who still want to stick to the Monarchy.

PM: Yes, but that is an opinion. It is not division, I don't think. There may be some people who feel hot and bothered about this, but by and large, I think most people are interested and that is a good thing.

PG: But, I guess his point is that you can't have a divisiveness over constitutional changes because it is better to wait until you can have them.

PM: Yes, but that is the little implied threat. You see, unless you get us on side, Prime Minister, you won't get any change here. You are going to have to cuddle up and kid to us and by the way, we have got this black hole convention where this issue will get lost along with arrangements with the States, external affairs powers, et cetera. So, what do you reckon about that? And, I'm supposed to say 'oh, that is profound.' It is nonsense. All John Howard had to do tonight was provide just a modicum of leadership. All he had to do was say was say 'look ...

PG: Well, you call it leadership, he has shown his own leadership.

PM: No, no, he didn't show any leadership. Leadership would have been him saying (a) he was in favour of the retention of The Queen or (b) he was in favour of an Australian being head of state. Either position was a position of leadership on the issue. I think the leadership can only really be, in the national interest, that an Australian should be the head of state. But, he wouldn't even say that. What he came at was a colourless speech laden with cliches, about how it has all got to go to a Convention and when we got down to it, it was a convention half appointed by him. And, then just to make sure it was dripping with cynicism, he then said that 10 per cent of them would be young Australians between 18 and 25 years of age. Making certain in his model that not any of them would ever be, that he would never let any of those young Australians ever be the head of state of this country.

PG: How democratic is your proposal though? He says it is not, you offer no choice, it is either a two-thirds vote of Parliament for the head of state or nothing. Is he right that that will put people off right from the beginning?

PM: I think Jeff Kennett said it all very eloquently today when he said there is growing recognition, the issue is going to be resolved. Now, that will be done through a referendum and the public, each and every one of

us, will be able to make our own decision. That is the democratic act. It is not me saying it, it is the conservative Premier. He was asked 'Why do you think Mr Howard is supporting a peoples convention?' He said '... it is only going to be able to really express their personal views. They may argue they represent a greater number of people, but finally this is going to be decided by each and every one of us. A convention to me is just another committee ...' 'So, there is not much point calling out 400 people out of a community of 18 million, sitting them down saying 'now what do you think about that?'. In other words, what he is saying is the democratic expression, the ultimate democracy or democratic act is a vote we all get on this. There can be no greater strength than that.

PG: But arguing a referendum, that is the only vote we get.

PM: That's it. That's the vote that matters. But, to have a rinky dink convention, chosen half by a Coalition government and then sitting down and saying 'oh, we might discuss that republic, but we have got other issues to discuss as well, we'll make that item number five, after we go through the States and the external affairs power.' I mean, to use an old Australianism, he is not fair dinkum. He is not fair dinkum. He doesn't want to do this and he doesn't want to help and he is like every other conservative we have ever had. It could have been Stanley Melbourne Bruce up there saying that today or anyone else back in our history. It is like pulling teeth to get them to agree to anything.

PG: But, in the end, this is the big test as John Howard put it at the beginning of his speech - '... The system of government must produce unity, stability and tolerance', all of which we have at the moment. How can you better that with a republic?

PM: By making clear that we can never be the independent nation we believe we are when one of us is not our head of state.

PG: Prime Minister, thank you for your time.

PM: Thank you indeed.

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