



PRIME MINISTER

14 July 1996

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP ADDRESS TO THE CITIZENS RALLY AGAINST GUNS GOLD COAST ARTS CENTRE

E&OE.....

Well thank you first of all to Russ Walkington, to my Federal Parliamentary colleague Kathy Sullivan, to Cheryl Kernot, the Leader of the Australian Democrats, to all of my other State and Federal Parliamentary colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.

I am very pleased to be here today to say a few words in support of the decision taken by the national Government some weeks ago to try and achieve for the first time in Australia effective national uniform firearms legislation.

And I want at the outset of my remarks to express my thanks to both Kim Beazley, the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the Australian Labor Party, and also to Cheryl Kernot, the Leader of the Australian Democrats, for the support that both of them have quite generously given to this very important national initiative because it is something that crosses the normal party political divide. It is an unusual issue in that sense and my remarks here today are an appeal to a number of things. They are not an appeal to excessive emotionalism although emotion is impossible to separate from the tragic events that have been dealt with today. They are not just an appeal to that, but they are more an appeal to reason, they're an appeal to common sense, they're an appeal to the collective will of the Australian people to do something decisive to give ourselves a better future.

They are not about turning our back on the strong, vital, tough character which we pride ourselves on having as Australians and I did agree with the remark that Cheryl Kernot made about the possession of weapons not being some kind of symbol of male virility.

Last night I had the opportunity of witnessing a very remarkable match of Rugby at the Sydney Football Stadium, when the Wallabies defeated South Africa. And as I moved amongst the crowd and talked to lots of people I was overwhelmed by the number of people who came up to me, hardly a group of people who sort of have a retiring view of life, there was nothing retiring about what went on in the middle of that ground, they came up and said, for heaven's sake don't weaken on your resolve to have national gun laws.

Ladies and gentlemen, I do acknowledge that the laws that I sponsored and I hope by given final effect by the State Governments of Australia, I do acknowledge that those laws involve some reduction in the individual liberty of some Australians. I acknowledge that. And I also acknowledge that the overwhelming bulk of those people are decent, ordinary, law abiding, fellow Australians. I don't regard the great generality of sporting shooters in this country as being criminals. I don't regard them as being lesser Australians than anybody else in this hall. But what I am saying to them is I'm asking them to accept that sometimes in the affairs of the nation it is necessary that a group accept some curtailment of their individual liberty in the overall greater common good.

They are not the first people to have been asked to do that and they won't in the nature of the democracy be the last. Because the nature of a democracy is never absolute unrestrained liberty of the individual irrespective of the consequences. The nature of a democracy is always a constantly revolving compromise between the aggregate rights and interests of the community and the unrestrained rights of individuals. And achieving that compromise is the responsibility of a democratically elected Government. I mean all my political instincts are against regulation. I might be standing on the same platform as Kim Beazley and Cheryl Kernot on this issue but on other issues we might stand on different platforms because we have different views about the role of government in our society.

But when it comes to the safety of our community, when we have the opportunity as people to freely choose a path decisively away from the American path then we ought to seize that opportunity.

I don't argue that if the laws I've supported are given full effect, I don't argue that another tragedy can't happen. I can't promise you that we can abolish tragedies of that. I can't guarantee that there won't be further suicides and there won't be further murders. But I can guarantee to you that if those laws are implemented we will achieve a permanent and major reduction in the number of potentially dangerous weapons in our society.

And that my friends is a cause worth working for, it's a cause worth fighting for. I'm not arguing and I'm not proposing, although some in this hall this afternoon might so propose, I'm not proposing that all weapons, all firearms be taken out of the Australian community. One would imagine when one hears some of the criticism at what we have proposed that

people will no longer be able to be sporting shooters. That people will no longer have any access to firearms. Let me remind you that we're not doing that. Let me remind you that in relation to primary producers that if a farmer can clearly demonstrate a need for a low powered semi-automatic weapon for occupational reasons then that will be granted by the licensing authorities.

Let me assure retired Deputy Commissioner Atkinson that the proposal in relation to high powered semi-automatics for the culling of feral animals will be subject to the very stringent controls and the people having possession of those under this proposal will need to demonstrate the capacity of a professional shooter and the gun will only be available under my proposal for the limited duration of the cull, it must then be handed back to the licensing authority and not retained by the primary producer.

