



1a

# PRIME MINISTER

1 May 1997

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

E & OE .....

**O'BRIEN:**

John Howard, we'll come back to the media ownership issue in a few moments.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I'm sure we will. I'd be disappointed if we didn't.

**O'BRIEN:**

I knew you would be. Blanket extinguishment of native title, now out of the question quite clearly in your mind?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Yes, I don't think is the right way to go. It would create huge uncertainty. It would potentially cost this country an enormous amount of money and it would inflame a very difficult debate. The great advantage of my approach is that it totally restores to farmers the capacity to run and manage their properties without interference from native title claimants.

**O'BRIEN:**

But you've had endless dialogue with the farmers and with the Queensland Premier. They seem far from convinced right now.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I'm sorry that's not right. And not all of them are like that. I've had a very useful dialogue and I continue a very useful dialogue with the National Farmers' Federation. Now, I'm not going to verbal the federation, I'm not going to say what its view is. It can speak for itself, and quite rightly because the National Farmers' Federation were misled in 1993. They are very wary of anything at the present time but I believe that as pastoralists and farmers understand what is involved in my plan, they receive the security and reassurance of it, they know that they can run their properties without interference from native title claimants and they also understand that if we can get something that is seen by the community as fair and balanced, that will deliver a quick change rather than a protracted bitter change that might at the end of the day be subject to constitutional challenge and then you'd be back where we started from.

**O'BRIEN:**

Given the way in which divisions were so stark on this issue, I'm sure you would understand why there are still many farmers and for that matter aboriginal leaders who are sceptical that you can deliver the guarantees that you say you are going to deliver to farmers on the one hand certainty, while at the same time respecting native title.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well, I can. There's always the case that there had to be some wind-back from Wik, and I made that plain to the Aboriginal leaders when I first met them a couple of months ago. There was no way that the Wik pendulum didn't have to come back towards the centre because Wik delivered far more to the Aborigines than they themselves expected and what I have tried to do is whilst respecting Native Title, to veer back closer to the centre so that I'm able to say to the farmers, yes, you can run your properties without being interfered with, but I'm not going to engage in blanket extinguishment. One of the problems of blanket extinguishment is that if you wipe out every potential title on pastoral land then you could be up for a very large compensation, but then the other problem is that you'd have to use the race power of the constitution. And although there is legal advice saying that's okay and there's some court authority for it, I'm not certain that the current High Court wouldn't say that a detrimental use of the race power was unconstitutional. Now, these are the sorts of shoals that you would have to negotiate, quite apart from a parliamentary shoal, if you went down the blanket extinguishment route, but if you go down my route you don't have that problem yet you deliver the certainty.

**O'BRIEN:**

You were very much at pains before the election and since to say that there'd be no special interests attracting your patronage in government. Now, you were very strong this afternoon in saying that farmers would be the last group that you would desert. You would never desert the farmers....

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Yes that's a ...

**O'BRIEN:**

Almost that the farmers would come first...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

It's common language to say look it's the last person I'd desert., what you are really saying is that you are not going to let them down. It doesn't mean to say you don't take other people into account. Farmers have done...

**O'BRIEN:**

But the farmers' priority is ahead of Aboriginals...?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I think the farmers are entitled to want a decent deal out of this whole thing, because they were told by the former government that they didn't have to worry. They were told by the preamble of the *Native Title Act* that they didn't have to worry, and I think that has got to be delivered on, that commitment, but in a way that doesn't disrespect Native Title, and I make no apology for the fact that my package will advantage farmers from where they are now, because where they are now is unfair and unreasonable and unstable and they are entitled to have their interests looked after.

**O'BRIEN:**

I'm told that there are at least five members at today's backbench committee who will still accept nothing less than blanket extinguishment which I assume means that they'll cross the floor. Would it bother you if they did?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well, there were 21 people present, so if that's right I didn't do too badly - 16 out of 21. Look, I think it is premature to talk about people crossing the floor. I'd like to know what the Labor Party is going to do, what the Democrats are going to do on this legislation. They can make up their own minds...

**O'BRIEN:**

But what room is there in your mind for compromise in the way of amendments to get the Labor Party and the Democrats and the Greens on side?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Very very little room, no room at all for significant amendments. Tiny-ly at the margin in relation to the detail yes, but if there is any attempt made to sort of water down the guarantees and protections that we've put in for farmers that enable them to run their properties, then the answer is no. If there is any attempt to sort of reintroduce the complicated right to negotiate procedure which has gummed up the works of the mining industry in Australia, the answer is no. If on the other hand there are some tiny changes at the margin that don't act in a detrimental way to those goals then of course I'll look at them, but I've given a lot of thought to this, I've invested a lot of personal energy and capital into this. It is a fair plan, it is a balanced plan, I've fought very hard to get it accepted and I'll go on fighting hard to get it accepted because I believe in it, and I'm not going to have it tricked around by people who are going to try and gum up the process again.

