



PRIME MINISTER

17 September 1997

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
DOORSTOP INTERVIEW - RAROTONGA
COOK ISLANDS**

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister are you confident yet about the form of words that will be agreed in the Communique regarding greenhouse gas and what sort of statement do you expect the Communique to come out with?

PRIME MINISTER:

I wouldn't be so, how shall I say, discourteous to my hosts and to my colleagues to try and pre-empt the final words of the Communique, but I am hopeful that they will be words that everybody feels comfortable with.

JOURNALIST:

So there's no worry in your mind that Australia might want to reserve a position on this?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, I'm pretty optimistic that we can get a sensible outcome. Our position on the greenhouse gas issue is quite well known. We can't, for obvious national interest reasons - Australian jobs, Australian investment - commit to mandatory targets, to legally binding targets. We do however understand the situation of the Pacific Island States, particularly those very small ones, and I think over the next day or two we can work our way through and come out with a Communique that everybody feels comfortable with, but I don't want to pre-empt that, I want to observe the courtesies of such a meeting.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Downer said recently the only position Australia could accept in Kyoto was one which allowed Australia to increase its emissions up to 2010. Is that the position and when will the actual figures go to Cabinet for endorsement?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well that's Kyoto, this is the Cook Islands, and I'm dealing with the Conference over the next couple of days. As to what is said between now and the Kyoto conference is something that will emerge over that period of time.

JOURNALIST:

But will Australia only accept an agreement which allows an increase in emissions?

PRIME MINISTER:

I'm not going to get into the detail of that at this stage.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Downer has already said that though publicly.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I haven't read what Mr Downer has said on it.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister you say you understand the position of the Small Island States, but I take it you don't accept their proposition that greenhouse gases raises a real risk of sea levels rising. You just deny that do you and don't accept that as a real possibility basically?

PRIME MINISTER:

What I accept is that this is an issue like so many other issues, where different countries come from different perspectives according to their own national interests. And I want to talk to my colleagues. I want to understand their position as best I can. I also want them to understand our position, and it's that kind of attitude which naturally precludes my making declarations, and ruling things in and ruling things out at this stage before the Conference has even started. That would be entirely inappropriate and would rightly draw the rebuke of those who are interested in a balanced coverage of such important matters.

JOURNALIST:

But they're arguing that it's a matter of survival, but you seem to be suggesting that the threat's not as real as they perhaps think it is.

PRIME MINISTER:

No I'm just sensibly waiting till the Conference starts and waiting till I hear from my colleagues before I start laying down conditions about the precise formulation of the Communique.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, would a decline in Australia's economy impact on its ability to provide continuing aid to the member states of the Pacific Forum?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I suppose it would depend on how great the decline was. Obviously, if there were a very sharp decline then it would affect a lot of things but I don't expect that. I expect the Australian economy to go from strength to strength. I'm very optimistic about the Australian economy. That's not to say that we can live apart from what happens in the rest of the world but the growth prospects of the Australian economy are very bright, very strong and I'm optimistic because the Australian economy will continue to grow at a very fast clip. I ought to point out that we have kept our aid budget for the Pacific area constant, despite some reductions in the budget elsewhere in the world, and that's a token of the very high priority we place on support for Forum countries.

JOURNALIST:

Would mandatory targets mean that we would be unable to provide the same level of support that we do now?

PRIME MINISTER:

Mandatory targets, if they were severe and if they were against Australia's interests would, over time, affect jobs and affect investment.

JOURNALIST:

Would that affect the amount of money we would be able to spend.....

PRIME MINISTER:

Well it depends on quantity, obviously.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, on another matter - in your discussions with Jim Bolger this morning did you raise the question of New Zealand defence spending and whether or not New Zealand would buy the extra ANZAC ships?

PRIME MINISTER:

No.

JOURNALIST:

What sort of progress have you made with Mr Skate on Bougainville?

PRIME MINISTER:

That was a very good discussion. He's optimistic that the tide has turned towards a better outcome. He's quite optimistic about talks in New Zealand in October and we are helping to take some of the delegations there and I've indicated to him that we're very keen to help in the peace process in Bougainville. The government that he leads accepts that you need a non-military solution to the Bougainville problem. I got from him and we've picked it up from other sources, a more optimistic view - we don't want to get too excited but it certainly does appear to be a lot more optimistic than it was.

JOURNALIST:

Do you think in the future there may be some peace keeping role on Bougainville that involves(inaudible).

PRIME MINISTER:

That's one of the proposals that's in the ether and it would make a lot of sense providing it were based on a plan that would work, it were based on a recognition that the only solution is one that involves resorting to things other than military processes and also one that keeps Bougainville within Papua New Guinea. That is fundamental in my view to the proper resolution of this dispute.

JOURNALIST:

Would you have Australian personnel involved?

PRIME MINISTER:

Let's not jump too far ahead. I was asked about a concept. I'm not going to get into the business of whose in or out.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, on the economic issue, do you think your recent decisions on cars and TCF has somehow diminished the authority of Australia to speak here on tariff reductions?

PRIME MINISTER:

No. In fact, in relation to one of them, we, from my recollection, received a submission not to reduce tariffs from one of the Forum countries.

JOURNALIST:

.....(inaudible) with Fiji on its re-entry into the Commonwealth and what was the response?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, we are very strongly supportive of Fiji's application to re-join the Commonwealth. I spoke to the Prime Minister over dinner last night and General Rabuka is optimistic that he will attend the meeting in Edinburgh next month as the Prime Minister of the re-admitted Fiji. The Indians objections are now apparently not as strong, or perhaps they've disappeared altogether. The Leader of the Opposition in Fiji, Mr Reddy, visited India recently and I understand as a result of that the Indian position will be different and I'm very optimistic. I've indicated very strong support for some months for Fiji's re-admission. I think it is a wholly desirable development.

JOURNALIST:

.....(inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER:

Can I have Mr Short please.

JOURNALIST:

What do you think of the recent Australian media reports about your health and Mrs Howard's health and is Mrs Howard going to CHOGM?

PRIME MINISTER:

Mrs Howard is in very good health. I thought the reaction of some of the media over the last couple of days was ludicrous in relation to both my own plans - I haven't felt better and haven't felt more - how shall I put it - more as someone who is enjoying the position for some time. As for CHOGM, well I hope my wife will be going to CHOGM, but her going to CHOGM won't only be governed by such things as health it will also be governed by the time of the year it is for one of our children in relation to school exams and those things still, quite rightly, bulk larger on our agenda than most other things.

JOURNALIST:

Isn't it right that that was a consideration of Mrs Howard not coming to this meeting? I think it's Richard having exams at the moment?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I don't know that that was a consideration but she doesn't go to everything with me and this is only a short meeting.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, how damaging are reports from Australia that another three politicians are about to be charged for rorting their travel allowances and that further investigations into further politicians are occurring?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I haven't heard about those. Perhaps somebody will enlighten me later.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, the new Solomons Islands Prime Minister said today that the leaked Australian AUSTEO paper helped bring down the previous - what he said was corrupt - government of Mamaloni in the Solomon Islands, trying to combat potential damage to the Commonwealth Games bid for Melbourne in 2006. Are we seeing increasing evidence of negative impacts from that report and also what do you say about his suggesting thatgovernment in the Solomons Islands?

PRIME MINISTER:

I wouldn't want to comment on the internal affairs of another country. You wouldn't expect me to do that and I won't. Ron Walker is here, quite properly, as the major projects man for Melbourne promoting Melbourne's cause for the 2006 Commonwealth Games, and good luck to him. I hope Melbourne gets those Games.

Melbourne's got a fantastic bid - it's obviously the city to have the 2006 Games and Mr Walker is here doing a superb marketing job and nothing else.

JOURNALIST:

Will you raise it with island leaders and push the Melbourne bid?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes, I've already done so. I raised it with Mr Bolger this morning but he said he may not be able to form a unity ticket with me on it because Wellington may be putting its hand up.

JOURNALIST:

Would it be unfair if New Zealand got it again so soon?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, whoever gets it has my good wishes. I just hope it's Melbourne and it ought to be Melbourne because it's got a much better bid than anybody else I've heard of.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, Bob Carr has written to you

PRIME MINISTER:

Who?

JOURNALIST:

Bob Carr, New South Wales Premier.

PRIME MINISTER:

I'm sorry - I wasn't being sarcastic, I just didn't hear that's all. I haven't seen him around one of the palm trees.

JOURNALIST:

He's apparently written to you calling for the establishment of a national sex offenders' register. Is that something you'll consider?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, as with all correspondence I get from Mr Carr, I hear about it from you before I see the letter, but of course we will, if that's something that will help. I will be saying something about the broader issue of drugs and Commonwealth responses. I indicated some weeks ago that I'd have some work done on that and that work has now been almost completed and I hope to have something more to say about it quite soon.

I will consider any intelligent proposal from any State Premier that will help reduce the usage of harmful drugs in this country. I have a very strong view about their harmful effects and if Mr Carr has a constructive proposal and if a national register will assist in relation to pedophiles, or drugs or anything else, I'd be very happy to do so.

JOURNALIST:

Can I just ask you one thing. How would you describe the concerns of the small island nations in terms of global warming. They say it's urgent. What's your view? How would you describe it?

PRIME MINISTER:

I want to spend a bit of time over the next few days talking about it.

JOURNALIST:

Have you got - you must have some answers already?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, of course I do but I think the courteous thing to do is to listen at a conference like this before you start making declarations.

JOURNALIST:

They're saying it's survival. They're saying it's urgent.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I will talk to them first. I mean, I don't -with great respect - always rely on reports I read about what people say. I like to have an opportunity of discussing before ..

JOURNALIST:

Was Mr Rabuka sympathetic to Australia's position on greenhouse?

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't think it came up last night except in a very transitory sort of way.

JOURNALIST:

He's offered to mediate between Australia and those island nations that have concerns and have expressed anger. Is that a proposition that your're(inaudible).

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't know that there's going to be any argument to mediate in but all I can say is we have certain interests to protect and defend and so do the island states and we'll talk about it and we'll see what emerges.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, can I just clarify a comment you made this morning. Were you saying that claims that some smaller islands might go under because of global warming are exaggerated? Is that what you were saying?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I was answering a question which I thought was colourful and I used a colourful response.

JOURNALIST:

Is it exaggerated to say some small islands may go under?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think the answer to that is the answer I gave to the earlier question - I'll wait and hear what the leaders of the island states have to say. There is nonetheless quite a bit of debate about the science, so far as greenhouse effects are concerned, and it's not all one way. It is not all - how should one put it - the apocalyptic view of the world and of life.

Thank You.