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**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
ADDRESS AT THE MELBOURNE PRESS CLUB'S
ANNUAL JOURNALIST OF THE YEAR AWARDS
GRAND HYATT, MELBOURNE**

E & OE

Thank you very much Mr Steve Harris; to all the other distinguished guests, in particular to Mrs Perkins; to all of my colleagues in political pursuit because journalists and politicians have a very special relationship.

I once wrote down on a form that was circulated in the final year, when I was at Canterbury Boys High School in Sydney in the 1950s, what were my employment preferences. And I have to confess of the three that I wrote down not one of them at that stage was politics because I thought you had to do something else before you went into politics. But one of the three that I did write down was journalism. And I've frequently been accused by some of my colleagues and occasionally by some of my friends in the media, I've frequently been accused of being something of a frustrated journalist. And in fact in one of my periods of political obscurity - the 10 months or so that followed my removal as Opposition Leader in May of 1989 - I, in fact, did try my hand at writing columns for *The Australian* newspaper and it was something that I enjoyed immensely.

I've always taken quite seriously the relationship between politicians and the press. I've taken that relationship rather vigorously on occasions as well as I think all political figures inevitably do. And I hope I don't sound in any way trite or patronising or just going through the motions of saying the sort of thing that a Prime Minister or a political leader is expected to say on an occasion like this in telling you how important I regard both the role of the news media in Australia in both reporting and commenting upon politics in Australia and how much I value a professional, direct and honest association between political participants and the news media.

Like all politicians I've felt on occasions over my political career that particular issues haven't been reported, on occasions, quite as they should have been. I have to say,

and I was asked the question by Steve Harris before I got up to speak how I thought I'd been treated over the last year - and it will be of course a year this weekend since my Government was elected, the first coalition government to govern Australia for 13 years - and I made the observation in reply that I thought by and large making allowances, and on some occasions some sizeable allowances, in some areas for some shortcomings, I thought that by and large my Government had received reasonable and fair treatment from the news media of Australia. I hope that I'll be able to say that in another year's time and another year after that and another year after that again. You will all have your ideas and your own views as to whether I've been treated gently, harshly or treated just about right.

I'd like to say a couple of things about the, I suppose, the juxtaposition of the different areas of the media in Australia and the way in which it reports federal politics.

In Australia, as in most other western democratic societies we tend to have a national capital city gallery. In Australia it's a little different that we also have a very strong reporting of federal politics at a State capital city and regional level. It is very important that that balance continue.

There is obviously great merit in having a Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery composed of people who have spent a fair amount of time in Canberra, who draw most of their exchanges and intellectual nourishment, inevitably their prejudices and their biases and own particular points of view from personal interchange with people in the Federal capital. But it is also tremendously important that that be counterbalanced with a proper focus on national affairs by journalists who don't live in Canberra. It would be a great mistake for the reporting of federal politics in Australia to ever become the exclusive preserve of the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery. And one can see inevitable and subtle, and not so subtle differences emerging between the reporting of federal politics by the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery and the reporting of federal politics outside of the federal capital.

I think one of the possible explanations - and I say this choosing my words carefully, not out of any sensitivity but simply because I think it's one of those cases that is probably only just proven - I think one of the reasons why the Coalition's victory in March of last year was rather greater than many people, including a lot of people in the Coalition including myself at various stages during the election campaign ever thought it might be, was that there was a fair gap between the perception of the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery of some of the things that really mattered in that campaign and the views of people outside of Canberra, and most particularly in the context of my remarks, the views of people who reported federal politics and spoke about them in the major cities and the regional areas of Australia.

