

Interview

21 April 2009

Doorstop Interview City of Cockburn, Western Australia

Subject(s): *Jobs, Global Recession, Extradition of Hadi Ahmadi, People Smuggling, Richard Pratt, 2020 Summit*

PM: Thanks, I'll say a few things and then happy to take your questions. Firstly on the economy and employment and what we are doing here locally and then secondly on a further development in relation to people smuggling.

On the, it's good to be here in the City of Cockburn with our local member Melissa Parke and to be discussing with this local community how we can make a difference with the impact of the global recession on jobs in this part of Australia.

And the purpose of our gathering today in this local jobs forum, here at the City of Cockburn, is to work out practical ways in which we can make a difference.

The truth is this. The global economic recession makes it inevitable that we'll have a recession in Australia which means that as we frame the budget we're going to have to make even stronger our economic stimulus strategy because unemployment will rise even further.

Therefore, the whole point of that is to cushion this community and communities like it from the full impact of the recession.

We've been speaking today in this gathering about the global strategy which the Government has been engaged in through the G20, to support stability in global financial markets and support local economic stimulus.

We've spoken also about what we're doing nationally through our support for stability in Australian financial markets, the bank guarantee and short, medium and long term economic stimulus including our investment in infrastructure to generate jobs.

But we've also been here today talking about local initiatives and how we partner with communities such as this to make a difference. And our appointment today of a priority employment coordinator in this part of Perth to work together with the local jobs fund to make a difference with local government, local church and charitable and community organisations, local small businesses, local unions, in order to again provide additional jobs and training opportunities here at the local level.

As Prime Minister of Australia I can't wish this global economic recession away. As Prime Minister of Australia what I can do is work with local communities through our local members, through our priority employment coordinators, to make a difference to reduce the problem, to reduce the impact, to cushion local communities from the full force of the global economic gale.

The second point I'd like to touch on concerns people smuggling. Last night, President Yudhoyono approved the extradition to Australia of alleged people smuggler Hadi Ahmadi.

This is a major and very welcome development in the fight against people smuggling.

This extradition comes soon after the third prosecution this year of a people smuggler in Perth here on Friday afternoon.

Mr Ahmadi, believed to be a dual Iraqi and Iranian national, is wanted in Australia to face prosecution for a range of extremely serious people smuggling crimes.

Mr Ahmadi is accused of organising four boat arrivals into Australia from Indonesia on 25 March 2001, 22nd of April 2001, 4 August 2001 and 22 August 2001, collectively carrying over 900 unlawful non-citizens to Australia.

Mr Ahmadi was arrested by Indonesian authorities on 29 June 2008 at Australia's request, and has since remained in police detention.

Australia's formal extradition request was presented to Indonesia on 29 July 2008.

Mr Ahmadi's extradition proceedings were heard in the South Jakarta District

Court - the Court found that Ahmadi was eligible for extradition to Australia.

The matter then turned to President Yudhoyono to consider whether to extradite Ahmadi to Australia.

President Yudhoyono's decision last night clears the way for Ahmadi's extradition to Australia.

This action further demonstrates the absolute importance of the closest possible cooperation between the Australian and the Indonesian Governments in dealing with the scourge of people smuggling.

Also, effectively prosecuting people smugglers is the most effective way of dealing with the problem of illegal movements of persons around South East Asia and more broadly.

Finally, our approach simply is this – tough border protection regime and reinforced also by the professionalism of our police services, our border protection personnel, and our naval and military staff as well.

This is the best and most effective strategy for dealing with the challenges of the future.

Working closely with our regional partners and friends, working effectively to provide proper resourcing and support for our naval assets, our military assets, our police assets and our surveillance assets, and getting on with the business of dealing with this global push of unlawful movements of people from around the world.

Can I say this as I conclude. This approach on the Australian Government's part stands in absolute contrast with the shambles on border protection policy we see from Mr Turnbull and the Liberals.

Mr Turnbull and the Liberals policy on border protection could be summed up, I believe in three words, chaos, confusion, and opportunism.

Chaos, confusion and opportunism. That's what we see from dawn till night with every statement by the Liberal Party on border protection policy.

It's driven by political opportunism. The Government's getting on with the

business of making sure that our border protection forces are properly resourced, properly supported and properly engaged with their partners around the region to do their job, which is to maintain this country's border protection, and to do so in a manner consistent with our international legal obligations.

Over to you folks.

JOURNALIST: (inaudible)

PM: The policy of the Australian Government has been consistent on this and that is consistent with that policy, our naval assets will continue to interdict vessels as appropriate on the high seas.

We've done that in the past, we continue to do that and we continue to deploy all of our military, naval and other surveillance assets in pursuit of that mission and to do so consistent with our international obligations. Nothing has changed on that front.

What we are dealing with are new global factors at work which are pushing a greater number of people out of the Middle East, out of South Asia, out of Sri Lanka, out of Burma, and governments right across the region are having to deal with these additional new push factors.

Our challenge is to make sure that our military, naval and air assets continue to reinforce a strong approach to border protection, a hard line approach to border security and to do so consistent with our international obligations.

JOURNALIST: (Inaudible) Prime Minister (inaudible). Banks are starting to raise their fixed interest rates. Is that an appropriate action given the current economic climate?

