



PRIME MINISTER

17 June 1996

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP AM PROGRAMME WITH FRAN KELLY

E&OE.....

KELLY:

Prime Minister it was a fairly fierce crowd as we've just heard. You met with some gun owners afterwards. How do you assess yesterday's meeting - the first of what will be a series around the country?

PRIME MINISTER:

I found it fairly predictable. I thought I would get a hostile reception because the people, in the main, who turn up to meetings like this are people who disagree with you. They're not representative of the whole population. I'm sure that most Australians support the stance the Government has taken. If I'm wrong in that, well there will be a political price. But so be it. I'll have a few more meetings. I've been to noisier meetings. I understand how cranky these people feel because the new laws are going to limit, but not eliminate, a sporting pursuit of theirs. Now I want to make it very clear, we're not banning all guns. People will still be able to engage in sporting shooting, it's just that they won't be able to use certain types of semi-automatic weapons. So this idea that in some way we're taking an axe to one sport is quite wrong and there has been a feeling spread in the community that in some way we are banning all weapons, all firearms. Now there are some in the community who think we ought to do that and the only people who should possess firearms are the police and the military. Now that would be going too far. Obviously farmers need certain types of firearms for their work and it will still be possible for people to engage in sporting shooting. But the range of weapons will be different and that is an inevitable consequence of bringing in a comprehensive, stricter law that will extract from the community a very large number of firearms. That is the objective of the proposal and unless we stick to that, unless we maintain our determination to take a large number of firearms out of the community then we're not going to achieve the national good.

KELLY:

Is there a danger though that these kind of public rallies could back-fire and could, instead, turn into a focal point for the gun lobby rather than a focal point for you to calm the heat on guns. I mean, yesterday's was hot enough and yet, as Peter McGauran says, Gippsland isn't Gympie. It could get much worse than this, couldn't it?

PRIME MINISTER:

Fran it appears that one is damned if one does and damned if one doesn't. Governments are always criticised for not going out and explaining their decisions. People have said you've got to get out and sell your message. When you do it you then get that kind of, if I may say so, that kind of question. Now I'm not going to, sort of, do these endlessly but I do think that I have an obligation and can I say it will be a feature of my Prime Ministership to revive the use of public meetings to explain government policies, particularly in the rural and regional areas of Australia. The idea of the Prime Minister going to a large community gathering and talking about a range of issues in an area such as Toowoomba or Mt Isa or Geraldton or Whyalla is, I think, a concept that we should revive in this country. I don't want to be a desk bound Prime Minister. I want to be somebody who will go and explain his decisions and go and explain his story. I've already had several public gatherings in the three months I've been Prime Minister and yesterday was the latest of them. I did one in Sydney in relation to aircraft noise and I'm going to do more of those as the weeks and the months roll by because it's an important way of getting the message across.

KELLY:

Mr Howard what prompted you to wear a bullet proof vest before an Australian audience yesterday?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I'm not going to comment on anything, any speculation, in relation to personal security things.

KELLY:

Well it certainly looked from all the press photos as if you did have one on. What would such a, sort of, a move say about Australia in the 1990s?

PRIME MINISTER:

Fran you've heard my answer to the earlier question. You want to go on to something else.

KELLY:

All right, well you talk about the political, you mentioned before that this could have some political impact further down the track. You were in National Party heartland in Sale yesterday. You must be concerned about the electoral damage that you could suffer over this issue?

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't believe if we stick to our guns we will suffer electoral damage. It's my view now, for what it is worth, that we will suffer electoral damage if we retreat.

KELLY:

So the big crowds we're seeing in Victoria, the big crowds we saw in Sydney, yesterday. The noisy crowds, you think that still represents quite clearly a minority, just a very noisy one?

PRIME MINISTER:

I do. I understand the depth of their feeling and I don't brand all of those people as fanatics or Rambos or extremists but they are a minority. I have not doubt that the great majority of Australians support what the Government is doing overwhelmingly.

