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**TRANSCRIPT OF THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
JOINT PRESS CONFERENCE WITH THE
PRIME MINISTER OF THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE
MR GOH CHOK TONG
SINGAPORE
27 MARCH 1997**

E&OE.....

Prime Minister Goh

Ladies and gentlemen we have had a very good meeting. Our relations are excellent. I am very happy to have the opportunity to continue our dialogue which we had in Manila. Basically the foundation of the framework of our bilateral relations are very strong. It's now for the private sectors of both sides to flesh the framework and we want to encourage them to do so.

We also discussed developments in the region and we shared our views on how we see things in the years ahead. We also discussed the international economy and all in all we have had a good discussion.

Prime Minister Howard

Well I'd like to echo everything that the Prime Minister has said. We, of course, have had personal exchanges at a political level going back a long time. First of all as fellow Finance Minister, or Finance Minister and Treasurer at Asian Development Bank Meetings. We had a very lengthy and enjoyable discussion at the APEC meeting in Manila last year.

The bilateral relationship is in very fine fettle. It's a very strong bilateral relationship and I'm delighted that one of the things that we have been able to announce today and finalise today is the new aviation agreement which will bring great benefits to both countries and we will each say something in more detail in a moment. But one of the very valuable things about today's meeting was our ability to talk about our shared aspirations in relation to APEC. I was most interested in the Prime Minister's views on both the economic and political future of the region. His views on the important role of China.

I want to congratulate the Prime Minister on his very successful hosting of the World Trade Organisation meeting here in Singapore in December. It brought great credit both to him and to Singapore and it was a valuable meeting for us and a very important

reminder to all of the nations of this region of the value, the long term value of trade liberalisation. And the Prime Minister of Singapore, of course, as the leader of a country which has practiced trade liberalisation with great energy and great success for a very long period of time is no stranger to the link between trade liberalisation and job generation. And it's a message that is required to be repeatedly communicated to the populations and within the nations of the region. But it has been a very valuable morning and I want to thank the Prime Minister and I want to thank the Government of Singapore for having me as their guest and I have invited the Prime Minister, at a time convenient to him, to visit Australia. He, of course, is no stranger to our country and indeed there are many citizens of this country and I will be meeting the alumni of Australian universities from Singapore this afternoon.

The President and his wife were both educated at Adelaide University and as you roam through these discussions it's a reminder of the very long history of bilateral people links between Australia and Singapore.

Prime Minister Goh

Before you ask a question perhaps you could state your name and organisation.

Journalist

Prime Minister Terry O'Connor from the Australian Associated Press - and I ask both of you was the question of the Australian race debate last year raised (inaudible)?

Prime Minister Howard

No

Journalist

Prime Minister Goh, Glenn Milne from the Seven Network - just in the light of that question, I noticed this morning in The Straits Times an article commenting on the formation of a political party in Australia by the MP (inaudible) the race debate. Are you disappointed that this issue is still running?

Prime Minister Goh

This is Australian politics, I am not disappointed or neither am I glad I think it is something for the Prime Minister to comment. It is the affairs of his political party not me.

Prime Minister Howard

Free country. People can form political parties. Could I just say, perhaps somebody will ask me, I wanted to say something about the aviation agreement. So that's just a reminder as we role on, I don't want to interrupt the flow of questions but somebody might do that because I gave you the opportunity to do so.

Journalist

Prime Minister Goh, Paul Smith from the Ten Network - is Australia's race debate still in any way an issue in Singapore or in Asia?

Prime Minister Goh

No, it's not a big issue I've given my views and there is a television interview. It's purely domestic politics for Australia. But as I explained, we in Singapore would be very much against bringing race into politics. We would have come up very strongly on anybody who tries to use race in order to advance his own politics. But for Australia I have no comments.

Journalist

(inaudible)

Prime Minister Goh

No, in general we exchanged views on how we see developments and both of us believe that China and the US are now engaged positively in the longer term developments and that is good for us - we encourage it.

Journalist

Prime Minister Goh, Matthew Frost from SBS TV News - the difficulty that your country is having with Malaysia at the moment, what's your reaction to the Malaysian Cabinet decision to freeze bilateral ties?

Prime Minister Goh

Well I think I want to take some time getting to understand the latest reaction before I give further comments.

Journalist

Prime Minister Howard, Glenn Milne from the Seven Network - did you discuss the situation in PNG? Can we have comments from both of you on the current situation?

Prime Minister Howard

Well we did. I explained to the Prime Minister of Singapore some of the background. I talked about the discussions that I had had with Sir Julius Chan in Sydney almost three weeks ago and put to him the basis of Australian policy in relation to the events of the last few days. Can I say that both of us were concerned to ensure and we noted with approval the fact that the elected civilian government remained in control of the situation. And although as all of you know I and my government have been very critical of the introduction of mercenaries into the region and made that very plain to Sir Julius Chan. Equally we were very critical of any suggestion that the military in Papua New Guinea should assert itself independently of the elected civilian government. Both the

Prime Minister of Singapore and the Prime Minister of Australia are great believers in the authority of the civilian duly elected government over the military.

Journalist

Can you tell us the substance of the aviation agreement and how it will benefit both countries?

