

30 April 1997

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER  
THE HON. JOHN HOWARD MP  
RADIO INTERVIEW - 3AW WITH NEIL MITCHELL**

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**MITCHELL:**

With me in the studio is the Prime Minister, Mr Howard. Good morning.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

How are you Neil, great to be back.

**MITCHELL:**

Thank you very much for coming in. Pauline Hanson, do you believe that she could have 25% support from the people of Australia?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

No I don't. That particular question said, would you consider voting for a Pauline Hanson candidate? That really is a nonsense question. The only question that really counts is, will you vote for somebody if an election were held today. So you can forget about the 25% but you can't forget about, say the 10% in *The Bulletin* poll but that doesn't surprise me at all. We are living at the moment in a time of tremendous change and upheaval and people feel uncertain. They feel insecure. They feel their lives are changing economically and socially. Their relationships are changing under pressure and when somebody comes along as she has done and offers simplistic solutions and a few scapegoats thrown in for good measure, it's easy to cream 6 or 8 or 10 points in an opinion poll mid term. This phenomenon has happened all around the world. It happened on the right of the Republican party in America, it's happened in France. It happened to a degree in New Zealand, it's happened in a different way but nonetheless the trend is there in the United Kingdom and in Germany and I believe that that will disappear, that support will disappear once people realise that she doesn't have any superior answers but for a while it sounds attractive because you are saying, look, for example, she says stop foreign investment. The code of that is, if you had no

foreign investment then Australian jobs would be protected because foreigners make heartless decisions about Australian jobs.

Heavens sake, in the last 24 hours we've had the biggest company in Australia, BHP, which is Australian owned, take a decision which sadly in a few years time will result in the loss of several thousand jobs in Newcastle and some hundreds of jobs in other parts of Australia. Now that decision was taken for the same reason that a foreign company running an operation in Australia might take a decision that would result in the loss of Australian jobs. So what's the automatic advantage for Australia. Now the point I'm simply making is it's easy to feed off unhappiness and insecurity in a time of change but ultimately, when you've got to offer a rational alternative and you can't offer it, then that support will recede.

**MITCHELL:**

Do you think they will be any sort of force at the next election? They're talking about a candidate in every seat. Even 10% ahead of the Democrats.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I remember in 1977 after the Australian Democrats were first launched, they were attracting in House of Representatives opinion polls, they were attracting 17 and 18%. I can remember the Joh for PM campaign, remember that?

**MITCHELL:**

Yes.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Got to 25% in one poll and this was voting...

**MITCHELL:**

Mind you, it did the Coalition a lot of damage.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Of course it did the Coalition, well it certainly did the Coalition a lot of damage but the point I make is that you have now people that look back with embarrassment, with complete embarrassment, saying for heaven's sake, how did that occur? Now to some extent it's exploiting that same sort of understandable... I mean I sympathise with people who feel uneasy and insecure and some of the figures that she said are, you know, sort of half understandable in the sense that she expresses a resentment of many Australians and I have expressed it too, about the fact that for too long and for too often we're being told we're a bunch of racists and we ought to be ashamed of our past and that this country has achieved nothing and that it's been a long litany of sort of racism and sexism and imperial triumphalism, and there has been I believe in the Australian community a deep seated rejection of the politically correct and distorted

view of Australian history and I have played a major role myself in rejecting that very negative view of Australian history and to some extent, she's also tapping into that. But the point I make is..

**MITCHELL:**

....something like cannibalism.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Even she was not prepared to defend that so why should I? Why should anybody else, and if she's not even prepared, I watched her exchange with Kerrie Anne Kennerley on that. Now if you say something in the political game, you've got to defend it. You can't walk away from it.

**MITCHELL:**

Do you think it is racially based though, her philosophy?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I don't think the people who are superficially attracted to her are racist, no I don't. I think she is, look, she is articulating the fears and concerns and the sense of insecurity that many Australians feel at a time of change and instability. Now that is an undeniable fact of life at present and I have to as Prime Minister be honest enough to acknowledge that we are going through a time of change and readjustment economically, socially and personally and politically. Now it's easy to sort of finger the fact that people feel uneasy and unhappy. The next step is to say well, okay you've fingered the uncertainty. What are you going to do about it? Now I haven't heard from her. Indeed, I haven't heard from any of the other major players on the political scene other than the Coalition, any serious long term answers. I mean you can't solve every problem by having a national referendum on it.

