



PRIME MINISTER

18 June 1996

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
INTERVIEW WITH HOWARD SATTLER - RADIO 6PR**

E&OE

SATTLER:

Prime Minister. I haven't called you that before have I? Not face to face.

PRIME MINISTER:

No you haven't. No, not face to face. It's very nice to be here, although along with I'm sure all other Australians I would have wished it to be in different circumstances but I'm delighted to be with you and to have the opportunity of talking to you and your listeners and can I say at the outset that I will endeavour - other commitments allowing - to keep in regular touch with you and try and be as regular as I was when I was in Opposition. Now, that's a big ask, but I'll try.

SATTLER:

Well, we are part of Australia.

PRIME MINISTER:

You certainly are, and I came here regularly as Opposition leader and I intend to visit Western Australia on a regular basis as Prime Minister.

SATTLER:

The big issue, I've just taken call after call after call today about it and it just keeps bobbing back all the time is the gun control debate and it seems to be consuming so much of your time these days as well, and you are going to allow them to do more because you are going to be going all over the countryside trying to placate some of these shooters and telling them that what you are doing is in the interests of the nation.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, it is consuming some of my time but it is not going to dominate what I do over the next few months. As soon as the legislation is passed by the State Governments the better. I think that's a very important thing. The State Governments have the constitutional responsibility. We reached an agreement at the police ministers' conference and the sooner the State governments pass laws that give effect to that agreement the better. I do intend to attend other meetings, not only on this issue but one of the features of my Prime Ministership will be that I won't be desk bound. I will go back to the pattern of years ago of people actually going to meetings around the country directly explaining to people what it's all about....

SATTLER:

Forest place would be a good place wouldn't it?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I reckon it might be, why not. Look, it is part of the colour and movement of Australian politics that political leaders should actually talk directly to people. Now, talking directly to them through your studio is very important also but a little bit of flesh and blood interaction directly with people is a very good idea.

SATTLER:

Now, I know you won't tell me whether you were wearing a vest the other day, or will you now? I mean, everybody knows you were, we saw it...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I'm not going to comment on personal security matters.

SATTLER:

I know, but not exactly what happened, but were you afraid when you standing up there the other day?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, no.

SATTLER:

Are you afraid of any Australians at all...

PRIME MINISTER:

No, no.

SATTLER:

... the sort of people who really bitterly oppose you?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, I'm not, but I'm not going to get drawn into talks about personal security. But let me say this, that it will be a feature of my Prime Ministership that I will go to different parts of the country on different issues to talk directly to people. As far as the gun issue is concerned, I believe that the overwhelming majority of Australians support the stand that the federal and State governments have taken.

SATTLER:

I don't know about that now, because when you listen to the talkback lines, it appears the debate is swinging around. Or have the, are sporting shooters now doing what the Ted Drane's of Australia have said and hijacking the talk back lines.

PRIME MINISTER:

I think what's happening is that people don't demonstrate in favour of the status quo. People assume that the law is going to be changed. They assume we're going to have tighter gun control laws, therefore they don't feel the need to say 'yes we agree with that'. Inevitably if you are particularly affected by a measure and the bloke next door is not affected by the measure but supports it, then you are going to ring up and complain rather than the bloke next door. So you are seeing the normal interaction but I have no doubt that the great majority of people support what we are doing and I want to emphasise Howard, we are not closing down sporting shooting. When you listen to some of the sporting shooters you would think we are saying that they can no longer be sporting shooters. What we are doing is taking semi-automatic weapons out of the community. They will still be able to use other weapons for their sports and the idea that we are closing it down completely is wrong.

SATTLER:

But aren't some semi-automatic weapons used in olympic sports and olympic shooting sports?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, some of them are, but also a lot of the people who are involved in clay shooting use weapons that just have a two-shot capacity and the idea that the measures, I mean, the real objective is to take out of the community as many semi-automatic weapons as we possibly can.

