



PRIME MINISTER

6 May 1996

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON. JOHN HOWARD MP
THE 7.30 REPORT**

E & OE:.....

O'BRIEN

John Howard, of those decisions that you took today that relate directly to the states and the need for co-operation from the states, what is your bottom line? Are any of these points that you have decided negotiable?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think as a matter of broad principle, no they're not but at the end of the day the states at the moment have the constitutional power but Kerrie, I am hopeful that in the climate of very sober and profound reflection that's gone on in Australia over the last week the states will see the wisdom of what I've put forward and to be fair to them, if you look at some of the statements over the last few days, I think the state leaders have been very positive and very helpful, and I've tried very hard to quarantine this issue from the normal political bi-play because it is an issue that's gripped the Australian community in a way that none that I've experienced in 22 years in politics has gripped us.

O'BRIEN

There are still some areas of potential difference though. How important is it that you have a national gun register as opposed to a gun register that individual states...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well providing it cumulatively provides an effective system of national registration, in other words the principles have got to be the same in each states, it doesn't really matter who's got the power as long as the law is strong, the prohibitions are effective,

the register is revealing and you bring about a change in the attitude of the community. This is not an exercise in grabbing power for one or other jurisdiction. It's more important than that and I think...

O'BRIEN

So in fact the states would end up policing it in each state anyway but what's important to you is that it is a uniform register in the way it is compiled.

PRIME MINISTER:

Of course.

O'BRIEN

Okay. You also seem to have a very strong conviction that all semi-automatic weapons should be banned.

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes I do.

O'BRIEN

Including the small bore or .22 calibre semi automatics?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes.

O'BRIEN

Now why is that important to you when you compare your views to the arguments of say, Western Australia which says, look thousands of farmers use them? They're okay?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well where do you draw the line, and the view that we have taken, and I concede that it's a view that will cause a lot of inconvenience to tens of thousands of law abiding people and I in a sense apologise for that but there is a national need. The view that we have taken is that it's the rapidity with which a weapon can be fired as well as its power that's important and we've drawn a line between automatic and semi automatic and other weapons that require repeater rifles and some kind of physical action in order to reload them. We've drawn the line there. Now people will argue with that but if you let in some semi-automatics, you'll have a far greater problem in keeping other semi automatics out. I mean, the dividing line between semi-automatics and others is far clearer than the dividing line between one class of semi automatics and another, so

the argument that you ought to let in the low powered semi automatics falls over when you are met with the request of people who have got more high powered semi automatics well, if you're letting in that category of semi automatics, why don't you let in ours, and I find that argument very convincing.

Now I repeat, it's going to affect a lot of people. I am particularly conscious that some people in the rural community will find that inconvenient and that's a group of people who always in my experience consider the national interest. I am sorry about that, deeply sorry but we are going to have a proper compensation proposal during the amnesty period and I hope that will be seen as an acceptance by the whole community of the cost of this very profound change. I mean, we have an opportunity in tragic circumstances to reverse a culture, to change an attitude, to not go down the path that the United States has gone down. I mean, I would be horrified as a citizen of this country to contemplate that we might have in 20 or 30 years time the level of gun violence in this country that exists in the United States.

O'BRIEN

Okay. So I just wanted to clarify that you are immovable on that issue - all semi-automatics as far as you're concerned?

PRIME MINISTER:

That is our policy, yes.

O'BRIEN:

Okay. Are you asking state governments to come on Friday prepared to reach agreement on the day? In other words, you would be disappointed in the least if they walked away without some finite conclusion?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I'm not trying to set an exam on Friday.

O'BRIEN

No, no, but you'd be well aware of the number of times Ministers have tried in the past and it's failed.

