



PRIME MINISTER

8 December 2002

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
INTERVIEW WITH ROB DUCKWORTH AND GREG HENRICKS
RADIO C91.3**

Subjects: terrorist threat; Max Moore Wilton; soccer World Cup; Prime Minister's visit; Ansett employees.

E&OE.....

JOURNALIST:

Our very special guest on the telephone line this morning the Prime Minister of Australia, Mr John Howard. Mr Howard, good morning.

PRIME MINISTER:

Good morning, Rob. Very nice to talk to you and your listeners and I'm looking forward to spending a day in your area with Pat Farmer - your very hard working Federal Member.

JOURNALIST:

Yeah. Welcome to Campbelltown and Macarthur region. We all love Pat Farmer around here. What's he like in Canberra? Does he leave his running shoes around in the House of Reps?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, he is... what you see is what you get with Pat. He's very hard working, he's very sincere. If somebody's got a complaint about something, he raises it. He's also a very good team player and he's something of a personality. He's one of those people that in a way transcends politics. He crosses the political divide, people from all walks of life like him because he's a genuine article.

JOURNALIST:

He certainly is and we love him around here too, but don't tell him we said that.

PRIME MINISTER:

No, no.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, it's been a tough year, hasn't it?

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh, it's been a tough year for Australia. Bali was a terrible event and it took a lot of, mainly, young lives and it's left a permanent imprint on Australia's psyche. Our spirit hasn't in any way hasn't been broken by it, but we're certainly a more hardened, wary, but nonetheless still very optimistic people.

JOURNALIST:

Yeah, it's going to take a little bit of the joy out of Christmas this year, I tend to think anyway.

PRIME MINISTER:

I guess all of us will think very much of the families of those who were killed. We'll also think of the loss of some of the careless abandon that Australians have been used to. On the other hand, Australians are very adaptable people and we'll adjust.

JOURNALIST:

Yep. Now, getting to today's news, Mr Prime Minister, the front page of the *Daily Telegraph* a rather disturbing headline - ready for war, in big letters, and under that - Australian troops gear up for March Iraq attack. How much truth is in that?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, we haven't taken any decision to be involved in military action against Iraq. I still remain hopeful, as does the leadership of the American Administration that the process of satisfactorily disarming Saddam Hussein will take place through the United Nations. We are still going through the process of analysing the document that was given to the Security Council by Iraq. We want to see what is in it and also work out what is not in it. We don't have the final word on that yet. Using military force has only ever been a last resort as far as Australia is concerned. I've indicated already that naturally the defence forces are involved in some contingency arrangements, they must do that in the event that they're called upon. But the true position is that at a political level, we have not taken any decision to be involved. And the occasion for taking that decision has not as yet arisen and I hope it doesn't arise. It might arise and then that is something that we will have to take account of and seek through in accordance with what is in Australia's interests. We have an interest in preventing countries like Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction for the simple reason that they might use them. And once people start using weapons like that, you don't know where it is going to end. Therefore, even though Iraq is a long way away from Australia, we have an interest in seeing that countries like Iraq are not allowed to use those sorts of weapons.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, it's Greg from the news room. Now, would you be comfortable going into this without UN approval?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, that is a hypothetical question and I'm not going to answer it. We are working through the UN and it doesn't really help the process of getting a successful outcome from the UN to be speculating as to what we might do if the UN process fails.

JOURNALIST:

And how closely in contact are you with the President and the Bush Administration? Have you had recent contact with them?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I had contact with Richard Armitage, who's the Deputy Secretary of State, he was in Australia only a few days ago. I had a lengthy discussion with him. I had a lengthy discussion with... he had a lengthy discussion with Mr Downer and Senator Hill. I saw President Bush only a few weeks ago and talked to him at the APEC meeting in Los Cabos in Mexico and I've been on the telephone to President Bush earlier as well on a couple of occasions. And of course, we had a lengthy meeting in Washington in June. So, I'm in quite regular contact with senior people in the Administration, but so are my senior ministers. Nobody wants military conflict out of this, but it is not something that we can just hope will go away. I do want to make it clear that if we were involved either here or indeed anywhere else in military conflict, distant from Australian shores, the contribution we would make would not in anyway weaken our capacity to deal with a problem on our own doorstep. I mean, our first responsibility is what happens on our own doorstep. In any decision that we take in relation to any military deployment elsewhere in the world would necessarily be relatively modest, given our obligations in relation to what happens on our doorstep.

JOURNALIST:

If we just turn for a moment to the departure of your most senior public servant, Max Moore, or no more, Wilton. There's raging speculation - using the cricketing parlance - that you may be ready to pull up stumps. Have you given him the heads up?

PRIME MINISTER:

Max's departure is not surprising. He indicated to me in general terms a little while ago that he would see himself returning to the private sector some time during the Government's third term in office. I always expected that that would occur. I recruited him to the position from the private sector. He had previously worked in the public service. He's done a terrific job. People shouldn't read into his departure any implications for anybody else's future.