**MITCHELL:**

She's certainly taken, well that's right, that's the other suggestion, national referendums on every issue. But she's certainly in the polls so far seems to be taking support from the conservatives. Will it be a factor for you in the election that you have to consider?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

No I don't believe it will because it's, the election is not for another 15 or 18 months and the Australian public will want to know over the next few months, those people who have said they might consider voting for her will want to know what are her answers and you can't forever say, well look, there's something wrong with this and we're unhappy or insecure but don't ask me for an answer. Now I have the responsibility as Prime Minister of trying to deal on a day to day basis with these problems. I don't pretend to have all the answers. I haven't but I do think in the end

people will realise that rhetorical exploitation is one thing. A serious alternative is another.

**MITCHELL:**

I suppose I was just surprised. I see the Queensland Premier on *AM* today saying this movement could sweep the nation.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well I don't agree with that and I think the Queensland Premier should read Australian political history. He shouldn't react to polls. I mean, I find this rather curious. Over the past few months I have watched commentators, not just yourself but others say that John Howard listens to the pollsters too often and reacts to polls. Now I can tell you this, I am not going to react to these polls this morning. They're not going to dictate the way I take decisions and I would counsel all of my colleagues on the Liberal and National Party side of politics to remember the passing phenomena of earlier years, to remember the transient appeal of the populist who pretends to articulate the concerns but has none of the answers. They've come and gone in the past and I believe that that will be the case with this particular phenomenon.

**MITCHELL:**

Mr Howard, you mentioned BHP. Is the Government staying clear of it? Is there nothing the Government can do there?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well everybody has known for a long time including the unions, including the Labor Party, including the Government, that the long term future of steel making in Newcastle, for example, was at the very least under a cloud. I have to say that the announcement yesterday and the decision to make that announcement yesterday was not communicated to the Government until the night before and I indicated to the Managing Director of BHP that I was at the very least disappointed that the company had not given the Government of this country a few more days notice. Now I did know, along with all of those other people that there was a problem with long term steel making but the actual date, the timing of the announcement was not conveyed to us until the night before which I have got to say, I was somewhat disappointed about.

Look, I don't pretend for a moment and nobody should pretend that governments can intervene and reverse commercial decisions of that kind. I am concerned, very deeply concerned about the psychological effect that this could have on the city of Newcastle and the Hunter Valley and other parts of Australia that would be affected. I will do everything I can to co-operate with the New South Wales Government and I hope to talk to the Premier of New South Wales later today. He's been trying to reach me this morning about joint Commonwealth-State plans for retraining. I would like to visit Newcastle in the very near future to talk to the civic and union and business leaders in that city not because I can bring gifts but because I want to demonstrate that I understand the psychological impact of this and there are some practical things that I

believe the Federal Government can do in the area of retraining and transition. Bear in mind that steel making in Newcastle won't cease for another couple of years.

**MITCHELL:**

Is it a one off? Is this the end of it? Are we seeing...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

For BHP?

**MITCHELL:**

Well BHP and more broadly. Are we going to see a spate of these sort of decisions now?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well, decisions like this have been going on now for a lot of years. This is not the first one and this is going back to your earlier question. We are living in an era in which change of this type is occurring all around the world and it's easy for people who don't have the responsibility of responding to you and you say, look, this is terrible and we must protest against it. Now you've got to have an alternative. Now what we argue is that if you can make it more attractive for people to invest in businesses and industries where they will get a bigger return and can employ more people then you have to take all the steps you can to bring that about and BHP will argue that this restructuring will improve its capacity internationally and will ensure its viability. Now it's hard for others to question that commercial judgement but equally as Prime Minister I have to say, the personal impact of this decision on the Hunter Valley, on the people of Newcastle is significant. I want those people to understand that the Federal Government knows that and within the bounds of realism we will do what we can to help.

**MITCHELL:**

Speaking of jobs, *The Bulletin* is reporting today that you are planning to cut 100 000 public servants in three years. Is that right?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

It's news to me.

**MITCHELL:**

Amalgamating departments?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

That's news.

**MITCHELL:**

Okay, they're suggesting it may be down to 50 000.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

That's nonsense.

**MITCHELL:**

Are there any cuts planned?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

We don't have... amalgamating departments? I don't know where that's come from. You say, are there any cuts? Well we don't have any targets for a particular size of public service. We take decisions, some of them which involve redundancies, some involve out-sourcing. We are making a dramatic change to the job placement activities of the Commonwealth. We're forming a business enterprise to be owned by the Commonwealth to compete with private employment agencies to find people jobs, to replace the CES, a lot of those changes. But as for having some kind of target of "x" thousand public servants, no.