Can I frankly say ladies and gentlemen that most of the people that I've spoken to in the rural community although many of them will find it a degree inconvenient, they are the people in the main who have always been prepared to see a common good triumph over some personal inconvenience and the great bulk of them accept the wisdom of what is being proposed and indeed the weekend before the first police ministers' conference, among the many phone calls that I placed to people leading representative bodies around Australia were some phone calls to leaders of primary producer organisations including some here in the state of Queensland, and the general message I got from them was well it will be a bit inconvenient but we accept the need and I have found frankly amongst farmers an overwhelmingly intelligent acceptance of the need albeit with some disappointment of the decision that we've taken.

Now, there is as you are aware essentially only one outstanding matter. And that relates to the question of crimping. A practise whereby a semiautomatic weapon with a capacity of five or more is reduced to a semi-automatic weapon with a capacity of only two. The argument being that if you can have double barrelled shot guns, why can't you have a crimped semi-automatic weapon that has a capacity of only two after the crimping process. And what I said was that if it could be overwhelmingly demonstrated to me that the process of crimping was irreversible, then I'd be prepared to consider that. Now, we did have a report from the Australian federal police which indicated that for practical purposes, a single continuous crimp was irreversible. I then sought some further information and I handed the matter to some people in the defence forces and I received late last week, and I have released the report, except for the highly classified section to the media this afternoon, from the Australian Defence Forces, and that report says two things.

That a single continuous crimp can be effectively reversed and five cartridges fired from the magazine within an hour. The reversal can take place within an hour, and through a more difficult process, a multiple continuous crimp can also be reversed through the use of a mandrel. And what that report says essentially is that given the time and the application and the skills, there is no such thing as an irreversibly crimped semi-automatic firearm. Now, that is the reason why I made the statement that I did last week. I was prepared to examine it, and I do not believe that there was any responsible course left to me to my colleagues, or indeed others throughout Australia who have Government responsibility in

that area in the face of that sort of evidence, and that is why I have said that the Commonwealth will be going to the Police Ministers' meeting on Wednesday, arguing that the crimping process should not be allowed as consistent with the spirit of the original Police Ministers' resolution.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, I don't as a practising politician, as the leader of a political party and as the Prime Minister of Australia, I don't as a matter of ordinary course enjoy or seek argument or disagreement with any group of people in the Australian community. The instinct is always to try if one can to find a common ground a common basis. But that common ground and common basis must always be behind the common good. It must not be around the lowest common denominator. And that is why I set the goals that I did before the first Police Ministers' conference. Now, I recognise that we live in a federation. I do respect in our system of Government the roles of the States and I want to assure all of you that I am above all a passionate Australian nationalist, and being a passionate Australian nationalist there are some things that are indivisibly and indisputably valuable to all Australians. And one of these things, yes - somebody interjects 'freedom' - yes the freedom to work in the relative absence of unnecessary fear. That is a very important freedom.

And we do have an opportunity on this occasion, we do have an opportunity as a nation, as seven governments working together across the party political divide, across the Commonwealth- State constitutional divide, we do have an opportunity as a group of leaders to do something of lasting value and something that will be seen I hope by future Australians as a moment when we put aside our normal differences and we are united behind some common objectives and I hope the commitment of so many Australians as demonstrated here today, I hope the commitment by so many Australians irrespective of how they vote, I hope that that commitment is communicated and transmitted loudly and clearly to all governments around Australia especially over the next few days. I don't come to this debate as somebody who reacted particularly in a knee-jerk fashion to the tragic events in Tasmania. In fact anybody who examines the statements I made as long ago as 1988 when I was first leader of the Opposition they will find that I expressed support for many of the initiatives proposed by Mr Unsworth, the then Labor Premier of New South Wales.

I am not a latter day convert. But now in the position of Prime Minister of our country, I do have the opportunity, but even more importantly, I have the responsibility to use whatever authority that office brings to achieve the sort of goals that I believe the overwhelming majority of Australians want.

