



PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP
INTERVIEW WITH ANDREW DENTON 'PAUL KEATING UNPLUGGED',
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AD: That's a good start. Now I have seen you work a room before. You are very, very good at it. Does working a room come naturally to you? When you were a kid did you go to other kids birthday parties and walk out an hour later knowing you had the numbers?

PM: No, but I always had a sixth sense of who liked me and who didn't.

AD: Yes.

PM: I could always tell.

AD: How can you tell?

PM: Well it is just a, you know, maybe an aura, an idea you have. But you need it in public life. You need to be able to assess people quickly and also to enjoy them.

AD: When someone doesn't like you, how do you deal with that?

PM: Oh, well I try and do the best I can with them. Put them out of their misery.

AD: What, you kneecap them?

PM: No, make them feel more comfortable.

AD: Is power sexy? Is it a sexy thing?

PM: Well, I don't think so. It wouldn't interest a sexy fellow like you.

AD: Sure.

PM: But it is uplifting and exciting. It is uplifting and it is exciting, partly because it is a high wire act. It is always big issues with a lot of moment, always done mostly under difficult circumstances. So it is the ultimate high wire business and you can't be on the high wire and not be excited, or elated.

AD: I have a quote here from Neville Wran - former New South Wales Premier, Federal President of the ALP, as you know

PM: A great fellow.

AD: about what it takes to get to the top in politics. "To get there in the first place takes an enormous amount of tenacity and courage, the capacity to snap out of depression because it is a lonely life stepping over the bodies to get to the top. To get there you finish up covered in blood and shit up to your elbows. It doesn't vary anywhere. It is never easy. It is all hard." Does that ring a bell with you?

PM: Yes, it does. It is like an endurance test. It is like a marathon. I think the better analogy. It is like a marathon. But you can't keep running unless you have got something to run for. You know, you can't keep going unless you have something to run for. And, therefore, I don't really think you have to crawl over people, or in some way respond to that sort of frame of reference providing you keep running. But you can't keep running if you don't believe. If you are not a believer, you run out of puff.

AD: Is it as brutal as Neville Wran makes it sound though?

PM: It is perhaps during the mezzanine phase. You know what I mean?

AD: The mezzanine phase?

PM: That is before you have got to the first floor. That is where all the sorting gets, I think, brought on in earnest. Once you are at the first floor, it is a bit like coming to the top of the mountain. As you get towards the apex there are fewer places to go, fewer places to hide and it is all more obvious. So the selection becomes more automatic. But down at the base it is harder.

AD: So basically the higher up you go, the easier it is to clean the blood away because it just ...

PM: Yes, but it is not blood. It is, what should I say, easier to fill the intellectual vacuums.

AD: What does that mean?

PM: Well if there is a void there somewhere, you can fill it with somebody and move on.

AD: Are you often in touch with intellectual voids?

PM: I have got a whole range of them sitting opposite me every day.

AD: First one. This will be an interesting exercise in statesmanship tonight.

PM: You are a bad influence.

AD: I said nothing. I was actually wondering more about your own Caucus. Actually speaking of your fellow Ministers, when Barry Jones is on the line how do you get him off the phone?

PM: Don't get him on.

AD: Is that Labor Party policy now, don't get him on?

PM: Oh, no, Barry is okay.

AD: When he rings do you sort of scribble a note going "not here, not here"?

PM: I have done that, but not very often.

AD: What about Kim? Do you worry about his weight?

PM: Oh you were unkind to him a week or two ago.

AD: I think everyone is unkind to Kim at least once in their life. It is just part of the political cycle. Neville Wran describes it as you have to deal with depression because it is lonely getting to the top. Is depression ever anything that you have had to deal with?

PM: I have had bad times, but you have always, I think, got to believe you can slog it out.

AD: What is your idea of a harrowing experience that you have been through, moments where you realise oh don't touch that fence it is electrified?

PM: Well you have got to make judgements. For instance, one I made - if you like, the turning point in the last Parliament - was I said in the Parliament if Labor loses the election, we will pass the GST in the Senate and our mob went "ahh". And I thought oh they'll be right in a couple of minutes. But they weren't. They weren't right. They all had a Bex and a good lie down after it. The whole lot of them. I mean seeing a full Caucus having a Bex and a good lie down it is a moving sight.

AD: Yes. I just thought of Kim Beazley and Robert Ray lying down.

PM: Well you can always pick them out. And I thought did I call this wrong? But I was sure I didn't, you see? So the public thought this is getting serious, we are going to get a GST because if this other joker wins, this one will pass it and from that moment it became real - that discussion.

AD: Yes.

PM: And the moment that became real, the pressure came on Hewson and then the cracks started running through the stratas, you see what I mean? Whereas before I couldn't get the weight on him. But then the cracks started appearing in the stratas. So, you said what was harrowing, living through the little period until everyone decided it was a masterstroke and not a mistake that is the definition of harrowing.

AD: You didn't consult with them at all before you said this? The first time they heard it was when you stood up?

PM: Oh, yes. But if it is not spontaneous, it has no effect.