SATTLER:

Rapid fire, potentially rapid fire weapons?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, any semi-automatic weapon can obviously be fired more rapidly than one that's not a semi-automatic and it will still be possible for example for primary producers, for farmers, if they can demonstrate a need to have a low powered semi-automatic weapon, and of course they will be able to retain the other single-shot bolt action or double-barrel shotgun. So, I mention that because the impression is being created that all weapons, all fire-arms are being taken out of the community. The aim is to get the automatics and semi-automatic weapons out. The aim is to have nationwide register. The system will be run by the States because they have the lawful authority. There will be a compensation system based on the value of firearms as of March 1996.

SATTLER:

Individual or by category?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well it will be based on the value, the individual value.

SATTLER:

Of each weapon?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I mean some weapons are going to be worth more than others.

SATTLER:

Except better.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well exactly. Look, I want to make a general comment to people who own weapons which will become unlawful after the new laws come in. There is no intention on the part of the Federal Government to rob people. What we are doing is saying to people, 'you must hand in weapons and we will pay you a fair compensation based on March

1996 values'. Now, the details of that have got to be administered by the States. The details have got to be worked out by the State Police Ministers. I'm not a repository of all the detail, I can only state the principle. And I say to all people, we're not going to take away your property without giving you proper compensation, that would be against the constitution of this country.

SATTLER:

Are you worried that some of the States are now starting to renege on what was agreed to at the conference? Because Queensland Premier, Rob Borbidge, apparently now has promised to give farmers access to - listen to this - high-powered semi-automatic weapons. Now that's led the farmers of New South Wales to say 'hang on a minute, if the Queensland farmers can have these high-powered semi-automatic weapons, we want them to'.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I haven't spoken to Mr Borbidge since last week...

SATTLER:

But that's outside what was agreed.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well certainly any suggestion that people could have the centre-fire semi-automatic rifle, which is what is meant by the high-powered - that would be clearly outside the agreement. What was agreed in relation to farmers was that in addition to the single-shot bolt action rifle, and in addition to the double-barrel shotgun, if a need could be demonstrated to the licensing authority, the low-powered or rimfire semi-automatic weapons would be available to farmers. Now, there is some confusion about the Queensland situation. I've been in the air for the last three or four hours. The Attorney-General, Daryl Williams has been in discussion with the Queensland Police Minister about this matter, and until I get a further report on that I don't want to comment.

SATTLER:

But what I've just read is outside what was agreed.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well *that* would be outside what was agreed, yes.

SATTLER:

Prime Minister, the Premier on the programme earlier today said that they've got a green paper out on the State legislation in respect to gun control here. That will run for public comment until August the third, then they'll get round to formulating

legislation. Are you happy with that timetable or would you like to see it happen a bit earlier?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I'd like to see the legislation in all of the States passed as soon as possible. I accept that it is the responsibility of the States. I don't want to get into a situation of being a running commentator on each of the States, but the sooner the legislation can be passed the better. While ever a State has not passed legislation there will be continuing pressure on the members of that government, on the members of the Parliament of that State, to water down the legislation. So it stands to reason that the sooner it can get passed, the better. But I accept if that's the Premier's judgement, well he's in the best position to know what can work over here, but it stands to reason nationally, the sooner the legislation can be passed, the better.

SATTLER:

All right. Well, your Deputy Prime Minister and your Coalition Party Leader, Tim Fischer, is under the pump today too. There's a Party meeting on, there's all sorts of rumours that he might get rolled, and this is sort of all coming from the backbench of the National Party who aren't happy with him going along with this gun legislation. Would you be happy to work with whoever's the leader of the National Party?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, can I just say a couple of things about that. Of course the leadership of the National Party has delivered Tim Fischer into that position, and ought to keep him there.

