

②

17 July 1996

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON. JOHN HOWARD MP
PRESS CONFERENCE - PARLIAMENT HOUSE**

E & OE.....

Ladies and gentlemen, the situation after today's meeting of the Police Ministers is that there is total agreement in relation to everything except a proposal regarding modification of which I will come to in a moment. The Commonwealth has indicated a willingness to help generously in relation to the cost of administration of the gun buy back and the new registration system. We have agreed on a very limited exemption under Category C to ensure that Australians can effectively compete in clay target sports in the Olympic, international and national context and the model rules in relation to that are going to be drawn up in consultation with representatives of the various jurisdictions. There was a proposal put to the meeting for what amounted in the words of some of its proponents the re-manufacture of the magazine of a semi-automatic or pump-action shotgun to reduce, so it was argued, permanently its capacity to two cartridges.

For a combination of reasons a majority of the jurisdictions represented at the meeting indicated that they were unwilling to support that. Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory - their representatives at the meeting have said that they would take this matter back, and in particular, the majority view in relation to that proposal for consideration by their respective cabinets, all of which will meet next Monday and the final position of those three jurisdictions in relation to the majority view of the, majority indication of the meeting, including of course the Commonwealth, will be known next Monday.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the State governments of Australia and the Territories of Australia for the tremendous co-operation so far in relation to the goal that is still very much within our grasp, of uniform, tough, effective national gun laws. Thus far we have achieved what many would be described as 80 - 90% of what was sought. I would like to achieve 100%. I believe the overwhelming majority of Australians would like to achieve 100% and that is their fervent desire but there are proper democratic consultative processes within a federation and those processes must

be worked through, and they are being worked through, and in relation to the Territory and the two States I mention this matter will be referred back to their Cabinets and each of them will meet on Monday and their final position in relation to the matter will be known next Monday.

Are there any questions?

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, how did you convince the three States that didn't want to agree to your position, what did you use to convince them that they should?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, I don't sort of get into putting, you know, descriptions and commentaries on things. Everybody has a strong view on this issue and we talked it through and I recognise that despite the clear evidence of a majority Australian opinion on this issue, there are various parts of the country where strongly held views by people of decent intent who are very good Australians exist and you have to respect that and you have to allow the proper democratic process to take its place. I mean, we are talking here about an area that's unresolved which is a very small percentage of what was originally set out to be achieved on the 10th May.

JOURNALIST:

Could I ask a question of the WA representative?

PRIME MINISTER:

You can ask any question you like to anybody.

JOURNALIST:

Is it correct that the Prime Minister threatened a referendum if States could not come on board in terms of his position?

BOB WIESE:

The question of a referendum was obviously, was mentioned. We have indicated in Western Australia that we will be going back to our Cabinet for some final resolution on this matter at our meeting on Monday.

JOURNALIST:

Is it correct that the Prime Minister raised the issue of a referendum?

BOB WIESE:

That's correct.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, Monday, if the Cabinets in the respective States and Territories don't agree to come on board, are you prepared to go for a referendum at some stage?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look our response, if we don't achieve 100% uniformity next Monday is a matter that I daresay we'll consider on Tuesday which happens to be when Federal Cabinet next meets. Obviously having a referendum is a possibility. I want to make that very clear and to suggest that a reference to a referendum is a threat is highly amusing. The idea of a referendum has been in the ether for quite some time and it is clearly a possibility but referendums are not to be embarked upon carelessly or lightly or capriciously but very soberly because they're significant events in the life of a Commonwealth but this is a very significant issue and people have very strong views about it and people are passionate throughout Australia to have uniform tough gun laws and that's the bottom line of any political analysis of this issue. They are passionate about that. Now, obviously a referendum is a real possibility but let me make it clear, I am not committed to anything other than continuing to work effectively with the states to try and achieve in a co-operative federation the spirit and the letter of what was agreed on the 10th May, so I still have very great faith in the co-operative federalist approach.

JOURNALIST:

Have the Ministers from the two States and Territory agreed to argue the majority of the case or simply to take the majority case back to their Cabinets?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I think they can speak for themselves Michelle. I wouldn't presume to speak for them. Well, that's up to them. Mr Stone's got something to say.

SHANE STONE:

We will take back in the case of the Territory the views that I said all along, that it was a matter for the Police Ministers. A majority of the Police Ministers have rejected the crimping option and also the modified magazine. I will be taking that back to my Cabinet colleagues.

JOURNALIST:

Will you be advocating the majority position or simply saying, well this is what they said. It's..

SHANE STONE:

I'll be taking back the substance of what was discussed in the course of the meeting.

JOURNALIST:

And you will be advocating it?

SHANE STONE:

Well, I will be taking back what was discussed in the course of the meeting.

