



PRIME MINISTER

13 August 2006

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
DOORSTOP INTERVIEW
MOSMAN MEDICAL PRACTICE, SYDNEY**

Subjects: Electronic Medicare claims; Middle East; Migration Legislation; Stem cell research.

E&OE.....

PRIME MINISTER:

Any questions about that or anything else?

JOURNALIST:

What sort of timeframe are you looking at the scheme for starting next year?

PRIME MINISTER:

Joe, you're the best one for that.

MINISTER HOCKEY:

Within 12 months.

JOURNALIST:

So this time next year or...

MINISTER HOCKEY:

This time next year but within 12 months. The good part about this is almost every doctors' surgery already has an EFTPOS device on it, so it's pretty simple to roll out.

We've just got to make sure all the encryption codes are right to protect privacy and make sure it flows directly through the system.

JOURNALIST:

And no job losses from Medicare offices?

MINISTER HOCKEY:

No job losses from Medicare offices.

JOURNALIST:

Can you explain with the access card, what's the difference between the access card and the...

MINISTER HOCKEY:

Well the access card covers both health and welfare and it deals a lot with concessional entitlements such as the Pension Card, the Health Care Card and so on. This is a Medicare card. It simply does a Medicare transaction. If you like, the access card is the next generation, the next step up.

JOURNALIST:

Do you expect any Medicare offices to be closed?

MINISTER HOCKEY:

No, because the Medicare offices are going to roll out a whole lot of family payments. The Howard Government has been extremely generous to families and we want to make, currently a lot of those people have to go in to Centrelink offices, and whilst we have 800 Centrelink offices, some of them are pretty hard to access for families. So the Medicare offices are actually in a lot of shopping centres, like for example, there's a Medicare office in Westfield at Chatswood, which you can go up to.

MINISTER ABBOTT:

Warringah Mall.

MINISTER HOCKEY:

Or Warringah Mall. But the fact is, the Medicare office isn't open on a Sunday or public holidays, but under this scheme Medicare offices are open 24 hours a day seven days a week.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, on the Middle East, there's been a deal to end the hostilities tomorrow. What's your reaction to that?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I welcome the passage of the resolution by 15 to nil by the Security Council. I think everybody wants to see the fighting and the killing stop. I don't think we should forget who started this latest conflict. It was started by Hezbollah, which effectively attacked Israel. But the important thing is whether what the United Nations has decided is going to work. It looks good on the surface, but I am myself a little discomfited by the lack of specificity in the language regarding the disarming of Hezbollah. Unless there is a clear determination and a clear authority to disarm Hezbollah, this is not going to work. So I have real and serious reservations about the effectiveness and the lasting character of this resolution. I hope I'm wrong, but if you actually look at the language of it, it's quite loose in relation to the disarming of Hezbollah and that is the long term problem. The other long term issue, of course, is the implementation of a two-state solution. Unless we have a Palestinian state side-by-side with a free Israel, whose right to exist is recognised by all the Arab world and all relevant countries, we're never going to have peace in the Middle East.

JOURNALIST:

Can you outline what Australian troops will be actually sent to help with the UN peacekeeping force? I understand you said the other day that if Australians had been asked to provide....

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes, we have made no decision to send Australian forces, and it should not be assumed we will. If we do send Australian forces or make a contribution it will be a very small or niche contribution. One of the things I am concerned about is the effectiveness of the United Nations resolution. I know everybody's voted for it, but I am uncomfortable about the lack of specificity in the language.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, do you know if any other world leaders feel the same way about the lack of specificity?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well you'd have to ask them. I'm speaking for myself. I've read the resolution and whilst I support it and I'm happy that there's going to be a cessation of hostilities, I'm not satisfied that the resolution makes it abundantly clear that one of the conditions of the International Stabilisation Force is that it will have the authority to disarm, or work with the Lebanese Army and the Lebanese Government in disarming Hezbollah. Because unless Hezbollah is disarmed, there is not going to be a settlement, a lasting settlement.

JOURNALIST:

...your response to Muslim leaders who have written to the Lebanese Government specifically asking that Australia not take part because they feel we're too closely aligned to Israel?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I think if any Australians have a view about this, they should express their view to the Australian Government.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, just to clarify, your concerns about the language and the deal, does that relate to whether we're going to send troops or not?