There is a Canberra view about politics. It's a very legitimate view. It's a proper view. It's an informed view. And in most cases it's a quite intensely professional view. There is also another view about national politics and the priorities are often different. And the treatment of certain issues which were high on the agenda of the former government by people in the Canberra Press Gallery was often disproportionate to the importance attached to those issues by other sections of the Australia community. Now that is not to demean the importance of those issues nor is it to

demean the professional role of the Parliamentary Press Gallery but merely to emphasise something that is probably very apparent to all of you and that is that the way in which politics is reported can often vary very greatly around the country and most sharply between the way it is reported out of the national capital and the way it is reported in the rest of the country.

These particular awards I know have played a very major role in the life of your profession here in Melbourne. And it is particularly important of course that one of the awards, the Graham Perkin Award, honours the life and times and the contribution particularly to the *Melbourne Age* of a man who had an immense influence on journalism and on the media, especially here in Melbourne, but all around Australia.

Many very young journalists have won their first recognition and acclaim through the 'Young Journalist of the Year Award' which has been part of this particular event for quite a number of years.

And I said in the beginning of my remarks how much I valued the role of the media in Australian politics. I've often been asked in the various positions I've occupied in politics my view on whether or not Australia should have a Bill of Rights. I must unashamedly say to you that I'm not much of a believer in Bills of Rights. I am very much a common law man. I tend to think that societies that try and write down in too much detail the fundamental rights which are meant to govern the conduct of their citizens either end up in some way leaving something out or over-prescribing something. And generally the track record of those countries is no better than the track record of those countries that have adopted the common law approach.

I've frequently said in answer to that question that if you really want to guarantee democracy in a nation you need three things. You need a vigorous and open parliamentary system. You need an incorruptible judiciary. And you need a vigilant, on occasions cranky and profoundly sceptical, media. I think those three things are really the essential pillars of a vigorous democratic society.

When President Clinton was in Australia last year we spent quite a bit of time talking about the comparisons between Australia and the United States, the similarities between our two peoples and two societies. And we both agreed that something we obviously had in common was an informality, and in most cases in both countries and in both peoples a scorn for pretension and a dislike of class structures and class barriers. The President said what areas did I believe that we were different. And I said that one area where I thought Australians were quite different from Americans was that I thought Australians were a more sceptical and a more suspicious people, particularly of those who made decisions that affected their lives, and that meant him and me and those who carried on our prospective, mutual profession in both countries. And I think that is reflected in the media in this country.

I think the media in this country is sceptical. I think it has a right to be sceptical. I think it's part of its role. It will on occasions be over sceptical and therefore draw very heavy and very legitimate criticism from other sections of the media and from people who are perhaps the object of that scepticism. But it is one of the three pillars of our society. I have my quarrels on occasions with sections of the media. I've been known

to pass some critical comments about one or two well-known sections of the media and I'll no doubt do it in the future. And there'll be many occasions when I feel that the reporting of what my Government has done is perhaps not as balanced and not as just and not as fair as it might have been.

But in the long haul, having been in politics for now almost 23 years and having become after that career Prime Minister of Australia, I have to say that in that 23 year experience I think I've have experienced the lot. I've experienced very good press. I've experienced very bad press. I've experienced in the main a press that is, I think, representative of the Australian community.

So I come here tonight as somebody who has both a professional association with the media of Australia, someone who has had more than a passing interest in the craft that you have practised, somebody who enjoys very much for its own sake the art of clear and direct expression. Elegant writing is something that's always a delight to read. And although there is a very heavy emphasis, and properly so, on television and radio and instant reporting of events I hope that we always have in our media in this country a very special place for the well researched, the elegantly written and the powerfully presented newspaper article. Because those contributions to journalism in Australia can have an enduring impact and they are an important part - perhaps to borrow the analogy from a sport that you all know I love so much - perhaps the test cricket part and the others are the one-day part of the total game.

So to all of you, ladies and gentlemen, can I say the association that I have with the media of Australia is an association that will always have its interest, it will have its continuing vigour, it's continuing tension. I respect the role of the media. I'll criticise it on occasions. I'll disagree with it as it will with me. But the Australian democracy would be the poorer without it. It is a vigorous media, a very, very important pillar of the vigorous democracy that we all claim Australia really is.

