



PRIME MINISTER

19 August 1997

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON. JOHN HOWARD MP
DOORSTOP INTERVIEW, TREASURY PLACE, MELBOURNE**

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PRIME MINISTER:

I just wanted to inform you that after a very intense discussion, the Cabinet has decided that the Federal Government cannot support the heroin trial in the ACT and we've indicated to the ACT Chief Minister that we are withdrawing all co-operation as a Federal Government. This is not an easy issue and I respect the very strongly held views on both sides of the argument but we are concerned that a heroin trial sends an adverse signal. We are not convinced that the potential benefits from it outweigh the detriment of that and we believe that on balance the decision that we have taken is the correct one.

JOURNALIST:

Was there unanimous opposition in Cabinet to this decision... support in Cabinet to this decision?

PRIME MINISTER:

I never canvass the level of fervour or individual views within Cabinet on any issue.

JOURNALIST:

In the end, did this come down to a moral decision?

PRIME MINISTER:

It's not just a question of morality although every individual brings a different perspective. I mean, everybody is deeply worried about the level of heroin addiction in Australia. Parents are desperately concerned about the potential damage of drugs to their children. One of the perplexing aspects of this whole issue is that people similarly affected, devastated, the lives of their children claimed and destroyed by drugs can take diametrically opposed views.

I think I remarked the other day that I have had the parents of children who have died through drug overdoses plead with me, plead with me not to weaken the law, change the law, not to experiment with trials, not to do anything that could send an adverse signal. Equally, I know of people in a similar position who take a different view. I think anybody who tries to claim a monopoly of concern for those who are addicted to drugs, anybody who says that their particular point of view evinces a greater concern for the drug problem is quite wrong. It is one of those issues where people with equally strong views on both sides can put them with dignity and with great strength and I don't claim any sort of monopoly of wisdom. I am a human being, I am a father, I am the Prime Minister and I am trying to bring the best judgement that I can and it is as I expressed the other day and it is now the view of the Government.

JOURNALIST:

What then did the decision come down to?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well it came down as best I can express it, a view that we would be sending the wrong signal. We were unconvinced of the benefits and those two things in particular were very important matters weighing in the minds of all members of the Cabinet.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, given that this heroin trial has been in the news for some time, why didn't you convey this opinion to the Health Ministers' meeting in Cairns? Why some weeks later?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well there were a number of conflicting messages from different governments in the lead-up to that particular meeting and of course you will be aware that that meeting took place while I was away.

JOURNALIST:

Should Dr Wooldridge have supported the trial without first getting it through the Cabinet?

PRIME MINISTER:

I'd like to defend Dr Wooldridge's role in this matter. I think if you analyse what Dr Wooldridge said, he was very ambivalent and equivocal in what he said at the time and look, let's be adult about it. These issues are always difficult. You will always get a range of views amongst people on the same side of politics as well as people on the other side of politics. I think these are the sort of issues where frankly, there'd be some people in the Labor Party and some people in the Liberal Party would hold similar views and there would be groups in the Labor Party and groups in the Liberal Party who would hold the opposite point of view.

If I may say so with great respect, the media are often calling for more mature and sophisticated debates on these sorts of issues and one of the ways in which we can increase that maturity and sophistication is to not see them in the ordinary typecasting of political views and to recognise that they are hard issues. I don't find it an easy issue. Anybody who imagines that I sort of have an open and shut view on this issue is wrong. I agonised over it. I talked to a lot of people about it and the view that I have taken is an on-balance view and I am sure it is the right view.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, when you say that the Federal Government is withdrawing all support for the trial, does that simply mean that you won't see your way clear to allow occasional heroin....

PRIME MINISTER:

Anything that involves our active co-operation will not be available.

JOURNALIST:

Including financial support?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes.

JOURNALIST:

Are you happy that means there will be no trial at all?

PRIME MINISTER:

I would imagine that the impact of the Federal Government's decision is that it won't go ahead but that is a question you will have to direct to the jurisdictions who are involved in the trial but what I am making clear is that we don't think it ought to go ahead. We won't support it and we will withdraw all co-operation.

JOURNALIST:

What about the Victorian leader's suggestion that Victoria will consider having a trial of its own?

PRIME MINISTER:

The view we took today would apply to trials in any jurisdiction, not just in the ACT?

JOURNALIST:

Do you think this decision reflects community sentiment?

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't know. I think community sentiment is very divided because it's a very difficult issue. Nobody has a simple answer. Everybody is worried about it, parents in particular and I am concerned. I think giving the right guidance to children and to young people on these issues today is not easy and I think parents in the community like us in that Cabinet Room, are grappling with a very difficult social issue and people who run around saying, I've got the blindingly simple answer, are deluding themselves.

Nobody has the blindingly simple answer. I think any of us of goodwill can do is to try and take commonsense decisions based on the best assessment that we can make. Now I respect the other point of view. I know I will be criticised by people, some on my side of politics, some on the other side of politics but I don't mind that criticism. I think the decision that's been taken is the right decision and I think the majority of Australian parents will support it very strongly.

Thank you. I must return to the meeting.

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