**O'BRIEN:**

Well, I guess the question very much comes into focus if you can't get this past the Senate. Since it is so important to you will you consider a double dissolution.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well, I will consider what I am going to do if it doesn't go through the Senate when that eventuality arises.

**O'BRIEN:**

Certainly at this point you're not going to rule out a double dissolution?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Look Kerry I will give a whole lot of consideration to a whole lot of things related to this and I've got a very clear view in my own mind about what I am going to do in relation to this...

**O'BRIEN:**

Please share it...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

No, not tonight. ... Other subject.

**O'BRIEN:**

But you would agree I'm sure that if it did come to a double dissolution on this issue, it would be an enormously divisive issue in this country?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Kerry, I have fought very hard to prevent division on this, and that is why I have unhappily seen myself in conflict with some people on my own side of politics. It's not something I enjoyed and I've done that in the name of unity, not in the name of division. I'm the last person who wants to cause division on this, but I say to you and to the Australian people, this thing has got to be fixed, it has got to be fixed quickly and it has got to be fixed unambiguously. My plan is the way to do it and I'm determined to drive that plan through.

**O'BRIEN:**

Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, made a very strong speech today against Pauline Hanson. Do you agree with his comments?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well, the ones that I've seen to affect that if you have, for example, no foreign investment policy in this country, that will destroy thousands of jobs, yes it will. I don't know what Pauline Hanson's policies are. I don't think anybody does really. But if she is against foreign investment then she is against the employment of tens of thousands of Australians. Because if we didn't have foreign investment in this country we would have a lower standard of living, we would have fewer jobs, fewer industries, we would not have developed as much as we have. It's easy to score, you know, cheap shots against foreign investment but every developed country including Australia owes a great debt to foreign investment because without it we would have to accept a much lower living standard.

**O'BRIEN:**

You've given the impression in the past that you've been very careful about what you've chosen to criticise in Pauline Hanson and what you haven't. Alexander Downer today described her views as offensive and he says it's critical to fight and destroy the ideas that she's promoting. Do you agree with those expressions?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well what I've done in the past Kerry is not to elevate the woman...

**O'BRIEN:**

Well she's been elevated now.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well yeah, I saw a very interesting comment from Michelle Grattan, one of the most respected members of the Press Gallery in Canberra, on this today and she suggested that Pauline Hanson had been over indulged with media coverage and perhaps Howard was right in having said that at the end of last year. I thought it was very interesting

from somebody of Michelle's seniority and balance - she doesn't always say nice things about me but...

**O'BRIEN:**

But that may or may not be true.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well anyway, well I think...but I think it's a point...

**O'BRIEN:**

The fact is you've now got that problem sitting squarely in your lap.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I think it's a point worth making. Look, my situation is that if I see a stupid policy prescription that is going to hurt Australia, I'll attack it. When Pauline Hanson first made her maiden speech I did repudiate her claim about Aboriginal disadvantage. I did repudiate her claim about the country being swamped by Asians. On the other hand I acknowledge that there are a lot of people in this country, and myself included, who resent being constantly told that our history is a matter of unmitigated shame and disgrace and that we are a crowd of racists. Because we are not a crowd of racists, we are a very tolerant society that has welcomed hundreds of thousands, indeed, millions of people of different races into our ranks and absorbed them in a very harmonious fashion.

**O'BRIEN:**

But do you find her views offensive?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well it depends which ones you're talking about. If she's...well no, look, I'm not mincing words on this because it's very hard to know what she stands for. But if Pauline Hanson is saying foreign investment is stupid then she's wrong. If she wants to have...

**O'BRIEN:**

(Inaudible)

**PRIME MINISTER:**

If she wants to have a discriminatory immigration policy then I'm against that.

**O'BRIEN:**

Is it offensive?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

A discriminatory immigration policy is offensive, yes.

**O'BRIEN:**

The South Australian Premier, John Olsen, came back from South-East Asia last week warning that the backlash against Australia there was serious as a result of Pauline Hanson. Do you now agree with that, that Australia is still hurting?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

No, no, well can I say that is quite contrary to the experience that I've had visiting those countries. I was in China quite recently, a highly successful visit. And I did not find that and that was not the message that was conveyed to me by the Australian Embassy, it was not the message that was conveyed to me by the Consulate in Shanghai, it was not the message I got. Now he may have talked to a different group of people.

**O'BRIEN:**

Like business people for instance...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well I spoke to a lot of business people. I, in fact, had 15 senior Australian business people with me in China. They talked to their counterparts and none of them reported that. Now John may have had a different experience. I can only report as Prime Minister, my experience.

