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**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
INTERVIEW WITH ALAN JONES - 2UE RADIO**

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JONES:

Prime Minister good morning.

PRIME MINISTER:

Good morning Alan.

JONES:

You offered a personal apology at the National Reconciliation Convention. Your critics seems to say that's not enough.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I thought it was. I meant every word of what I said. Alan, I have read this report. There are some horrific stories in it and it's quite plain that a lot of people were affected very badly and continue to be affected and that can't be denied or ignored. It's also true, as you said, that the practises were meant, at the time, to be doing the right thing. They were thought at the time to be benefiting the people involved. And there is no doubt that in many cases, however wrong we now see the taking of the children away from their own natural homes, that in many cases those people received a very happy home life and a very, very happy upbringing. In many cases they didn't. But sadly, even as we talk, there are children in Australia and children all around the world who are having a happy home upbringing and others who are having a very unhappy and neglected one and that is a sad fact of human behaviour. But my view was that this generation can't be held accountable for the mistakes of past generations. I did make a very strong and unambiguous expression of my own sorrow and distress at what had happened and I meant that. I meant every word of it. I didn't tend to what is called an official apology. One of the things you've got to bear in mind is that we have received legal advice to the effect that an unqualified apology delivered on behalf of the Government and the people could have quite significant legal implications.

JONES:

In other words, that could be construed as an admission of wrong doing...

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh yes.

JONES:

...and therefore action...

PRIME MINISTER:

Give rise to compensation claims and the like. Now, we got that legal advice in writing from the Chief General Council of the Attorney-General's Department. And that is a factor that I ask Australians who think that I should have gone further to bear in mind. I have an obligation to them given that we take the view that cash, monetary compensation is not appropriate in this situation. And having taken that decision and made that submission to the commission, I have an obligation to the Australian taxpayer to avoid using words that could give rise to...inaudible...compensation claims. Now, it's easy when you're in Opposition, it's easy when you're outside the loop of responsibility to call on the run for all sorts of apologies and statements. We will give a very considered and sympathetic response and sensible response to this commission...report. We'll do it in a measured way. We'll take our time, but not a lot of time to do so. And there are many things in the report which I'm sure that we'll be able to respond to in a positive and helpful way and we'll want to do that. But we do hold a strong view about compensation and we've stated that and we've expressed our sorrow for

what happened. But as for a formal apology it does have the difficulty about being an admission of liability, of giving rise to a stronger legal claim that I've referred to and that is the reason why this week I have stopped short of doing it...is one of the reasons why I've stopped short of doing it.

JONES:

The convention...the Reconciliation Convention began last Monday and you made your speech there. I'm just wondering for the benefit of listeners who've heard a lot of rhetoric and a lot of emotion and a lot of anger, how widely circulated has this report been? How many people at that convention would have read the report? How many people actually commenting upon now and advising you or criticising you for what you should or shouldn't do would have actually had access to the report?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well that's very, very hard to tell. I think at the convention itself, probably not a large number would have had access to the report....

JONES:

So in other words they're calling upon you, are they, to do things without actually knowing...?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well many of them, many of them would, although to be fair to them there had been extensive press briefing a few days earlier of the contents of the report and there had been some of the case histories in the report published widely in newspapers.

JONES:

Should that have happened prior to it being tabled in the Parliament?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, but it wouldn't be, Alan, the report that's been released before its been tabled in Parliament. But certainly that, technically speaking, shouldn't have happened. But the thrust of the report, the themes of the report were pretty widely known, although perhaps the detail of it and certainly no opportunity to scrutinise the detail of it would have occurred before that conference.

JONES:

Well do we have any documentation...I mean, if we just take a figure of \$100,000 and he apparently, Sir Ronald Wilson's, got 535 cases and I don't think we need to go on about how tragic it is that people are abused in any walk of life, indigenous or otherwise. But is there any documentation about those Aborigines, indigenous Australians, living today who've been educated and cared for under that kind of regime who may not have been with us if they hadn't been removed from the dangers of their childhood environment?

PRIME MINISTER:

I can't give a precise answer to that. I can tell you that in relation to some of the case histories I read in the report the individuals involved acknowledged that they had received good support and good education, they have been well looked after. Although, then going on to say that despite that, they felt a separation from their own culture, from their own families and so forth. But certainly the emphasis of the report is on the tragic side of it. Now, if you're asking me is there a fair and full documentation of the good things that occurred in the context of the overall practice, I'm not aware of that. But I don't...I'm not in a position to pass judgement about how comprehensive the report...in acknowledging that in some cases people did receive very good education, very good care. I mean, there is no doubt that in some cases the children involved did enjoy and receive the benefit of an upbringing and an education and of support...

JONES:

That was to their benefit.

PRIME MINISTER:

But equally (inaudible) is a report document say, well, you know, all of this was fine, but, I was separated from my family and that was very, very heavy negative in my early years and it remains so.