SATTLER:

That's an endorsement if I've ever heard one.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I do endorse. I think Tim Fischer has displayed more guts on this issue than anybody. When you represent a Party that is comprised entirely of members holding rural seats, it's obviously a bigger ask than if you lead a Party, which I do, that although it holds more seats in the rural areas than the National Party...

SATTLER:

But you're not getting the same flak as he is...

PRIME MINISTER:

..well we have a lot of urban members as well. Now, I understand that and I think Tim has shown tremendous guts and tremendous leadership; he is the Deputy Prime Minister of Australia. The National Party along with the Liberal Party waited thirteen

years to be in government and I want to say, I couldn't find a finer colleague to work with. He's loyal, he's intelligent and he's a decent gutsy Australian and I enjoy working with him, and if that's an endorsement, it's meant to be.

SATTLER:

Well what do you think of the people that have been working in the background who are trying to destabilise him then?

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't give any credence to that Howard. I think it's a bit of scattered paper talk.

SATTLER:

So you think he'll survive the day?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think Tim will be around for a long time in the future.

SATTLER:

Well what about someone like Bob Katter? Now there's a man who's almost working as a fifth columnist in the Government at the moment.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well every Party...look Howard, one thing I think people should understand right at the beginning of our hopefully long term in office, is that you are always going to, when you have a big backbench, you're always going to have a few people who become sort of occupational critics, mavericks if you like. I mean, Bob Menzies as Prime Minister, he had people like Billy Wentworth and Ian Wood who sort of weren't happy unless they were criticising the Government. Bob's in danger of becoming a sort of latter day maverick.

SATTLER:

Do you think he should be excluded from Joint Party Room meetings?

PRIME MINISTER:

He's entitled to attend them. His peers in the end will make a judgement on his behaviour. I'm untroubled by it but he should understand that that sort of behaviour can have an adverse effect on some of his colleagues who hold more marginal seats.

SATTLER:

Maybe now that Tim Fischer's back in Australia you should grab him by the lug hole and pull him into gear.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I'll leave that to Tim, but I think people just have to understand that some people are not happy unless they're dissenting.

SATTLER:

We've had reports suggesting you told your backbench last night that crimping - and I had to find out what that was, it's when you reduce the magazine capacity of the gun - that that's not on. I mean, I would have thought that was a really good idea.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I've had a discussion and I've said to them if any proposal that sort of doesn't lead to a situation that a change is irreversible, is not something that I can support. I am prepared, obviously to be sensible and practical about the implementation of the decision, but anything that violates the principles laid down by the Police Ministers, I'm not going to support. I had a discussion with the backbench committee last night - I'm not going to talk about that discussion, it was between the members of that committee and myself and I'm sure we're going to have some more discussions in the future, but the Police Ministers' resolution is one that I totally support. Anything that is consistent with that resolution is fine. Something that's not consistent with that resolution doesn't have my support.

SATTLER:

Now, this issue has brought out some of the worst in Australians I'd suggest to you; there have been threats. One of your backbenchers was talking about a bomb threat in his electorate. There's been white feathers sent to people, bullets and all that sort of thing. What is happening to Australia that this sort of thing is going on?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I don't think anything is happening to Australia as a whole. This country is still the greatest country in the world in which to live.

SATTLER:

And you want to keep it that way.

PRIME MINISTER:

Of course I do. Of course I do. Can I say to those people who are sporting shooters, even though you violently disagree with what I am doing on this issue, I don't regard sporting shooters as being rambos, I don't regard them as being un-Australian.

SATTLER:

Even when they shout you down?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I've been shouted down before.

SATTLER:

Will be again.

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes. I've been shouted down by experts over the years and I will be again. That is part and parcel of the robust democratic system. There are a very small minority of people who, no matter what the issue is, will behave in an anti-social way. But to the generality of the sporting shooters, I don't regard them as that. I've been very careful in the language that I've used. I've not used provocative language but I have said to people that we've taken a decision and I will use all the authority of my office to see that that decision is implemented.