JOURNALIST:

Can you be a bit more precise?

SHANE STONE:

Well I've been as precise as I'm going to be. I will...

JOURNALIST:

So in other words you're not going to advocate it?

SHANE STONE:

No I'm not saying that either. I am taking back the substance of what was discussed in the meeting so that my colleagues can come to a view on this, guided by my particular views.

JOURNALIST:

Is it your expectation that if you don't go along with the majority position, then the Prime Minister will proceed with a referendum?

SHANE STONE:

Look, a referendum is clearly an option. It's always been an option and I would take the view that the pulling on of a referendum by any State or Territory would be both reckless and irresponsible. It's quite clear to me that all of Australians including Territorians, would vote overwhelmingly for these national proposals.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, is it possible in your view to have effective national gun laws if they are not uniform laws on this issue?

PRIME MINISTER:

They will be diminished in their effectiveness if there is not uniformity on this issue but I stand by what I said earlier, a great deal of common ground, an enormous amount of common ground, way beyond what's already been achieved has already been achieved

so I don't, you know, one's got to keep a sense of proportion about it but I would like to see it at 100% rather than 80 or 90.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Cooper, what's the Queensland position? What will you actually be saying to your Cabinet colleagues on Monday and do you expect your Cabinet colleagues to agree to a majority position?

RUSSELL COOPER:

I have spoken to Premier Borbidge several times this evening and he and I both agree that this matter should be properly brought to the Cabinet on Monday and that's exactly what we'll do.

JOURNALIST:

What's your recommendation going to be?

RUSSELL COOPER:

I will just be reporting to the Cabinet on what has occurred here today.

JOURNALIST:

And Mr Wiese, will you be doing the same thing?

BOB WIESE:

I will be doing exactly the same thing.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, is it the case that after the early session of today's meeting all of the states indicated the willingness to accept this new modification proposal but later changed their mind after their first meeting with you?

PRIME MINISTER:

I never go into the details of private discussions. I think the only way that meetings like this can work effectively is for there to be periods when the members of governments who have executive responsibility could talk directly and confidentially with each other and I for one won't be canvassing the details of any of those discussions except to say that they were conducted in a very direct and co-operative fashion and I have appreciated the input of all of the Ministers, and I accept without qualification that all of them are seeking to achieve the optimum result according to their particular assessment - the situation of what's fair and what is politically desirable and what is politically achievable. This is not an easy issue. I mean, it's very simple

for those who write about it to say at the flick of a finger that you can have uniform this and that and why don't you do this and that.

We are a federation and you have to achieve things in a patient, exhaustive, co-operative fashion and can I say again that I appreciate the co-operation of the States. I also appreciate the co-operation across the political divide of Mr Beazley and Senator Kernot and of State Opposition Leaders around the country.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, are you absolutely convinced if you went to a referendum you would win?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, look, to answer that question sort of assumes that we are already doing it. I mean, let's do one thing at a time. We've had a discussion today. People in three areas are going back to their Cabinets on Monday and they'll be reporting in the terms that they themselves explain, not what I explain. I hope that after Monday through the cooperative process we will have achieved nationally uniform tough effective gun laws. I acknowledge that a referendum is a possibility. I do not want to start speculating about the outcome except to repeat what I said earlier that the thing that cuts through to me above everything else in this debate is that passionate desire of Australians of all walks of life across all party allegiances to have tough effective national gun laws. But referendums are not things likely to be embarked upon and it is easy when you don't have to make the decisions on it to call for them and I note with interest the calls that have already come for referenda, it's a bit like Ministerial resignations when you are in Opposition.

JOURNALIST:

How much money is the federal Government prepared to give to the States for the cost of administration. Is that in addition to

PRIME MINISTER:

We will demonstrate our unfailing generosity.

JOURNALIST:

But is that in addition to the \$500 million?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes of course it is. The \$500 million is the dough for buying back the guns. This is in relation.... I mean, we are not saying we are picking up every last dollar, I mean, hang on....

SHANE STONE:

But you'll be generous.

PRIME MINISTER:

We'll be characteristically generous.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Wiese, is it correct that the Federal Attorney General initially supported your position in relation to the re-manufacturing option?

BOB WIESE:

As Mr Howard has said, I don't think it is proper for us to be discussing the matters that were discussed within the meeting that we've just held. Let me say that we haven't... let me say that we will be taking back, we haven't reached total agreement. Western Australia will be going back to our Cabinet to see where we go from here.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, could you explain why you rejected the re-manufacturing option?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, we had a meeting on the tenth of May which said that crimping ...that never mentioned crimping. We said we'd look at crimping. We looked at crimping and we found that it was not irreversible and then another proposal comes up. I mean there has got to be a point at which you draw the line and I think the Australian public is sort of starting to imagine that it is a thing ... the line isn't drawn and if things continue to go on we'll have a never ending succession of proposals for this or that modification.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Williams were you overruled by the Prime Minister on the South Australia's proposal after you accepted the re-manufacture of a magazine?

