



PRIME MINISTER

29 April 1996

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP PRESS CONFERENCE - PARLIAMENT HOUSE

E&OE.....

Ladies and gentlemen, I have called this news conference to say a few things about the dreadful tragedy in Tasmania. In common with all of my fellow Australians, I express a sense of shock and disbelief that such an enormous tragedy could have occurred. On behalf of the Australian Government, I express our sympathy to those left bereaved and there will be countless numbers of people around Australia and in other parts of the world that have been touched by this frightful tragedy. I want to say on behalf of the Federal Government that whatever assistance that the Tasmanian Government may properly stand in need in this circumstance will be available from the Federal Government. Senator Jocelyn Newman, the Minister for Social Security, who is also the senior Tasmanian in the Government is on her way back to Tasmania and will speak to the Tasmanian Premier about the issue.

I have been in touch with the Tasmanian Premier on several occasions already. I would like to go to Tasmania later this week to convey directly the concerns of the Federal Government, our condolences, to visit some of the injured in hospital. I have discussed this with the Leader of the Opposition, Mr Beazley, and I have invited Mr Beazley to accompany me when we go to Tasmania. At this stage I am planning probably to go there on Wednesday morning. It is difficult of course for anybody to properly convey the sense of disbelief and horror at an incident of this kind. It is certainly the worst example, the worst case of mass murder by an individual in Australian history, and perhaps in the history of the world over the last few decades and it is an occasion for people to reflect carefully, not to engage in knee-jerk reactions but equally to acknowledge that when a tragedy of this magnitude occurs it is not just sufficient, particularly for those in positions of authority, to shrug their shoulders and

to say, well, it's a tragic event but things of this kind, if there are people in our communities sufficiently deranged, are going to occur.

Inevitably there will be questions raised about gun control laws. I have discussed this already with the Attorney General and steps are under way for an urgent meeting of police ministers and it is hoped that that meeting will take place on Friday week. There had been one scheduled for later in the year, it is hoped to bring it forward to Friday week. I imagine as they reflect upon what has happened, Australians will be asking the question, how is it that what appears to have been a semi-automatic, military style rifle of which there are, on my conservative advice, tens of thousands freely available in Australia, how is it that weapons of this kind are still available and what earthly purpose is served by their free availability, and they are the sort of questions that have to be addressed. I hope they are addressed and for our part they will be addressed in a co-operative bi-partisan fashion.

As you know there are certain responsibilities of the Federal Government in an area like this they largely relate to importation, and there are also very heavy responsibilities for State governments. I have not come here today in any way to criticise anything that's happened in the past, either by the former Federal Labor Government, or by any of the State governments. It's not an occasion for the apportioning of political blame. It's an occasion to acknowledge to ourselves and to all of the Australian community what a dreadful event this has been. It has implications for the kind of society we have become, and we have to ask legitimate questions about the culture of violence that perhaps has brought about such an event. We have to ask ourselves questions about gun control laws, and perhaps as the antecedents of the person in custody properly unfold, perhaps questions about the functioning of some of the other medical and other services of our society. But they are things that have to be considered rationally and sensibly. We need a mixture of acknowledging, without qualification, the enormity of this in a country which has so long prided itself in a certain degree of freedom from some of the things that afflict other societies. We must acknowledge openly, and without qualification, the enormity of what has happened, and accept that things that we might previously not have thought even examinable should be examined, but equally to do it in a calm and deliberate fashion, and not to succumb to any knee-jerk response which in the calmer light of day may prove to be inappropriate.

Could I just say finally, by way of introductory remark, and I'd be very happy to answer questions, the Coalition parties had planned the beginning of session celebratory dinner tonight. I should inform you that that dinner has been cancelled, because it seemed to us to be entirely inappropriate to hold such an event on a day such as this.

JOURNALIST:

Mr. Howard, is there anything that the Federal Government can do unilaterally about gun control and the second question: what proposals will the Federal Government take to the Police Minister's meeting?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, we are developing some proposals, Peter. You ask me what can the Federal Government unilaterally do. Well, our main powers relate to importation, and obviously, there were a lot of steps taken by the former government in relation to that. I would like there to be the maximum degree of cooperation between the Commonwealth and the states. But let me remind you that it is an issue that I addressed in the first Headland speech I made, in which I said that although it was overwhelmingly a matter for the States, there was a leadership role in the Federal Government, and we intend to discharge that role to the full. I say that without seeking to raise, at this stage, criticism of the states. There is nothing gained in a situation such as this to start the dialogue from the point of view, well, we have done what we can do - it is now up to you to do the rest. That is not my approach. I will do everything humanly possible, and the Federal Government will do everything humanly possible, to get an effective tightening of the gun control situation in this country. It's a personal view I've had for some time, and that I've expressed. There are obviously legitimate sporting interests to be respected, but there is no legitimate interest served, in my view, by the free availability in this country of weapons of this kind. I think most Australians would find it absolutely unacceptable that weapons of this kind are available.

