



The Hon. Scott Morrison MP
Prime Minister

TRANSCRIPT
INTERVIEW WITH LEIGH SALES, 7.30
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EO&E...

LEIGH SALES: Prime Minister, thank you for your time.

PRIME MINISTER: Thanks, Leigh.

SALES: I want to start by stepping back and giving viewers total clarity on what the Government's overall strategy is. It's still accurate, isn't it, that Australia's goal is flattening the curve, not total elimination and not herd immunity, which are the two ends of the spectrum.

PRIME MINISTER: That's exactly right. It's called the suppression strategy. That was the advice from the medical expert panel again today and I think that summarises it well. And what you need to do is all of those things, but you need to have in place an economic support package which enables you to do that and keep people with income and so you'll be able to work through that suppression strategy and ultimately be able to bring the economy up more strongly to be in a position where you can both suppress the virus and at the same time have enough activity in the economy that supports people's incomes.

SALES: So I'll come to the economy later, I just want to stick with health for the first part of the interview. So does this strategy mean that Australia is prepared to live with a certain number of cases and deaths as long as it doesn't overwhelm the health system?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, what we've seen in Australia is we're pursuing a suppression strategy. But per head of population, we've actually got a lower number of cases than New Zealand that is pursuing the other strategy. See, the other strategy requires very extreme economic measures, but we're actually getting a better result with more flexible measures. And so it is quite possible, Leigh, that by pursuing the suppression strategy, you actually get eradication as a by-product and the Chief Medical Officer said that today. So one doesn't necessarily exclude the other. It's more about the level of economic restrictions that you're prepared to put in place, which also come at a great cost both to lives and livelihoods.

SALES: I guess what I'm trying to get to is are authorities working on the basis of a number of cases every week that Australia could reasonably tolerate and if so what is that number?

PRIME MINISTER: No, we're not. What we're working on, and we talked about this today, and this is the effective rate of transmission, and if that is below a score of one, then that means that basically we have

the transmission of the virus in Australia under effective control. And that's where we currently are right now. We've been there and in each state, except for Tasmania, for over a week and what's important over the next few weeks is we keep it in that level and that we build up three things. First of all, we need to have an even broader testing program, a surveillance testing network, which means we can get on top and identify any outbreaks early. Secondly, we need to be able to have an industrial level-type tracing capability of cases. Now, the manual arrangements that have been put in place by the states have been magnificent. But to ensure that we can lift our level of activity, we need an even better system of tracing. And thirdly, we need the capacity to respond to outbreaks where they occur very effectively and we're seeing a form of that in north west Tasmania right now. So if we can get those three things in place at a stronger level over the next four weeks, then we believe we'd be in a position to reduce the baseline level of restrictions that we currently have.

SALES: On those three things, with the testing, when will that be broadened and what would broadened testing look like?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, it wouldn't be just where the issues are symptomatic or people are at high risk, this would be more broader, a random type surveillance testing because you need to know where it might break out at any point in time. Now, that is another level beyond where we are now. Now, right now, we have one of the best testing regimes in the world and have had for many weeks. And the level of accuracy we're getting on how many cases we have of what we believe is out there is also one of the highest in the world. But to ensure that...

SALES: But is what you're talking about, would I be getting say, when you say sort of random testing, would I get a phone call to say your neighbourhood has an outbreak so you need to come in for a test? Like how would it work?

PRIME MINISTER: Quite possibly, even without that type of situation arising, because of what's called sentinel testing. It's actually out there trying to see where the virus has moved where you may not even have an indication that there is a particular risk because it's basically trying to work out where outbreaks may occur. And that's how you stay on top of it.