SATTLER

Have you received any hate mail?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well look I'm not going to go in, I said I'm not going to deal with personal security matters. I'm simply not. What ...I'm sure, well you know, I'm sorry about that. I'm sorry if that happens to anybody but for myself I'm not going to ...

SATTLER:

It's a shock isn't it?

PRIME MINISTER:

It is. Look, I just, I don't think we should dwell on it. We are determined to go ahead with this and I'm asking people who are sporting shooters to accept that some limitation on their freedom of action in the overall common good. We want a safer Australia. Fewer guns means a safer Australian. Fewer guns would give greater reassurance to Australians. And what I'm asking of people affected is to accept that

this is a decision that all governments believe to be in the national good. We will pay you full and fair compensation based on March 1996 values. I know that it will cause inconvenience and annoyance. But it sometimes happens that the greater good involves some inconvenience and annoyance to a section of the population. It's happened before and it will happen again.

(ad break)

SATTLER:

Later on we've got good family passes, G rated movies. There should be more of them. What do you think Prime Minister?

PRIME MINISTER:

Indeed. More G rated movies?

SATTLER:

Yeah, family movies.

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes indeed.

SATTLER:

Paul Keating was talking about having a television channel that would be for families. What do you think about that?

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't think it's a commercial goer. The remedy lies in greater parental supervision and perhaps a greater degree of self regulation and self restraint by the networks. The idea of a family channel to line up with Channel 7 and Channel 9 and Channel 10 and the ABC, I just don't think that is a commercial goer. There is no reason why in pay television you won't get the emergence of a lot of family channels and if there are family movies then you will. And if there are, obviously, people who are interested in seeing that their children see that kind of material the better. I detect in the community a bit of a movement against the, certainly, the excessive portrayal of violence.

SATTLER:

Which you can go and pick up at your local video store at any time.

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes indeed. I think there is a movement against that and it's one of the reasons why, rising out of this Port Arthur tragedy, I put together a group of ministers to look at

that issue and also the question of the policy of the last ten or twenty years of pushing people, perhaps too soon, out of mental institutions into the community. I know that there are a lot of arguments in favour of it and, in many cases, it works very well.

SATTLER:

But it's been used as a bit of a convenience by mental health services around Australia, hasn't it?

PRIME MINISTER:

It has, I believe, perhaps, become something of a fad of mental health administration in this country and I don't point the finger at any one State or the states or any one side of politics. I think it's been common to both sides of politics and it is something we should look at again and look at very carefully because there are so many examples of people who, without any supervision or guidance, stop taking medication and their character therefore changes and what would be a fairly normal behavioural situation becomes something quite different. I would also like, in the course of that inquiry, to have the interaction of the privacy laws in relation to the treatment of mental illness examined. I've had examples brought to me of local members of people who - as a local member - of people who have had a mental disorder have treated in one part of Australia are admitted to hospital in another part of Australia and because of the privacy laws the second hospital can't get the detail out of the first hospital.

SATTLER:

Crazy.

PRIME MINISTER:

Absolutely crazy. I had one example which, where the young man in question suicided despite the fact that he'd been hospitalised on the eastern seaboard of this country. He came to a hospital here and the second hospital couldn't access the records. In this day when we have such instantaneous communications and everything is... that sort of material could be accessed, I think that is carrying the privacy laws to crazy lengths and I think in those situations the balance ought to be in favour of the self interest and the survival of the person rather than sort of deifying privacy to such an extent that it takes precedence over survival.

SATTLER:

That video and violence movie committee should be delivering their deliberations ...

PRIME MINISTER:

I expect to get an interim report from them next week.

SATTLER:

Good I might listen in for that. Now we shouldn't forget, and nor will we, the main reasons for your hurried visit to Perth. This is another major tragedy in Australia that has left 18 families, and probably thousands of other people who knew them, grieving after last week's Black Hawk tragedy and we won't forget about that. But the very important question I think now is, will the families of the SAS soldiers and the Airmen receive prompt compensation unlike the survivors of our biggest peace time military accident the Voyager collision?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well the answer to that is yes they will receive ...

