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2 May 1997

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

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PRIME MINISTER:

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to congratulate Tony Blair, the Prime Minister-elect of Great Britain on an extraordinarily impressive victory. I commiserate with my friend, John Major. He fought a courageous personal campaign in quite impossible circumstances. Mr Blair inherits a very strong British economy, in fact the strongest economy in Europe. He inherits the legacy of 18 years of overall, very successful Conservative Party rule and at a time in which the electoral fortunes of the British Conservative Party are at a very low ebb, it is worth recalling the enormous transformation that the Thatcher years, followed by the Major years brought to the economy of the United Kingdom. The relationship between Australia and the United Kingdom is a very important relationship. It consists of many layers of history, of shared values and shared attitudes and many personal links and on a personal note I look forward to meeting Mr Blair in the very near future. I again warmly congratulate him. I wish him well. I hope he brings good government to the country that he has now been elected to lead.

JRNLS:

Mr Howard, is our economy growing as strongly as the United Kingdom's?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes, in fact on some estimates, a tick stronger. It depends what measure you use but certainly, the growth rate in Australia and the growth rate in the United Kingdom are very similar indeed.

JRNLS:

Mr Howard, did you, as has been suggested in newspapers this morning, attempt to broker a deal with Mr Murdoch?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, I saw that story. I was rather surprised at the tone of it. What happened was that I was asked by News Ltd, by one of the Murdochs, whether I would be willing, whether the Government would be willing to agree to an increase in the foreign investment limits for television. In the course of discussions with him and also with Mr Cowley, the proposition was put that, as to whether News Ltd would be willing to surrender ownership of some newspapers if the increase, if an increase in television foreign ownership were allowed. At no stage was there any suggestion put that there was some trade off between changing the cross media rules and lifting the foreign ownership limits in television. The approach about lifting the foreign ownership limits in television was to me, came from News Ltd, and may I say, I didn't find that the least bit odd.

I mean, newspaper and press proprietors are always putting propositions to the Government about changing the law in a way that might suit them and that applies to Mr Packer, it applies to Mr Murdoch, it applies to Mr Stokes, it applies to a whole lot of other people, so there's nothing odd about that and I don't take any exception but what I do reject about that Financial Review article this morning is the suggestion that I tried to sort of broker some trade off between changing the foreign investment limits for television in exchange for some tacit acceptance by the Murdoch interest of changing cross media. What was put to me was, would we change the television laws, and we said, well would you surrender some newspaper interests so that the overall level of foreign ownership in the media did not go up, and nothing has come of that. So what happens is a matter for the Government to decide but the law as it stands at the present time is the law as it stands and no Government decision on any aspect of media law has been taken and I ought to make that very plain to everybody who is interested.

JRNLSST:

What do you say then Mr Howard, to Mr Stokes who today has accused you of doing a quote, disgraceful deal to deliver Fairfax to its...

PRIME MINISTER:

Really? Well that rather tiresome allegation was I think launched onto the world stage in Singapore and outside the Brandenburg Gate by my predecessor as Prime Minister a couple of years ago. Of course I have not done any deal, disgraceful or otherwise with Mr Packer. Our policy at the last election left open the question of whether the cross media prohibitions would be lifted. I am on the record over a period of ten years as being opposed to the cross media prohibitions and I'm rather puzzled, I had a talk to Mr Stokes two days ago and he didn't say anything about that to me.

JRNLSST:

Are you surprised at the bitterness of his attack? He's accused you of playing king maker, much the way that the Labor Party did?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I think that's an extraordinary attack but I am not surprised. I mean, Mr Stokes doesn't want the cross media rules changed so I mean, look, I think there's a pattern. All media proprietors tend to make public statements in promotion of their own interests and I understand that. I don't criticise them for it. I think he obviously feels that obligation to his shareholders to put a point of view. Mr Packer does to his interests and Mr Murdoch does to his and all the other players on the Australian media scene really do the same thing. There's no real difference. I think in fact it's better that these things be discussed in an open fashion like this. Every media proprietor in Australia is pushing his or her own barrow. There's no qualitative difference as far as I have been able to divine but I just reject completely any suggestion of a deal. That's a silly, erroneous and quite dishonourable claim.

JRNLSST:

Mr Howard, is there any chance that the foreign ownership in television will be lifted so it's consistent with newspapers, to that 25% limit?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, I don't want to speculate or comment any further. Obviously the media laws are under some consideration at the present time. That's plain. We haven't reached any final decision. As I said a moment ago, the law at the present time is the law at the present time and in the course of these reviews you have a lot of views put to you by a lot of people and I have been receiving a lot of those views from different people. The one thing I can tell you is that nobody, no one person is in agreement with any other person. They all have a slightly different point of view.

JRNLSST:

Is it according to what the proposition, or the counter proposition you put to Mr Murdoch, you might be prepared to contemplate increasing the levels for tv if there was a divestiture in, say print or something to (inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I said what I said. I can't add anything to that and I wouldn't have said it if it weren't accurate. I simply make the point that at no stage did I try and broker some kind of trade off between cross media laws and foreign investment laws in relation to television. That part of the Financial Review story was completely erroneous and I am very surprised that it was written in that form.

JRNLS:

What do you think of the proposition?

PRIME MINISTER:

What do I think of what proposition?

JRNLS:

The News Ltd proposition that they increase their stake to seven at the same time as you (inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER:

Well that wasn't their proposition. That was the whole point of what I said.

JRNLS:

What do you think of the idea?

PRIME MINISTER:

What do I think of the idea? Well I think that's academic.

JRNLS:

Mr Howard on Wik...

PRIME MINISTER:

On Wik, yes.

JRNLS:

If as reported, next week the National Party forces Tim Fischer to abandon your plan to favour extinguishment, where do you go?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I never react to each and every piece of speculation in newspapers and on television about how something like this is going. I am confident that the plan that I have put forward is the best plan to give certainty to pastoralists and deliver fairness to the Aboriginal people. I am determined to press ahead with it. I have already asked that work begin on preparing legislation. I will be talking to the Cabinet about it next week and I am very confident that the plan will receive the support of the Joint Party Room.

JRNLST:

Aboriginal groups are worried you've ignored the stolen generation inquiry?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I haven't received a detailed briefing on that and until I have I am not going to make any comment.

JRNLST:

Mr Howard, when do you expect to make a decision on plans to (inaudible) the laws on cross media ownership?

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't know.

Thank you.