



PRIME MINISTER

10 May 1996

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
RADIO 2UE WITH ALAN JONES**

E&OE.....

JONES:

Prime Minister, good morning.

PRIME MINISTER:

Good morning, Alan.

JONES:

Congratulations on what you've done, and I speak on behalf of many who have been most impressed with the leadership that you've shown, and the sensitivity with which you've articulated it. How are things going to go?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I'm hopeful, Alan, and I appreciate what you say. I think there is a sentiment in the community this time to do something quite decisive, but getting agreement on every detail from six states plus territories is always hard. You must remember that the legal authority to prohibit the ownership and carrying of weapons in this country rests with State governments, although the Federal Government has considerable power in relation to the importation of firearms and ammunition. But ultimately, the legal power at the moment rests entirely with State government. I gather the meeting today, in a spirit of cooperation, a spirit of putting forward proposals that are well-understood, simple direct-proposals. You explained them very well a moment ago. That is the essence of what I'm proposing. I don't like it, I don't like the idea of

saying to tens of thousands of law-abiding Australians, "You must give up weapons you've had for a long time in the national interest." I hate very much telling people to do things that they've done in the past quite lawfully, but we have reached a stage in our history where we have the chance to seize a moment, and if we collectively seize it, we can begin to turn around an attitude and to turn around a culture. There will be other things required, but this will make a big start. . . .

JONES:

Are Victoria and Queensland still expressing reservations? You actually spoke to Mr Kennett yesterday, didn't you?

PRIME MINISTER:

I spoke to Mr Kennett yesterday, and he said to me that if it were possible to achieve a national consensus on what I was proposing, he would unqualifiedly support us.

JONES:

So you can tick him off. Then what about Queensland?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, there I've had a similar expression from the Queensland Premier. The only area that people have been debating is the position of what are described as low-powered, rim-fired semi-automatic weapons.

JONES:

Yeah. Like the .22s.

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes. All the others, people accept. Now, the problem of leaving out such a large category is very simple: that there are a lot of them used in a close space, they can be immensely destructive. Immensely destructive. Anything that can be fired rapidly is a problem.

JONES:

And in principle, any legislative demand which creates exemptions also creates massive problems in terms of implementation.

PRIME MINISTER:

~~Oh, it does.~~ Oh, it does. And the more exemptions you have, the more complication and the weaker the laws, and the greater the pressure for yet further exemptions.

JONES:

Exactly. So you're saying . . . exactly . . . so you're saying, all semi-automatics, low-powered, high-powered, any powered - banned.

PRIME MINISTER:

Out. And that's the line of demarcation. Now, that would not, of course, affect the ordinary repeater or old action single shot weapon that so many farmers use.

JONES:

Yep. Well, Ian McLachlan got that right, didn't he? He said they've been surviving for years and years before this sort of weaponry. He has previously held an enormous mandate from the rural community. You've obviously heard his views.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I have, and his contribution to this debate is very significant. He's been a primary producer all his life - and his family before him - and he has very strongly supported what I'm arguing for. So the idea that farmers are all hostile to this: they don't like it, but they accept it. They normally take

JONES:

And you said also that you don't like it, but in the interests of the national good, something must be done.

PRIME MINISTER:

I not only don't like it, I apologise to tens of thousands of law-abiding Australians for the need to even propose this sort of legislation. But, because of what has happened, and because of the legitimate demand of the Australian community to its political leaders, it is necessary for me to try, at a national level, to achieve laws of this kind. I don't go there in any spirit of belligerence. I go there quietly arguing for what, in the moment in which we find ourselves, is something that people demand of their political leaders.

JONES:

Right. I believe that Walter Miacac wrote to you personally, and you have got permission from him to read his letter to the meeting, have you?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, yes, he has written to me, yes, and I did speak to the poor gentleman, and I will certainly, I think, be . . . I mean, there are quite a number of people who have been directly affected.

JONES:

Hmmm. Without getting too maudlin about all of this . . . I mean, being there personally, and amongst these people, how emotionally draining did you find it?

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh, the experience of visiting Pt Arthur and going to the State memorial service was a very emotional experience. The stillness of the crowd, which reflected the profound shock and disbelief, was one of the most lasting memories of all. It was a very draining experience, but it drove home to me the way in which it had gripped and shaken a community. It's a small community, and a tragedy of this size would traumatise any community, and the smaller the community, the more tightly-knit community, the greater the sense of isolation of the community, the greater the trauma, and the more long-lasting the psychological impact.

JONES:

Could we just take it a step further, then. I notice many people - including political people, the Attorney General in Tasmania and others, and indeed, your own Richard Alston, the Minister in charge of communications - has said that if a connection between violence as entertainment and violence within the society can be established, then consideration will be given to reviewing the showing of these sorts of videos. Just as a parent and a person who's been around for a long, long time in politics, what is the rationale for endorsing violence as entertainment, whether there were a connection with violence in society or not? How can you justify violence as entertainment ever?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I suppose many people would argue - and I don't necessarily disagree with this myself - that the starting point always is that adults should be entitled to read and hear and see what they choose in a free society, and it's not for politicians to say what they can't see and read and hear. That's the starting point. I mean, as an individual, I can't personally see the point of viewing unmitigated violence. It turns me off, it makes me sick. I find it aimless, mind-numbing and so forth, but I have to ask myself as a law maker, have I got the right to tell somebody else, who's an adult and who is otherwise law-abiding, that they should But that's the argument. Honestly, I don't agree...you know, I don't like it. But however, that's the starting point, that if you can establish a connection, well you then have a completely different situation.