AD: Eisenhower used to say that a sense of humour is a part of the art of leadership. Do you ever tell jokes against yourself?

PM: Oh, yes, all the time.

AD: Oh do share.

PM: Well they don't come to mind.

AD: Well, no, I'll tell you what

PM: They are situation jokes.

AD: ... no, I will give you some thinking music.

PM: We will give you some tonight.

AD: [Denton humming "God Save the Queen"]. No, in what situation then? I mean, yes, it is hard to come up with jokes off the top of your head. In what situation?

PM: Oh, often with my staff I will say things which are self deprecatory.

AD: Well what would you self deprecate about?

PM: Well that is a hard question. I mean, again, they come up on the spur of the moment.

AD: You used to be a larrikin. You say this. You used to leap off the back of ferries and arrange for a mate to pick you up just when everyone

thought you were drowning. Which, in fact, could also be a political metaphor when you think about it.

PM: There is always someone there to pick you up.

AD: Always someone there to pick you up. Especially a mate in the New South Wales Right too.

PM: It is laden with mates.

AD: Absolutely.

PM: Wall to wall mates.

AD: I would presume in your job you don't get the opportunity to be a larrikin. I mean Malcolm Fraser apparently used to slip ice cubes into the pockets of people as a joke and well we loved him for that.

PM: Oh, yes, I wondered what it was actually.

AD: Because he didn't have pockets sometimes. I am just trying to get at what is the Prime Ministerial sense of humour.

PM: Oh, I have a great sense of humour. I am always a sucker for a laugh.

AD: Yes.

PM: Any friend of mine that makes me laugh is a friend of mine for life, basically.

AD: Really? Even if they are on the other side of the House?

PM: Oh, yes. You're in there with a chance, pal.

AD: Hey, hey, hey. We have said no body contact. Absolutely no body contact. I think he is trying to crack on to me. You have got to be careful.

PM: You're getting value out of those boots, aren't you?

AD: Yes.

PM: They will be with you in five years time.

AD: You're getting value out of those too.

PM: Yes, but these will wear out in 18 months.

AD: Well it depends whose head you have been kicking with them, really. If you pick soft heads or hard heads.

- PM: Where did you get those, at the sort of army surplus, is it?
- AD: We haven't found out much about your sense of humour, but we have discovered you are a foot fetishist. You like passionate people don't you?
- PM: I do. I love stars. I like people who are good at what they do.
- AD: What about passionate Liberals?
- PM: Well how can you be a Liberal and be passionate? It is a contradiction in terms to say I am a Conservative but I am passionate about it.
- AD: How has this happened though? How have we ended up with such an apparently tragic situation where all the people with ideas are on one side of politics and a bunch of people totally bereft of ideas are on the other?
- PM: Well it happens. I mean look at the Labor Party in the 50s and 60s, it was nowhere. Philosophically, it was nowhere. Now it is not that the individuals didn't have ideas then, or that individuals of the Liberal Party don't have ideas now. But, philosophically, in the 50s and 60s we were all over the place. They are now in that position.
- AD: Could I put to you your worst nightmare? John Howard dies tomorrow, you have to go to his funeral and say something nice about him. What would you say?
- PM: Well, no, I would say that he stuck by the ideology and the philosophy that he believed in. But, of course, I think that is all wrong for Australia
- AD: Yes, we know that.
- PM: at the end of the 20th century.
- AD: He has stuck by it passionately, would you say?
- PM: Dogmatically. There is a difference.
- AD: There is a difference. You can't mention John Howard without talking about the Parliamentary bear-pit and we have some examples of your work here. First of all, a couple of examples of you in full flight.
- (video rolls)
- AD: It seems to me that you really enjoy the theatre of Parliament.
- PM: I do because I like to think that all the incoming balls are coming in slow motion. So you say, is this one going into the Queen Elizabeth Stand? Is this one going into, you know, the such and such stand?

In other words, if you have got the mosaic right, every question is going to have a slot. Whereas if you don't have a mosaic it is just all happening rapidly around you. So, even though you don't have much time to prepare, you know what the argument is and where it fits and if they come particularly slow, you can get the rhetoric ready as well. A theatre, you know, a nice little touch.

AD: Whereabouts in the mosaic then does this particular performance fit.

(video rolls)

AD: Was that adlib or was that written. Was it like blgh, blgh, blgh?

PM: No I learnt that one in primary school. Everybody was out of step bar him. That was the point I was trying to make.

AD: In public perception, the word most thrown around about you is arrogance.

PM: I know that, yes.

AD: Does that surprise you?

PM: Well, I think they confuse pride in ones craft and getting the job done with arrogance. I mean, letting a good thing be knocked over is not humility. What has happened in our political system in most of the post war years is that politicians threw the pass. They threw the pass on all the big changes. Australia had become by the very early 1980s quite a relatively poor country in terms of its national income.

AD: I'm going to stop you there for one second. I don't want to go into that speech.

PM: No, no, but I just want to say this, that it became a poor country and people had thrown the pass on big policy changes. Therefore to get them through you have really got to have a big run at it and you have got to push hard. I think they confuse the pushing with arrogance rather than with pride in one's craft and getting it done.