ATTORNEY GENERAL:

Look, I think what you are asking me to do is to enter into a discussion about what was discussed behind closed doors. The Commonwealth position was quite clear at all times to my colleagues I understood.

JOURNALIST:

But there was a report on the wire service saying that you were overruled. It's already been written.....

PRIME MINISTER:

Well if it is in the media it has to be right doesn't it?!

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister could you explain how you intend ... exemptions for competitive shooters?

PRIME MINISTER:

You mean the Olympic people?

JOURNALIST:

Yes. Would they have to be only at an Olympic level?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look it is going to be very very narrow, so that you don't have a ridiculous situation where foreigners competing in Olympic sports for example... I mean, the thing that provoked this was I got a letter from the people tied up with the Olympic shooters and they'd had an inquiry from the Olympic 2000 saying is the thing still okay. And we don't want a situation where Australians are prevented from competing on equal terms with foreigners.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister was there any discussion today about whether farmers could have access to the Category D..?

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh the Category D thing has all been fixed up. I'm sorry, I should have mentioned that. You'll remember a proposal was put forward by Queensland in relation to that and we considered it and indicated that we were prepared to go a certain distance. I don't think, to be fair, quite as far as had been asked by Queensland but essentially to the effect of what now operates in the Northern Territory and that was accepted as I am told, I wasn't there when it was discussed and I'm told that was accepted by all jurisdictions. So there's complete agreement on that. I mean, there's just this one area and we have three jurisdictions who want to further discuss before committing themselves either way. Now I accept that and that's a proper part of the process and I think people should understand that in something as complicated and difficult as this where views vary a bit around the country, that that is a proper working out of the federal system.

JOURNALIST:

Can I ask a question about an area of agreements? Have you now, the Ministers, have you all agreed on the actual schedule for compensation of weapons and when will that be made available?

ATTORNEY GENERAL:

There is a broad agreement on the timetable. It will need to be flexible because of the need for each state to put legislation in place in its jurisdiction. But in general terms it should be under way within four to six weeks on a national basis.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard you've made it clear to the representatives of Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory that if they don't support uniform national gun laws on Monday the federal Cabinet will consider a referendum on Tuesday. Is that a fair summary?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, I've made clear - what I've been willing to say - I've made clear tonight. I mean, look, we had a very long discussion. I'm not going to go into the detail of that. They are meeting on Monday as part of their ordinary proper processes. It so happens that we will meeting the following day. There haven't been any threats made. I don't deal in threats. That's not the issue. We have a goal. We have a goal of tough national gun laws, and that's what the Australian people want, and that's my goal and I am working through the federal process to try and achieve it. And inevitably there are disagreements along the way and we'll see what we'll see on Monday. I'm not going to start answering hypothetical questions. Obviously everybody knows that a referendum is a real distinct possibility. Of course it is - I mean it has been talked about by everybody. It's been talked about by a number of people in the Government, it's been talked about by some of the State Premiers, it's been called for by Mr Beazley and Senator Kernot....

JOURNALIST:

But you haven't said anything until tonight...

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh yes I have, I just haven't quite gone as far as people have wanted me to go in committing myself to it. I'm not committing myself to it tonight. I'm not committing myself to anything tonight other than to continue between now and Monday to use all of my efforts and any influence I have to bring about tough uniform national gun laws and that's what I'll continue to do. I'll continue to talk to the Premiers of the States about it and I appreciate very much the co-operation that's already been given by the Premiers of all States. They've been very very helpful and generous and very supportive of the Commonwealth position.

JOURNALIST:

Were you disappointed it has taken so long and that there isn't a final resolution tonight?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, no, because these things take a bit of time. I mean, it is very easy when you are on the outside and you are looking at eight governments and saying 'fellows get it fixed up' straight away. I mean, we are a co-operative federation and you've got to work through these things and I think we've come an enormous distance but we are nearing the point, you know, the moment of final truth and that will be next Monday. And everybody knows where everybody stands and there's no misunderstandings and our position was enunciated last week. I rang each of the Premiers and the Chief Ministers and told them our position. We discussed it again today. We did have the additional injection on our part... I mean, we worked out this exemption in relation to the Olympics, and also the Commonwealth indicated a willingness to be you know, our characteristically generous self in relation to the financial side of it. Now, we had a discussion and we await the resolution of their respective positions by the three jurisdictions I've mentioned. Now, I think that is fair, proper, that is how the federation works in this country, and you always achieve results if you work through the system in the correct fashion.

Thank you.