Prime Minister Howard

Well the aviation agreement will result in something like 28-30 additional Jumbo flights from the two countries. It will result in a 100% increase in the freight capacity out of Australia into Singapore. That incidentally is directly relevant to the supermarket for Asia strategy being pursued by my government. It's going result in something like a 37½% increase in the traffic flows between the two countries. It really is a first class agreement and of enormous benefit to both Singapore and Australia and a reminder of the still burgeoning tourist traffic and the rising number of applications for visitor visas for Singapore into Australia. I mean, given the size it is a remarkably strong people to people association.

Journalist

Prime Minister, Terry O'Connor from AAP - have you been able to quantify the increase in exports that you can expect from this new aviation agreement?

Prime Minister Howard

Well it's very hard to put a figure on it, I can't. But when you increase your freight capacity by 100% in a single stroke and one of the goals of Supermarket to Asia strategy is the capacity to export fresh food into the region. As the Prime Minister reminded we already have a very impressive share, something like 12% of the fresh food market in Singapore and that is something that can be built upon. But the greater capacity that this gives us is very significant but I can't, for obvious reasons, put a dollar figure on it.

Prime Minister Goh

Have a look at this in a very symbolical way. It means that both countries want to have more trade and investments with one another. When you liberalise your air services agreement, that is going to lead to further flow in tourism and also in investors going to Australia and Australians coming to Singapore. Symbolically that's a very important step which we have taken. (inaudible) we want to engage each other more positively, free up our economies and have more trade with one another.

Journalist

Prime Minister Goh, Catherine McGrath, Australian Broadcasting Corporation - can I ask you on the Malaysian incident once more. It must be a bit concerning for you to have the headlines of the (inaudible) the day John Howard arrives in Singapore

Prime Minister Goh

I've given my comments to the gentleman there just now, so I would stick to the same comments.

Journalist

How long do you think it might take for the problem to die down?

Prime Minister Goh

Well, I think I will still stick to the same comment. I want to absorb the implications of all this before I give further comments. Next question.

Journalist

Prime Minister Howard, Jim Middleton from ABC Television - why did the committee in the Senate, Senator Calvert chairs decide to move off the Work for the Dole scheme to a Senate Committee? (inaudible)

Prime Minister Howard

I think now that I'm in Singapore I should, unlike some others who's name escapes me, not comment too heavily on domestic politics.

Journalist

(inaudible)

Prime Minister Howard

Well I think Singapore brings in any bilateral exchanges between our two governments brings a perspective which is different from ours. I'm not saying whether it's better or worse, it's different. It's not a question of being better or worse but one of the enormous values for me, particularly as I'm on the way to China, of coming here first is to hear what a man who's been at the helm of his country's affairs in the region for longer than I have been at the helm of my country's affairs hear his views on China and I found them very valuable and as I'm sure in a reciprocal situation he would find mine.

Journalist

I wonder if you could give us an indication of the flavour of the discussion about China?

Prime Minister Howard

Well I think both of us have a very positive view about the role of China in the region. Both of us believe that China should be engaged in the region. Both of us support the accession of China to the World Trade Organisation on proper terms. Both of us recognise the desire of the United States that China be constructively involved in the region. And one of the messages that I will be repeating to the Chinese government is that we want China to be a full constructive, positive player in the region. We don't in

any way see China in a negative light in the region, we seen China in a positive light. And it makes sense from China's point of view, from our point of view, from the regions point of view that all of us in our different ways encourage that positive engagement. There will be differences, there will always be some significant differences between China and Australia on certain issues because we are different societies but our approach is to focus on the pragmatic practical future interests that we have in common.

Journalist

Is there any progress in your attempts to join the (inaudible)

Prime Minister Howard

Any problems?

Prime Minister Goh

Any progress

Prime Minister Howard

Any progress? Well I certainly want to put on record my appreciation of the support that's been given to me and my country by the Prime Minister of Singapore. He has been very helpful, very positive. Our view is that it would be appropriate for Australia to join that organisation. We're not fretting about whether or not we become a member but we think we could bring value to the grouping. We do not wish to see groupings of that kind in any way cut across the way in which APEC brings people from the Pacific area generally together. It's one of the great strengths of APEC. It is a congruence of countries that are different geographically, different economically, different in size, different in so many ways and we wouldn't want other groupings to in any way dilute that but Singapore has been very positive. We'll keep putting our view on that, but as I say, although it's important to us it's something over which we're not going to fret.

Journalist

Mr Howard, Louise Maher from Radio 2UE - given the international interest in the Sydney 2000 Olympics. Are you concerned at all about the changes in the leadership of SOCOG?

Prime Minister Howard

Oh look I really don't want to talk about domestic politics and that is very domestic and although you have to give a liberal interpretation to what is domestic politics as I think I have, I mean Papua New Guinea is a fairly - but I really think something like that or Work for the Dole in fairness to the Acting Prime Minister, I do think I should avoid make comments on those things now that I'm out of Australia. Last question.

Journalist

Mr Howard one domestic issue that you might not want to pass up on sir what about the Shadow Ministry reshuffle - Kim Beazley reshuffling the deckchairs?

Prime Minister Howard

No, I will pass up on that and with great pre-Easter restraint invite the Deputy Prime Minister, Acting Prime Minister of Australia to comment on that as I'm sure he will.

Prime Minister Goh

Unless you have an answer to that question I will call the conference to a stop. Have you got an answer to which they haven't asked a question?

Prime Minister Howard

Thank you. Thank you very much.

Prime Minister Goh

Thank you.

End