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PRIME MINISTER

1 October 1996

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

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SATTLER:

Good morning Prime Minister, how are you going?

PRIME MINISTER:

I am very well. I'm over here for a cabinet meeting.

SATTLER:

The first since the Howard Government was elected?

PRIME MINISTER:

First in Perth, not first cabinet meeting, the first one to Perth.

SATTLER:

Glad to see you've been working.

PRIME MINISTER:

We've been flat out. But I think we could be, perhaps, creating a first in the Federal Cabinet, both meeting on the same day, commencing at the same time.

SATTLER:

In the same room?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, not in the same room, although Richard and I have had...

SATTLER:

(inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER:

No, and I don't want to...I'm not going to leave it until three months before the election and then pretend that I'm suddenly interested in Western Australia, as some of my predecessors have done. I, as Opposition Leader, visited Western Australia frequently. I've done so already as Prime Minister. There will be Cabinet meetings from time to time in Perth in Adelaide, in Brisbane and I hope next year in some of the major provincial centres. Now, we can't do it all the time, but it is an important demonstration that Australia is not just the triangle of Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne, it really isn't.

SATTLER:

Of course, your Treasurer won't be at the meeting because he's overseas...

PRIME MINISTER:

He's still at the IMF.

SATTLER:

We're going to hear from him later through our correspondent....

PRIME MINISTER:

Give him my regards...

SATTLER:

...in Washington. Well, one of the subjects you might be talking about today is interest rates.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I don't think we will. I notice the Australian had an interesting headline saying that in effect that the time was right now for another cut in interest rates. Can I say that that is a bit of an exaggeration of what I said. What I said yesterday was if the Senate passed our budget intact, that would help the interest rate climate. Having said all of that though, Prime Ministers always like to see low interest rates, but what happens with monetary policy is ultimately a matter for the Reserve Bank.

SATTLER:

And they are meeting today.

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes.

SATTLER:

Well, Senator....not Senator Evans, I've got so used to saying that, ...Gareth Evans....

PRIME MINISTER:

Gareth Evans, Mr Evans.

SATTLER:

...Mr Evans, who's the opposition...he's the opposition treasury spokesman, now he suggested the economy is a bit weak and we need a cut in interest rates. Is that right?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, the things that drive interest rate levels are myriad. The level of inflation, the rate of wage increases as well as activity and views about employment, they are all things that have got to be taken into account and I don't think it probably helps the process of orderly decision making for me to be talking about what ought to happen with interest rates tomorrow.

SATTLER:

But is the economy ...?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, the economy is mixed. There are some areas that are flat, some areas of manufacturing are flat, the Western Australian economy is very strong, it is probably the strongest of any of the states, I think it certainly is the strongest of any of the States.

SATTLER:

Richard is going to love you.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, you know, I call it as it is. The WA economy is growing very strongly. And if all the other states were growing as strongly as Western Australia, we would be going,

well, not quite gangbusters, but really very well. Parts of the service industries are good, there are some signs of a housing and construction recovery but areas of manufacturing are very flat and retailing to say the least is modest, so it is a mixed picture, but that is how I call it.

SATTLER:

All right, let's get onto the MP who seems to be attracting more attention than any other. She's not a member of any of the major parties, although she could have been a member of the Liberal Party, she was for a time - Pauline Hanson, the member for Oxley has made statements about Aboriginal funding, and also the immigration mix and the level of immigration from Asia. Now, the deputy Prime Minister has warned that her attacks on Asian immigration could damage our economic interest and export prospects to that region. Do you agree with him?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think what really matters in the region is the attitude of the Government, and to a lesser extent...

SATTLER:

It's only one independent MP.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, that's right, and the attitude of the opposition to a lesser extent. Look, everybody in the region knows that this country has a non-discriminatory immigration policy. I mean that is, .. I have re-affirmed that. I am not going to get into the business as I've said probably on half a dozen occasions over the last couple of weeks, I'm not going to get into the business of responding to everything that an independent member in his or her maiden speech says. If people want to know my views and the views of the Government I'll tell them. Now, on immigration, we have cut the level of immigration because we thought it was too high. We have shifted the balance away from an over-reliance on family reunion to a greater emphasis on skills, but we have re-affirmed its non-discriminatory character, and the non-discriminatory character of the immigration policy will remain. Now, that is what is important in this debate, the policy of the government, the level of immigration is something that is determined from time to time according to the national need, the national interest. We took the view a couple of months ago that it ought to be lower. What we decide in the future will be conditioned by the national interest and nothing else.

SATTLER:

So is Mr Fischer over-reacting - as we said, over one independent MP?