JONES:

See, what I don't understand is if you walk down George Street, Sydney, and any of this behaviour was even hinted at, there would be an absolute outrage. But just turn right and go through the Hoyts Cinema and go through an open door, and there it all is in front of you in all its gory colour. I don't understand, there's got to be something wrong with the society that is so contradictory.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I suppose we have grown up with, because of the influence of the cinema and television, we've grown up with a situation where...but you didn't have that when you were a kid. No they weren't nearly as graphic where as real life played out on the screen is somehow rather acceptable.

JONES:

So are we better or worse for the fact that your kids have had to endure this and you didn't?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well in most cases the endurance of this, if people choose to see it, doesn't have a negative effect on children because they have other counter influences which are very good and are stabilising and protecting. The problem of course is if people have a previous position to unstable behaviour or erratic behaviour. The worry is that the constant exposure to this kind of material can tip those people over the edge. The constant exposure to this sort of material can't tip over the edge a young man or woman who is otherwise stable, got a supportive family, has loving relationships. But if you get somebody who has none of those, feels society doesn't like him, feels inadequate, has a predisposition to behave in an anti-social way, the worry - and I speak here as a lay man, I don't have any technical understanding except life's experience, I speak only as a lay man that I find it hard to believe as a lay man that kind of material wouldn't have a negative effect and run the risk on occasions of tipping that person into violent conduct. A psychiatrist might shoot me down.

JONES:

Don't worry about that.

PRIME MINISTER:

I think most people, 99% would agree with me.

JONES:

Absolutely. Just to change entirely, while I've got you here for a couple of moments, about not good unemployment figures yesterday, and Amanda Vanstone said we've got to change the environment in which people are trying to secure jobs. You talked the day before yesterday about the intimidatory effect to employers of anti-dismissal laws. Do you have personal experience rather than anecdotal evidence of the mess that

this actually has got employers into, that you've actually got to jump through five thousand hoops that people can steal and still be reinstated?

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh yes. I mean when you say personally, I mean I have spoken to many employers, many employers, who have gone through this process.

JONES:

You can steal and be reinstated?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I know of a case where because the person was not adequately warned that stealing was unacceptable...that's it...that there was a settlement...that's right.

JONES:

You can use the boss' business premise to set up a business of your own, spending his phone time, and when he says - hang on this can't be done, you're sacked - that person is improperly sacked and must be paid compensation.

PRIME MINISTER:

Because there hasn't been adequate warning.

JONES:

Well are you going to change that dramatically?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes. Alan we will be introducing legislation when Parliament meets again later in May to deal with this, was one of our central...the sooner the better Prime Minister, the sooner the better...and it will come as part of the entire industrial relations legislation and I'll then be delighted to see whether the Australian Democrats, the Greens and others in the Parliament are willing to vote against a Bill, getting rid of this nonsense.

JONES:

Are there any circumstances under which a Howard Government would introduce death duties?

PRIME MINISTER:

No.

JONES:

None.

PRIME MINISTER:

No. We've never ever...so you can tick that off...we are not going to introduce death duties.

JONES:

So no debate, gone. What about that editorial yesterday in the Financial Review which I know your adviser would have plonked in front of you and said Prime Minister read this: - 'The continued existence of middle class welfare benefits serves to cultivate a handout mentality which makes Australians less willing to take responsibility for establishing their own financial security.' It talks about genuine change to Medicare so that only the needy get it, and an increase in the higher education contribution scheme so that we don't have this middle class dominance in Australia's university campus. Any comment?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes Alan. We made a commitment in the election campaign about Medicare, and that commitment will be honoured in full. It would be a blatant breach of the basis on which I was elected if I were to depart in any way from the commitments I made on that. Now I believe very strongly that restoring trust in commitments, or trust in people who make commitments in elections are a very important part...

JONES:

So you'll be able to meet all your commitments and still cut expenditure as you want?

PRIME MINISTER:

It's going to be very hard. I don't pretend that but I place enormous store on meeting commitments, and one of the central commitments I made in that election campaign was about Medicare. Now people may debate the rights and wrongs, but when you make a commitment so directly, so explicitly and so repeatedly, people are entitled to keep you to your word and the Australian people will do that. Well they won't need to because I will keep it. There will be some very difficult decisions made and there were some of the decisions we will take people will not like. I don't disguise that but they will be done fairly.

JONES:

You'll then have to sell them.

PRIME MINISTER;

Of course I am.

JONES:

Just a quick one before you go then on controversial issues. Some of your backbench, 21 apparently according to reports today, have prevented your reform plan for the Native Title Act going ahead unless it included an extinguishment provision. I thought you were in favour of providing for circumstances where native title was extinguished.

PRIME MINISTER:

What we said repeatedly during the campaign was that we would keep the Native Title Act, that we would change it to make it more workable particularly for people in the mining and pastoral industry, and that is what we will do.

JONES:

So that a mining lease and a pastoral lease would extinguish native title?

PRIME MINISTER:

We didn't say that. What we said was we'd make it more workable. There are different ways of making it more workable. If you combed through our policy you will see that I repeatedly said we would make the Act more workable.

JONES:

So you've got to sit down and have negotiations and meetings and all that nonsense which inhibits development.

PRIME MINISTER:

No, no, no. I think you will find when our proposals come out that there are proposals for a very, very radical change in the negotiating process...okay, look we'll leave it there...so as it to make it a lot easier for people who want to mine and want to develop.

JONES:

Yeah, want to make a quid and employ people. Good luck today and thank you for your time and congratulations on what you've done today.

PRIME MINISTER:

Thank you.

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