Thank you very much.

Questions & Answers

QUESTION:

Steve Price from 3 AW, Prime Minister. One of the criticisms of yourself and your performance in the media is you're very Sydney-centric. You continue to give interviews to people like Alan Jones, John Laws and AM on the ABC. Are you actually aware that John Laws and Alan Jones and AM are listened to by very few people in Melbourne?

PRIME MINISTER

No. They keep telling me everybody listens to them. I'll take that question very seriously to heart. I don't set out to be Sydney-centric. I have been accused in the columns of at least one newspaper recently of being channel-centric, a particular channel-centric. I seem to have had a few appearances on one particular television channel purely by accident over the last few weeks. I don't set out to do that. I shall

take it very seriously. I shall carefully research what I have done and if there is a lack of balance I shall mightily act to restore it. I would never want to allow the impression to be created that I am Sydney-centric because I am not. I play no part at all in the constant tug of war about the location of sporting events between Melbourne and Sydney. I encourage vigorous interstate rivalry and as far as I am concerned, good luck to the Victorian Premier if he can pinch more sporting events from other states.

QUESTION:

Jill Singer, self-employed. I wonder, Prime Minister, could you tell me, do you think there would be anything wrong with Kerry Packer owning Fairfax in Victoria and also owning Channel Nine. The Chairman of Channel Seven has said that he considers there would be problems with this because of Mr Packer's gambling influences and that there could be some sort of, you know, murky little areas in this. I wonder what you think about this?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well we will be looking very soon at the existing cross media laws and it is something we will have to take a decision on quite soon. I don't mean next week but quite soon. I have said in the past that I was always very sceptical about the original reasons for the cross media prohibitions and I have never been a fan of them and that's something that I'm on the record as having said as far back as 1987 and I think I was Opposition Leader then, and I have sort of retained the view and I ceased being Opposition Leader and I haven't had a different view since then. I believe that the original purpose of the cross media rules that were brought in largely at the instigation of Paul Keating in the mid 1980s was to dismantle or reduce the power of the then Fairfax empire which included of course not only the newspapers that you mentioned but also the Seven television network and a very large network of radio stations. It was in fact at its height the biggest and most powerful media empire that this country had seen.

Now a lot has happened since then. I understand exactly what you are saying and I think it's one of those issues where a Government has got to take a whole lot of things into account, including the enormous changes in the technology of the media. You can find just about every major player in the media, including Rupert Murdoch, including my predecessor as Prime Minister, who at various stages had criticised the absurdity of having cross media prohibitions in an age of what is called convergence between the various arms of the media. I hope that we will make a conscientious, national interest decision. No matter what decision you take with the media you can always be accused of favouring one proprietor over another.

There's a sensitivity in this country about foreign ownership. I have never been particularly paranoid about foreign ownership because if you have any understanding of the way the Australian economy operates, fairly high, not high level but perhaps a high degree of foreign ownership is indispensable if we want to maintain the sort of activities and the sort of standards of living we have. But all of the things that you mention weigh upon my mind but I do start from the proposition of not having the sort of blind obsession about maintaining the present system simply because it's been there for a number of years. I think there are arguments for changing it. I think there are

also arguments, legitimate concerns about plurality and diversity but you've also got to understand the size of the media market in Australia and you've also got to understand that everybody but everybody in the media who talks on this issue has a self interest to promote and that obviously includes people who talk on behalf of the Nine Network, the Seven Network, the existing Fairfax organisation, even the ABC, everybody has sort of a self interest to promote on this issue and it's our call to try and get the balance of that right and we will be looking at this. I knew somebody would ask me the question tonight. I didn't think it would come from a small business woman but I hope the decision that we ultimately take will be seen as one that we conscientiously believe is in the national interest.

