



2

PRIME MINISTER

8 November 1996

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON. JOHN HOWARD MP
RADIO INTERVIEW - 3 LO WITH DOUG AITON**

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AITON:

John Howard good afternoon.

PRIME MINISTER:

Good afternoon Doug. It's great to be here.

AITON:

Thanks for coming. It's good to see you. I've got to go to a news item first thing. David Irving and Gerry Adams have been, it's been decided by your Government that they cannot enter Australia as they had hoped and my immediate thought is that doesn't seem to fit in. This is my first confrontational question. That doesn't seem to fit in.

PRIME MINISTER:

I hope things improve.

AITON:

Yes. That doesn't seem to fit in with John Howard's approach to free speech which you've made fairly clear.

PRIME MINISTER:

It's got nothing to do with free speech.

AITON:

What's it got to do with?

PRIME MINISTER:

It's got to do with the unfitness of both of them on character grounds to come here.

AITON:

Could you explain that further?

PRIME MINISTER:

Very easily. The Minister, whose decision I fully support, has decided that because of his prior criminal convictions, David Irving can't come here. Any other person would, with that background of criminal convictions, would routinely be rejected by the Department of Immigration and the thing wouldn't even go to the Minister.

AITON:

As a visitor?

PRIME MINISTER:

As a visitor, yes, yes. That in fact to me is game, set and match. This idea that it's got anything to do with free speech is spurious. David Irving's book is published in Australia. He will no doubt be on television tonight, probably bagging me and saying he's going to appeal and do all sorts of things. So nothing stops his views coming out here but any government has got the right to say to somebody who has got a record of criminal convictions, you can't come here. As far as Gerry Adams is concerned, he is the head of Sinn Fein. Sinn Fein is the political mouthpiece of a terrorist organisation. There's been a breakdown tragically in the peace negotiations in northern Ireland. I would have thought that was also an open and shut case and once again has precious little to do with free speech. The movement of people in and out of Australia is not so much a question of free speech, it's a question of whether the Government of this country has the right to decide at all times who should come here, even for temporary purposes.

AITON:

Do you think they, notwithstanding your explanation, do you think they'd do any harm?

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't think that's quite the point. These things always...

AITON:

But it's the question.

PRIME MINISTER:

No they always establish precedence^{etc} and governments do have a right to have a look at the background of people in order to make a decision so the Minister in my view, and it was his decision, I certainly support it very strongly.

AITON:

Particularly in the case of David Irving, I object to his views very strongly. I mean, I think...

PRIME MINISTER:

He's a crackpot historian but it doesn't alter the fact that he was convicted in the United Kingdom, he was convicted in Germany, he was convicted in Canada, and two of the offences as I understand it are related to passport, immigration or visa issues. That record, if it had been, dare I say it, John Howard or Doug Aiton or any one of your listeners, it wouldn't have even got to the Minister. People with that background are being routinely rejected by the Department all the time so to let Irving in in those circumstances would have required us to give him preferential treatment, preferential treatment. We would have been required to discriminate in favour of him.

AITON:

Yes I understand what you mean but I still don't think he would have done much harm and I think it would have been handy to know what people think from, or what our own people think, Australians from having a nutter like that let loose, if you like.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, it's really a question of applying the law in a consistent fashion. There have been some very unusual people allowed in to come to Australia in the past. I've known a few heads of government who have come here. They've subsequently turned out to be very unusual, so unusual at the time that their unusualness was demonstrated later like the late Romanian dictator, Ceausescu.

AITON:

Yes, that's a little bit of a pot shot at Bob Hawke, is it?

PRIME MINISTER:

No it's not. I think in fact he was invited to visit Australia by one of Bob Hawke's predecessors. No it's not a pot shot at Hawke. It's just an observation on some of the difficulties and choices you have to make when you're in those situations.