PRIME MINISTER:

No no no, I think you should look at the totality of what he said. I don't think it was as member specific as has been suggested.

SATTLER:

And the business council have come out today worried about what she says and how that might effect our...

PRIME MINISTER:

I haven't seen that. I just think it is important in this whole thing to look at what is government policy, because it is government policy that conditions how people react. I mean, I've just been to Indonesia and Japan...

SATTLER:

They're not talking about Pauline Hanson are they?

PRIME MINISTER:

The issue wasn't raised with me once, and from my recollection the speech was made before I went overseas.

SATTLER:

She's getting a pretty hot go at the moment. Her private life is being exposed...

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, I don't, I always find it unfair, distasteful that people's private lives are dragged into these things...

SATTLER:

Threats against her too.

PRIME MINISTER:

I'm just not going to sort of fuel the voyeurism about that by making any further comment. Look, she is an independent member of the Parliament. She is entitled to express her view, I defend her right to say what her views are. If people want to know my views I'll make them known. I've declared again that we have completely non-discriminatory immigration policy and if you want to know my views on any other issues I'm very happy to give them but not in the context of saying she's right or she's half right, or she had a right to say this or somebody else, and in the end I'll spend my whole time responding to each and every speech, and I just think that is getting the whole thing out of proportion. I mean, there is something odd about ... some

commentators are saying, 'isn't it shocking and dreadful and outrageous what she said' but then they spend the next 48 hours furiously writing columns about it.

SATTLER:

And you must have been concerned about Aboriginal funding because you tried to put the auditor through ATSIC.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, look, there has been money wasted in that area and people are fed up with it. The anger in the community is not about the desire of Governments to help genuine disadvantage. The anger is about waste and where waste occurs Governments have a responsibility to act and I don't apologise for anything that the Commonwealth Government has done in that area because money was being wasted, but I do believe that as a group Aboriginals are disadvantaged and our responsibility as a humane Government is to address that, but in areas like health and education and housing, and to focus in an efficient way the resources that are available on those areas and not have them wasted in what can loosely on occasions be called political pursuits in that whole area.

SATTLER:

Now, at the Cabinet meeting today, are you going to talk about media ownership?

PRIME MINISTER:

We might.

SATTLER:

Well, are you about to renege on the promise to hold a public inquiry into media ownership restrictions?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, we haven't discussed it yet and I don't think it is appropriate for me to try and forecast what we are going to even discuss. I mean, we might discuss that issue, we might not.

SATTLER:

There is an agenda...

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes but...I have certain control over the agenda, I must have... look, we could discuss it Howard, we did make it clear before the election that we'd look at the cross-media rules, which have become outdated by the advances in technology. I can say this, that

whatever method of inquiry is adopted, it will be an inquiry that enables people to put their views and it will be an inquiry where I think people will be satisfied about the transparency of it.

SATTLER:

(ad break)

Good to see so many Federal Ministers across here, and they'll know what a great state it is before they go home I hope Prime Minister.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, a lot of them know that already in fact all of them ought to know it. It is a great State. It produces a much lower population proportion - 25% of Australia's export income so we're very heavily upon the, not only the resource sector, but the general wealth of Western Australia.

SATTLER:

It's a pretty rugged State too... they've had a tragedy.

PRIME MINISTER:

A terrible tragedy and it must have had a traumatic effect not only on the local community in Margaret River but...

SATTLER:

Which has been a really effervescent community....

PRIME MINISTER:

I know, and it is one of those things where everybody is lost for words because of the terrible freakish nature of it and the sadness that it inevitably brings to people who lose children and parents and teachers but to a local community it has a particularly traumatic effect.

SATTLER:

All right, one issue which you may or may not have spoken with our Premier on, but I would have thought he might have raised, was the guns buy-back scheme. How much is this, do you really know how much this is going to cost Australia?

PRIME MINISTER:

Very hard to estimate.

SATTLER:

You said \$500 million...

PRIME MINISTER:

We put on a special levy that will raise about \$500 million. We hope that will be enough to cover it. I suppose you could say that if it's not enough to cover it then it means that the buy-back has been spectacularly successful because people have participated. This is a completely virgin area. No country has really done this before, certainly not in the 20th Century, so we are in unexplored waters.

SATTLER:

Is \$500 million just a 'guess-timate'?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, it wasn't a 'guess-timate'. It was the best informed estimate we could make given the absolute absence of any precedence and going on information that was fairly meagre. I mean some of the gun legislation systems in States are good. They are quite good in Western Australia and South Australia, not so good in New South Wales and Queensland. So...

SATTLER:

We are next to no guns have been returned....