JOURNALIST:

They're all made overseas. Why not ban the importation?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, that has happened. This particular weapon ... the weapon I understand, and I have to qualify what I say only because the information I have is still a little meagre. But, I understand that the weapon that was used was probably a weapon that was manufactured in Australia.

JOURNALIST:

Mr. Howard, there have been similar calls for tightening gun control after similar tragedies such as the Strathfield Massacre. How important is it not to let the impact of this wane?

PRIME MINISTER:

It is very important, Lyndal, not to let it wane, very important - absolutely critical. And I don't intend to do that, but the constructive, productive way not to let it wane is not to start off by pointing fingers or apportioning blame. I mean, I offer no criticism of the former government's handling of this issue, and I will seek to the maximum degree possible to work with Mr Beazley in the Opposition to formulate a coherent Commonwealth initiative. Daryl Williams, who is with me, is already well advanced in the preparation of a quite detailed paper to put to the State Ministers when they meet on Friday week. I have no doubt that the enormity of this tragedy will register on the

minds of every lawmaker in Australia, and so it should, and that is responsibility for everybody.

JOURNALIST:

When you talk about a federal leadership role, as you did in your first Headland speech, can you see already room where the Federal Government can take a lead and can take the States with them, or is it all dependent upon you being able to get a successful dialogue with the States.?

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh, look, I have no doubt, Fran, that the States will understand their responsibilities. We won't be reluctant to discharge ours, but obviously, one sets out initially to do these things in a cooperative fashion. But at the end of the day, we have a national responsibility.

JOURNALIST:

Have you spoken to the other State leaders, and what was your general impression from speaking to the Tasmanian Premier about whether this has changed his view of gun laws?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I spoke to the Tasmanian Premier twice last night, and at that stage, we were coming to terms with the details of the tragedy. And look, he understands fully, naturally, he'll answer for himself, but he understands fully just how massive has been this tragedy. We didn't get into the detail, although we both agreed that we would have to look again-both of us-at the gun control situation in this country.

JOURNALIST:

We've heard words similar to this over many years, following massacres and tragedies, and nothing much has really happened. At this point, every State government in Australia except NSW is of your own political shade. Do you think, really, it is time for you to show some leadership by actually-rather than speaking cooperative words, such as cooperative-wouldn't it be time to actually start saying something has to be done, and you will have to do it?

PRIME MINISTER:

Tony, without gainsaying what I said a moment ago about working cooperatively, and recognising that there are certain constitutional powers that the Federal Government just doesn't have in this area but without in anyway gainsaying the need for cooperation, can I just gently point out it is only the day after the tragedy. For me to make a detailed statement of things that a Federal Government might do so soon after it would legitimately be criticised as having been prepared in haste. Let me make it very clear to you that I will not retreat an inch from the national responsibilities I have

in relation to this whole issue - not an inch, and at the end of the day the security of people, the protection of people - of Australians - the safety of Australians going about their business, enjoying themselves on a Sunday afternoon, that kind of thing is something that I regard as sacrosanct and I will do everything within my political and constitutional capacity to ensure that it is promoted. Now, don't ask me a few hours after the event please to spell out in detail what that might be. Equally, let us not at the beginning of a response to such a tragedy allow it degenerate into a name-calling exercise between the Commonwealth and the States or between Labor and Liberal. I do not want that to happen and I've made it determinately clear that I will work in a cooperative fashion with the Federal Opposition and I will work in a cooperative fashion consistent with my national leadership responsibilities with State Governments of both political persuasions. To do that effectively I need the cooperation and the understanding of the media as well.

JOURNALIST:

What's stopping you moving to ban the importation of...

PRIME MINISTER:

These particular weapons were banned on my advice in 1991 by the former Government and I compliment them for doing that.

JOURNALIST:

In the area of gun laws where you think something needs to be done, or earlier you said that you thought things not thought examinable should now be examined. Were you talking about that in relation to gun laws or are there other areas of government...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I certainly had that in relation to gun laws - yes.