AITON:

You've been Prime Minister for eight months now I think. The greatest flak you've taken by far, as far as I can see, is regarding Pauline Hanson. The flak seems to be, you seem to be puzzled by it, you seem to say, look, I don't share her views but I regard her freedom to speak, to make them important but the flak seems to be perception to me. People think that you're not strongly enough opposed to her in your heart?

PRIME MINISTER:

That's wrong but my reaction to that whole issue is not so much one of puzzlement, it is one of the very strong belief that if the rest of the Australian community, particularly some sections of the media, had taken the view to that speech that I took, I don't think we'd be even talking about it now. I went to Indonesia and Japan. Two weeks after the speech had been delivered I addressed the largest press conference ever addressed by an Australian Prime Minister in Tokyo. The issue was not raised in Japan. It was not raised in Indonesia. It never occurred to me to raise it myself because it never occurred to me that the views of one person would be taken as representing the views of the Australian Government, let alone the Australian people. If a member of the national assembly of Indonesia or Malaysia or New Guinea for that matter, one member made a speech which was violently hostile to Australia, I don't think we would get ourselves into a lather of sweat about it. I don't think we would assume that that meant that the Malaysian Government or the Indonesian Government disliked us.

So I took a deliberate decision. I don't have a racist bone in my body. I abhor discrimination against people on the basis of race or background or colour or creed but I also know that an obsessive and disproportionate preoccupation with the speech of one person can produce consequences that are not in Australia's interests and I do think that there has been an obsessive reaction by some sections of your own employer in particular and by the *Sydney Morning Herald*. I single those two out as having really sort of gone overboard on this issue.

Now they have a right to do that. I haven't rung up the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and complained about it and any view I have I express publicly because I do believe that people have got a right to criticise me. I am the Prime Minister. I know that in the line of duty you're going to cop a lot of flak. I have resolved not to change my handling of the matter because I do believe it's correct. I spoke to Tim Fischer this afternoon. He's just come back from a visit to Asia and he said that the position of the Australian Government and the Australian people is well understood and I think in a couple of months' time we will look back and we will say, gee, what was that all about?

AITON:

Well I'm not so sure. I've spoken with people such as Malcolm Fraser and Phillip Adams and...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, Phillip Adams is an occupational critic of mine. You know that. I mean I don't say that with any anger but Phillip Adams is...the opportunity to have a swipe, and he has got a right to do that. He is exercising his free speech.

AITON:

I wasn't talking to him about you, I was talking to him about Pauline Hanson. He and I shared the view that we were both rather almost frightened. Malcolm Fraser that said things along the same lines, but for what it's worth, Malcolm Fraser, Phillip Adams and myself all believe that Pauline Hanson has caused an incredible amount of damage and that I believe that you as Prime Minister could have at least deflected it further than you have.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well that's a view, particularly coming from you, that I respect but it's a view which I disagree. I believe that if the same appropriate level of indifference had been extended to that speech by others as was extended by me then I don't think we would be talking about it now. Now we have to agree to disagree on that I do think that you have to understand the very simple fact that there are a lot of people in Australia who have felt over the years that discussion on some things has been too bottled up and there has been this pressure cooker atmosphere develop in the community and there has been in the community developed a view that there is an elite that really thinks that the Australian mainstream can't be trusted to talk about certain subjects and I very widely quoted a comment of Bob Hawke's that has been quoted by a number of people where he sort of argued that attitudes on certain issues because they had been common between the government and the opposition had really been maintained against the strong body of opposite opinion in the Australian community.

Now in some circumstances that is an appropriate boast for a former Prime Minister to make and in some circumstances that can be appropriate. In other circumstances it can be very conceited, it can be very arrogant and it can be very insulting to ordinary Australians and I do think there is a feeling in the Australian community, there was a feeling in the Australian community before the last election, that they were being told to what to believe on certain subjects rather than being encouraged or having a point of view advocated towards them, so that was one of the considerations that I had in mind. I do believe that if people had given the same level of disdain, displayed the same level of disdain, now, I accept that people of great decency and good will have a different point of view. I wear that, I wear that as part of the job and nobody likes being criticised or bucketed but I don't complain and I accept the right of people to criticise me in the most virulent fashion. I'll just argue back when I have the opportunity of doing so I hope in a good tempered fashion.