PM: I saw some reports of this morning. What I'd say to all Australian consumers is that they should vote with their feet. If they are finding their banks are unacceptably raising interest rates for fixed term deposit - for fixed term loans or fixed interest rate loans, then customers will make up their minds as to what's the best deal for them.

I say again what the Australian Government has done through the provision of bank guarantees is to make it possible for our banks to effectively operate

in a very difficult set of global economic circumstances, given the contractions occurring in global financial markets.

Banks therefore have a social and community obligation with the Australian community. But for individual consumers I'd say, if the rate's been jacked up for the future, as I'm advised that it is in the case of a couple of banks, than individual customers should vote with their feet if those arrangements are unacceptable to their family budgeting arrangements.

JOURNALIST: Why are you now saying it's inevitable we'll go into recession given you previously refused to pre-empt official economic forecasts?

PM: Well it's quite plain that we have seen most recently economic data from China, it's quite plain that we have also seen the fact that during the first quarter of 2009, a range of data emerge from various economies around the world which have a direct influence on Australia, that most of that data has been negative. That's the first point.

The second is, the International Monetary Fund is obviously currently analysing and will report again I think later this week on the state of the global economy. Australia is not an island. Australia is directly impacted by global economic factors and the first quarter of 2009. Most of those economic data coming out of those economies which directly affect Australia were negative.

Therefore, as night follows day, it affects Australia. Therefore the global economic recession is making it inevitable that there will be a recession in Australia, and the challenge for framing the Budget is to do as much as possible through continued economic stimulus to cushion Australia from the effect of rising unemployment coming off the back of this global recession.

JOURNALIST: What form will that further economic stimulus take in the Budget and are we likely to see another stimulus package?

PM: We have maintained a consistent strategy of economic stimulus right back to the events of the fourth quarter of 2008. And we have, as consistent by my remarks in the City of Cockburn local jobs forum today, outlined and implemented strategies to support one and a half million jobs in the retail sector through what we have done through payments to pensioners, veterans and carers and others.

Secondly, invest in the biggest school modernisation program in the country's history. In Western Australia, injecting some \$2.6 billion worth of additional investment and infrastructure.

And thirdly, getting on with the business of long term infrastructure, rolling out a National Broadband Network.

What I'm saying today is that because the global economic recession means that a recession is inevitable in Australia, unemployment will therefore rise further and, as a result, continued strong economic stimulus will be necessary through the Budget.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, are you talking more about the chances of Australia falling into recession to detract from the asylum seeker issue?

PM: The International Monetary Fund will be reporting in a few days' time about the state of the global economy, and the state of various economies within it.

Furthermore, if you look at the recent conclusion, obviously of the first quarter of 2009 following on from the negative quarter which was the fourth quarter of 2008, if you have two quarters in succession of negative growth, technically therefore you are moving into recession. That's the technical definition.

If you look at the data that's emerged from all those economies which directly affect Australia, it follows inevitably that this huge impact of global economic forces on Australia is going to have an effect.

And if you look most recently at the China data, while it wasn't falling through the floor and there was some turning or at least arresting of the collapse, the impact on Australia of China's economic performance - given it is our single largest trading partner - is clear.

I believe dealing with forums like this around the country, it's very important to be upfront and direct about the emerging problem of the global recession, its impact on unemployment at the national level and the local level. I'd much rather have a continuing conversation with local communities about that, rather than pretending that things are better than they are.

JOURNALIST: Can I get a quick comment about Richard Pratt, reports that he is gravely ill. How do you see to date his contribution to Australia?

PM: I've seen those reports. I'd rather not comment on that further, until I've had the opportunity to confirm personally with his family his circumstances.

The thing about Mr Pratt is that he and his wife Jeannie have been significant philanthropists over a long period of time. And that's been particularly reflected in the state of Victoria but beyond that as well.

But in terms of Mr Pratt's health, I would not comment on that further until I've had the opportunity to confirm it.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, are you set to release your response to the 2020 findings any time soon?

PM: Yeah, we think it's appropriate to get that up and out there. And the reason is, that it's about a year since we gathered Australians from right across the nation to plan our future, and to do so in a way which we've sought to do here again reflecting the spirit of 2020, with this community in the City of Cockburn today.

What we did a year ago was say, here's the next decade plus, here are 10 big challenges the nation faces, and what therefore are our strategies for making sure that Australia realises its full potential.

What we said is that we would then deliver the outcome from the 2020 Summit by year's end last year. What interrupted that of course was the impact of the global financial and economic crisis.

And as a result therefore, there's been a delay of some three months in concluding that report. But we'll be releasing it very soon. And I say this in conclusion.

Our challenge is dealing with the impact of the recession in the here and now. Also, maintaining fairness in Australia to make sure that we're looking after those who are least able to look after themselves. And thirdly, to make sure we're also laying out a strategy for the long term future as well.

The big challenges on education, the education revolution, on health and hospitals, as well as the future of clean green energy - these remain with us. And they need to be addressed, embraced and planned for and acted on as well.

Our strategy as a government is to move ahead on all these three fronts. It's a necessary course of action for the future.

And I believe I've got to zip because I've got to catch a plane to Esperance.

See you folks.

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