

Interview with Leigh Sales, ABC 7.30

LEIGH SALES:

With me now is the Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull. Welcome again.

PRIME MINISTER:

Great to be with you.

LEIGH SALES:

What is the actual problem you are trying to fix here?

PRIME MINISTER:

What we are doing is re-enforcing the citizenship which is at the foundation of our nation, ours the most successful multicultural society in the world.

LEIGH SALES:

If it's so successful, what's the problem?

PRIME MINISTER:

Leigh, we can never be complacent and we want to be more successful.

Let's be clear – we don't define ourselves, like many other countries do, by race or religion or ethnicity. We are defined by a commitment to a common set of political values. They are, as you had me saying on the introduction – freedom, equality of men and women, mutual respect, the rule of law, democracy, a fair go. That's our Australian values. And they are shared with many other democracies but they are in and of themselves unique. There is something uniquely Australian about them. We're proud of them. We're committed to them. We should celebrate them and we should put them at the core of becoming an Australian citizen.

LEIGH SALES:

In a speech at the start of February, you opened by mentioning all the new citizens on Australia Day, you praised multiculturalism and at no point did you mention a problem around Australian values or English language skills or anything like that. What's changed in the 10 weeks since then other than your growing need to shore up your political stocks?

PRIME MINISTER:

I'm disappointed you are so cynical but I'm used to it-

LEIGH SALES:

I can run you through the opinion polls if you'd like? You set them as a

benchmark yourself.

PRIME MINISTER:

You know something, what this is about, the vast majority of Australians are pleased to see that we are standing up for Australian values. They know that it's good – even Bill Shorten agreed with us – they know it's good for people applying to be an Australian citizen to be able to speak, and read and write English. They know that's a good thing.

And asking them or requiring them to be a permanent resident for four years instead of just one year, that means there is more time to integrate, to be part of the Australian community.

We're catching up with the rest of the world. In the United States, the period is five years. In Germany it's eight.

So we have had a fairly administrative approach to citizenship. What we are doing – John Howard took a very important step in 2007 – and what we are doing is building on John's work to re-enforce the values that are at the core, the democratic values-

LEIGH SALES:

Did you decide that these changes needed to be made in the past 10 weeks? Because, as I say, you had that opportunity there, you were discussing this 10 weeks ago and-

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, as you know, Australia is a parliamentary democracy and the Government's a Cabinet Government-

LEIGH SALES:

And so when did you decide?

PRIME MINISTER:

This matter has been discussed in the Cabinet for a considerable time.

LEIGH SALES:

How long is a considerable time?

PRIME MINISTER:

For months. Months. Very carefully considered, I can assure you.

LEIGH SALES:

One of Australia's most successful business leaders and greatest philanthropists is the founder of Westfield, Frank Lowy. When he came here as a refugee, he understood only a little English – I checked with his office

today. Today with that level of skill, he would be unlikely to qualify for citizenship. Is that the sort of Australian we are happy to miss out on, Frank Lowy?

PRIME MINISTER:

Again, that's not a fair comparison because what we are saying is that a person comes to Australia, they're a permanent resident for four years and they're expected, if they want to be a citizen, to have competent English.

LEIGH SALES:

Sorry, if I can just interrupt – but what if they are like Frank Lowy, they're working madly to get up a deli, running a business in Western Sydney, working all sorts of crazy hours – they might not have time to go to English language classes.

PRIME MINISTER:

It is in their interests to do so and they can maybe take longer before they make their application to be an Australian citizen. Remember, the starting point for applying to be an Australian citizen is being a permanent resident, so they're not prejudiced, but to take on that additional honour, that additional privilege of being an Australian citizen, it is perfectly fair and it is in their interest to have a competent level of English.

LEIGH SALES:

How will somebody demonstrate proof of integration, as you'll require?

PRIME MINISTER:

We have a discussion paper out about that at the moment. We are looking for views. I hope your viewers will pick it up off the immigration department's website.

