



PRIME MINISTER

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL MAHER - AM PROGRAMME

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PRIME MINISTER:

I've said that if our programmes coincide I would be happy to meet the Dalai Lama. He is a significant religious leader and it's appropriate in those circumstances, as he's a guest in Australia, that I see him and it would be strange if I didn't and I don't think the Australian people would expect me to spurn an invitation to meet him as a significant religious leader. Our links with China are very important to us and there are all sorts of reasons why the Chinese Government should see the meeting in proper context, should understand that he is a significant religious leader and it would not be appropriate for me to turn down an invitation to meet him.

MAHER:

It's a pretty serious warning though, isn't it, to say that you going ahead with this meeting might affect trade ties? - Is there a bit of bluster in this do you think?

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh look, I don't want to overreact to it. I note what a spokesman for the Foreign Ministry has said and I'm not going to take it any further. I have discussed the matter with the Chinese Ambassador, he understands our position. Mr Fischer, the Deputy Prime Minister, was in China very recently. Mr Downer has been to China. We value that relationship and we'll continue to work on it. Equally in our kind of society significant religious leaders meet Prime Ministers and senior people in the Government. He met the former Prime Minister when he was last in Australia and it would be quite strange in all of the circumstances if I didn't see him.

MAHER:

So that meeting will definitely go ahead?

PRIME MINISTER:

If his programme and mine coincide, yes.

MAHER:

While you've been in Indonesia you raised the issue of human rights with President Soeharto, a traditionally vexed issue between the two countries. On this issue of human rights, is this one of the areas where you'd like to see a change of emphasis from the previous government?

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh look, it would be wrong, as I think your question implies, to suggest that human rights dominated the discussion between President Soeharto and myself. It didn't. It came up in the course of the discussion. The great bulk of the discussion was about the commitment the two of us and our two governments have to the bilateral relationship between Australia and Indonesia, particularly the economic side of it. The human rights thing is important but you've got to recognise in a relationship like ours with Indonesia that we do come from different vantage points, from different perspectives and the essence of a successful relationship is to respect each others differences whilst defending ones own principles and practices and values, and that's the attitude I'm going to bring to the conduct of international relations on behalf of Australia. We've got nothing as a nation to apologise for. We have our own distinct attitude and way of doing things and our own values and our own history, and I'll protect and respect that as I go abroad, but equally I respect it in others.

MAHER:

Obviously though there is a great deal of curiosity here about your visit. This is the first visit you've made it to Indonesia as Prime Minister. People are looking for changes of emphasis or style. Do you think the human rights issue will be one of those areas where there is a change or is it more the same?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I think that's something that will just unfold. I don't seek to do things differently for the sake of doing them differently but I am different from my predecessor and inevitably I will do things differently. One of the things I won't do is to give the impression that there is something incompatible between a close association with the nations of the Asian Pacific region and continued close links with what might be called our traditional associations in Europe and North America. Those relationships together are part of an integrated set of international relationships that Australia should have and the one shouldn't be seen as involving a choice against the other. We don't

face a choice between our history and our geography, we should see a complementarity in those relationships.

MAHER:

During a speech you gave here you did make the point that Australia is not an Asian nation. Why did you feel it necessary to revisit what has been a long running debate in Australia, why did you feel the need to make this point once again?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I don't know if it's been a long running debate. I made those comments in the context of talking about the fact that Australia had its own particular identity. I never want to see Australia's identity defined by reference to any part of the world. We are Australian and that carries with it a special, distinct character to which many parts of the world have made a contribution and it was in that context that I made that completely unexceptionable remark.

MAHER:

On the issue of Australia not being a bridge between Asia and the West, a point you also made, what about the effort that has gone in in the past couple of years by Australian business to use Australia or to sell Australia as a launching pad, if you like, or a bridge into Asia? Do you think that what you had to say may have had an impact on those efforts?

PRIME MINISTER:

Certainly not. That was a comment in the political and cultural context. What I mean by that, self-evidently, was that a country like Indonesia doesn't need Australia to interpret the West for it, it's quite capable of doing it itself. And for Australia to suggest that somehow or other countries of the Asian Pacific region are incapable of forming their own linkages directly with Western societies either in North America or in Europe would be plainly patronising and wrong. When it comes to business the situation is often very different, and a launching pad, a bridge, a take-off point, Australia can certainly be for many businesses coming out of western Europe in particular and North America. Although, once again, in many cases they make their own direct linkages.

MAHER:

Would you like to see a tempering of the rhetoric that has been used by Australian leaders in this part of the world in the past?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I don't know that I want to start running the ruler over what my predecessors have done. They've all tried in their own ways to make a contribution and I don't want to be negative about them. I'm just going to do things my own way and to the

extent that that is different from the way my two immediate predecessors did things, well that will emerge over a period of time. The important thing is to have a valuable, constructive, positive relationship with countries like Indonesia to build on the common interest we have and not fret too much about our historical and institutional differences because they will, in many cases, always be there. We are different countries, we come of different cultures and different histories, but that shouldn't stop us being the very best of friends.

MAHER:

Of course you come here in the wake of some of the worst political rioting we've seen in Indonesia for more than 20 years. What's your assessment about the prospects of Indonesia, the political prospects and the stability of this country over the coming five years?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, there's not much doubt that this country has achieved enormous things in the last 25 years. It's economic growth has been incredible. It will change as all societies that experience very strong economic growth in a relatively short period of time inevitably do. I hope that those in charge have the wisdom to manage that process of change and the interaction of the political and economic forces that are inevitably at work. But I am impressed with what the Indonesian Government has achieved. I'm impressed with what President Soeharto has done. But what ultimately happens in this country is a matter for the Indonesian people and consistent with my view not to deliver lectures and political science sermons, I'm not going to say any more.

MAHER:

So on that front you wouldn't, for instance, consider meeting the Opposition Leader Megawati Sukarnoputri?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, I think in that respect I'm behaving no differently from any of my predecessors, Labor or Liberal.

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