Ladies and gentlemen can I thank you for coming here today. Can I thank you for demonstrating your willingness to participate in open debate on this issue. Can I say to all of you that my own personal commitment to effective strong uniform gun laws, gun laws that given the nature of what has happened in this country, and given the nature of what is at stake and what can be achieved are not excessively intrusive, they are reasonable, they are balanced, and they are no more than the national need demands that all governments should deliver to all Australians.

ENDS

QUESTIONS + ANSWERS GOLD COAST RALLY

QUESTION:

Would you support legislation but rather why do you support legislation seeking to remove the right of law abiding citizens to defend lives and property against criminals?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I don't, and I think it is a complete and deliberate misreading of what we have proposed to suggest that the laws are designed to do that. The reality of the matter is that these proposals impact in no way on the common or statute law governing the right of self defence and I think it is a complete red herring to drag that into this whole debate.

QUESTION:

A corollary to that question however asks what about women in remote locations. Why have you removed self-defence?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, the reality is that under the laws that we are proposing I would be very surprised if there were any women living in rural areas of Australia where some kind of weapon were not lawfully available to them, to members of their family or to the owners of farms. What you've actually remember when you are talking about this argument about people in remote areas, if they are living on farming properties there is no prohibition on bolt action weapons, none whatsoever.

(interjection)

Really? And most people who are primary producers, if they can demonstrate the need to the licensing authorities will have access to low-powered semi-automatic weapons and if you can satisfy the registration requirements and most of the farmers to whom I've spoken, many, not all of them but a large number of them have said 'we contest the need of many people in rural areas, we contest the absolute essentiality of semi-automatic weapons so the point I'm making is that from a practical point of view in many of these isolated areas and these isolated situations of which the questioner speaks, there will be weapons. Now, I've got to say to you that it is not only people who live in isolated areas who may feel in fear. I know of many people, of women in urban areas who feel vulnerable and feel unsafe and there are a complex series of reasons and I think some of them are bound up with the way in which in some respects our society has degenerated into greater levels of violence and I think all of us are moved with any expositions on the incidence of domestic violence in our community and those of us who have been fortunate enough not to experience those things are of course as I am always very touched by and affected by references to the particular hell through which many women live in those situations. But if these laws we propose can make even a tiny contribution to inculcating a less violent disposition and a less violent

culture in our community then on that ground, as well as the other grounds, those laws will be well and truly worthwhile.

QUESTION:

If the laws are enacted and it is necessary to hand in certain types of guns, what will be done with them, will they be destroyed or stored, what security precaution?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, they'll certainly be, the compensation will be paid and they will be destroyed.

(tape break)

... government that will take away the lawfully acquired property of Australians without proper compensation. This is not seizure of private property without compensation and there is a, I mean, people talk about constitutional rights in this debate. Can I say that there is only one relevant constitutional right in this whole debate which is actually referred to in the Australian constitution and that is that acquisition of private property must be on just terms and that I promise you will be the situation in relation to fire arms.

QUESTION:

Will the Prime Minister explain if the present proposed gun laws are not part of a plan to disarm the nation, why did the Coalition sign the United Nations convention to general and complete disarmament?

PRIME MINISTER:

Can I say that this proposition about disarming the nation, I mean, let me make a few things clear about the government's policy towards the defence of Australia. I happen to believe that defence expenditure in this country has already been cut very heavily indeed too heavily and despite our difficult budget situation, the one major area of federal Government expenditure that is going to be completely immune from any overall reduction in spending in the coming budget is the area of Australia's defence. So I feel rather keenly about any suggestion that I am a Prime Minister who is going to preside over the disarming of Australia, look, suggestions that this has got anything to do with weakening our defence or disarming Australia for it is the consequence of that particular convention, there is nothing and anything this country has signed which in anyway inhibits its capacity for defence self reliance and any suggestion that we have, I mean, I have visited many sins upon my political predecessors and I will visit more on them I suppose as time goes by in the nature of political combat but can I say I do not accuse them of having signed something that legally prevents this country from defending itself and can I assure you that there is nothing, there will be nothing, and there is absolutely no substance at all in the suggestion that these laws in some way inhibit our capacity for self reliance and self defence. That really is cloud cuckoo land stuff.

