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**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
TELEVISION INTERVIEW WITH KERRY O'BRIEN
THE 7.30 REPORT, ABC TV**

E&EO.....

O'BRIEN:

John Howard before we go to the domestic issues, how personally do you feel the loss of the Princess of Wales?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think like all other Australians, I was shocked and stunned at the harrowing nature of her death. It's always moving and upsetting when someone so young dies. I can't claim that I knew her closely because I didn't, but I think she did represent, particularly to younger women, somebody who identified very strongly with the modern world.

She was seen by many people as bringing a different perspective to the British monarchy and of course, I think, the most evocative of all the images of the days following her death is the enormous spotlight and pressure that it places upon her two young sons, particularly William, her eldest son. I think the photographs of them travelling in a very tight and contained fashion to church only hours after they learnt of their mothers death, in many respects those pictures had an enormous impact on me.

It is an extraordinary way in which the public has reacted. I think the outpouring of public emotion and grief and sentiment. In my lifetime, I think it has even exceeded the reaction to President Kennedy's death, which I guess for people roughly of your age and mine is that event in the past that you sort of say well: where were you when that happened.

O'BRIEN:

The Papparazzi became the immediate target for anger, perhaps too easy a target it may turn out - we don't know. But are they an acceptable catalyst for you to want to review privacy laws in this country, or do you think we have got it right? Do you think we have any reason to be concerned about intrusions on the privacy of individuals, including celebrities, well known people in this country.

PRIME MINISTER:

I am always very reluctant to embrace curbs on press freedom, I really am. I think there are standards of taste and standards of ordinary human respect that ought to be observed. I didn't say anything public about the paparazzi and what's subsequently emerged, whilst it doesn't excuse what may have been their inexcusable behaviour, does throw some fresh light.

I think it is the sort of thing where we should let a little time go by before we embrace knee-jerk solutions. It's a difficult call. I hope that media owners and reporters and news editors apply a code of self discipline. I don't think we are as bad in this country as they are in Britain and Europe and the United States. I think our standards are better. They are less intrusive, although they are more intrusive now than what they used to be, dramatically so.

O'BRIEN:

Have you got something in mind when you say that ?

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh, I just think generally. Well, I thought some of the photographs that I've seen around now, in recent years, are just more intrusive. But I think we are a long way better than in Europe and certainly our tabloid press is not quite as off the planet as often the British tabloid press is.

O'BRIEN:

While we are talking about the media, for a long time now, you have said that the media laws in this country are obsolete and need reviewing and in fact you promised a review and now you have put the whole thing on hold, why?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, my view hasn't changed but I've got more important things to do. I want to focus for the rest of my first term in office on reducing unemployment, reforming the taxation system and fixing the native title mess I inherited from Paul Keating and which was complicated by the High Court decision in Wik.

Now if I can do all of those things over the next 18 months, I will have served the people of Australian extremely well.

O'BRIEN:

But you've got a Communications Minister, whose job it is to formulate and recommend media law, and he, like you, has said that the media laws of this country are obsolete and need to be changed. Are you saying that as a Government, you can't handle more than three things?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, I am saying, as a Government, we ought to allocate priorities.

O'BRIEN:

But even so..

PRIME MINISTER:

No, what I am saying is that it is perfectly proper of a Government to devote its priorities and its energies to particular things and the Australian public wants a total focus on the important things that affect all of them.

Now I am not saying the media laws don't need changing. I think the cross media prohibitions are less relevant and they're obsolete in today's more modern world but obviously they are issues that provoke a lot of heat and enormous controversy. I have not known a Government in the last 20 years that has found a resolution of media policy issues easy and on top of that, I've got 18 months before the next election, I am exactly at the half point in my first term.

I want the Australian people to understand that what matters to John Howard, over the next 18 months, is an all out attack on unemployment, a complete commitment to taxation reform and fixing the native title mess.

Now, they are things that will reach out and touch and affect and influence the entire Australian community and I want the Australian people to understand that they are the things that will really consume my interest.

O'BRIEN:

But you raise in the process a question about your capacity to deal with a number of complex issues at the same time as a government, as any modern government has to do. You promised before the last election that you would have a public inquiry into the media. That public inquiry never happened.

PRIME MINISTER:

But Kerry, you're talking about dealing with a whole lot of things...

O'BRIEN:

Yeah, that's what government is, isn't it?

PRIME MINISTER:

Let me just take you through what I have done...

O'BRIEN:

Sorry, Mr Howard, before you go on, I must ask you...

PRIME MINISTER:

No, no, you have asked me a question and you're not letting me answer...