**O'BRIEN:**

The issue of the Fairfax media group and the cross-media rules - any regrets about those rather extraordinary comments you made yesterday that nobody was running the company at the moment?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well I went on to say - and that was left out the Laurence Street interview - that I was not criticising the management. The point I was making was, and it's evident by comments...numerous comments have been made by financial writers about instability of the share register, it's because of the character of the law at the present time. It's not a criticism of the management. I think...

**O'BRIEN:**

But you did say nobody is running the company at the moment.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well that is a paraphrase of saying there's no dominant shareholder, yes.

**O'BRIEN:**

It's one thing for media commentators to analyse these things, it's quite another isn't it for a Prime Minister to single out an individual company for those kinds of quite critical comments?

**PRIME MINISTER:**

No, no, it's not a critical comment. It would only be a critical comment...

**O'BRIEN:**

The Chairman of Fairfax, Sir Laurence Street, thinks it was. The Chief Executive thinks it was.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well, well I don't agree with Sir Laurence. I don't agree with him. And I went on to say in that interview that I wasn't being in anyway critical of the management. I'm not critical of the management of Fairfax, not at all, I haven't been.

**O'BRIEN:**

Kerry Packer supported you strongly before the last election.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Yes but he voted Labor in 1987 and as far as I know he might end up voting Labor at the next election. So let me just say...

**O'BRIEN:**

Pretty clear how he voted at the last one...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

It probably doesn't matter how he votes, I mean...



**O'BRIEN:**

Well, you now seem ready to change media laws in a way that many, many people, those same market analysts that you talk about see as virtually handing Fairfax to Kerry Packer which of course he's wanted for years.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well the present laws...

**O'BRIEN:**

No connection between Kerry Packer's support for you.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Absolutely none. I point out that in 1987 when Kerry Packer openly consorted with Bob Hawke, openly said that he was going to support the Labor Party, ridiculed the Opposition which I then lead, I then in 1987 was publicly critical of the cross-media prohibitions that have been brought in by Paul Keating.

**O'BRIEN:**

Well Kerry Packer broadly seemed to have got what he wanted then and he seems to be about to get what he wants now.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well in 1987...the 1987 changes were done, in my view, to spite the Fairfax company and also to spite the old *Herald and Weekly Times*. Look, I am against a law which is outdated. Rupert Murdoch, Paul Keating, Kerry Packer, a whole lot of people over the years have said that in this day and age of convergence, to have cross-media prohibition is anachronistic. Now whether the Government ultimately decides to change those is a matter that Cabinet is yet to decide. But I have made no secret of the fact that I regard those laws as outdated. There are other considerations that the Government has got to take into account - I'm not going to go into them tonight - before we decide whether or not to make the change. But this idea that it's the result of some deal is wrong. And this idea that there's some sort virtue in having a law that, no matter what the modernity of the media is, says that if you own a television station in Sydney you can't own a newspaper Sydney, is a completely outdated law.

**O'BRIEN:**

There are those who say that your comments in what you're foreshadowing as legislation could almost be taken straight from Kerry Packer's own submission to your internal government review.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well, I mean, people will say what they can. I don't particularly mind that. I of course reject the implication that they are designed to particularly deliver on any kind of understanding because there was none. There is something strange about a law which says that because you own a certain level of television you can't have a newspaper when somebody on the other side of the world can bounce a television signal anywhere into Australia irrespective of cross-border prohibitions. I mean, the whole thing has been overtaken by technology.

**O'BRIEN:**

But the fact is if you apply what it sounds like you're going to apply and Kerry Packer does end up with Fairfax you will be reducing, you will be presiding over a policy that reduces the diversity of media ownership in this country in terms of the major owners of this country from...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well yes, and that of course assumes that the major owners determine the diversity of media opinion. I mean media opinion in Australia now is dominated by a lot of considerations. For example, I made the comment yesterday that I thought many talkback people now...

**O'BRIEN:**

Yes, I was intrigued by that...

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well it's true.

**O'BRIEN:**

...because who hires them? The proprietors. Who chooses? The proprietors.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well the ABC, the ABC can hire people...

**O'BRIEN:**

Not as many as we used to be able to.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

I happen to hold the view Kerry that the media organisation that has the most concentrated clout in this country is the ABC. And the reason that I hold that view is

that it reaches into all parts of Australia and it also has a narrower spectrum of opinion on particular issues than much of the commercial media.

**O'BRIEN:**

With less efficiency, with less effectiveness, with less reach, I would suggest after this next budget than before.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Well...but still greater than the commercial radio stations. And any measure will tell you that the concentrated clout of the ABC into the four corners of this country is greater than that of any other television station.

**O'BRIEN:**

I'm going to have to end that there I'm afraid because we're well out of time. We can hopefully pursue this after the budget. John Howard, thanks very much for talking with us.

**PRIME MINISTER:**

Pleasure.

ends