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PRIME MINISTER

10 May 1996

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
PRESS CONFERENCE
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA**

E&OE.....

Mr Premier, Chief Minister, Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am very happy to announce that the Commonwealth and the States and Territories have agreed on a uniform and much tougher approach to gun laws which will, in our view, make Australia a much safer place in which to live.

The agreement includes a ban on automatic and semi-automatic rifles and shotguns, and a nationwide approach to licensing and registration. It is an historic moment in a long debate for a nation which is still coming to terms with the tragic circumstances which took place in Tasmania at Port Arthur only a short while ago.

The Australian community demanded a strong response, and I believe today's outcome to which all governments have contributed in a constructive and positive way, and I want to thank the Ministers of the various State governments and Territories for that.

We have agreed to prohibit the importation, ownership, sale, resale, transfer, possession, manufacture or use of all military-style centre-fire rifles, including those which substantially duplicate military styles, all other self-loading centre-fire rifles, all self-loading and pump-action shotguns, and all self-loading rim-fire rifles.

The importation ban will take effect immediately. The exceptions will be a limited range of official or occupational purposes. In relation to official purposes, I clearly have in mind the Police and the Armed Services.

In practice - and this of course has been the subject of much debate over the past couple of weeks - in practice, the decision today will mean a primary producer can only have access to a low-powered self-loading .22, or a self-loading or pump-action shotgun, if he or she can satisfy the police that they have a genuine need for them which cannot be met by any other methods, or any of the non-prohibited weapons. So there is not a general exemption for low-powered rim-fire rifles.

Action will be taken to strictly regulate mail orders. These prohibitions will be enforced by all jurisdictions as soon as the necessary legislation or regulations can be passed, and all jurisdictions have agreed this will be done as soon as possible.

All of us have agreed that there should be fair and proper compensation paid to those affected, and next week I will write to the Premiers and Chief Ministers on the details of the financing of the surrender scheme.

In addition, all firearms will be registered as part of an integrated licensing system, and that will be linked nationally. There will be a comprehensive common approach to licensing, which will ensure that only those people who are fit and proper, with a genuine reason and need for a firearm will have access to one.

Stringent storage requirements and compulsory safety training for first-time license applicants will be introduced in all jurisdictions. There will be tight controls on the sale, advertising for sale, and transfer of all firearms and ammunition, both within jurisdictions and between them.

Ladies and Gentlemen, needless to say, this represents an enormous shift in the culture of this country towards the possession, the use and the ownership of guns. It is an historic agreement. I am very grateful for the contribution that has been made by all the governments of Australia, and I want to personally thank the Ministers who are here today. This is an issue where there has been a range of views.

People have come here with a desire to do good for all Australians, and to do good for Australia, and to make it a safer place. I don't pretend for a moment that this decision can prevent the recurrence of tragedies in the future but it does represent a tactical, powerful, effective, legislative and governmental response to a problem.

It means that this country, through its governments, has decided not to go down the American path, but that this country has decided to go down another path. It will involve sacrifice by some. I again particularly apologise to the farmers and primary producers of Australia for the inconvenience that many of them will suffer as a result of this. They are

law abiding good Australians, but most of them I think will understand that there is a greater common good.

It will result of course in the surrender of hundreds of thousands of weapons. I don't know how many. We are trying to do some estimates of the cost of the compensation, and I'll be writing to the Premiers about that next week. And as I said a few days ago, if it were to become necessary the Commonwealth would be willing to impose some kind of one off levy in order to finance the cost of the compensation.

Ladies and gentlemen, I think we have done good work for the future of Australia today. We have done something that will build a safer environment for our children. We have done something that will send a signal to people all around this country, that ours is not a gun culture, ours is a culture of peaceful cooperation.

We have tried to be consistent with that goal to draw up a set of laws that are stringent but practical and I think we have achieved that and I particularly want to thank the officials of both the Commonwealth and the States that have worked: police commissioners, my ministerial colleagues and most particularly - I know, because of the horrendous impact on his State - my colleague Tony Rundle, the Premier of Tasmania, and can I take this opportunity at a national level of saying something that I said in Tasmania ten days ago that on occasions like the tragedy of a couple of weeks ago, that you recognise the true worth of the police forces of this country. They are often denigrated and criticised and are often the object of fun and ridicule. To have been an officer in the Tasmanian police two weekends ago would not have been a pleasant thing and on occasions like that we recognise the true worth of the police force and I want as Prime Minister to particularly record my thanks to the Tasmanian police for the work they did in the wake of that.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, yesterday you were in Parliament saying that there would be no bargaining today. There were surveys done over recent weeks which showed overwhelming public support for a blanket ban. Was there no regard for that?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I think what we've done today is magnificent.

JOURNALIST:

Was there a consensus among the Ministers today on the levy question or is that something that can be sorted out later?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I think that the only thing that ever has to be sorted out later is who pays between the Commonwealth and the States, but obviously the Commonwealth is going to be generous in respect of this because we've taken a lead on it.

JOURNALIST:

A levy is the most likely...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, just wait and see. I mean, you know, what I have said quite upfront that if necessary we are prepared to do it in order to fund it.