O'BRIEN:

Before you do, I will let you answer it, but can I please make a plea to you, can I make a plea to you before you answer?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, don't interrupt me, please.

O'BRIEN:

But can I make this plea to you. You can now spend the next five minutes telling me about your record in government and that will use up most of the time of this interview. With respect, can I ask you, if you're going to tell us about what you've already achieved, could you please, with respect, make it brief and then we'll move back to the question?

PRIME MINISTER:

Could you please, with respect, not impugn my capacity or the capacity of my Government to make a lot of critical decisions on a lot of important issues and then try and stop me pointing out that I've done the exact opposite. And what I was about to say was that since I returned from being ill I have launched a major reform of the taxation system; we have responded to the Wallis Report and announced major deregulation of the financial system; we have announced our decision in relation to the replacement reactor at Lucas Heights; we have announced a \$100 million commitment to the Darwin-Alice Springs Railway; we have published and indicated a general direction in relation to the second airport to Sydney, and today we introduced a comprehensive response to the *Native Title Legislation*.

So, any suggestion that this Government has been preoccupied with one or two issues is nonsense. And I go back again to what I said, that what the public out there really wants from us, whilst dealing with all of these important issues, is an overwhelming focus on reducing unemployment. They are attracted to the proposition that we can have a reformed and modern tax system for the 21st Century. And rural Australia is desperate for a workable solution to the native title mess.

Now, if I do those things and do all those other things, I will have well served the people of Australia.

O'BRIEN:

And very briefly, what exactly was it that you found too hard about media policy?

PRIME MINISTER:

Kerry, I've decided to focus on other things of higher priority.

O'BRIEN:

With respect again, that doesn't answer the question.

PRIME MINISTER:

Kerry, you can mouth, with respect, as often as you like. I've indicated what our position is. I think you are now wasting the time of this interview on one issue of which the great bulk of the Australian people don't regard as important.

O'BRIEN:

I have other issues that I do want to move on to...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I'd be delighted to stay here for the whole programme.

O'BRIEN:

Well, we might end up doing that.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, that's fine.

O'BRIEN:

I'll have one more go...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, you can have a go but you're wasting your time...

O'BRIEN:

I understand, I understand...well, it is you who actually pinpointed media policy as one important area of government policy that needed to be addressed. You've had 18 months in government. You've spent a lot of that time, one of your Ministers has, and in Cabinet, discussing media policy. The simple question is, what was it that you found too hard in trying to reframe the policy?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, the simple answer, Kerry, is that we have decided to give priority to the things that I've enumerated. That's the simple answer.

O'BRIEN:

You promised also to simplify the native title mess...

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes.

O'BRIEN:

But, as you say, was created by the previous government. You've just introduced nearly 400 pages of legislation. How many people in this country do you think understand what you're doing?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I think the farmers of Australia will understand that this legislation responds to the uncertainty that was created by the former government's legislation and also by the High Court decision.

I think the Australian public will understand one very simple thing. What has happened with native title is that the pendulum has swung too far in one direction, particularly after the Wik decision. And what I have done with this legislation is to bring it back to the middle.

Let me just show you a view of it. This shows 78 per cent of the land mass of Australia coloured brown on this map. Now, the Labor Party and the Democrats are effectively saying that the Aboriginal people of Australia should have the potential right of veto over further development of 78 per cent of the land mass of Australia.

Now, that is a very simple message. I think the Australian people will understand that message.

O'BRIEN:

Do they understand your solutions?

PRIME MINISTER:

They do understand our solutions. Because what our solution does is to guarantee that any pastoralist in Australia can carry on the normal activities of a primary producer without having to get the permission of a native title claimant. They will understand that if native title rights are infringed then that infringement will carry with it the rights of compensation. They will understand that the rights, in relation to land, will be equally shared, where appropriate, in relation to claims, by both pastoralists and by farmers.

I mean, what my legislation will do will be to guarantee security of the enjoyment by pastoralists of, not only their rights as pastoralists, but also rights that can generally be described as the rights of a primary producers.

Now, I think that gives enormous certainty to the pastoral community of Australia without...

O'BRIEN:

Well then, why aren't the farmers reacting with the same...I mean, for once it seems you finally united the pastoralists and Aborigines with this view, at least, and that is that both of them are predicting masses of court cases out of this and court cases are crippling.

PRIME MINISTER:

Kerry, no government can stop people going to court. But can I say to the farmers of Australia, if you really want to be tied up for 20 or 30 years in the courts of this country with block by block litigation, leave the *Native Title Act* precisely as it is. The only alternative in town, as the Queensland Premier said on your news tonight - and he's been a critic of mine on this legislation - the only real alternative in town is to pass this legislation.