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, I know that. This is not a new issue. It's been around for a long time and I think people have had plenty of time to think about it and whilst I'm not trying to set an exam on Friday, I would want to see results on Friday but I don't approach it with any sense of belligerence. The conversation that I've had with Premiers is politically different as Rob Borbidge and Bob Carr have been positive. I'm not pointing the finger at any states. I think the attitude and the conversations that I've had, for example from Queensland, have been very positive.

O'BRIEN:

But in your statement you said, there is a broader national and human interest involved and last Monday you said, quote "I will not retreat one inch from the national responsibilities I have". Now, it doesn't sound as if you are going to, but how far are you prepared to go to ensure the outcome that you want?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, the sensible thing in these issues Kerry is to state your view, to talk to people calmly and sensibly and reasonably, don't point the finger or start threatening people, I'm not into that game...

O'BRIEN:

But you won't budge?

PRIME MINISTER:

I'm not going to budge from the view I've put, no.

O'BRIEN:

Well, then the next question is if they are not going to budge either where do you go from there?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, Kerry, let us do it one thing at a time. I have some experience in negotiating with State Governments and the last thing you do is sort of carry on like some kind of centralist Rambo. What you try and do is talk to people, appeal to the broader Australian interests. I mean we are Australians before anything else and there is an Australian interest in this and I hope that Australian interest will prevail.

O'BRIEN:

With the six month gun amnesty and the gun buy back, you've told the Parliament tonight that the Government would seek contribution from all members of the community to cover the cost of compensation. What do you have in mind, a gun levy?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I don't know at the end of the day how much it is going to cost but if necessary, yes, but I hope that won't be necessary.

O'BRIEN:

So it might be one regrettable occasion where perhaps your election promises might be waived?

PRIME MINISTER:

Hang on Kerry.

O'BRIEN:

This is not point scoring.

PRIME MINISTER:

I think it is a bit rich to even suggest that - I mean, nobody could have contemplated these circumstances - so I really think that....

O'BRIEN:

Nor am I.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I think you did by raising it.

O'BRIEN:

Well I, what I...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well you did, you raised, I mean you talked about broken promises, I mean, break it down...

O'BRIEN:

No no no. I said....

PRIME MINISTER:

No, you raised it, and look, let's be sensible. This is an unprecedented situation and what I'm saying is at the end of the day if necessary, and I hope it's not, then I would be prepared to go to the Australian people and say, look, this is a very unusual, atypical, not to have been foreseen situation on a one-off basis, there has to be some kind of special levy to pay for it. Now, I hope that is not necessary, I really do, and I would naturally seek some contribution from the States, but I don't think anybody in their wildest dreams could suggest that that represents a broken promise.

O'BRIEN:

What happens with those, I mean, I wasn't talking about it as a broken promise, what happens with those people who don't hand their guns in?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, we do have in mind some penalties, and they'll be more severe for the more lethal weapons, including probably a jail term, or the very dangerous weapons, and now, once again, these are laws that have got to be enacted by the States, but proposals to that end will be included in the Commonwealth paper that will go to the State Ministers.

O'BRIEN:

You've also raised again the connection between violence in the media and community violence. Would you personally like to see the more violent films like MA rated films shown later on television than they are now. I think they've already been shifted from 8.30pm as the earliest time for viewing, to 9pm?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes I would. I mean, this is a very difficult issue. I am not a psychologist, I am a mere layman in these matters, but as John Howard - individual, I find it very hard to believe that this repetitive mind-numbing extremely violent portrayal on television doesn't have a negative effect on some people. I think that's a view most Australians would share now. I've appointed a Ministerial group to have a look at all the available evidence and I hope that when I've got that in hand, depending on what it indicates, if it is necessary to talk in a cooperative way with the networks and the ABC then I will do so. But I don't like it - I mean, every instinct in my body is against regulation but this event has focussed the public mind, it's shaken the country to its foundations in a way that no other domestic event has done in my political experience and I think I'd be failing in my duty if I didn't rationally examine every response that was appropriate.

O'BRIEN:

John Howard, thanks for talking with us.

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