JOURNALIST:

Yeah, he has done a fantastic job, it's just a pity he's going to a bank, that's all, Mr Prime Minister.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, let him indicate where he's going. I'll make no comment on that speculation.

JOURNALIST:

Okay, can I just ask one more question and then I'll go back to the news room and get ready for the nine o'clock report, PM. But the soccer World Cup - it looks like we might be there, it would be another top ticket for you because I know you love your sport, all over the Olympics or wherever we're playing. That's got to be a good thing for [inaudible].

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh, I think the news about Oceania going straight through is great. It's a bit of really good news for Australian soccer. It's one of the great paradoxes of Australian sport, soccer. It is so widely played. I think there are more Australians under the age of 15 who play soccer than any other football code, including Australian rules and either of the two rugby codes. So it has an extraordinary claim at a junior level on the affections of people. But if something goes wrong on the way to the grand final sort of thing, as far as the senior levels are concerned, the administration of soccer has been fairly...they've had a lot of movement, let me put it that way, and I hope some of that can settle down. We're having an inquiry conducted into soccer, the administration of soccer, which the Federal Government is funding. We want a good outcome for all of those hundreds of thousands of people around Australia who love the game. I played the game for five years when I was a younger person after I left school and although I'm a great follower of the two codes of rugby, I like soccer as well. And it's an extraordinary worldwide sport, as everyone knows, and I want to see Australia in the next World Cup. I think we all do and it would be a great thing for the future of the country if that were to happen. So I'm delighted regarding the news. It was something that was briefly discussed when the President of FIFA was in Australia a couple of months ago. I saw him and others and this issue did come up very briefly but I'm delighted for soccer that it's happened.

JOURNALIST:

Okay, well I'm off PM but before I go, we've got a memorabilia auction coming up down here. Can I [inaudible] an old pair of boots? That would win a few bob.

PRIME MINISTER:

I think I've given them all away. I keep getting asked for them.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Prime Minister, we have a lot of ex-Ansett workers from around the region. I just want to throw this question at you. Talking about problems on the doorstep - you had a couple the other day at Kirribilli House - we understand that the Ansett employees still haven't been looked after, as far as their entitlements are concerned. Does it surprise you that the process has taken so long?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, when you say they haven't been looked after - they have been looked after fully in relation to the guarantee that we gave. The guarantee I gave on behalf of the Government...when I returned from America after the 11th of September tragedy, when I saw

the Ansett workers the very day that Ansett collapsed I said we will guarantee your holiday pay, your unpaid holiday pay, long service leave, pay in lieu of notice and eight weeks redundancy, which is the community average. I said beyond that we can't guarantee your redundancy because it's beyond the community average. Now, that has been delivered. What hasn't been delivered are entitlements for redundancy and, perhaps, in relation to other things over and above our safety net. Now, that is the responsibility of the liquidator. When the liquidator gets permission from the court I understand he can do more but it is very much in the...the ball is in the court of the liquidator and I do have to very gently say that the liquidator was appointed at the behest of the ACTU. The liquidator is the union nominated liquidator. I'm not saying that makes him a bad person in any way but I'm just making the point that it's their man and I feel for these people and many of them I got to know quite well. We had a very friendly discussion. There was no acrimony in the discussion we had outside Kirribilli House. They even sang some Christmas carols for me.

JOURNALIST:

That's very nice.

PRIME MINISTER:

Very melodious. And it was fine, well, I mean, it's fine in terms of having a sensible discussion. It's not fine for them if they don't have their money and I hope they get the rest of their entitlements. But I do want to make it plain to your listeners that what we said we would do we have done in full.

JOURNALIST:

And to that end, you sent John Anderson into bat too, didn't you, the other day?

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh yes, yes, I do. And look, we said we would guarantee those entitlements and the men I saw the other day, when I said to them, you understand that we have delivered on our commitment they said, yes you have. They acknowledged that.

JOURNALIST:

All right, let's get on to Christmas holidays.

JOURNALIST:

Well, firstly, you're actually coming to Macarthur today, Mr Prime Minister. Are you looking forward to seeing the kids at Briar Road Public School?

PRIME MINISTER:

I am, I am. I'm looking forward to it. It's my last sort of political and public political engagement in a way for the year and I think it's very appropriate that I finish the year in Pat Farmer's electorate, an electorate that he's worked so hard to represent on the outskirts of Sydney ever since he came into Parliament more than a year ago.

JOURNALIST:

Well, Mr Prime Minister, we're going to thank you very much for your time today. We hope you have a lovely day in Campbelltown and the Macarthur region and, basically, on behalf of us here at the station and our listeners we wish you and the family a very merry Christmas and a happy New Year.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I want that to be the case for all of your listeners as well and I hope they have lots of time with their families and feel refreshed for the New Year.

JOURNALIST:

Thank you for your time.

PRIME MINISTER:

Okay.

JOURNALIST:

And we hope you have a little happier, more peaceful New Year, Prime Minister. Thank you for your time.

PRIME MINISTER:

Thank you. Bye bye.

[ends]