KELLY:

There seems to be some disparity between the Commonwealth's interpretation of the gun laws and the Queensland Government's. Queensland's newspaper ad over the weekend says primary producers have access to category D weapons, yours says they don't. Is there some confusion here?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well Daryl Williams, I understand, is talking to the Queenslanders about that today. I haven't seen the Queensland advertisement so I won't comment further, but he's going to talk to them about it.

KELLY:

Just before I move off guns, in terms of your gun amnesty we now know that guns handed in to Victoria police previously have been on-sold to gun dealers. Can you give Australians preparing to hand over their weapons during your amnesty or the amnesty the States will announce shortly a guarantee that those guns won't be sold for profit and will be disposed of effectively?

PRIME MINISTER:

As far as what lies within my power yes. But bear in mind that the control of that process is in the hands of the State Governments but I was disturbed to read that report about what happened in Victoria. I'm sure that the Victorian Premier was equally disturbed and he has reacted accordingly.

KELLY:

On another issue Mr Howard there will be residual problems for you from last week's Premiers' Conference won't there? I mean, isn't it going to be simple for the Premiers to portray the situation as the Premiers go to Canberra, they return home with new taxes foisted upon them. Some have already labelled it the Costello tax. Won't it be difficult to avoid responsibility for that?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think what is being forgotten is that the reason why the States had to make a contribution to our deficit problem is that we were left that deficit problem by the former Labor Government. To use the racing parlance, if there is a levy imposed in New South Wales it will be by Carr out of Beazley because what you've got there is a deficit, the legacy of the former government and we made it plain to the States that some contribution to the States was to be expected and the interesting thing out of this whole exercise is the sole Labor Premier in Australia, Bob Carr, has in fact acknowledged that the Federal Government has a deficit problem. I mean by agreeing to make a reduction in the general purpose payments going to New South Wales last Friday he was, in fact, acknowledging what Kim Beazley keeps denying. You see Kim Beazley keeps saying the \$8 billion is a myth, it's an invention of the new Government, it doesn't exist. Well if that is the case and that is the Labor Party's story why on earth did Bob Carr agree to anything last Friday. The fact is all of the Premiers acknowledged that we have a problem, not of our own making. They all agreed that some contribution had to be made by the States. They disagreed with the method proposed initially by us and they came up with a compromise which involved some of what we proposed and in addition a reduction in their financial assistance grants the one thing that previously, the ones to whom I spoke, said that under no circumstances should we cut.

KELLY:

Politically you're not concerned though about odium being attached to the Federal Government if new taxes are imposed at a State level against your Federal Government?

PRIME MINISTER:

Fran, I believe the Australian public understands that we have inherited a problem and that we have sought a contribution to solving that problem from the States and at any attempt by the Premier of New South Wales, in particular, to drive home responsibilities of the Federal Government for any increase in New South Wales taxes will be seen for what it is and that is a direct consequence of the deficit left to us by the Labor Party.

KELLY:

The ACTU indicated yesterday that it will boost its pay claim for low income earners if the States do put up taxes to offset the budget cut. Is that reasonable?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think if you're going to start talking in those terms you ought to have the offsets as well. Has Jenny George ignored the fact that we have, in the last few weeks, embarked upon one of the most

competitive battles in the history of housing mortgage interest rates in Australia. I mean you can't have it ...

KELLY:

Do you claim responsibility for that ...

PRIME MINISTER:

No, no well I have seen, hang on. It's a reflection of market conditions and certainly what the new Government has done has not discouraged the belief that interest rates will possibly go lower so we certainly haven't restarted the process. I'm not claiming in three months that we deserve all the credit for it. That would be ridiculous. But can I just point out to the union leadership that if you're talking about the ups and the downs of the situation of the modest wage earner nothing helps the generality of Australian families more, nothing takes financial pressure off them more than a fall in housing interest rates. It's the best gift that a battling Australian family can possibly have, that is a fall in housing interest rates.