**MITCHELL:**

Aboriginal leaders, over Wik, are now threatening to organise a boycott of the Olympics, possible sanctions, trade sanctions. What's your reaction to that?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well can I say to those Aboriginal leaders that every time you do that, you do your own cause immense damage because that sort of talk, that sort of threat is seen as contrary to the Australian national interest and no Australian, whatever their view on Wik, wants to see this country hurt, wants to see this country humiliated, wants to see the farm product of this country denigrated or boycotted and I say to the Aboriginal people, with the best will in the world, stop talking like that. Every time they open their mouths and they talk like that they lose further support within mainstream Australia. Now I say that as somebody who has tried very hard over the last few weeks in the face of some quite unreasonable criticism from my own side of politics and I repeat that quite unreasonable criticism.

**MITCHELL:**

...that continues.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Yes, to negotiate a fair outcome in an extraordinarily difficult situation and the Aboriginal leaders do not help themselves. They do themselves a grave and painful disservice by using language of that kind. It will get them nowhere, it will put them further behind the eight ball as far as Australian public opinion is concerned because it is unhelpful to Australia's interest and at the end of the day, that is all that counts.

**MITCHELL:**

What about your conservative colleagues? Are they on side or is there a backbench problem as we're told?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well I will be talking to the backbench about this tomorrow and I believe that when the full ramifications of the plan are understood, reasonable men and women will see it as a fair outcome. It was inevitable after the Wik decision which went far beyond the expectations of everybody including the Aboriginal leaders, including the Aboriginal leaders, it was inevitable that we had to come back from Wik. Now it's a question of how far you came back from Wik. Now I have produced a plan that will give certainty to pastoralists. It does not involve blanket extinguishment of native title and I repeat to all of those farmers who may be listening to this programme and who wonder whether they won't be able to carry on their pastoral and farming activities of a normal kind without having to deal with the native title claimant, the answer is no, you won't have to deal with that claimant because under our proposal you will be able to carry on all of the expanded primary production and agricultural activities as contemplated under the definition in the tax act, and that is as wide as you can get, without having to deal with native title claimants.

**MITCHELL:**

The Deputy Prime Minister seemed to be saying in the press today that the states would get involved in effectively...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

The states have always been involved...

**MITCHELL:**

Yes but effectively extinguishing native title over pastoral leases by turning them freehold.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

No what Tim was saying, and it's right, is that our plan has always allowed for compulsory acquisition of native title in the same way that your title or my title can be

compulsorily acquired by a state government at the present time and providing proper compensation is paid. That's quite different from blanket extinguishment. It's a block by block, case by case consideration.

**MITCHELL:**

Mr Howard, you had a more than hour long meeting with Kerry Packer. What did he want?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well he wants the cross media laws changed and he's never been shy. Media barons are never shy when you talk to them. He has an uncomplicated view.

**MITCHELL:**

He wants Fairfax?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I think he's said that publicly. He would like to, he would like to buy Fairfax and at the moment you've got a situation where the law says he can't because he owns Channel Nine and we're considering whether that law should be changed. We have a situation in Australia of course where 70 - 80% of the newspapers of this country are owned by foreign interests. I know Mr Murdoch's company has very deep roots in Australia, as does his family and I acknowledge that but the fact remains is that Mr Murdoch is no longer a citizen of Australia and therefore under the laws of Australia his company is classified as foreign. Anybody else could buy Fairfax at the present time who is not a foreigner and who doesn't own a television station but one of the interesting things about this debate is that I haven't seen anybody else come along. I mean, people periodically say to me, wouldn't it be good if such and such a company or such and such an arrangement could be reached whereby somebody else bought Fairfax. Well it's been possible for somebody else to buy Fairfax providing an agreement could be reached on the price. For years and the present law right at the moment allows people to buy Fairfax. I mean, I have people occasionally in the city of Melbourne saying to me, wouldn't it be a good thing if the Melbourne consortium could buy the *Melbourne Age* or something from...

**MITCHELL:**

Sounds like Jeff Kennett.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

From... well, it wasn't Jeff Kennett, from Fairfax. Well the answer is, if Fairfax now is willing to sell it, that can happen but of course it hasn't.

