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PRIME MINISTER

21 June 1997

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
DOORSTOP INTERVIEW AT THE WREATH LAYING CEREMONY
ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIRFORCE REMEMBRANCE STONE
BATTERSEA PARK, LONDON**

E&EO
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JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, how did your talks on unemployment go yesterday?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, they were very useful. It is obvious that the new Labour Government here in Britain is to some degree feeling its way in relation to the work to welfare schemes. One of the things that did strike me is that what they have in mind is a system that will make the payment of benefits after a period of time conditional on the people receiving the benefits doing certain things, including undertaking training, doing work, doing work in the voluntary sector, doing work in the environmental sector. The conditionality of it struck me as interesting because whilst the details are yet to be settled it strikes some resemblance to proposals that we have in mind in Australia at the present time. There's certainly a strong view within the new British Government that you do have to try and break down the dependency culture that can develop if benefits are made available unconditionally over an indefinite period of time.

JOURNALIST:

What does that have to do with unemployment, Prime Minister?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I think what the scheme is designed to do is to tackle the problem of long term unemployment and to ensure that people who are out of work for more than six months are dealt with in a particular fashion and I think it does relate in some way to

the experience that we're having in Australia. The other thing that I found very interesting was that the existing arrangements in Britain effectively don't make the benefits available for people under the age of 18 years. People under that age are provided with either the options of remaining at school or going into training places. Once again, there are similarities. I don't suggest they're on all fours with what we're proposing in Australia. Every country has a different experience. But, what I did think was very useful about the hour or more I spent with the British people yesterday was that their problems are not dissimilar from ours. Their measurement of unemployment is different. They use the registration system and not the survey system.

JOURNALIST:

Did you detect any difference of emphasis between the civil servants you met yesterday and the Prime Minister?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, no. Look, if I did, it's not something I would go into. I think they were very helpful and I certainly didn't detect any significance difference. No, I didn't.

JOURNALIST:

Did you get any new ideas about how you might tackle the Australian unemployment problem?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I think my views in a number of areas were reinforced. And I think what is interesting is that you have a situation in Britain that is now largely the product of a long period - 18 years of Conservative government - where unemployment has in fact come down, albeit only over the last two or three years. It is much lower than the rest of Europe. And a new Labour Government that is obviously going to continue many of the policies of the former government. There is no sign that the new Labour Government will reverse the labour market changes made by the former government except perhaps in the area of minimum wages and even there I think they will probably tread very carefully, particularly amongst younger people. I think what I did have confirmed to me yesterday, and I have had confirmed to me both by my discussions yesterday and also with Mr Blair is that there is a view from the other side of the political fence here that you can't indefinitely have a situation that however unintentionally can encourage a dependency culture and a dependency attitude. And you do have to strike a balance between, on the one hand, providing a proper safety net and proper counselling and proper support and proper opportunities, but on the other hand not have incentives that encourage people to develop a dependency attitude.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, you spoke to the Queen yesterday. At home there seems to be confusion about the Constitutional Convention, can you clear that up for us?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, the two events are unrelated.

JOURNALIST:

...well to some extent.

PRIME MINISTER:

...quite unrelated.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, can I put it to you this way. If the Labor Party blocks the Constitutional Convention through the voting system in the Senate will we have a plebiscite or ...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well Glenn, I think if, you know my views on talking about things that are of immediate domestic import while overseas. Mr Fischer and Senator Minchin have stated our position on that very clearly and I think it is well understood. We were elected with a commitment to hold a Convention and we intend to hold a Convention.

JOURNALIST:

Some people in the Government seem to be saying back home that the Convention would be scrapped if it can't go ahead in the way that you had intended.

PRIME MINISTER:

I think there will be a further debate on the matter next week, but Tim and Nick will look after it on my behalf while I'm away.

JOURNALIST:

On unemployment, if the British Conservative Government had adopted the labour market laws that your Government has adopted would unemployment be down to six per cent in Britain?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well in a sense Laurie, that's an extremely hypothetical question because Britain has never had a tradition of a rigid minimum wage, even when Labour governed in Britain after the war and in the 1960s they didn't have a minimum wage. The Australian arbitration system is virtually unique in the world in that it provides for that minimum wage.

JOURNALIST:

But you are looking for ideas here, are you, I guess what I'm asking is have you now decided that you need to go further given what you learnt about the ... ?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I have never believed that the labour market changes that we made, important and valuable though they are, are all that you would ever do. But I do believe they have to be given time to work through. And one of the criticisms I have of our critics on this issue is that they have only been in operation for, in some cases, less than six months. And how on earth people can declare them as having failed when they have only been in operation for six months is beyond me. Bear in mind that, it is only in the last year or two of the former British Government's term in office, that there has been a marked improvement on the unemployment front. There were long years during the time that the Conservatives were in power in Britain when unemployment in this country was much higher than it is now with comparable ... well it went much higher than it is in Australia at the present time.

JOURNALIST:

But if it takes that long Prime Minister, we will be well into the next century before ...

PRIME MINISTER:

No, you are talking... the point was not the length of time that it takes in relation to a given set of policies but just a commentary on what has happened in this country.

JOURNALIST:

Is the Australian Government disposed to help facilitate the return of Yagan's Head?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I am going to have a talk with Mr Colbung about that in a moment. The answer is yes. It is essentially though, of course, in the first instance a matter for the British Government. There are some sensitivities involved in that the head is buried beneath the graves of many stillborn and young children and in order for the thing to be decently done, the permission, where possible, of the families of those children is needed. I understand that the British Government has been negotiating that and our High Commission has been in constant touch with them and certainly observing those

sensitivities which I think you would all agree ought to be observed, I would be very anxious to see that it happened. But I am going to have a talk about it in a few moments and to the extent that we can help and having regard to the sensitivities that should be observed with others, I will certainly be very keen for that to happen.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, do you have complete confidence in Geoff Prosser?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes.

JOURNALIST:

Will there be a Constitutional Convention if the Senate insists on ...?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, I want a Constitutional Convention. The tactical handling of what happens in the Senate and in Australia right at the moment is something that I want you to get comment from Mr Fischer and Senator Minchin on. There are obviously nuances which make it desirable that they comment on the day to day tactics. The principle is we want a Convention. We are honouring our commitment and it will be on the heads of others if we don't have one.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, can Colbung depend on Australia for some financial assistance?

PRIME MINISTER:

I want to have a talk to him. I haven't personally met him before. I'd like to talk to him before I say any more. I've indicated my sympathy. I've indicated there are sensitivities involving the feelings of others and the families of others and they have to be respected and I hope that everybody would agree with that. But, if I can help I will.

Thank you.