SALES: And then how about an antibody test where we're able to mass test the population and discover who has already had coronavirus?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, those sorts of tests, my advice is, are still not at a level of accuracy that you could put a lot of store in them. That's my understanding. What's important is the tests we have been using and we've also been working with the Doherty Institute here in Australia to ensure that we can have better domestically based testing arrangements. So the sort of testing we're talking about at the moment is the sort of testing that people have been seeing and we've been able to access greater supplies of that testing equipment. And that's what's also necessary to go to this next phase. So testing, tracing and response, they are the three critical weapons we need to combat the virus and at the same time be able to lift your level of economic activity.

SALES: And then on the second one, tracing, we've been hearing a little bit this week about this tracing app that Australians might be asked to download. When will that be ready to go?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, it's not ready yet. I would like to see it ready in the next fortnight. I indicated that the other day. The technical side of it has been going well and we've been effectively using the code of the technology that was used in Singapore, based on a meeting I had with Prime Minister Lee a few weeks ago and we appreciate their support in that. But there are a lot of issues that we still have to resolve for

its use in Australia and the privacy issues are paramount amongst that. The Attorney-General is spending a lot of time on that at the moment, but the purpose of this tracing app is pretty straightforward. Right now, if you were to be diagnosed with contracting the coronavirus, Leigh, the authorities would get in touch with you and they would identify the critical time when you might have been in a position where you might have infected others and they would want to know every name and every phone number and then they'll ring them all up. That's what happens right now.

What you can do with technology, with a permission-based app, is that where two of the phones that have downloaded the app are in contact with each other for a period of 15 minutes or more, then those numbers can go into a secure encrypted location, not in the phones, not available to either of those users, that can be unlocked where someone has been identified as having contracted the virus and that's been identified by a medical professional. And then in that case, the medical authorities have the numbers and they can get in contact and that can be done very quickly. Now, this is a bit like war bonds, Leigh. In the war, people bought war bonds to get in behind the national effort. What we're doing in fighting this fight is we'll be asking people to download an app which helps us trace the virus quickly and the more people who do that, the more we can get back to a more liveable set of arrangements.

SALES: So say we get the testing, the tracing and the local response capability up in the next four weeks, and that's going well and the numbers are going well, what are the first of the restrictions that would be eased in four weeks' time?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, already we're going to want to move and are on things like construction and manufacturing and those types of activity, and today we talked at National Cabinet in particular about things like infrastructure and how we can get some of those works moving. But once you go to the next phase, I mean, in the retail area, there will be opportunities there. I think what you'll see is more people being able to work at work, that might be on a roster type basis. I mean, some of that is happening now already. But what we are looking to do, and schools also come into that ultimately, and what we're looking to do is get the pace, get the churn, the activity in the economy moving back up. Because when that happens, then people's jobs come back into play. Their incomes come back more strongly. And their reliance on the welfare system and the JobKeeper program will diminish over time. The way out of this is to get on top of the virus and to get people back into work and in their incomes. When we do that, we're winning.

SALES: If we can turn to schools that you mentioned, their operation is a decision for states. The health advice is that children aren't at risk. Teachers are at risk, like any worker in any workplace that forces you to mix with other people. Is there any reason that schools shouldn't reopen sooner rather than later, with teachers adopting protective measures?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, that's the advice from the medical expert panel. The issue that I think is confusing, though, is that the health advice is that the children are safe, that the risk for children at school is very low. But for teachers, it's different. For adults, the risk is different. Now, where are the adults at risk? The adults are at risk when they're with each other. So teachers are at more risk in the staffroom than they are in the classroom. The other place where they're at risk is during school drop off and pick up, where there might be groupings of parents. That needs to be better arranged to ensure that teachers aren't at risk there. There's also a range of issues about hygiene in schools and clean down of play equipment and the application of sanitizer and all those things that need to be in place, like there is in many other work environments right now. There also needs to be the arrangements to if there is a case in a school about how those procedures are handled. They're all very fair and reasonable things that are necessary when you're dealing in a COVID environment and they can all be achieved. Now, Victoria's already gone back, they've set their arrangements for now and that's fair enough. If you live in Victoria, listen to the Victorian

Premier. If you live in New South Wales, listen to the New South Wales Premier. They'll have slightly different arrangements, but they're all working to the same goal in that, ultimately, we want to get children back to school, learning in a classroom in front of a teacher, because that's the best place for a child to get their education.