PRIME MINISTER:

It will be one of the elements, yes. I want to make it very clear that this Government has made no decision to commit Australian forces. If we were to make a decision to make a commitment, it would be a very small, niche commitment. We have other responsibilities. It's not that we are disinterested. We share the grief and the anguish of people on both sides of this debate, but in the end we make decisions in Australia's interests and people who feel strongly about this issue should look to the interests of Australia above the interests of anybody else.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, Steve Fielding said on the Sunday Program this morning that he'll oppose your migration laws. Judith Troeth has hinted very strongly that she will as well. That could mean your bill is scuttled. What's your reaction to that?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I saw what Senator Fielding said and he's made it very clear he will vote against it. Well I think we can all count. There are 39 Government Senators and there are 37 against. There will certainly be 37 votes against it, and that means that if one Government Senator crosses the floor, the bill will be defeated. All the Government can bear, if I can put it that way, is one Government Senator abstaining. That would bring it down to 38. Because if one crosses the floor, then we would lose it. I suppose if one abstained, then that would make it 38 to 37. If two abstain, that would make it 37-37 and it would fail because according to the rules of the Senate, an equality of votes resolves a proposition in the negative. So any Government Senator crossing the floor will kill it, and if two Government Senators were to abstain, that would kill it as well.

JOURNALIST:

And what would you say to Senator Troeth and Senator Joyce?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think these are matters that are dealt with inside the Party Room. I'm not somebody who yells at my colleagues if they happen to disagree. We talk these things through, there's nothing unusual about people occasionally having a different view from the majority. But it is a majority view, a strongly held majority view and I would naturally ask that that be taken into account. But we'll see what happens next week.

JOURNALIST:

Is it too late for any amendments that might...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I haven't had any propositions in relation to that of any consequence. You've got to remember we've already made a lot of amendments. We've changed many of the provisions of the bill in response to concerns that people have had. We made a whole raft of amendments before the winter break, so there does come a point where the passionately held majority view has to get a look in as well as the passionately held minority view.

JOURNALIST:

Would you be hoping that Judith Troeth abstains rather than crossing the floor?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well look, I don't want to add anything to what I've said. I think everybody understands the arithmetic. It's 39-37. There's certainly 37 against it, so if somebody crosses the floor it makes it 38-38. It's dead then. We could have one abstention and make it 38-37. If we had two abstentions it would be 37-37, so we'd lose it. That's the arithmetic.

JOURNALIST:

That's looking likely. What would your...

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh look, I'm not saying anything other than explaining what the contingencies are.

JOURNALIST:

If it fails Prime Minister...

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh look, I'm not going to hypothesise.

JOURNALIST:

...what will it mean for our relationship with Indonesia though?

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh I think our relationship with Indonesia will remain soundly based, no matter what happens. This is not something that is crucial to the relationship with Indonesia. I do want to make one thing clear, that whatever happens, this Government will maintain very strong border protection laws. What we're trying to do is to make them even stronger. The Labor Party is opposed to them being stronger and I just hope that the Labor Party is not given any aid or comfort in that aim by any of our own Senators.

JOURNALIST:

Steve Fielding says it's because you're trying to appease the Indonesians, that's what the whole thing is about.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well that's not correct.

JOURNALIST:

And Peter Beattie...

PRIME MINISTER:

Peter Beattie? Has he got a vote in the Senate?

JOURNALIST:

It seemed like you wanted to change the subject so I mean, Peter Beattie has lost an MP that could force him to go to an election...

PRIME MINISTER:

He's lost an MP? [inaudible] a big state Queensland, a great state though.

JOURNALIST:

She's going to resign, which could mean that the by-election...

PRIME MINISTER:

I hadn't heard that.

JOURNALIST:

What do you think his changes are of winning anyway?

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh look, leave me out of that for the moment. I'm not advised on that.

JOURNALIST:

Just on stem cell research, Professor Peter Schofield this morning was saying that he would like to see a conscience vote. Is that something that you would consider?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well what I will do on this issue is have, as I promised, a Party Room discussion about it. There are a range of views. The Cabinet has a disposition not to change the current law. There's actually, at the moment, nothing on which to have a conscience vote, there's no bill before the Parliament. So we have to sort of understand the processes involved in this. But let's have a discussion and let's hear the views of my colleagues. In the end, on things like that, I'll be influenced by what my Liberal and National Party Parliamentary colleagues say. I mean in the end they are the people who have the votes, they are the representatives. And we had a very lengthy debate about this, and there was a very strong view expressed about the matter and it resulted in the current legislation. So we have to think very carefully before we alter it. But I'm very happy to have a debate and we will have a debate on this some time in the very near future, perhaps this week. And we'll see what comes out of that debate.

But in the end, it's the Members of Parliament who decide these things. After all, it's their free vote and their consciences that are involved. It's very easy for somebody out there to tell somebody else in Parliament what his or her conscience should be. In the end we are all masters of our consciences and we all have a right to decide these things, and each person's view on something like this is as valid and worthy as another. And you're dealing with issues here that are not just clinical and technical and scientific. You're dealing with issues that involve a whole range of other considerations as well. And you're also dealing with an issue that is not easy.

I envy some people in this debate who have such unconditionally strong, clear views, never entertaining any doubts on either side. These issues are rarely as simple as that.

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