PRIME MINISTER:

But the buy-back is starting in New South Wales this week, so, look I have a very positive view and I am quite certain that any of the sort of minor technical disagreements over who contributes what to the cost of running the scheme, I'm sure all of that can be worked out. I did discuss that with Richard Court. I discussed it on the way over with Dean Brown because I called into Adelaide on the way.

SATTLER:

Picked him up...

PRIME MINISTER:

No I just did a couple of functions there and had a luncheon with some education people and I discussed it at the weekend with Jeff Kennett and I'll discuss it with the other Premiers and I'm sure we can sort it out.

SATTLER:

Well haven't you been forced to pull the rug from under the Attorney-General ...

PRIME MINISTER:

No he was doing what he ought to have, quite rightly done and that was to say that we'd made a very generous offer. We had offered to pay two-thirds of the total cost of administering the scheme and four out of the six states have said yes to that, two said they wanted more, they now all say they would like a bit more and that's natural but look, it will get sorted out.

SATTLER:

Have you heard of the national service rifle team...I haven't heard of them before, but they apparently represent people who own these weapons, they've said that only what they call 'sacrifice weapons' are being handed in and the rest are being hidden.

PRIME MINISTER:

You've got to take that with a grain of salt. I mean I saw some footage on the box the other night of literally hundreds, thousands of guns being sort of prepared for pulping in Victoria and my mail is that tens of thousands of weapons have been handed in. Bear in mind that many of the people who have opposed the Government's moves have perhaps if I may say so, a bit of an interest in creating the impression that is not working.

SATTLER:

All right, what about this allegation that gun deals are being made for mates of the Liberals - \$3 million contracts...

PRIME MINISTER:

That thing that Senator Ray raised? That's nonsense.

SATTLER:

Is it?

PRIME MINISTER:

There was a completely proper tendering process and I've been informed this morning that in fact two of the three people that he named as not being suitable to be on the committee actually inside the committee's deliberation voted in favour of another agency and like all of these things, you have a group of five or six people and you have several bids, and some people think one bid is right, some people think another bid is right. There is absolutely nothing unethical about that. The firm is quite reputable.

SATTLER:

What would you have done if something unethical had been done. You would have reversed it would you?

PRIME MINISTER:

Of course I would have. But nothing unethical has been done. I mean, somebody is suggesting, not even Senator Ray is suggesting that just because an advertising company may in the past have advised the Liberal Party it is therefore disentitled to have any Government work, I mean, you are not seriously saying that. I mean, if it gets Government work on the merits ... I mean that would have punched people like Rod Cameron and John Singleton out of the ring a long time ago.

SATTLER:

Okay let's talk about Euthanasia if we could. Do you support it?

PRIME MINISTER:

Personally no.

SATTLER:

Any reason?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, look, can I make the comment right at the beginning that this is not a party political issue, it is a conscience issue...

SATTLER:

... and there will be a conscience vote?

PRIME MINISTER:

There will be an absolute guarantee of a conscience vote and I do not speak to you on behalf of the Government on this, I speak to you as John Howard, I happen to be the Prime Minister but I'm not seeking to use the authority of that office to persuade, suborn, coerce - whatever, anybody into voting in any particular way. I have enormous respect for the difficulty that people have within their own consciences. It's something that have I wrestled with. I can understand people being in favour of euthanasia. I come down on balance against it because I think there should be some absolutes, I guess, in our lives and there should be some things that are so important and the preservation of human life is...

SATTLER:

Have you read the letter of Bob Dent...

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes I have, I've read all of that and I am moved by it.

SATTLER:

He said if I was a dog you'd prosecute me for keeping someone like this.

PRIME MINISTER:

Howard, I understand that and I think what is important in this debate is that we all display a tolerance towards the other point of view. I mean, I can talk emotionally about the sanctity of human life with somebody who supports euthanasia. I can say if you go this step what will be the next step, it's a horrendous leap into the unknown - all of those things. I'm not going to do that because I respect that people feel very deeply probably, perhaps on this issue, a majority of Australians could share your view, maybe it's not your view, I don't know.

SATTLER:

No, it is my view.

PRIME MINISTER:

Okay, well I respect your view.

SATTLER:

And watched a close relative...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I understand, I do understand that and I'm not trying to ram my view down your throat.

SATTLER:

No, no.