SALES: Teachers are currently being asked to do two jobs, which is to run online classes but also to be available to work in the schools for kids who still attend. Is that workload really fair or sustainable for them?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, it's challenging, I don't doubt that at all. But there are some teachers who shouldn't be at school, particularly teachers who might be in older age groups, who might have other health conditions and things like that, and where the school leadership and the school system is able to better deploy their skills in online environments and things like that. They're issues that practically have to be worked through in the school system. But the ability for, I know in some states, they're considering actually having the classrooms where students would be there getting face to face learning and that being streamed to students who can't do that for other reasons. So, look, there are many options here and Australians are incredibly innovative and no less so than in our teaching profession. I know how passionate our teachers are about teaching. I know for so many teachers, they'll be... I mean, they love teaching kids and they'll be, you know, they'll be finding it hard to be away from them.

SALES: And quickly, before we move on from this, will your daughters go back to school when schools open in New South Wales?

PRIME MINISTER: When I can send my kids to school and they get taught in a classroom, face to face, that's what I want my kids to do. At present, that's not available to me. And right now, it's school holidays, so they're with me right now. But this is where we want them to be. If, you know, when the school that they attend is providing those face to face lessons, Leigh, those classroom lessons then I can assure you, that's where I want my kids. And the sooner the better, from my point of view.

SALES: If we can switch now more to look at the economy, I want to show people some of the latest graphs from the Federal Health Department. The first of these graphs shows the number of cases by age group in Australia, and you can see that it's pretty evenly spread across ages. Most cases are people in their 20s. But when you look at deaths, the deaths are heavily in the 70s and 80s age brackets, with zero deaths in Australia under 50. Is it fair to say that the people who are bearing the hardest burden of the economic shutdown are not the people who are at the most serious health risk?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, I think that is a reasonable assumption to make, but I don't think they would consider the death of any Australian would be an unreasonable burden to carry for the sake of another one of their fellow Australians.

SALES: Are authorities worried, though, that when you look at graphs like that, that if the hard lockdowns last too long, Australians under 50 could start rebelling and pushing back against the destruction of their jobs and livelihoods?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, sure, it is a social contract. I don't deny that for a second, I think there's a social license here with governments about how these arrangements are put in place. And I can assure you no one wants these restrictions in any longer than they have to be. It's one of the reasons why we don't go for that complete eradication strategy. a) I mean, it's very elusive. And the costs to those livelihoods, as you are saying a very significant with no real clear additional benefit at least from what the evidence we're getting at the moment. So, yeah, I think it is getting that balance right Leigh.

One of the things that we have consistently said as a National Cabinet and I've particularly said as Prime Minister and our government has said, and that is we've got to fight this war on two fronts. You can win the health war and lose the economic war. And, but you've got to, you've got to deal with both of them at the same time. And that's what we're doing. We will move these restrictions when we can get the health protections in place, because this is what happens if you don't, if we don't get those three things in place - because I've heard this theory, just go and let it go now. And if you know, if it gets worse, we'll do it all again. We'll tell you what happens then. The outbreak gets so severe, and if you want to know what it looks like, go and look at New York, go and look at London, go and look at Spain. All of those places, that could be Australia. We should not kid ourselves that the success we've had at the moment protects us from ending up where they are right now. If you don't keep it under control, it will get away from you quickly and then you'll have to lock down even harder. And the economic costs will be even worse.

SALES: Do you accept that there's been some inconsistency in the restrictions that people find annoying? For example, why can't I sit in a park by myself and read a book but I can go on a bus with other people.