**MITCHELL:**

Is it desirable though to have, I suppose then you would have most of the media owned...?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Look, you've got to make a choice. There's really three options. You can leave it as it is which is inherently unstable and the Fairfax share register is very unstable and you really don't have anybody running the company or alternatively, not in an identifiable way, I mean, that's not meant to be critical of the management but the fact is it's a pretty unstable situation. You can open it up completely and that is take off all of the restrictions, cross media and foreign and that could result in all of the media in Australia owned by foreign interests. I'm not saying it would but it could or alternatively you can relax the cross media rules which means that foreigners can't buy more but it would allow Mr Stokes or Mr Packer or anybody else in the future who also has television interests to buy the paper.

Now there are arguments for and against. It doesn't all come down on the side of so called diversity. When you're talking about diversity, I mean, who is more influential? A columnist in the *Melbourne Age* or Neil Mitchell, a columnist in the *Sydney Morning Herald* or John Laws, a columnist in the *Courier Mail* or Ray Martin? This idea that family proprietorship is the sole embodiment of media domination is an outdated notion in Australia and it predates the influence of talkback radio, it really does. I think you blokes have a lot more influence and I think the journalists have a lot more influence than the press barons. I think since the mid 1970s the influence of press barons on the treatment of political news in Australia has been greatly exaggerated.

**MITCHELL:**

Was Kerry Packer persuasive?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

No, more or less than in the past. Can I just, on that point can I say that I have been critical of the cross media prohibitions dating back to 1987 and in 1987 Mr Packer said that he was going to vote Labor and I'm sure he did. Well I mean he said he did so, and he was very publicly associated with Bob Hawke. I don't regard Mr Packer as being somebody who has always associated himself with my side of politics nor would I imagine it in the future that he would necessarily always or whatever, associate himself with my side of politics. that's not the issue.

**MITCHELL:**

I think there's reason to suspect that previous media policies had been based on mateship and deals and political...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I haven't made any deals and, I mean, look, if we end up changing the laws which enable Mr Packer to make a bid for John Fairfax, that will not be as a result of any deal and I simply point to the fact that at a time when Kerry Packer was saying he was going to support the Labor Party I was critical of the cross media prohibitions.

**MITCHELL:**

Mr Howard, when is Mal Colston going to be sorted out? That is irritating.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well it is but I don't have the power to expel him from the Parliament and can I say, I don't think I should and I think it would be quite wrong if the Government party having the numbers could expel somebody. If we started doing that in the House of Representatives we would get into trouble. Now we have said that he ought to stand down as Deputy President. Whether he remains a Member of Parliament ought to be determined by the law. Like Carmen Lawrence, he is entitled to a presumption of innocence and it's very important, even when there's an avalanche of criticism, it is very important that that principle be upheld. Now it's being investigated by the police. I have done what Kim Beazley and Gareth Evans 13 years ago didn't do and that is have this matter sent off to the Federal Police. Evans as Attorney General was advised by the head of his own Department to send this matter to the Federal Police and he negotiated a payback of the money and did not send it to the Federal Police yet he is now, along with his leader, who is also part of that exercise, they are both now criticising my handling of the matter.

Now I have sent it to the police. I have said he should stand down as Deputy President. The Coalition's numbers would be there when the Senate resumes for him to be voted out of that position. I have said I won't accept his vote any more. I cannot do any more without violating some important principles of our legal system, namely the presumption of innocence.

**MITCHELL:**

Have you asked him to go?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Personally? I publicly said he should stand down as Deputy President. (inaudible) I mean, I did it three weeks ago with the recantation by his former, or his current secretary, Mrs Smith, and her earlier statement.

**MITCHELL:**

But in allowing for that presumption of innocence he'd probably be better off out of the Senate, wouldn't he?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well I tell you what, he wouldn't take the slightest bit of notice. I mean anybody who, I mean I don't think you understand that. I mean, I can't snap my fingers and say go. You know that. Kim Beazley knows that. The Australian public knows that. What I can do is all of the things I've enumerated and there's nothing more I can do. The processes of the law must take its course. It is obvious to me that if Mal Colston had not defected from the Labor Party, the Labor Party would not be pursuing, they're not pursuing this thing out of a sensitivity for the proprieties of the Senate. They're pursuing this because he reneged on the Labor Party. Now I understand that but let's not try and clothe their behaviour in some kind of high minded demonstration of supreme political principle.