LEIGH SALES:

I am looking for your views on that-

PRIME MINISTER:

Well my view-

LEIGH SALES:

As the Prime Minister.

PRIME MINISTER:

Let me explain, what people should demonstrate is that they are engaged and integrated with the Australian community so they would be able to say, well, they have children, the children are at school, they might be part of the P&C, they might have joined a club, they might have joined an association,

they might have joined a surf club, they might have joined a service club. In other words, demonstrating that they're involved in the broader Australian community. Again, that's a great incentive. That is what sociologists call bridging capital. It is encouraging people to reach out and become engaged.

LEIGH SALES:

Let me ask you to run through some examples – are Jews who celebrate Hanukkah integrated into Australian cultures and values?

PRIME MINISTER:

Of course they are. Of course they are.

LEIGH SALES:

Is a woman who wears a head scarf integrated?

PRIME MINISTER:

Leigh, what you are asking me to say is a woman who wears a head scarf is not integrated.

LEIGH SALES:

No, I am not asking you to say-

PRIME MINISTER:

Wearing a head scarf is a feature of a woman's life, wearing a particular garment-

LEIGH SALES:

I'm not asking you to say anything. But there would be, do you think most Australians would consider a requirement for a woman to wear a head scarf in public to represent Australian values?

PRIME MINISTER:

People are free to wear whatever item of clothing they like. Bear in mind, I say again and again, whenever I talk about Australian citizenship and Australian values, I say that the foundation of our success, our extraordinary success, is mutual respect. That means – it is a two-way thing – you respect others in their diversity and they respect you. It's also about respecting the equal rights of men and women. That is vitally important.

LEIGH SALES:

If you want to talk, say, about, as Barnaby Joyce did today about Judeo-Christian values underpinning Australian society, Christianity doesn't advocate equality for women. Wives submit to your husbands and so forth-

PRIME MINISTER:

Alright – well, I can tell you, the values of modern Australia – I hope you agree with this – certainly assert that men and women are equal. That is the law of our land. It's our value. It's in our DNA. And we say, and I say as Prime Minister of Australia, that part of our extraordinary nation, part of our values, is respect for women and children and the respect for the equal rights of women.

LEIGH SALES:

I want to ask about the values that are driving-

PRIME MINISTER:

I'm surprised you are challenging me this on the ABC but there it is!

LEIGH SALES:

I want to-

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't think your heart's in it, actually, Leigh. I think you agree with me.

LEIGH SALES:

I want to look at your personal values that are driving your choice of policy.

PRIME MINISTER:

Sure. Yep.

LEIGH SALES:

Before you became Prime Minister, your image was that your values put you in the small 'L' liberal tradition of Alfred Deakin and Malcolm Fraser. Can you today name one policy position that you hold that aligns with that tradition rather than the conservative wing of your party?

PRIME MINISTER:

My values are the same as they have always been. When I was-

LEIGH SALES:

Can you address the question which is policy?

PRIME MINISTER:

My policies, all of them, are about giving people greater freedom, greater opportunities to develop and grow-

LEIGH SALES:

Are any of those at odds with the conservative wing of your party? Because they used to be, for example, on climate change.

PRIME MINISTER:

Leigh, I have just been in Tasmania announcing work to begin on doubling the generation capacity of Hydro Tasmania, which is the largest provider of clean, green hydroelectric capacity in Australia, bigger than Snowy Hydro.

We are going to work on increasing the capacity of that hydro system to provide the storage, the large scale storage, 2,500 megawatts of storage. You know what that does? That makes renewables reliable.

You talk about energy. That is ensuring that we are able to have the storage and the back-up to support the intermittent renewables like wind and solar. So I am actually getting things done.

My energy policy is not governed, as perhaps you might like it to be, by ideology. I'm not interested in left or right. I'm interested in lowering the pressures on Australian families by ensuring that energy is affordable and reliable and, of course, we meet our emissions reduction targets.