SATTLER:

Some of those people from the Voyager ...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I don't want to comment on that, but I will say that in relation to the Townsville accident the families will receive proper compensation. The Defence Minister is in charge of that and the Veterans' Affairs Minister, but I can give the general assurance that they will. It is the least Australia owes to the families of those men and their deaths demonstrate very vividly and sadly how dangerous it is, even in peace time, for men and women to be in the Australian Defence Force because there's just a natural element of danger. It was a very sad happening. I think all of Australia was rocked by it.

SATTLER:

Well you were just about to go into a Premiers' Conference weren't you?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes I was actually at the Lodge having a discussion with the Premiers and I was rung by the new member for the seat of Herbert, in which Townsville is located, Peter Lindsay and he gave me the information. He was actually at the army base. It was a terribly tragic event. Of course, I know it's had a big impact on people here in Perth because the SAS regiment is stationed in Swanbourne.

SATTLER:

They're like the sons and brothers of a lot of us.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well they are. And it is the biggest and most significant army unit that is based in Western Australia. I know it is part and parcel of the Perth community. I know the people of Perth feel particularly this happening.

SATTLER:

Well you've seen an example of that. We've got a huge wreath in here that was then passed through us by one of our listeners who is going to make sure that's sent down there today. A former SAS man himself.

PRIME MINISTER:

They are a great band of men the SAS. I'm very lucky to have met a couple of people who are ex-SAS officers and I think your current State Governor is a former commanding ...

SATTLER:

Former commanding officer.

PRIME MINISTER:

... of the Special Air Service. They have won for themselves a wonderful record and, of course, don't forget three of the men who died came from the 5th Parachute Regiment, but the bulk of them from the SAS. There's always something particularly poignant about people who are struck down in those circumstances in the prime of their lives and when they are doing something for all of us, which they were, we all owe them something and the best way that we can try to repay that debt is to make sure that their families are properly looked after. As Prime Minister I give my assurance that that will happen and there won't be any inappropriate delays and there won't be any obfuscation. They will be properly looked after in accordance with the compensation provisions that are provided for in the law.

SATTLER:

On a lighter note, are you still getting flak for living in Sydney?

PRIME MINISTER:

No. None at all but I'm actually spending more time in Canberra than I am in Sydney. I mean all that's really happened is that I tend to go back to Sydney at weekends. My family spends their time in Sydney because my children, two are at university and one is still at school.

SATTLER:

They weren't yearning to go to Canberra?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well if you're an 18 year old boy, for example, and you've just started first year at university and all your mates are there you'd rather stay there wouldn't you?

SATTLER:

Oh definitely. Why would he want to go with dad to Canberra?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well they don't mind coming occasionally and they do. But what tends to happen is that I rattle around in the place during the week on my own, the Lodge, and I go back for the weekend in Sydney.

SATTLER:

Don't tell me you're doing your own cooking?

PRIME MINISTER:

No I can't claim to do that, but I sort of, I eat there from time to time. It's a very comfortable residence and I have no complaints at all. I think the arrangement we have, which is not ending up costing any more, I think I've got one great advantage too. It means that by being out of Canberra for some of the time I talk to people from different parts of Australia.

SATTLER:

You mean you go to the real world?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well there are a lot of real Australians in Canberra too. I'm not a Canberra basher. I'm not a public servant basher at all but I think it's important to understand that Canberra can be atypical of the rest of the country. There's nothing quite like talking to parents on the side line of a football game and being told what's wrong with your policies. I think that's a very, very good idea and I do that. I still do that on a regular basis and I think it's very handy.

SATTLER:

I appreciate you coming in today and I know that probably next time round, on a less tight schedule, we'll take some talkback as well.

PRIME MINISTER:

I'd be delighted to Howard. It's very good to be here.