**MITCHELL:**

Mr Howard, I know you need to get away. Just quickly, I toured the new casino complex this week and broadcast from down there. I know you are unable to attend the opening next week. You've got another commitment.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I'm attending a dinner in Sydney which is forming a branch of the Asia Society, the very prestigious Asia Society in Australia.

**MITCHELL:**

Do you still have concerns about what we describe here as the casino culture and what it would do to...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well I haven't altered the view I expressed on your programme and I've expressed on other occasions, that the level of gambling has reached saturation point in this country. I'm not worried about people who can afford to gamble. We were probably talking about one of them a few minutes ago. I'm not worried about those people. They can afford to do it. I do worry about people who can't afford to do it. I worry about the impact of excessive gambling on small business and I can't honestly say other than that. I am not a wowser. If people want to gamble and they can afford to do so, well that's their business. That's not for me to say they shouldn't do it and I'm not saying that casinos should be made illegal but I am saying that we have reached that sort of saturation point in this country and that's a view that's quite widely shared in the community and you've got to try and strike a balance and if you don't say that, you're being dishonest but on the other hand you run the risk that people are going to say...

**MITCHELL:**

Are we in danger, there's a balance here with the size of what we're doing, do you believe?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well I don't, I spend a lot of time in Melbourne and I don't want to personalise it and make it specific to one particular enterprise. It's one of those situation where you do have to try and strike a balance and walk a very difficult path between, on the one hand, expressing a concern you have but on the other hand not sort of embracing a prescriptive approach to behaviour. Now Governments normally shouldn't try and regulate personal conduct. I don't think they should try and do it at all. We face that difficult choice in relation to what I loosely call X rated videos. Now I find that sort of material distasteful.

**MITCHELL:**

Have you ever seen one?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I have some, briefly, yes and I find it very, very distasteful but at the end of the day you've got to say to yourself, unless there is overwhelming evidence that watching those videos produces very anti social behaviour. You can't really tell adults what they should see and hear and read. I mean it's a, I don't think I've got a right to do that or you haven't got a right to do that. Nobody has and we are supposed to live in a democracy and they're the sort of difficult balances that you have to strike. Now if you've got overwhelming evidence that watching something like that produced very violent, very anti social conduct then that's another matter. Now it's a question of striking a balance and we think the balance had to stop short of the absolute prescription of those things. Whatever I might personally think of them and you're doing it in a sense with the same sorts of issues when you're dealing with something like Canberra. I mean, one school of thought says you just say nothing about it and you let it rip and you never say anything. Another school of thought is that you have to be very, very prescriptive and start telling people what to do. Now I'm not, I don't belong to that latter school. I don't think I have some kind of moral right to tell people how they should behave and I won't even try.

**MITCHELL:**

Of course if you have a look at our state budget today we're very much based on gambling. I suppose it would have to be.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well we are, and people will legitimately argue that if those who can afford to gamble are going to gamble, why shouldn't they make a contribution to the rest of the community and that does have a point and I don't disagree with that but it's a question of how far you go, and without wanting to attack any particular business, I remain uncomfortably of the view that we have reached a, sort of a saturation point and I hope it doesn't go any higher. Now that will bring down on my head the criticism of some but I think a lot of people will agree with it. it's my view and I owe the Australian people at all times a candid expression of my view and that's it.

**MITCHELL:**

Lloyd Williams suggested double the figures on the temporary casino when the new one opens. Extraordinary.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I've stated my view and I hope it is understood but it remains very much an area that concerns me.

**MITCHELL:**

Thank you very much for your time and thank you very much for coming to Melbourne for the launch later today of the Alannah and Madeline Foundation. We've had Walter Mikac and I know you've dealt with him....

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I have, yes.

**MITCHELL:**

...since Port Arthur. He's an extraordinary man, achieving a great deal.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Yes he is an extraordinary man and he does personify the courage of all of those people and it's a great concept, the foundation. It's all about caring for the victims, particularly the children of violence and crime. I said the other day that I thought however aspirational it might be that the greatest memorial of the people who died at Port Arthur could be a resolve by the Australian community to put aside violence as a solution to dispute and a solution to problems, whether it's in the home or on the sporting field or in the pub, in the school yard, even in the radio studio I've occasionally seen a few, not in the civilised climes of 3AW I might say, but I think it is a fitting way, I think it's a tremendous foundation and I know 3AW has played a major role in sponsoring it and supporting it, it's greatly to the credit of the station and to you personally.

**MITCHELL:**

Thank you very much for your involvement and we will see you later in the day as it's officially launched. Thank you for your time.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Thank you.