AD: There may be some truth in that, but I think they also see a man who is verbally very brutal.

PM: Orally very brutal.

AD: Yes, orally and, of course, extremely linguistically pedantic. Let's not forget that, but also a winner, a man who desperately loves to be a winner which isn't a bad trait for most Australians, but you have pushed that through so forcefully, I think that is what they see as arrogance. Somebody that will never, ever, ever, ever back down no matter what the situation.

PM: Well, there is no prize for coming second is there?

AD: There is a second prize.

PM: That is the one we gave John Hewson at the last election. I think what the public need to know is when I do those things I am doing it for them.

AD: This will hurt you more than it will hurt them.

PM: No, when I push one past the system I am doing it for them because so many have not done it for years, who don't I think, have not had the conscientious regard for them that I hope I have. That I won't sponge on them or kid them. And if the price of all that is that some of the imagery gets scratched up along the way well, I don't mind that.

AD: How is it possible as Prime Minister to keep in touch with the battler? Is it a sort of remote sensing thing where members of your Caucus tell you about people they know who know real people or do you go straight to the source and have lunch with John Laws, how do you do it?

PM: He knows them!

AD: He does.

PM: He is one himself. Well, for a start, I lived for 40 years in Bankstown in Western Sydney. I grew up there and worked there, lived there and you end up with all of the frame of reference, mores, values of that community. I am a westie.

AD: You are a westie?

PM: I am a westie.

AD: Well, where are your ugh boots? Come on.

PM: I have got them on can't you see.

(video rolls)

AD: Do you sometimes feel awkward about the positions you are put in as Prime Minister?

PM: What happened was, we were standing there with this very interesting group of young people who were going off to the Skill Olympics and then there was this very strong beat of this song coming through and we were all standing there. Well, of course, I can't resist a beat so I had the feet going and I thought well, I might as well throw the lot in and then I brought them in.

- AD: So, old good time Paul was leading ...
- PM: A sing-a-long.
- AD: Yes, all right. Maybe it is just me, but you didn't look totally comfortable in that situation.
- PM: Have a look at the people next to me. I look more comfortable than them.
- AD: You have always championed Australian culture. Not since Gough Whitlam have we had a Prime Minister so allied to that sense of culture. And, you have championed the information super highway and we have seen the first three gleaming lanes of that open recently courtesy of pay television - Foxtel, Optus and Galaxy - which is essentially wall to wall American broadcasting with a token Australian representation. What benefit is that to Australian culture?
- PM: It may be at this point of its development, it may not be a development of Australian culture, but it will be a development to Australian services and information. The pay television is paying for the fibre optic cable. When Telecom slips the fibre optic cable under the door, which is going to bring with it all the interactive services, all the on-line services so when people have got their personal computers and they are really into creativity and interactivity, the thing that is going to facilitate that happening as a pay television service which pays the freight for putting the cable there in the first place.
- AD: I guess the reason I am puzzled and frankly depressed about the future prospects of Australia as an individual entity is that yours is the party and you are the man that is rapt in the flag. You actually have the flag as your logo and you have always been on the public record as being deeply committed to Australia and I don't think anybody could doubt your emotional commitment, yet on the other hand I see in a big picture sense national assets being sold off, American television swamping our own culture thanks to this new pay television and I, frankly, find it hypocritical.
- PM: No, we fought them. No, don't be too pessimistic. We fought the Americans in the Uruguay Round - the GATT - and the reason we did is so we would have the right to have our film industry. We would have the right to put content provisions into our free to air broadcasting. That we would have the right to have a somewhat protected film industry. Now, we have done those things, but Australian culture is not going to be decided by what comes down the pay tv channel. It is going to be decided by the sort of society we are, the faith we have in ourselves - one to the other - in our capacities and what we can do together and the belief that we have in the country.
- AD: I hope you are right Prime Minister. I hope that Australian children don't eventually see Australian history through American eyes. I don't

know if you saw how your office was portrayed on The Simpsons recently. Here is a sample.

(video rolls)

PM: Well, they have got some of it there haven't they?

AD: Would you like to move on from here maybe and lead a larger country?

PM: No, Menzies had that in mind you know. He thought the British Conservative Party might choose him over Churchill.

AD: Your wife has described you as a daydreamer. Do you get a chance to do that at all in your position.

PM: Yes, and that is a fair description because show me a good government and I'll show you a group of good ministers with good ideas. That sort of creativity can only come from putting the stuff together yourself so you have got to think.

AD: But, daydreaming?

PM: So, often I'll find myself at something and I'm thinking about something completely different. Annita will say to me, are you with us? Like, click, click, click, are you with us? I'll say yep, yep, but I wasn't. I wasn't. I was fibbing.

AD: Prime Minister, we are out of time. When you go home tonight, tuck yourself into bed in the jammies, are you going to sleep well?

PM: Not as well as I used to.

AD: What's the problem?

PM: Late night television programs perhaps. No I'll go home and do a bit of reading, have a look in on the kids, turn out the lights and hope we wake up to a good set of newspapers in the morning.

AD: Prime Minister, thanks very much.

PM: Thanks very much.

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