O'BRIEN:

So, do you accept that it will lead to up to hundreds of cases? Do you accept that it will lead to many, many, many court cases?

PRIME MINISTER:

Kerry, I don't accept anything in relation to the behaviour of other people over which I have no control. No Prime Minister, no minister, no government can guarantee that people won't go to court on their legislation. But I can guarantee you this, if we leave it as it is, pastoralists all around Australia will face block by block litigation. At least what my legislation will do, it will give the security and the guarantee of carrying on their activities without interference. If there are native title claims involved and those claims are in any way effected, the compensation will be payable by governments, the compensation will not be payable by the farmers of Australia. This is the best deal that the farmers of Australia are going to get. It's a good deal. It brings the pendulum back to the middle. It doesn't push it right over there, but it brings it back from the absurd point it reached after the Wik decision.

O'BRIEN:

You've hailed the good news on the economy this week. Economic growth seems to be moving ahead. When can you anticipate that the unemployment rate will start trending down on any consistent basis?

PRIME MINISTER:

I believe that the stronger growth, the labour market reforms that we have put in place that are now starting to flow through, I think they will create better circumstances for unemployment next year. I can't honestly be more precise than that. I believe that we have created the circumstances where next year will be better on the unemployment front. Unemployment is always the last of the major indicators to come right and I do think we have created better circumstances. But, if you say May or June or July of next year and at what level, I can't answer that. I don't think anybody, responsibly, in my position can do that.

O'BRIEN:

If we assume conservatively that you won't start thinking about the next election until around October, November, December next year, do you agree that we will have to start seeing unemployment trending down on some consistent basis before you can honestly face the Australian people and say: I have shown you that I have the solutions?

PRIME MINISTER:

Kerry, that is an incredibly, sort of, hypothetical question...

O'BRIEN:

I think it's what a lot of Australians are asking.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I will face the Australian people by the third anniversary of my election. And I believe that when I do face the Australian people I will have a good record to talk about. I'll have an alternative taxation policy, which the Labor Party won't have, to take us into the 21st Century. I will have fixed the native title mess and I believe that our policies will have produced a lower rate of unemployment. But if you ask me, if you ask me at what level, I can't tell you that. And I think it's absurd to, in a sense, with respect, waste time in trying to, sort of, fix upon a particular figure by a particular month.

O'BRIEN:

On the waterfront, you've said that you're determined to press reforms. Bill Kelty has signalled, this week, open conflict if you do that by force. How far are you prepared to go?

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't want a confrontation. I just want more productive wharves. And I also can't understand why Bill Kelty is standing up for the elite of the trade union movement. I mean, the wharfies of Australia are no longer Aussie battlers. Many of them earn \$80 000 to \$90 000 a year. They have extraordinarily generous conditions and other programmes, which I dare not mention on the *7.30 Report*, have detailed some of the orts that occur on the waterfront.

O'BRIEN:

The question is, how far are you prepared to go, if it really does come to the kind of confrontation that Bill Kelty was signalling last night, are you prepared to go as far as sending troops in?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, don't talk about troops. They're your words, they're not mine. I don't contemplate the use of the military in civilian disputes. I've never advocated the use of the troops. And the only people who talk about troops on the wharves, with respect, are journalists and my political opponents. It is Bill Kelty...

O'BRIEN:

At least one of your colleagues has made that as a possibility in the past.

PRIME MINISTER:

No, he didn't. Anyway, we won't waste time on that. But Bill Kelty is the man who's using the inflammatory language. It's Bill Kelty who's invoking the images of pickets and industrial stoppages. He's reaching back into the 1930s and the 1940s. I think he's desperately trying to have a rationale for a trade union movement that's losing its relevance.

I just say to the people of Australia, particularly to the exporters and the farmers who've suffered in the past, we're going to give you a more productive waterfront. We've had to wait until we get the generic changes of the *Workplace Relations Act* through before we can then go on to the next step. Don't ask me to say precisely what that is or when it will occur. Watch this space, as the saying goes. But we want a rational improvement in the productivity of the wharves. We don't seek a fight but we are determined to do it because we think it is in the interests of Australia. We think it is absurd that we should have such unproductive wharves. And we're dealing here, not with Aussie battlers, we're dealing here with the elite of the trade union movement.

O'BRIEN:

John Howard, thanks for talking with us.

PRIME MINISTER:

It was a pleasure.

[ENDS]