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PRIME MINISTER

10 February 1997

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
7.30 REPORT WITH KERRY O'BRIEN**

E&OE.....

O'BRIEN:

John Howard, this Work for the Dole scheme will be compulsory apparently for those in remote regions but voluntary for people in other regions. Why the difference?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, it would be compulsory in those areas either in the regions or closer into the big cities where the local group whose scheme has been accepted believes it can only work on a compulsory basis. In other cases it may be voluntary, but what we are going to do if necessary and I think it is, is to amend the law to enable the Government to require people to give some time in return for their benefit. It will be on the strict principle that award rates will be payable so nobody can argue there is exploitation, and it is really built on the notion of mutual obligations in a society - we provide the safety net - and people who receive the benefit of that can, on reasonable conditions and in certain circumstances, be asked to do something in return.

O'BRIEN:

According to reports today it seems that the pilot is consigned to regional Australia. Why not the big cities as well where of course youth unemployment is also in many areas of the big cities an intractable problem?

PRIME MINISTER:

Pilots are going to be in areas of greatest or highest youth unemployment and I've used the expression regional and rural fairly loosely. I mean, for example, I would envisage that one of the pilots could well be in an area like Campbelltown which is on the outskirts of Sydney and some people would say it is regional. Some people would say it is suburban Sydney and an area like Logan City on the southern outskirts of Brisbane where you also have a very high level of youth unemployment.

O'BRIEN:

You say that I think the work will be generated by local businesses and community groups. What sort of work would business generate?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, we would be expecting local submissions from combinations of local business groups and community organisations. We would only certify as suitable those proposals which didn't involve the displacement of current workers. I mean, three examples that come to mind, and one I quoted on the weekend of people meeting newly arrived tourists in Australia; another example I know of where a group of people contributed the materials and the advice and the help to enable a group of young people to convert an old disused hotel into a new tourist attraction. I've known of examples of where local community groups can get together and provide a pattern of work and the experience involved for young people in helping the care of older members of the community in all sorts of ways.

O'BRIEN:

Did you consult with any community groups before announcing the scheme?

PRIME MINISTER:

Before the actual announcement a few days ago, no. But I have over a long period of time talked to lots of community groups about the capacity to tackle problems in this way.

O'BRIEN:

One reason I ask is that we had a call today from the Australian Council of Volunteering - an umbrella group of volunteer organisations, covering something like 10 000 volunteers. They say that they are totally opposed to this, that you can't - and this applies particularly to compulsory - that you can't force anyone, whether they are 16 or 60, to do volunteer work necessarily well and responsibly.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, they are entitled to their view. I don't agree that you can't have an element of compulsion in something like this. I mean, it is based on this principle of mutual

obligations in a society. We provide the safety net and we ask that people accept the responsibility on reasonable and fair terms. It should be seen as something that is separate from all the volunteer activities that go on at the present time because that in the main does not involve people who are on unemployment benefits. I mean, the great bulk of volunteers in our society at the present time are not on unemployment benefits and haven't been on unemployment benefits, so the notion that you don't mix up a work for the dole scheme and the day to day efforts of volunteers is something that I think should be kept in mind in responding to their comments.

O'BRIEN:

Although what you are saying is you are expecting that some of that work and it might for some be compulsory, that some of the work might be working in charity kind of work, care work for older people. If you have somebody doing meals on wheels and they were rather resentful of the fact that they had been compelled to do it...?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, it would depend very much on the individual proposals and obviously we will make a judgment in relation to those sorts of things but there has always been a great reservoir of voluntarism in Australian society and it is one of our great characteristics as a community. This is something in a sense which is separate from that and I don't think the two of them should be mixed up.

O'BRIEN:

The big issue that remains of course is whether there will be a real job for these people at the end of their time on this work for the dole scheme, and on that point, when do you believe that unemployment will start to trend down?

PRIME MINISTER:

I can't make a prediction about that. I've only been Prime Minister for 11 months. The Labor Party was in power for 13 and a half years and I'm not going to make any prediction at the present time. The promise I make is that I will do everything I can to get it down, certainly at the end of the work for the dole scheme young people will be better motivated, they won't have that sense of despondency and isolation and alienation that many of them have now, and I think if we can achieve that we will have achieved great things.