PRIME MINISTER:

I'm really asking people to be tolerant on both sides of the debate. And it's one of those things where members of Parliament ought to be mature enough across the party divide. I mean, I note incidentally that Kim Beazley has said that his view is essentially similar to mine. Now, I'm not going to run around nobbling any of my colleagues,

equally I'm saying to my colleagues on both sides of the debate, have tolerance for the other point of view and we ought to be able to talk about this thing in a mature adult fashion and reach a decision. I have no difficulty with people as a matter of conscience having a violently different view from mine. Some of my close colleagues and friends in the parliamentary Liberal Party will probably vote differently than I do on this. Now as far as I'm concerned that is democracy at work and I won't have a diminished respect for them simply because they have a different feeling of conscience on what is an extraordinarily difficult issue.

SATTLER:

Of course there is another part to the issue too and that's States rights...

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't think that is a very strong argument, can I say. To start with the Northern Territory is not a State it's a Territory. The law...

SATTLER:

Doesn't it have the same rights as say Western Australia...

PRIME MINISTER:

No it does not because the law that established self-government for the Northern Territory expressly reserved to the Commonwealth Parliament the right to over rule a Territory law. That is not something that applies to the States.

SATTLER:

I can feel a push for the Northern Territory to become a State emanating out of this.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, they've been pushing for that before, but bear in mind that there are 140,000 people in the Northern Territory and there are 18 million people in Australia and the idea that on something that is obviously consuming the interest of the nation, the idea that the Parliament of Australia which brings together people from all over the nation that has the legal and constitutional authority to express a view wouldn't express a view and would hide behind the, as it were, the excuse of 'States', in inverted commas, 'rights' - that is not an argument.

SATTLER:

So if it's Western Australia that had this legislation...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well we would have no legal power to overturn it. No legal power at all.

SATTLER:

Free speech. I'm not going back to Pauline Hanson, but people like David Irving used that speech that you gave just a week or so ago to say, well come on, let me in - you talk about free speech Mr Howard but you won't let me in to put my point of view. Now, let me just tell you that I vehemently disagree with David Irving.

PRIME MINISTER:

So do I.

SATTLER:

I'd love to have him sitting where you are.

PRIME MINISTER:

And you'd make mince meat of him.

SATTLER:

Well, I would enjoy that.

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes of course you would.

SATTLER:

And I would do it, not for me, but I would do it because I think he deserves to be verbally dismembered.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, some people would argue, of course - even better still, that if somebody like that were to be admitted to Australia and, look, I'm not going to pre-empt the decision as we haven't got any application yet and he played an opportunistic game in, sort of, putting his hand up.

SATTLER:

Well he's an opportunist, that's what he is.

PRIME MINISTER:

Of course he is, of course he is.

SATTLER:

He's a repulsive creator.

PRIME MINISTER:

We have let a lot worse people than opportunists into this country in the past. I mean, you know this country was once host, only eight or nine years ago, to Nicolae Ceausescu the former dictator of Romania.

SATTLER:

Indeed I do.

PRIME MINISTER:

And he was actually - attended a state luncheon and it was the most appallingly embarrassing sort of, I mean, that man was a murderer, a butcher - he was everything.

SATTLER:

I think surpassed only by his wife wasn't he?

PRIME MINISTER:

She was dreadful too. So these things are a little bizarre. Can I say that I think the particular person you're talking about has some decidedly peculiar perverted views of history and I don't think anybody takes those views very seriously. The question of whether he or anybody else with a questionable track record is allowed into this country is something that will have to be decided on the merits.

SATTLER:

I mean the point being that he was on this radio station last week. He's able still to be interviewed...

PRIME MINISTER:

Of course, I mean that incidentally, is the argument about, if I can go back to an earlier subject, cross-media rules and media restrictions is that in a world of globalised communications the technology has demolished the geography and the same thing applies with a lot of these other issues including the desirability or otherwise of letting people into the country.

SATTLER:

All right. Finally, a Republic, when are we going to get to vote on it...?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well there will be a vote on the issue as I promised before the turn the of the century. Now we're not walking away from that.

SATTLER:

What form will that take?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, we don't know yet because we've said that we'd have a convention, I'm still disposed to have a convention and we said in the run up to the campaign that if a consensus emerged from that convention we'd put that as a referendum, if it didn't we'd have an indicative plebiscite to determine people's views. Can I just say again, that I said the Australian people would participate in this, they'd have a vote on it and that remains the situation. There is no way that I am going to allow this to die in the sand because I think people do want to express a view on it, but I do want a situation that if there is a change the change is an event that unifies the Australian people. I think the worse thing to have would be a situation where you had a premature referendum and say, suppose you had a referendum and 51% said no and 49% said yes, that would be a very unsatisfactory result.

SATTLER:

Indeed it would. Thanks for coming in today and thanks for bringing the Cabinet across to Western Australia.

PRIME MINISTER:

Great, pleasure.

SATTLER:

And I hope it's not for the last time.

PRIME MINISTER:

It won't be.

ends