LEIGH SALES:

The Federal Budget is in a few weeks. In a sentence can you tell viewers what its defining theme will be?

PRIME MINISTER:

What we will be doing is ensuring that we continue to support strong economic growth. Without that, we can't remain a first world economy with high wages and a generous social welfare safety net. We will be ensuring that those vital services on which we all depend and that provide us with security are afforded and paid for. We will be bringing the Budget back into balance.

LEIGH SALES:

Will Scott Morrison retain the Treasury portfolio in your next reshuffle?

PRIME MINISTER:

Of course he will.

Look, Scott is doing an outstanding job. You know, it is such a disappointment, I have to say, that you are focused on the politics when we should be talking-

LEIGH SALES:

You are in the business of politics I'm afraid, Prime Minister.

PRIME MINISTER:

I know I am in the business of politics, but can I say to you – your viewers

they are interested in energy. They want to know about how we are reducing the cost of energy-

LEIGH SALES:

They are interested in policy and politics and we were talking about policy, now we are going to talk about politics. Is it fair to say it is open warfare between you and Tony Abbott?

PRIME MINISTER:

Totally unfair. It is a ridiculous thing to say.

LEIGH SALES:

Well, there has been a leak today showing that polling in his seat was going really badly for him until you shored it up. He has been keeping up a running commentary of the performance of the government. How is that not open warfare?

PRIME MINISTER:

My job as Prime Minister is to deliver on my commitments to the Australian people. I'm not interested in personalities or politics of that kind.

LEIGH SALES:

Is it fair to say we will only see the end of the Turnbull/Abbott warfare in the same way that we saw the end of the Rudd/Gillard warfare which is when your government and all of the key players lose an election and are banished?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well Leigh, I'm focused on delivering for the Australian people. We just won an election last year, less than a year ago. We won the election. And look what we have done – you and many other wise people in the media said we wouldn't get anything through the Senate. Poor old Malcolm, you said, he's hardly got any seats in the Senate. Only a one seat majority in the House.

We have got through tax cuts and for more than half of the employees – the employers of more than half of Australian workers.

We have secured the restoration of the rule of law to the building and construction sector. That was said to be impossible.

We have delivered on our VET fee reforms.

We have delivered on our child care reforms.

We have delivered on all of those things and many more which most said were impossible.

So I'm governing. I'm delivering. That's what I'm doing.

LEIGH SALES:

Before we run out of time, the US Vice President Mike Pence will be here in the next few days for a visit. The latest fake news from the Trump team was the USS Carl Vinson was powering towards the Korean Peninsula when it was not. How can the Australian Government put any faith in anything that officials from the Trump Administration say?

PRIME MINISTER:

I look forward to meeting the Vice President. I want to say It is very noteworthy that this is a very early visit – I believe the earliest visit by a Vice President to Australia in a new administration. It shows – many people, including wise people in the media were sceptical of the Trump Administration's commitment to the region-

LEIGH SALES:

Sceptical of their reliability of their statements-

PRIME MINISTER:

The region, the commitment is very real. And of course, the focus this week is on North Korea and I'd say what I've said before is that the eyes of the world are now on Beijing.

LEIGH SALES:

Do you trust him?

PRIME MINISTER:

They have the leverage and the influence to stop this reckless and dangerous conduct by the North Korean regime.

LEIGH SALES:

Do you trust the judgement of Donald Trump and Mike Pence?

PRIME MINISTER:

I do, I trust the judgement, the wisdom of the American Government, the President, the Vice President. I say to you, it is, the United States Government will see changes of leader, of course, as indeed do all governments but the central national interest of the United States remains the same. Our Alliance with the United States is vital. The commitment is so deep on both sides, it will survive many prime ministers and many presidents. That commitment is rock solid just as is America's commitment to security and stability in our region.

LEIGH SALES:

Prime Minister, thank you, we'll see you around Budget time, no doubt.

PRIME MINISTER:

Thanks so much.

[ENDS]