JOURNALIST:

Are there other areas of government policy...

PRIME MINISTER:

I also went on to say that, I mean, I don't know the antecedents of the person and there is an ongoing debate in this country about treatment of certain kinds of illnesses and so forth. I simply say that when something of this magnitude has occurred, responsible policy makers ought to be willing to put things on the table that have not previously been put on the table and the last thing people should do is immediately retreat in defence of their domains, their prejudices and their commitments.

JOURNALIST:

Can I ask you as a parent rather than Prime Minister, how you think such an appalling event such as this might effect particularly children who see television news broadcasts or read their newspapers, but also the Australian society in general, the randomness of the violence of it all.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, speaking as an individual, as a parent, as well as a Prime Minister, I worry myself about the mind-numbing repetitive violence in some of the material we see on television. I also of course, as a believer in personal liberty and individual choice recognise that drawing the line in areas like that is always a very difficult thing, but I think, I can't help thinking as a layman in these matters and I guess to have the ordinary human reaction - I don't have any qualifications in criminal psychology - I just react as an ordinary layman, I find it hard to believe that these sorts of things don't create, or don't contribute towards what I think Cardinal Clancy in his Easter address, or his Christmas address, I forget which, describes as the development of cultural violence in this country and all of these things, I mean we are the sum of our parts and all of these things do make I'm sure over time a contribution. Now, where that leaves policy makers and where that leaves Governments is a very complicated thing, but you asked me a very natural question and I'll give you a very natural answer. Now, once again I don't seek in any way to apportion political blame in relation to that but it's the sort of event that should make all of us reflect upon the kind of society we have - and I don't mean that in a negative sense. I mean there's so much that is positive and decent about Australian society that the random cutting down and murder of people engaging in such an innocent pursuit as visiting a tourist attraction on a warm Sunday afternoon is pretty horrific in modern Australia, is something which most of us grew up to believe couldn't happen here.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, do you think in trying to get tighter control over guns that it's necessary to try and get some the guns out of the community rather than just controlling imports of point of sale domestically and if so is that possible?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, the answer to the first question is yes, and the answer to the second question is it ought to be, but difficult. But you are right, the problem is availability. As I understand it, the suspected assailant had no gun record at all, was unlicensed, and the problem is, these damn things are available in their tens of thousands and that of course is a problem, and even if you block off the importation, and I repeat again, my advice is that this particular type of weapon has not been possible to import since 1991.

JOURNALIST:

So you are dealing with sort of a black market of guns?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, yes, yes you are, but you know you have to I guess examine whether you shouldn't create greater incentives - now, I mean that very deliberately - for their surrender.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, have you given any thought to whether it's quite possible for the Commonwealth to have a framework instead of looking at those other reflections of the, you mention the cultural violence, the functioning of other services? If they're such formalised...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well Michael the answer is no, I haven't given any formal thought to that. I mean, I am, like anybody else, I am reacting as a human being first and my reaction is as I explained it to Malcolm and I will obviously give some thought to that and I don't want those remarks of mine which were totally candid as to how I feel, I don't want those remarks to be construed as necessarily portending this or that approach. But when you have something as horrific as this and something which is going to shake this nation to its core, you really do have to ask those sorts of questions and it is something that everybody who has a capacity to influence public opinion must ask as well.

JOURNALIST:

What kind of greater incentives are you talking about?

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh look, I don't at this stage wish to get into that. I used the expression, incentives, in its most generic sense, not in a limited political sense, but in its most generic sense.

JOURNALIST:

You said Mr Williams has been working on a paper, can you just tell us what the genesis of that is and how far advanced it is and what...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, Mr Williams may want to say something about that.

WILLIAMS:

The paper is considering a range of issues, and we're going to include in it the possible system of national registration of guns. We're going to put that on the agenda fairly and squarely. But there's a whole lot of other things that will be taken into account including from the point of importation to the point of ultimate use, and affecting all

the sorts of uses that are recognised as legitimate, like sporting shooting, like military gun clubs and like use in work such as in farmers.

PRIME MINISTER:

This will be the last question, I then must go to a Party meeting.

JOURNALIST:

You said you believed that this weapon was openly manufactured. Will the Commonwealth examine either using its defence powers or environmental powers on the manufacture of these sorts of weapons.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, my advice is that it was manufactured some time ago and these weapons are no longer manufactured but of course they remain in circulation for some time and I think in a sense, actions previously taken would have responded to that observation of yours but if they haven't we will obviously look at whether they should.

Thank you.