O'BRIEN:

Do you agree with your Cabinet colleague, Senator Vanstone, who said on this programme in September last year, that if you can't get the rate down by the next election, you won't win it?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I would never give away an election, Kerry, you know that.

O'BRIEN:

I do.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well that's my answer.

O'BRIEN:

But the point is you are saying now 11 months is not long enough to make a fair judgment on your record. I assume you'll agree that three years...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I don't make any concessions about the next election, so let's make that clear.

O'BRIEN:

So if unemployment is still 8.5% or even above it, you don't think that that necessarily should count against you?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, Kerry, I hope that we will have it down, but I can't promise that. But the Australian people will make a judgment on all of my efforts and the efforts of my government and as always I will accept the judgment of the Australian people, but I don't give any electoral contest away - ever.

O'BRIEN:

On that other issue floating around still, that is Bob Woods and also Michael Cobb the Coalition backbencher who is under police investigation - that's two names that we know about. Without asking for further names, do you know whether any other Coalition MPs are being investigated or have been complained against?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, if I did know I couldn't say and I don't think anybody should get excited about that answer.

O'BRIEN:

I know you gave that answer this morning on AM.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, it is the right answer, and that's why I'm giving it again. I mean, I'm not going to... if the right answer this morning is the right answer tonight, it doesn't change...

O'BRIEN:

I can understand, I can understand why quite reasonably.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, Kerry, I'm asking you to accept that there's a long standing practice that Attorneys-General and Prime Ministers don't comment on intelligence and security matters and police investigations when they are not in the public domain.

O'BRIEN:

Okay. You've made your own credibility, your own personal integrity, an important - I think - foundation stone of your Government, and on that point I think cartoonists are supposed to reflect reasonably a kind of popular mood out there of how people are reacting to issues. Did you, on that point, did you see Tanberg's cartoon in the Sydney Morning Herald last Friday on the Woods issue?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes, I'm reminded now of it.

O'BRIEN:

How did you react to that at the time when you saw it on the front page of the Herald?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, I have been in politics so long that I sort of take most of these in their stride. I think the cartoons in recent times that I have taken exception to are those that have suggested that I am in favour of overturning the Mabo decision and going back to Terra Nullius - that is about as dishonest as you can get in political reporting because the one thing I've said in relation to the Wik judgment that won't be entertained, that is an overturning of the Mabo decision itself, but by and large I take the Tanberg cartoons - which I think are very good - in my stride.

O'BRIEN:

That one does encapsulate a point as to how many people have reacted, doesn't it?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well that's your judgement, and Tanberg's. It's ultimately for the working out of the political process whether it's anybody else's judgement.

O'BRIEN:

What we now know, since the Ray Martin interview, is that you were told about Bob Woods by your Attorney-General in September. We now know you were told about Michael Cobb in July or August. We also know that in October two other assistant Ministers of yours were forced to resign because of the Ministerial code. So, you were told of one in July, another in September, there were two other - I suppose not totally removed instances in October - and yet you completely forgot about Bob Woods?

PRIME MINISTER:

I'm not quite sure what all of that proves. I've already ... you asked me a question...

O'BRIEN:

I'm trying to elaborate.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I'm not quite sure of the point you're trying to make. The simple fact is that I was asked on Ray Martin whether I knew about the investigation. I made a totally truthful statement when I said that Woods had given me the details of it ten days earlier and that was in fact the first time he and I had discussed it. I had at that time honestly forgotten the first mention that Daryl Williams made to me of it some months earlier. Now if you can criticise me for having forgotten it - I had no motive for saying that I had forgotten it if I hadn't in reality have forgotten it. In fact, the common sense, the last thing you'd try and cover up. I forgot it. Now if people are going to mark me down for that then so be it. I'm human. As soon as I ascertained that my recollection had been faulty, I did something about it.

O'BRIEN:

But how often do you get told by your Attorney General that one of your colleagues is under police investigation?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well you can make that point and you've made it, and the Australian people will make a judgment as to whether I've been dishonest with them. I haven't, but I just wear the fact that I forgot something in an interview where naturally the more recent discussion that I'd had with Bob Woods was very fresh in my mind and I think it was a very honest error and I think most reasonable people would understand that, but if you don't, well, I have to accept that.

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