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PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER THE HON. JOHN HOWARD MP DOORSTOP INTERVIEW - SYDNEY

TOPICS: the Beasley black hole; Budget cuts; Aboriginal affairs

E&OE.....

PRIME MINISTER:

I'll take a couple of questions, but I just wanted to say something at the outset about the comments made yesterday by the Leader of the Opposition, Mr Beasley, about the Budget task facing the Government. Can I say that it really is a bit rich. It's extraordinary and it's about as presumptuous as you could possibly get for the Leader of the Opposition to start lecturing the Government about a problem which is entirely the making of the Labor Party. Let's remember that the Labor Party was in power in Australia for 13 years and we've now been in power for six weeks and the \$8 billion Beasley black hole which is our inheritance is a product of that 13 years, and the idea that Kim Beasley has any credibility morally or politically at the moment in telling the new Government what it should or shouldn't be doing is quite extraordinary and it's something that I reject completely.

I guess the only other thing I'd say is that in whatever decision we have to take over the weeks and months ahead, they will be done fairly and decently and in a balanced and considered fashion, and to the extent that there is difficulty and pain I want to see that fairly shared with the most vulnerable in the community being protected. I want people to understand that if there is any pain bill it ought to be sent to Kim Beasley because he was the Finance Minister who has really caused this problem for us. I mean, he had 13 years and we've had six weeks and the idea that he can read any lectures to us is something that I reject completely.

JRNLS:

You're standing by the \$8 billion figure?

PRIME MINISTER:

I beg your pardon?

JRNLS:

You're standing by the \$8 billion figure?

PRIME MINISTER:

I didn't know that there was any other figure to stand by. This is the information that was available months ago. I mean it was made available to me the day after the election. It was already in the blue book for the incoming Government. I mean, it's about as deceitful as you could possibly get, and for him to have the nerve and the gall and the temerity to start issuing lectures to the new Government about what it should or shouldn't be doing is something that most Australians, even those who voted for him, will find unacceptable.

JRNLS:

Mr Howard, you've met with the Commonwealth Ombudsman, Philippa Smith. Did she convince you that it's not a good time to cut the watchdog?

PRIME MINISTER:

I did meet her and I listened to what she had to say and I reaffirmed that the proposals that had been outlined to her would go ahead. The reduction in that area is proportionately no greater than the reductions that are in other areas and I heard what she had to say but it didn't alter the view that I put and I don't really have anything further to say.

JRNLS:

And what about to the national broadcaster? There are reports this morning that there will be cuts to the ABC. Does that contradict your election promise? Are there proposals to cut funding to the ABC and if so, does that contradict your election promise that there won't be cuts?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think you will find over the weeks and months ahead there will be reports in a whole lot of areas and I'm not going to, I think I said this some weeks ago, I'm not going to give a running response every day to each new report. Can I just repeat that I am determined that the decisions we make are fair, decent and that the difficulty, if there is difficulty, is fairly and evenly spread. I am also very conscious of the commitments that were made by the Coalition in the lead up to the election and I have always treated seriously commitments that are made by political parties in election campaigns but in the nature of the budget process you get a whole lot of speculation, a whole lot of

options on the table and I am simply not going to respond to each and every piece of speculation that may be flowing around.

JRNLSST:

Well on something that's not speculative, on the issue of Aboriginal affairs, New South Wales Anti Discrimination President Chris Puplick, he's noted a sharp rise in reports of attacks on Aboriginal people in recent weeks. Are you concerned that the rate of reform to ATSIC and to Aboriginal affairs might be unleashing racist reaction in the Australian community?

PRIME MINISTER:

I heard that interview by him and he specifically said that it was not the result of anything that the new Government had done so don't try and associate his remarks in relation to his concern..

JRNLSST:

Well he said he couldn't connect it to the reforms to ATSIC...

PRIME MINISTER:

No, I heard what he said and I don't think words should be put into his mouth, but let me say in relation to the changes to ATSIC that they are sensible changes which look to the interests of all Australian taxpayers. They are about accountability. They are not about unfair treatment and they are not about in any way encouraging intolerance or intemperate language or comment about any section of the Australian community. My views on that kind of behaviour are well known. I repudiate it. I find it repugnant no matter who is the target of the comment, and equally however, our determination to ensure effective accountability is strong and I note incidentally that Mr Beasley last Sunday said that he supported greater accountability. I found that a very interesting commitment from the Opposition Leader and it's a commitment that will continue to be repeated and noticed by the Government in the weeks ahead when we present legislation to the Parliament. If Kim Beasley believes in greater accountability then he'll have an opportunity to vote for greater accountability when the legislation comes to the Parliament.

JRNLSST:

On Telstra, with job cuts of up to 30 000, would that be desirable for the partial privatisation of Telstra?

PRIME MINISTER: (to another journalist)

I think we could have a question from this bloke over here.

JRNLS:

Have you widened the scope of the budget cuts to areas previously...

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, I am simply not, I said a moment ago that I am not going to spend every doorstep between now and the Budget responding to the latest piece of speculation. I have said that. That's my attitude and there will be an orderly, sensible process within the principles that I outlined a moment ago of fairness and decency and a desire to make certain that if there is any difficulty, that that is fairly shared in the Australian community with a particular concern to protecting the most vulnerable in our community, and finally, let me just say again that it's a problem that we have inherited in large licks from Kim Beasley. It's the Beasley black hole that is the cause of any pain that the Australian community will suffer over the weeks and months ahead.

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