KELLY:

Mr Howard you've been a strong defender of Peter Costello, your Treasurer, against some fairly vitriolic attacks from the Premiers over recent days. Do you concede though that Peter Costello's style could do with some amending, that he clearly got the Premiers offside very early in this whole thing. Could it have been handled better?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look Fran the Treasurer's job, I know, is a difficult one. What he took to the Premiers' Conference was a decision of the Government. It wasn't some frolic of his own. We ended up with a contribution from the States which was very good indeed from my point of view and from Peter's point of view. It will make a tidy contribution to solving the Federal Government's deficit problem and in the process can I acknowledge that the States over the past few years have cut very hard and many of them have taken, particularly States like Victoria, have taken very difficult decisions for which the Governments of those States deserve a lot of praise. We ended up on Friday with a result that will make a very good contribution to the Federal budget deficit problem.

JOURNALST:

So you're entirely happy with how Peter Costello handled that?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look Peter Costello has my total support, let me make that clear.

KELLY:

The GST debate is doing its best to open up again on many fronts. The National Party voted for it at their State Conference over the weekend. Jeff Kennett wants one, business wants one, some welfare groups are even considering it and now there's reports that Wilson Tuckey, one of your own backbench, is going to raise the issue in your own party room tomorrow. How are you going to deal with this issue so it doesn't drag the Coalition down again? I mean are you going to have to do something pro-active here?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look it's a free country.

KELLY:

Well it is bubbling up all over the place though isn't it?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well things bubble in a free country. The '93 election people voted against a GST and because of that it went off our agenda, it's not part of our policy and I want to make that clear. We went to the last election looking people in the eye and saying we won't introduce a GST. Now against that background I'm not going to break my word. I'm certainly not. I don't care what anybody says, I'm not going to break my word on that. I said we wouldn't do it. Now that doesn't stop people debating its merits. It doesn't stop people who may have previously opposed it very strongly now running around saying it's a terrific idea. Now I don't criticise them for changing their minds, if that's their idea, but you've got to have some regard to the democratic process and you've got to have some regard to the concept of people saying one thing before the election and doing one thing after it. I mean it's almost as if I'm being encouraged to break my word on that, yet I'm quite certain some of the people who are doing it, if I did, would then turn around and dump on me from a great height and say this outrageous person is breaking... Look Fran, in simple terms we went to the last election saying there'd be no GST. I'm sticking to that, that is our policy. But if people want to debate it that's fine. It's a free country and I encourage them to do so.

KELLY:

Just finally Mr Howard, if I can ask you about the ABC, there's a media report today that says you've discussed with your Communications Minister Richard Alston holding an inquiry into the ABC's financial management. Are you considering that?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I don't respond to every piece of media speculation. I actually haven't seen that report so...

KELLY:

Are you considering an inquiry?

PRIME MINISTER:

I'm not going to respond to every piece of speculation. Look I have a warm regard for the ABC. I have some differences which I've never been unwilling to articulate. I was asked about the ABC a few weeks ago. I expressed a view about I thought from time to time it was politically correct to a fall. I think sometimes the range of opinions amongst its commentators is not as broad as in some other media outlets. It tends to be a concentration around one particular point of view but it has a place in Australian life which is important. It is particularly valuable to rural communities in Australia. It's played a very major role in the sporting and cultural life of this country and it play, of course, a very significant role in public affairs commentary. So whatever differences I may have had in the past with the ABC or perhaps will have in the future and whatever arguments we may have about things like funding levels let me make it clear that as far as the Howard Government is concerned the ABC is an important part of the Australian fabric.

KELLY:

Is it time to take another look at its charter perhaps?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well if I were to come to that conclusion I would announce it and say it in a more measured way than at the end of an interview. It's an organisation that obviously comes under the spotlight for any new government but I'm not going to respond off the top of my head to those sort of questions.

KELLY:

Prime Minister thank you.

PRIME MINISTER:

It's a pleasure.

Ends