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PRIME MINISTER

7 March 1997

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
DOORSTOP - SYDNEY**

E & OE

JOURNALIST:

What are your thoughts on the Grand Prix this weekend...(inaudible)...how will it backfire?

PRIME MINISTER:

It's a long time since I've seen anything as stupid, as bloody minded, as anti-Australian as what the union is doing in Victoria. Any pretence that this is other than an attempt to sabotage the Grand Prix is completely without any merit or without any substance. This piece of stupidity will backfire on the whole trade union movement. I'd like to know what Mr Brumby and Mr Beazley think of what the union is doing. Australians will see it as an attempt to sabotage a great Australian sporting event. And when you try and sabotage the great Australian sporting events, you incur quite properly the wrath of the Australian people no matter what the event is, and even amongst people who don't follow car racing it will be seen as an attempt to stab a great Australian event in the back in which it plainly is.

JOURNALIST:

(Inaudible)...great Australian event stolen from another Capital city?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, I'm the Prime Minister of Australia, as far as I'm concerned when something comes to Australia, I'm happy...I don't care whether it's in Sydney or Melbourne or Adelaide or Perth, I'm not a city specific Prime Minister, I'm an Australian specific Prime Minister.

JOURNALIST:

(Inaudible)...potential to damage Australia internationally?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think it sends a terrible message. Particularly given that we'll be hosting the Olympic Games in four years' time, I think it's a terrible message to send overseas. I mean they're just so out of touch with contemporary Australian opinion. I would imagine that decent trade unionists in Australia would absolutely cringe at this tawdry little exercise.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, just on another matter can you give any guarantee there won't be cuts to Medicare or pharmaceutical benefits in the Budget?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I can give a guarantee that the decisions we take in the budget won't unfairly treat any section of the Australian community. I'm not going to respond to a whole lot of, a whole lot of individual items of speculation. You always get options, you always get speculation in the lead up to a budget. Most of it turns out to be completely unfounded. I give a general guarantee that we'll take care to protect and defend the safety net and that the decisions we take will be fair and balanced and just. And beyond that I'm just simply not going to rule individual things in or out. But I just issue the general sort of caution or admonition that in the past we've had a lot of these shock horror stories and in the reality you've had very sensible and balanced results. And I don't expect this budget to be any different and it won't be any different.

JOURNALIST:

Do you believe...inaudible...\$1.2 billion out of health?

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't answer hypothetical questions.

JOURNALIST:

The NSW Government says it needs another \$240 million...to keep the hospitals running - how do you feel about that?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well there's a Premiers' Conference in what, two or three weeks time, and therefore this is the season for shadow boxing before the Premiers' Conference. I predict that this years' Premiers' Conference will be quite a positive event. And I'd predict that between now and then there'll be a little bit of positioning from all Premiers. I

understand that. They understand that. But at the end of the day the public hospital system of New South Wales is the responsibility of the New South Wales Government. I mean, there's no way that Bob Carr and Andrew Refshauge can shift responsibility for problems in the New South Wales health system on to us. Can I just say on this that if five or six years ago the Federal Labor Government had done something about encouraging people to stay in private health insurance then you wouldn't now have the same pressure on public hospitals in New South Wales or indeed in other parts of Australia. Graham Richardson warned this, other observers warned it, warned about it, but the former Labor Government did nothing and now, very belatedly, Mr Carr says that it's a big problem, that people are falling out of private health insurance. Well, why hadn't he done something about it some years ago? We've inherited that problem. We're doing something on the 1st of July. We're putting almost \$500 million into the pockets of Australian families to encourage them to stay in private health insurance. Now, that is a massive injection of money into the system from the Federal Government which in time will take some pressure off the State hospital system. And it's a bit rich that Mr Carr and Dr Refshauge can now turn around and say to us we want another \$200 million. I mean, their mates allowed the private health system to bleed to death when they were in power. They should have been saying something to Keating and Beazley and Lawrence some years ago.

JOURNALIST:

On the 'work for the dole' scheme have any reports come back to you?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes, we'll be taking that committee report at the Cabinet meeting in Pakenham in Victoria next Tuesday and I'll have something to say after that Cabinet meeting regarding further details of the 'work for the dole' proposal. But it has been very well advanced. The taskforce under the chairmanship of Dr Kemp is met very regularly and it will have a very detailed report for the Cabinet. And after the Cabinet meeting I'll have something in more detail to say about the 'work for the dole' proposal.

JOURNALIST:

(Inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER:

We won't be breaking our election commitments in the health area.

Thank you.