AITON:

What do you think of the 1950s?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well the 1950s was the decade, I guess, in which I grew up. I turned 21 which was the adult age in 1960. I think it was a period of enormous stability. In reflection it was a period of great prosperity. It was very different. I would not like to go back to it.

AITON:

Why not?

PRIME MINISTER:

To start with, you can't ever go back. Nostalgia is a nice thing but it ought to be kept in its place.

AITON:

But do you yearn for the 1950s?

PRIME MINISTER:

No I don't, I don't yearn for the 1950s. I know.

AITON:

You are accused of this you see.

PRIME MINISTER:

I know that but I mean it didn't work very well. I mean the first poster that the Labor party produced about was one that was resplendent.

AITON:

The picket fence.

PRIME MINISTER:

No, no the picket fence and the FJs and the Morphy Richards toaster and the Bob Menzies and the FJ and all of that, but it didn't work. I mean, in the end I was autographing them as fundraisers, they were really very good. I think you have to have a broad view of our cultural history. That was a period that had great stability and strength, but very low in unemployment. When I left school unemployment was less than 2%. On the other hand, medical science was nothing like it was today, we didn't know as much about the rest of the world. I don't think that women felt perhaps then they had as much choice as they do now.

AITON:

Censorship?

PRIME MINISTER:

There was more censorship. We probably had a narrower view in certain respects about the world and about other countries in other races. We, for example, had a white Australia policy which now people would regard as a complete anachronism. So like all of those things there were pluses and minuses and when I talk about that period I think, in fact, it was on your program I made a comment about the 1950s that provoked the Keating attack and it was probably the genesis of that poster. But the point I made then and I make now is that there were certain features of that period which should not have been completely ridiculed and dismissed but there is a balance sheet in all of these things. It is like the balance sheet of Australian history. I think that shows a profoundly benign balance in our favour as a people. That doesn't mean to say there aren't black spots in it and it doesn't mean to say that there aren't things that we should as a community be thoroughly ashamed of.

AITON:

Have you every entertained Aboriginal people in your house?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, I don't think I have entertained Aboriginal people in my home, not that I can recall. Look, I may have. It's not a question I have every been asked before and I'm 57, I just don't know. I grew up in a part of Australia where I didn't as a young person come into much contact with Aboriginal people. I grew up in the inner south-western suburbs of Sydney and it wasn't because of any positive decision on my part or that of my parents but I just didn't come into contact with many of them.

AITON:

Have you every entertained any Asian people in your house?

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh yes, very early stage, yes, of course, I had a couple of class mates of mine, both at primary and secondary school. Yes, from a very early age.

AITON:

What do you want to be remembered for as Prime Minister? Are you able to say that after eight months in office?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well the thing that I'm proudest of over the last eight months was achieving uniform gun laws. I think that has done more to turn around the atmosphere and the ambience of our community, it will over time anyway, than anything else I've done so far. It will give a safer Australia, it will make women in particular feel more secure, it will give a safer atmosphere for a lot of women and children and I am very, very proud of the fact that people will stop me in the street and say "look I didn't vote for you and I probably never will but I really did agree with what you did on guns".

AITON:

Well you certainly did it very fast.

PRIME MINISTER:

That's particularly with women. That's not the only thing that I'm proud of. I'm proud of the budget that Peter Costello brought down. I think it was a very strong but fair budget and I'm very proud of the fact that we have been able to negotiate a good understanding with the Australian Democrats about the Workplace Relations bill. It is not everything we wanted but we could never get everything we wanted once we didn't control the Senate but we have made giant strides and that Bill will over time change for the better, forever, the Australian workplace system.