QUESTION:

Tess Lawrence, Prime Minister. Also small businesswoman and a consultant in ethical crisis management. The question that I'd like to ask you on behalf of sort of spin doctors is why is it that I've noticed that throughout your political career, and I recall the documentary series that you participated in with me called Sex, Power and Politics, why it is that you have always been extremely potent and vigorous in defeat and yet I have noticed that in your political demeanour, since coming to the office of Prime Ministership, you lack that potency, you lack that vigour. Your speech writing is banal in the extreme and I say this simply on the basis of professional analysis and I wonder why it is that you are an extraordinary warrior in defeat and I remember, you know, your several defeat speeches and now that you are in office and now that you've been bestowed with the golden crown, has the sword outworn the sheath?

PRIME MINISTER

Well I don't have a speech writer. One of my besetting sins as sort of a, how can I describe it, as a meal or an appetiser or whatever for journalists is that I simply cannot read a prepared text. It's not because of any sort of intellectual impairment. It's simply that I'd hate reading something. I have a profound distaste of getting something in front of me and reading it. Now that sometimes has led me into trouble although I have to say that one of the sort of foreign policy glitches I had was when I got my bridges mixed up in Indonesia and I've got to say, that was on one of the few occasions since I've been Prime Minister that I actually read a speech and perhaps it teaches me that you've always got to rely on your instincts. Look, I can't explain the dichotomy, the paradox that you identify in me. I can't possibly explain it. I am unable to do that. I will have to leave that to the judgement of others.

I am glad you thought I was a warrior in defeat. I think that's very encouraging and I'm glad I was. I had a lot of fight in me then. I've still got a lot of fight in me now. Perhaps when you're in office, you've become Prime Minister, you've reached the top of the hill, politically speaking, you do take on a different attitude. You do see things a bit differently. I have a view about the relationship between the Prime Minister, the leader of the country and the people of that country. I, rather off the top of my head used an expression in the lead up to the last election campaign which has remained with me, and I daresay will remain with me forever, and that was the expression - "relaxed and comfortable". What I was trying to connote by this is that I do think the relationship between the leader of a country and the people of that country is a special

one, you have to have a capacity to identify with the hopes and aspirations of people. You can never do it all of the time and you can never do it with all of them, and you will always be despised by a section and being regarded rather suspiciously by others but at the end of the day, having an understanding of what makes the people of a nation tick and what their basic desires and wants are is a very important element of being an effective leader.

I think Australians want a lot for themselves. I think they do want a society which is harmonious. Australians don't like unnecessary conflict. They are fundamentally tolerant and very decent people. They think they have achieved a lot and they have good reason to believe that. They are rather proud in that sort of self deprecating, down playing way which is characteristic of Australians, of what this nation has achieved and they don't like it being dumped on and they don't like being lectured to and told that they should be perpetually ashamed of what has occurred in this country over the years. Now I think part of the role of a leader is to understand that, is to articulate it, be willing on occasions to jolly it along or disagree with it but not always be in a state of excited animation and pugnacity about the things in that nation which he or she regards as inadequate but perhaps on occasions, and more occasions than just a few, being willing to talk about the achievements of the country and articulate in a determined way the pride that people feel in it.

Now that is a totally inadequate explanation for the paradox but it's an attempt to explain perhaps the attitude that I have endeavoured in a broad sense to bring to the way in which I have carried out my duties over the last twelve months. I have said before and I will finish on this, that leadership does consist of two elements. One on occasions is to stand in the middle of the road and dare people to run you over. On other occasions it is to listen to people, to bring them forward, to walk with them, perhaps on occasions at their pace. I think you need to mix the two to get the balance right. If you're always in the middle of the road eventually one of the cars will get you. If you are never in the middle of the road and you're never encouraging and cajoling people and dragging them along, you won't ever get some of the necessary reforms that are superficially very unpopular done. I have tried over the last year, and I will continue to try for so long as the Australian people want me in my job. I will continue to try to get the balance between those things about right because I think that is the prescription and that is really what the Australian people want me to do.

Thank you.