JOURNALIST:

In what respects does this differ from the proposals put forward....?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, actually there are two respects. In one respect it's tougher because it has included the pump-action shotguns which were not included in our original proposal and in another respect it is a touch weaker in that if a primary producer can satisfy the police that he needs a low-powered centre (sic)... Semi-automatic, I'm sorry, a rim fire one, which is a self-loading rim fire rifle, because if he needs one of those he can only get a permit to have one, if the police are satisfied that his problem is such that other methods and other weapons are not sufficient in order to handle the problem. Now, I would have thought on the balance actually that this is, I mean, you would probably argue this is actually a slightly tougher proposal than we put in because of the re-inclusion of the pump-action shotguns.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister there was a suggestion of a jail term for anyone who fails to hand in their banned weapon - is that still an option?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes, yes, oh yes. It's in there. I mean, this is just a quick summary for your benefit because you have deadlines and so forth but there will be a more comprehensive document issued, but I mean, let's not be in any mistake about this. This is an agreement that I don't think anybody would have thought remotely achievable two or three weeks ago, even a few days ago.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister it's been a long session, what were the main areas of disagreement in the early stages?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, when you get something like this, I don't talk about disagreement and I want to particularly record my thanks to the Attorney-General Daryl Williams who chaired the main working part of the meeting and the important thing is that we have agreed on a nationwide, comprehensive scheme of registration and prohibition and I think it's an extraordinary achievement.

JOURNALIST:

...(inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER:

As soon as humanely and legislatively possible. They all will go back to their jurisdictions and draw the regulations and in some cases it can be done by regulation. In other cases you need legislation and the importation ban will take effect immediately and it will be done with all due dispatch and speed, I can assure you of that.

JOURNALIST:

Would applicants for a licence have to prove they're a fit and proper person?

PRIME MINISTER:

Absolutely.

JOURNALIST:

How would that be done?

PRIME MINISTER:

There will be a uniform set of rules worked out between the police commissioners. I mean, bear in mind that the approval of applicants for licences and permits will be in the hands of the police so you're not dealing with a group of people who are going to lightly tick off applicants.

JOURNALIST:

Does the compensation scheme cover just the semi-automatics and automatics or the tough licensing requirements require other people to hand in a number of...

PRIME MINISTER:

It will cover people who are directly affected. I mean, we don't believe in.. and it will also obviously cover some gun dealers who have stock that might be unsaleable.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, can you clarify in the proposal you took in, there was no exemption for the primary producers. Is that right?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, there was. The proposal included a ban on semi-automatic weapons, as well as automatic weapons and the only change in that area is that if a primary producer can prove to the police that he needs a low-powered semi-automatic, a low-powered, a rim-fire .22 or something like that in order to do his job but he can't even approach the police in relation to the more powerful weapons.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, was there a decision on a limited number of guns a person can have (inaudible)...?

PRIME MINISTER:

A genuine need for each.

JOURNALIST:

...(Inaudible) gun lobby (inaudible) against all the State Governments to remove them (inaudible)?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well no governments like being removed! Look I wasn't there for all of those discussions. The gun lobby didn't really come up. But I can't imagine they would like this.

JOURNALIST:

On the mental health question, will doctors have to inform on patients (inaudible)?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well we didn't discuss that today, that belongs to another...we did discuss it today.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, is there anything the Police Commissioner suggested that wasn't taken up?

PRIME MINISTER:

Not that I'm aware of.

JOURNALIST:

(Inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER:

Well it was seen as...when you say it's not an exception for farmers you've got to understand the proposal that was scuttling around earlier that farmers would be able to keep low-powered rim-fire rifles. I mean that's not what's been agreed. What's been agreed is that if they can establish a special case to the police, they would be able to have such a rifle.

JOURNALIST:

(Inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I think some people put that up, but that's irrelevant... who was in response to it. It's a practical approach to the situation.

JOURNALIST:

But if it could be that they could get hold of it for a limited period...

PRIME MINISTER:

The licence would be just for twelve months.

JOURNALIST:

They would then own that gun for that period or lease it (inaudible)?

PRIME MINISTER:

They'd own it.

JOURNALIST:

Are you able to give us an example of where this might apply to farming?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I don't think it would apply...if you were running a few sheep at Bowral it wouldn't apply!

JOURNALIST:

Well I'm wondering, there must be some common example. I don't know what an example might be.

VICTORIAN POLICE MINISTER:

In the case of a plague with rabbits.

PRIME MINISTER:

A plague of foxes.

VICTORIAN POLICE MINISTER:

Vermin generally, and also in the case of drought affecting graziers with sheep that have to be destroyed. It's much easier to destroy them much more humanely with an automatic weapon rather than a bolt action. And it is in that type of incident that a primary producer could make application to the Police Department for provision of the automatic rim-fire or shotgun.

PRIME MINISTER:

But you don't automatically have it because you're a farmer, and that's the critical difference and I think it really is a very sensible way of approaching it and I defend it very strongly.

Look I've got to go. I'm meant to be hosting 1100 people for dinner in aid of the Atlanta Games and if I don't get there Jeff will make all the speeches so I'd better go.

Thank you very much.