



PRIME MINISTER

20 June 1997

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
INTERVIEW, BBC RADIO 4
LONDON**

E&OE.....

JOURNALIST:

... should be a bit of a restful change from his troubles back home. After a huge victory over his Labor opponent, Paul Keating, 15 months ago, his government is now under heavy criticism over a sluggish economy, its handling of aboriginal affairs, and even sex and corruption scandals. Then there's the question of republicanism. Mr Howard is a monarchist but the latest polls in Australia show that 55 per cent of Australians want a republic. The Australian Prime Minister's with us. Good morning.

PRIME MINISTER:

Good morning, very nice to be here.

JOURNALIST:

Well we're happy to have you. Now, I suppose you will be raising the matter of a republic with the Queen at lunch.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well the Convention is not to discuss what you discuss in those circumstances, but there's no secret of the fact that there's a debate about Australia's constitutional future and it will be something that the Australian people will ultimately vote on and make a decision about. The place of the monarchy in Australia is obviously very different from what it was 30 or 40 years ago and it's one of those issues that is bubbling along in the background, it's not in the forefront of public debate, and there's still a significant division of opinion, but ultimately there'll be a vote on it and people will make a decision.

JOURNALIST:

Now before the vote you want to decide when the vote is going to be.

PRIME MINISTER:

There'll be a referendum at the end of the year.

JOURNALIST:

You'll call this convention?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well we promised the convention in the lead-up to the last election, and it will be held in December of this year and if a consensus emerges from that, well that will be put to the people. If there's not a consensus then we will have, probably have an indicative plebiscite to determine public opinion. So I think the issue will obviously continue to be debated. Whatever happens on that front, the bilateral relationship between Australia and Britain will remain very strong, but whilst it's an issue that will continue to be debated and it is important in a long term since obviously it's not a front of the mind, front-burner issue. The performance of the economy and our links with the Asia-Pacific region are far more front-mind issues.

JOURNALIST:

It's going to be a front-burner issue increasingly though as the year 2000 approaches and the Sydney Olympics approach and people will say, do we want a royal presence there?

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't think people are going to get terribly fussed either way about that. I said some time ago when, before I was Leader of the Opposition and therefore a potential Prime Minister, that I saw some merit in the Prime Minister of the day, whoever he or she may be, opening the Olympic Games.

JOURNALIST:

Well now, let us talk about something else that's been dogging you and apart from your own problems with the economy

PRIME MINISTER:

Can I just take you up on that. I have to say that any description of the Australian economy, it's growth rate according to the latest OECD report is right at the top of the OECD league, and we will have a budget surplus in the third year of our electoral cycle, having turned around a \$10.5 billion deficit, and we have a growth rate predicted this year of around 3.5 per cent, so any description of sluggish is just so inaccurate. I do have to emphasise that because I'm not going to cop unfair descriptions of the Australian economy, inaccurate ones either.

JOURNALIST:

Alright, fair enough. But in the limited time we've got here, I'd like to move onto the question of race in Australia and the aboriginal population, and obviously your views on that have been very closely watched, and people felt that it was a mistake of you not to apologise in the speech(inaudible) .

PRIME MINISTER:

....well, some people differ on a lot of various issues....

JOURNALIST:

In that sort of atmosphere there has been the rise in popularity of a politician called Pauline Hanson, who is now top of the headlines in Australia, who has been saying things like, it is not true to say that aboriginals are disadvantaged. This must be of concern to you, that that kind of right-wingery is now getting quite a lot of popular support.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well you have a certain amount of right-wingery in all western countries.

JOURNALIST:

Including our own.

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes indeed, indeed. And I think on a scale of ten, extreme views in Australia are lower than they are in many other countries. There's nothing unusual in western society in people expressing extreme views being thrown up from time to time. The views that she expresses are minority views and any suggestion that Australia is a racist country is one that I repudiate completely. It is not true of anybody to say that the Australian aborigines are not disadvantaged as an identifiable group. They are clearly a very disadvantaged people and the philosophy of my government is rather than dwelling on the past is to focus on remedying current disadvantages as we go into the future.

JOURNALIST: