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PRIME MINISTER

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**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
RADIO INTERVIEW WITH MATT PEACOCK
AM PROGRAMME, ABC RADIO**

E&OE.....

PEACOCK:

Mr Howard, was it a difficult conference? I mean, you hardly got a consensus here. It seemed more like a big brother power of veto, 14 to 1 or so.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, in all the circumstances, it was a very good conference and it had a very good outcome. And what was good about the outcome was that for the first time a group of nations said what is the reality about achieving controls on greenhouse gas emissions and that is that you not only need the developed countries, but you also need the developing countries because some of those developing countries contribute massively to greenhouse gas emissions. We've got to remember, Matt, that Australia contributes only 1.4 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions.

PEACOCK:

Per capita, though. It's a lot, isn't it?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, no, hang on. It's very important that the significance of that recognition of the need to get everybody involved in this process, that that be both understood and it's importance to the island States of the Pacific also be recognised. Because the only way, in the long-run, that we will get a workable system to control greenhouse gas emissions all around the world is to get everybody who contributes to the problem involved in the solution. And what Australia is arguing for is the one device that will deliver that and that is to allow different targets for different countries in different situations. That is really what Australia is arguing for. We're not arguing that nothing should be done.

PEACOCK:

Do you accept the science of the greenhouse, for example, it possible water levels will rise on those islands?

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't think anybody can absolutely accept or absolutely reject the science. It's an ongoing debate. Some of the experts to whom I've spoken say that the jury is still out on aspects of it. But let's accept for a moment...

PEACOCK:

What about the water level on those islands?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, well, let's accept for a moment the argument that there is a significant case establishing a link between water levels and greenhouse gas emissions. Let's accept that for the purpose of the discussion. You still get back to how to solve it. And how to solve it effectively is to involve everybody and that is what Australia is arguing for. Australia is not arguing to be given privileged treatment. We're arguing against discrimination against Australia. And my objective at the meeting in the Cook Islands of course was to promote and protect Australia's interest and I will never apologise for doing that and I'll never be reluctant to do it. Because if we were to bind ourselves to what some want us to bind ourself to at the Kyoto Conference, if we were to accept the European view, it would cut percentage points off our GDP; it would destroy thousands of Australian jobs; it would effectively end the bright prospects that this country has in attracting large amounts of foreign investment into things that we do very efficiently, and it really would strike a significant body blow at the development of the Australian economy.

I mean, this is a very serious issue for Australia and it's important that the dimension of the impact of what some are arguing for be understood. But, equally it's important for the Australian public to understand that I and my Government are not arguing that Australia should do nothing. We, in fact, have done a great deal.

I mean, our Natural Heritage Trust will greatly contribute to an amelioration of the problem. And we've got the greenhouse challenge programme whereby the major Australian companies have committed themselves to a programme of reducing greenhouse gas emissions 15 per cent below what they would otherwise have been. So, we're not sitting on our hands and asking for a free ride.

PEACOCK:

But you're saying that China and other developing countries should pull their weight too.

PRIME MINISTER:

I'm arguing that everybody should be in. Everybody who contributes to the problem should contribute to the solution. And the point I make is that the only way you will get the developing countries, that contribute to part of the problem, in, is to offer them differentiation, is to say: "look, we understand that you are at different stages of development and we don't ask you to commit yourselves to targets that are unachievable". And what Australia is arguing for, in relation to herself, is also relevant in relation to these other countries. And in the end, the message I tried to convey to the smaller island States in the Pacific is not that I was disinterested, not that Australia was uncaring or unsympathetic, but in the end the only way in which the problem could be tackled effectively on a global basis was to involve everybody. And that really is the approach that Australia is adopting.

PEACOCK:

You appear to have got a bad press for it though, nonetheless. What was the chemistry like between the leaders and yourself after that leaked document?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I never regard it as bad press for it to be reported that the Prime Minister of Australia has stood up for Australia's interests. I know some sections of the Australian press sometime find it hard to identify with the national interest when they are reporting these things.

PEACOCK:

Did you make any friends there?

PRIME MINISTER:

I went there with a lot of friends and I came back with much closer relations, for example, with the new Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, Bill Skate, with whom I had a number of very lengthy conversations.

I also had an extremely pleasant dinner and subsequent conversations with the Prime Minister of Fiji, General Rambuka, to whom I have given very strong personal support for Fiji's re-admission to the Commonwealth, which I believe, can be achieved in time for the CHOGM meeting in Edinburgh in October.

I regarded it as an extremely good Conference. Inevitably there was some background, relating to the leaked documents, which we could have done without, but that is a thing of the past and I treat it as such and I think people accept that.

But in the end it's my job to look after Australia when I go overseas and I will always do that, and if that on occasion draws criticism from the Australian press, so be it. But I will always identify with the Australian national interest. That is my supreme responsibility.

PEACOCK:

Well you are now back home. There are more gloomy predictions about a downturn in the economy and since you have been elected you are yet to create one full time job and a lot are disappearing. Are you praying for rain, like Senator Vanstone? Do people have to accept job insecurity as she has suggested?

PRIME MINISTER:

The bulk of the indications that I have seen in the last few weeks are very positive. The latest growth figures are very strong. Business investment is still very strong. Inflation is at a thirty year record low. Interest rates are lower than they have been since the 1960's.

PEACOCK:

Is your budget forecast still achievable, on unemployment, do you think?

PRIME MINISTER:

I believe, on unemployment, that we will see a better picture next year. It always takes a long time for unemployment to come down, following a recovery. It is always the last of the indicators to come right. I mean, we will keep doing things such as the decision on both motor car tariffs and textiles, clothing and footwear, to provide, not only the reality of security in those two industries for jobs, but also the perception of security and a sense of security in those industries.

PEACOCK:

The Maritime Union certainly seems to have saved its jobs in Cairns. Are your laws too weak, or are the companies too weak, as John Sharp says?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well there is absolutely nothing wrong with the industrial laws that we have brought in. We have brought more reform to industrial relations in Australia than any government since the end of World War II.

You now have, for the first time, a legal framework for companies involved in the Australian waterfront to recruit and employ non-union labour.

PEACOCK:

Why aren't they though?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, that is a matter, at the end of the day, for them to decide. But the big difference between the situation now and the situation they have obtained before is that we have

broken the legal monopoly of the Maritime Union of Australia on the supply and recruitment of waterfront labour in Australia.

PEACOCK:

Now it is still not doing much good in that respect then, is it?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well Matt, my job is to change the law to make it possible for better outcomes for Australia to be achieved, when companies and employees enter into arrangements and it remains the case that productivity levels on the Australian waterfront are below world best practice.

PEACOCK:

So when are we going to see this change, Prime Minister?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, it remains the case that we need to lift productivity on the waterfront. The timing of that will be determined by commercial arrangements that are entered into between companies and their employees, and other factors. But, the Government's responsibility is to provide the right legal framework and we have done that. Nobody, as the months go by, will be able to say, well we couldn't do this or we couldn't do that because the Australian Government was unwilling to change the law.

The Australian Government has reformed and changed the law. The climate exists now, for companies in a way that they haven't been able to act before. The climate now exists for them to take advantage of these new circumstances to boost productivity, which for years, companies in Australia have been saying is absolutely essential and for the first time they have got a Government that has delivered them that climate, it is now up to them to use that new framework and to exercise the freedoms of that different climate.

PEACOCK:

Prime Minister, thanks for joining us.

PRIME MINISTER:

Pleasure.

[Ends]