AITON:

The two issues that continue to be a thorn in the side of Australia over not only different governments on different sides of the fence, but also over the decades, it seems to me anyway, Aboriginal welfare and tax evaders of a rich nature and I don't think you have got any further that anyone else with either of those matters.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well give me time, I have only had eight months and as far as Aboriginal policy is concerned as far as Aboriginal policy is concerned I want to be, when the time comes, to remember me as distinct from experience ... ex-Prime Minister, I want to be remembered as somebody in the Aboriginal affairs area who made a practical contribution towards addressing the modern problems of the Aboriginal community - and that is their deprivation in areas of health and education and employment and housing. I see reconciliation as best being expressed through remedy and disadvantage and it's not easy. Things like the Hindmarsh bridge fiasco tainted the cause of sensible reform in the area of Aboriginal affairs and it will be hard and I'm not making any grandiose promises but I don't want people to believe that just because I'm doing it differently from my predecessor that I am any less committed. It's very important, and there has been a tendency for us to be criticised, because we're doing it differently from the Labor Party therefore we are less interested - that's not the case at all.

AITON:

What about rich tax evaders who no-one seems to be able to stop?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I don't entirely agree with that. I think when I was Treasurer I introduced a lot of measures which cut tax avoidance. If the complaints of those affected were any guide they certainly hit the mark because I suffered an enormous amount of abuse and criticism from some people all those years ago. And some of the measures, let me frankly say, introduced by the former Government - some of the base-broadening measures made a contribution to eliminating some things and there are certain things they introduced which we may have been critical of at the time which we haven't reversed and we don't intend to reverse. But I'm not quite as pessimistic on that front as your question indicates you are.

AITON:

Did you have to grit your teeth when you handed Andrew Peacock the plum of...

PRIME MINISTER:

No, no I did it with enormous pleasure. Andrew and I mellowed towards each other a long time ago. We buried the hatchet, smoked the peace pipe, toasted each other - whatever metaphor you want to use - quite a while ago and I really enjoyed being able to offer Andrew that position. He will do the job brilliantly and I'm delighted that he accepted. He understands the American political scene like no other Australian I've ever known. He has superb top level contacts with both sides of the Hill. And I can't think of anybody to better represent the interests of our country in the United States in the second term of a Clinton administration.

AITON:

Well what was the problem, just that you both wanted to be Prime Minister?

PRIME MINISTER:

You could say that. Perhaps we both, on that particular issue, matured late.

AITON:

Did you have a lot of confrontations with him, just the two of you?

PRIME MINISTER:

We had our share of arguments.

AITON:

Did you shout at each other?

PRIME MINISTER:

Occasionally yes, but we ended up getting - both of us got very tired of being blamed for all the then perceived ills of the Liberal Party and some of the criticisms of both of us - and whenever you have something like that each has got to carry a fair proportion of the blame. But in the end if something went wrong in the Liberal Party they'd say, oh that's because of the Howard-Peacock rivalry. It would have nothing at all to do with us, I mean, it would have to do with local dispute in Western Australia or Queensland and they'd say well, if Howard and Peacock both got out, this problem wouldn't arise. Now we sort of became the whipping boys for every perceived defect in the Liberal Party and both of us got pretty tired of that a few years ago and we decided over time to do something about it.

AITON:

When you draw down the blinds and close the curtains in your private home, perhaps, or your office and talk to a close friend, what do you really say about the ABC?

PRIME MINISTER:

I say that I think the ABC is a terrific Australian institution. I think its political focus is too narrow. You mentioned Phillip Adams, I think the ABC would do itself enormous credit if it had a right wing Phillip Adams.

AITON:

Yes, I think Gerard Henderson would be good.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well the assumption behind that is that Gerard Henderson is a critic of the Labor Party. I've read one critical comment, seriously critical comment of the Labor Party, by Gerard over the last four years. I mean, he worked for me ten years ago.