JONES:

But you would be aware, wouldn't you, of the stigma 25, 30, 35 years ago of pregnancy, teenage pregnancy, of having children out of wedlock and daughters of Catholic unmarried girls were taken from them at birth without the mother even seeing the child?

PRIME MINISTER:

I am aware of that and the point...I'm not going to go in to whether...you know, going to start talking about those practices on your programme or indeed any other one. The point I simply make with that illustration is that once you start going down the path of trying, through the compensation system, to make amends for what you believe to have been wrong practices in the past, you open up a Pandora's box - where does it end? If you were going to pay compensation in relation to the stolen children then are you going to have people who at birth were taken from their natural mothers now claiming that that was a breach of their human rights and that therefore they are entitled to compensation despite the fact that their mothers may have been at a very young age and may have wanted them to be adopted, or in some cases not wanting them to be adopted. But it was simply the practice of the time because it was thought to be in the best interests of the child that it not be left in the care of somebody who clearly was unable at that time to care for the child. Now, this is the difficulty of imposing backwards the standards and attitudes and today...

JONES:

And it is also a difficulty, as Prime Minister, is it not, to try and make decisions in the interests of all Australians? How much has that been a factor in what you've tried to do?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well it is. I mean, I take the view that the best thing we can do to repair the hurt of Aboriginal people who today continue to carry the scars of having been taken away from their families and continue to be affected by it, the best thing we can do is to help them now to build a better tomorrow. I would have thought if we understand that it happened, but if we say to them, how can we help to address your genuine disadvantage? I mean, those that aren't disadvantaged well, they don't need any more assistance than the rest of us. But those who are, and there are many Aboriginal people in Australia who don't need any special assistance and who are not asking for any special assistance. They're saying, look I've, you know, I've succeeded, I'm part of the Australian community, I'm proud of my heritage and my culture but I'm not asking for any special help.

JONES:

Well, one other dimension of this debate which hasn't been - and I raise this with you, because it's quite separate from this notion of taking the children away because in the interest of their safety and help they were going to be better off. I read where AO Neville, a Chief Protector in Western Australia from 1915 to 1940 - so he was the bloke legally in control of Aboriginal children - argued in 1937, and I quote what he said:- 'the pure blooded Aboriginal was not a quick breeder, on the other hand the half cast was' - his solution - 'our solution is to separate one from the other and let the Aboriginal race die out'. Now, was there a policy really to...that would be of some concern to us all that there were active and legally sanctioned decisions taken to really exterminate the Aborigines?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I can only conclude from a statement like that, and I've read statements of that type, I can only conclude that that was the view of some people at the time. I don't believe the totality of the report is as severe as that but certainly there were at that time and it continued up to the 1970s in the minds of some people a view about the unworthiness of Aboriginal people. And you still get it in today's society and I have to say these are the sorts of attitudes that can be very, very genuinely hurtful and quite distressing in relation...

JONES:

Absolutely.

PRIME MINISTER:

I mean, anybody who talks about, you know, inferiority of race, anybody who talks about the lowliness of people in the social spectrum, I mean, that is intensely offensive and totally unacceptable.

JONES:

Repugnant.

PRIME MINISTER:

Absolutely repugnant to all of us.

JONES:

Just on the legal side and one final question on that. Native title requires a traditional connection with the land. Have children who were stolen been denied the benefits conferred on others by the native title legislation?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I can't answer that question yet. One of the reasons I can't answer it is that the existing *Native Title Act* is so obscure. We know from the Mabo decision that there has to have been a continuous connection with the land in order for native title to be established. A question of whether a child removed from his or her family has thereby been denied the continuity of physical connection could come back and make a native title claim is something which, at this stage, I can't answer. Some of the lawyers very steeped in this area might be able to do so. I guess it's one of those questions which throws up the almost never ending difficulty and complexity of the *Native Title Act* which, of course as you know, we are very keen to amend with our 10 Point Plan which not only deals with the Wik decision and delivers certainty and stability to pastoralists in the mining industry but it also protects the Mabo principles of native title and provides a more efficient system and I hope prevents some of the more extraordinary ambit claims that have been made under the act over recent times.

JONES:

Just one thing before you go. Last night you talked about tax. Are you aware that there's a tremendous push in America through the presidency for a debits tax and given that the Treasury have figures that there are \$200 billion of withdrawals from financial institutions every day, a one half a per cent tax on that would net about \$250 billion a year, \$65 billion more than you actually need - you could pay of your debt in the term of one Parliament - and there'll be no tax, no tax returns needed, no file numbers, no deeming, no nothing. Is that likely to get on the table for debate?

PRIME MINISTER:

Alan, once you start a debate on tax reform anything can get on the table.

JONES:

Well you've started the debate.

PRIME MINISTER:

I've certainly started the debate. I mean, there are some distributional problems with that sort of tax if I remember rightly from some work I had done about 15 years ago. It sounds simple on the surface but it can have some sort of very awkward distribution, particularly with multiples...

JONES:

Well thank you for your time, we've got to go to the news. Appreciate your time.

PRIME MINISTER:

Thanks Alan.