PRIME MINISTER: Oh look, on the practical level, on the ground and the way the states are implementing these issues, Leigh, of course it's difficult. I mean, we are in unprecedented, uncharted times. And look, I think people have been very understanding of these issues and I think everyone's working to try and get these issues as consistent as they can. And that's why when we get that cooperation, when we can get cooperation, say, on this tracing app when it comes out, then I think a lot of these issues will move away because we've got the tools in place to be able to track these things down very quickly and respond. So there is a, there is a give and take here. There's a bit of a contract here. These tools are there to help every Australian to have a more- less restrictive environment, a stronger economy and helping save lives.

SALES: I received an email this afternoon from a primary school principal in New South Wales and she said, 'I don't understand why I'm unable to see my grandson and yet I can see other people's grandchildren on a daily basis because I lead a school of 300 children?'

PRIME MINISTER: Well, I made the point before that people who are in those more sensitive cohorts, those who are more vulnerable than there are- there is advice which is suggesting that those individuals should be constrained from their access to others and that they are actually more at risk in that environment actually from the other teachers, as I said before. But the protection of those who are elderly and why they've been kept isolated is for their protection. But equally, if they're in a workplace that might have some vulnerabilities. Well, the same point would apply.

SALES: On that point, Prime Minister, there are some business leaders who would like to see a return to a sort of normal existence for everyone under 60 and lockdown measures restricted to older Australians and younger people with serious health issues. Would something like that ever happen?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, I've found during the course of this Leigh that I get lots of health advice from business people and lots of business advice from doctors. What I tend to do is focus on the health advice from those who are expert there. And on the business advice, I've been listening very carefully to both the economists and business leaders and others to getting our plans right. The COVID Commission, which is led by Nev Power, they're doing great work. David Thodey's on there and Jane Halton and a range of others. And Cath Tanner. They're doing tremendous work on the industry side of this to support how we get the private-private cooperation, the industry-government cooperation, and also thinking about what's ahead as well, about how we can grow our economy again on the other side of this to get the jobs back. Because while we've talked about a lot of these issues tonight, Leigh, I'm sure you'd agree, we want your viewers to know that on the other side, we get out of this and we return to a life that we are missing at

the moment. But we will get again. But we're going to have to work hard for it in these months ahead and on the other side we're going to need policies that ensure our economy can grow quickly again and we can get back to that, those living standards that we're currently missing.

SALES: On jobs, just on Virgin Australia, 15,000 Australian jobs are on the line. What they're asking for from Government is a loan, not a handout. Is that something that can be delivered?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, we, of course, want to see two viable commercial airlines in Australia, and I'm concerned about all those jobs, I mean, JobKeeper is there to protect 6 million jobs. So the government has been very clear about our support for jobs. What we've been very careful here to do, is a couple of things. We are not going to get in the way of a market commercial solution to that issue in Virgin. And there are many things going on there. Secondly, we're going to make sure that anything we do in this space, like has been in other countries, that we would do it on a sector-wide basis. And so we've got some clear principles here.

But what's very important is that we don't get in the way of a commercial solution, like the TWU super fund, I mean, the industry super funds in this country have got \$3 trillion dollars worth of assets here we've got a company that needs capital. Its own workers have been paying in to industry funds and there are funds out there, in these super funds that could be investing in a number of companies. Now, I appreciate that comes in a different risk premium, but this is their own contributors that are involved here. And I'd like to see the industry and broader superannuation fund playing a more active role in dealing with the economic issues that we're dealing with at the moment. I mean, the government, the taxpayer is not the only economic actor in this event. There are many others. The banks are doing a great job, I've got to give them that credit. They are cushioning the blow. They are balancing things out in a lot of areas and they've stepped forward. And I know that banks have copped a lot of flak, including from me in the past. But during this crisis, I've got to thank them for the work that they're doing.

SALES: Prime Minister, thank you for your time.

PRIME MINISTER: Thanks a lot, Leigh. Good to be with you.

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