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PRIME MINISTER

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP DOORSTOP INTERVIEW HOTEL GRAND CHANCELLOR, HOBART

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, when can Australians start paying, or expect to be paying cheaper CD prices?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, Senator Alston is making an announcement this afternoon and it's the right decision in the interests of the consumers of Australia and I hope the legislation has speedy passage through the Parliament, and is not obstructed and delayed, because if it is obstructed and delayed then people can blame the Labor Party and the Australian Democrats for paying higher CD prices than might otherwise be the case. This decision is of particular benefit to young Australians, but not only young Australians. There is no reason why there shouldn't be significant falls in the price of CDs as a result of this pro-consumer decision by my government.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, the National Institute of Economic and Industry Research awarded Asia as about regionally the worst economic period in more than 40 years and Australia will be the looser in exports and also with the jobless rate it predicts of 11 per cent in the year 2000. Should we still be concentrating our efforts on Asia, or broadening?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I haven't read that report so I'm not going to comment on it, but one of the things that has been different about my Government, and the previous government, is that they adopted an Asia only focus, we have adopted an Asia first focus and we have been very keen to preserve and develop economic links with other parts of the world while at the same time, putting an emphasis on our links with the Asia-Pacific region,

so, we have a more balanced approach to these matters than the government we replaced.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, the Government announced today that the Jabiluka uranium mine would go ahead. Didn't you say during the election campaign that you didn't think it would because you didn't think it would pass the environmental test? What's changed between then and now?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, there was an environmental examination and it got the all clear from that examination and there's no reason, therefore, why it should not go ahead. This is a pro-jobs, pro-development decision that is entirely consistent with the commitment we have to the environment.

JOURNALIST: Your RSA process [inaudible].

PRIME MINISTER:

Well its the typical sort of pre-emptive, generalised, ill informed comment that one would expect. Our RFA process has been a balanced, careful one and I am certain that when the outcome is announced that only the most bigoted in the argument will have grounds to criticise it.

JOURNALIST:

Will the RFA be a legally binding document? The State Government is asking that.

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes.

JOURNALIST:

Has the Federal government agreed to that?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, regarding the nursing home package. Do you think people are still a bit concerned about what it might mean?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well they don't need to be, because it is a fair package and I've spoken about it today to allay the groundless fears caused by the disgraceful scaremongering of the Labor Party. What we are doing is applying to nursing homes, the policy that they applied to hostels and for them now to turn around and attack it is just, blatant, sheer, barefaced hypocrisy.

JOURNALIST:

[inaudible] ...on track for the employment forecasts from the Budget. Are you on track for those at the moment?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well we'll be seeing some employment numbers tomorrow, I think you ought to ask me the question then.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, what was your response to the Nixon Report into Tasmania's economy?

PRIME MINISTER:

I'm sorry, what was your question?

JOURNALIST:

When will you make a formal response?

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh, in the near future, but a number of the things have already been responded to by the State Government.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, do you have any personal reservations about the appointment of the East German, Mr Arbeit to the coaching position of Australian athletes?

PRIME MINISTER:

Warwick Smith was speaking for the Government when he called upon Athletics Australia to review the decision and to look again as to whether everything was taken into account. That's my position, and that's the position of the Government.

JOURNALIST:

When will you expect the RSA to be signed?

PRIME MINISTER:

Very soon.

JOURNALIST:

How long will the RSA be legally binding for?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well it will be legally binding to the extent that any agreement of that kind will be legally binding. See what you have to understand is that our position is clear. I am perfectly happy to sign an agreement on behalf of the Commonwealth Government, legally committing the government to do the things that is in the agreement. But what, in the unhappy event of a change of Federal Government, years into the future, what a future Federal Government can do I can't control. But as far as my Government is concerned, let me make it clear, that when I sign that agreement on behalf of the Government I will be committing my Government to what is in the agreement, I will be committing my Government to deliver resource security to the industry, environmental protection to the state of Tasmania and to the people of Australia, and it won't be my Government that will repudiate or renege on that agreement. I can't control what a future Government might do, but, except to keep them out of office for as long as possible.

JOURNALIST:

It's predicted that...

PRIME MINISTER:

No, can we give him a go. He's, he missed out earlier. He looks a bit forlorn, cast away and ignored and I can't have that happening. Start again.

JOURNALIST:

Thanks very much.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, you've said you want to take the brakes off growth rates?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes.

JOURNALIST:

Can you nominate what an appropriate growth rate target you would like to reach?

PRIME MINISTER:

Not at this door stop.

JOURNALIST:

It's predicted that Asian companies could try to start to dump some of their cheap products into Australia, if the currency crisis hits. Would you look at any barriers to protect Australia against that?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think you will know from the actions I have taken since becoming Prime Minister, that the national interest ranks ahead of everything else in the decisions that I take, so it follows that if that sort of thing was to occur, I would take the appropriate action as Prime Minister, but I haven't read that report and I think it would be very unwise to underwrite alarmist predictions about the economic future of Asia.

JOURNALIST:

If the Asian currencies and problems associated with them are not of concern to you at this time?

PRIME MINISTER:

Could you start that again, I just missed the first part of it.

JOURNALIST:

If Asian currencies are having a problem, and do have the problems that this report is predicting, are you saying it's not a concern of yours at this point in time?

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh look, I follow what happens. We after all, responded magnificently to the difficulty of Thailand.

JOURNALIST:

But we can't prop up all of these countries.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, we didn't prop it up. What we did was arrange a currency swap. Of course we are interested in what happens in the Asia-Pacific region but I think it is unwise and unhelpful and often ill-informed and quite counterproductive to start underwriting the more extreme elements of the first report that might cast some doubt on economic growth in the region. It's not the role of the government to do that and I repeat what I said earlier, the balanced, broadly based approach that I have taken to our links with

the rest of the world, will in fact serve Australia in much better stead than the Labor approach if in fact countries in the Asia area experience difficulty. I mean, you've got to remember that the great bulk of the outward investment from Australia, doesn't go to the Asia-Pacific region, it in fact goes into the European Union.

JOURNALIST:

What is the relationship between Indonesia and the US?

PRIME MINISTER:

What is our role, well I certainly did discuss that matter with the President and I offered the view that Australia, with particular knowledge of this region and particular knowledge of circumstances inside Indonesia, could play a role in perhaps better explaining to the Americans what is happening in Indonesia and bringing a regional focus and the focus of a close neighbour and a close friend, to a proper understanding of the nature of the Indonesian polity and the nature of the Indonesian economy. And the President responded in a positive way, and as a result of that the working parties from both sides got together as described in The Australian newspaper this morning. I think it's a prime example of where a country such as Australia, good relations with Indonesia, exceptionally close relations with the United States is able to play a positive role in better explaining the situation of Indonesia to our friends the Americans.

JOURNALIST:

Will there be benefits to Australia?

PRIME MINISTER:

There's always benefits for Australia in being seen to be a country that has close links with a nation like Indonesia, and is able to use those links and that understanding to further the understanding of the Americans about that country. It is in our interests that the Americans remain involved in the region, it is in our interests that the Americans properly understand the dynamics of the Indonesian polity and the dynamics of the Indonesian economy, and Australia is uniquely placed because of our well respected credentials in Jakarta and of course very well respected credentials in Washington to do that.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, what does the government intend to do about claims of widespread corruption, drug smuggling and gun running in the Australian Navy?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I haven't got a report on that. The Minister is examining it and she will be responding on behalf of the government. Thank you.

[Ends]