QUESTION: Prime Minister, if the State Police Ministers fail to agree on uniform national gun laws would you consider putting the question of gun control to a referendum?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, in answer to that question look I know there is a meeting of Police Ministers next Wednesday and I remain hopeful particularly in the light of the very detailed evidence to which I have referred that is being made available this afternoon, I remain hopeful that the cooperative process that I've embarked upon will deliver the remaining 10% of the agreement and give us a hundred percent of the agreement that was concluded on the tenth of May, and because I am a cooperative bloke and because I believe in reason triumphing over irrationality, and because I believe that in the mainstream commonsense instincts of all Australians no matter where they live in this country of ours I remain hopeful that the voices of the great mainstream of the Australian community will be clearly heard by all governments on this subject and therefore perhaps the most ... I'm quite sure that we'll all follow with great interest the lead-up to and the deliberations at the Police Ministers' meeting and I hope that, I really do hope very devotedly, very very strongly I do hope that all of the state Governments recognise that what the overwhelming majority of Australian people want is a one hundred percent delivery on the tenth of May agreement.

QUESTION:

Given that Mr Howard, will you add support to as suggested to by former deputy police commissioner Atkinson a mandatory jail sentence for offenders under the new law?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I think we need very tough and very effective penalties. The exact extent of those penalties is something that I know will be worked out and discussed at the Police Ministers' conference but I can assure Mr Atkinson and everybody else in this hall that it is my understanding that the penalties are going to be strong and effective and will constitute an adequate deterrent against any breaches of the law.

QUESTION:

Just a couple more. There is a questioner here who focuses on what might be an ongoing or continuing problem and that is the emptying of mental institutions and unstable people roaming the streets. If they have to hand in their guns they may use knives as an effective weapon. Will you direct attention to this area of problem?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, can I say in answer to that question that it raises a very difficult issue. I would have to say that quite separately from issues of physical safety I think there was probably in the 1980s in this country too great a trend towards the deinstitutionalising process in the

treatment of some forms of mental illness and I think some of those who argue that processes set in train for example by the Richmond inquiry in New South Wales, I apologise to our Queensland audience for using a Sydney example, perhaps those processes may have gone too far, on the other hand I have seen first hand evidence of where people with particular forms of mental illness have adapted extremely well to not living in institutions, they have, look, can I, this is not, if we have any sort of reason and compassion on a difficult issue it is not something where you can take a hard line black and white view and I think it is something where you really have to try and comprehend it... I mean, I do think the process probably did go too far and there is an argument that away from the atmosphere of certain institutions; the regularity of which medication is taken and all that sort of thing breaks down and there can be particularly difficult situations. Now, I choose my words carefully because I think it is something that one has to talk carefully and sensitively about because families of people who have mental disabilities carry enormous burdens and have a travail that the rest of the community doesn't have and I've spoken to many of them and there are arguments for and against the process of disinstitutionalising that's gone on in this country for quite a long period of time and it is one of those issues that has been gathered up in our examination along with our examination of certain proposals relating to violence on television and I noted the response of the audience to that issue when another person spoke and I want to say to you that I hope the measures that the Government announced last week, which I don't suggest for a moment are going to deliver some kind of non-violent Nirvana in Australia, anymore than the gun legislation is going to, but at least they will make a contribution. No group of political leaders in this country can deliver paradise but what they can do is to discharge their responsibility while they are in office to try and deliver significant improvements where they have the capacity to do so.

QUESTION:

Mr Prime Minister, would you reconfirm that this is not an over-reaction to the Port Arthur massacre but a response to the Australia wide ongoing problem?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I think it is important, it was a terrible event, but it was in magnitude something that gripped the soul of the country because of the sheer size of the horror. But there have been many others and they're referred to very directly and very effectively in the display behind me. But I said earlier as far as I am personally concerned, and as far as many people on both sides of politics are personally concerned, the idea of having effective uniform national gun laws has been on our agenda for a long period of time and I think what was agreed on the tenth of May is the right response and if we can deliver one hundred percent, if all of the Governments of Australia can deliver one hundred percent of what was agreed on the tenth of May, then I believe that particular political deed will do more than anything else to strengthen the faith and the confidence of the Australian people, whatever their political allegiance in the ordinary democratic political process in this country. Thank you.