AITON:

Yeah, I know.

PRIME MINISTER:

And I'd be fascinated to know what his political leanings are now. But that's his business and his right. I wouldn't quite see him as fitting that bill.

AITON:

Okay, you mentioned Phillip Adams, but do you really think the ABC is personified by Phillip Adams?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think on a lot of issues the ABC is - the spectrum of view is too narrow.

AITON:

You mean, left wing?

PRIME MINISTER:

I mean, areas of, well certainly left of centre and certainly in the area of what you might loosely call politically correct issues. I mean, the ABC has a fairly predictable reaction on most issues. One of the strengths of any broadly based news outlet is to have a range of views, a montage of views. I think, for example if I may quote a rival outlet, one of the great improved strengths of the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* over recent years as a tabloid newspaper is that it's got a range of columnists and they have unpredictable and different views and I think that is a very, very good thing. I think the ABC would do, if I may say - you asked me the question I'll give you an honest answer - I think it would do better if it did that. And I try to sort of encapsulate it by making that comment that I do about Mr Adams. Now I'm not anti the ABC - I listen to the ABC still more than any other radio. I was brought up on the ABC. I learnt to love cricket when I was a young child by listening to the ABC broadcasts. I learnt to listen to rugby league broadcastings, forgive my Melbourne audience for quoting my home town football. So I have no dislike of the ABC as an institution, I think it's a terrific institution.

AITON:

Well why don't you fix it instead of smash it?

PRIME MINISTER:

Fix it, that's the very antithesis of what it claims to be and that is an independent. You say fix it.

AITON:

I think the Government is entitled to fashion the ABC, any Government - Labor or Liberal, the way it sees fit. I think that would have been better than...

PRIME MINISTER:

No I don't agree, you see this is where I disagree. I mean, I think once you start even giving a cent, I mean if I said yes to that a lot of your colleagues in the ABC would say Howard wants to draw the teeth of the ABC, he wants the ABC to be a faint echo of the Government. I don't want it to be a faint echo of the Government. I just want it to be a reflection of the fact that it is funded by all of the Australian tax payers and all of the Australian tax payers, they cover the whole spectrum and I don't think they get the whole spectrum. I'm not saying they shouldn't get the spectrum that I think they get a lot of, I'm just saying they should also get the other spectrum.

AITON:

What about the Republic, can we say goodbye to that?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, I don't think so. I think there's still a lot of blatant support for the Republic. I'm not a Republican, but I'm not going to allow my anti-Republican views to stand in the way of a full and free expression of the Australian people if that's what they want in favour of a Republic. The only other comment I'd make is that if it is to happen, I want it to happen in circumstances that unite the Australian people. I want it to be a unifying event. Now that may mean that it comes a little later than some people would like, but I can't think of a worse outcome than to have a referendum on the Republic in a short number of years where it was carried by 51% to 49% or lost or even worse, lost 51% to 49%. Better, if it is to come, that it be a little bit later but the margin in favour of it be much stronger.

AITON:

Yes I think it should be a thumping majority in favour of it. But are you going to go ahead with the measures you said you were going to go ahead with?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well there's still very strong support in the Coalition to have some kind of convention, yes. We're discussing that issue quite a bit at the present time and I think we'll probably have something to say about it before too long. But there is a view that we, having said we're going to have a convention, that we should have a convention and then there will be a vote on it. I mean, I just want people to understand that my views, I'm not going to force my views on the Australian people but equally I'm not going to, sort of haul down the flag on my own views just because the latest polls say that it's a minority view. I am not going to let my views stand in the way of a full and free expression. People knew that when they voted for me and it remains my position. I haven't changed but I want the Australian people to think about it, talk about it, ultimately vote about it, but in circumstances where, whatever the result is, it's a result that everybody can feel comfortable with and that it's a chain of events that binds us together ever more closely as Australian people.