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Transcript from this morning's doorstep



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The Hon. Scott Morrison MP
 Prime Minister

**TRANSCRIPT
 DOORSTOP INTERVIEW
 AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT HOUSE, ACT
 TUESDAY 16 FEBRUARY 2021**

Eo&e...

PRIME MINISTER: I'm sure you'd all agree that what we witnessed from Caitlin was incredibly overwhelming and as a government we'll continue to do everything we can to further the cause of the fight against Ovarian Cancer. I wanted to make a few brief remarks and happy to take questions on the events of the last 24 hours.

I said yesterday in the Parliament that we had to listen to Brittany. I have listened to Brittany. Jenny and I spoke last night, and she said to me, "You have to think about this as a father first. What would you want to happen if it were our girls?" Jenny has a way of clarifying things, always has. And so, as I've reflected on that overnight, and listened to Brittany, and what she had to say, there are a couple of things here that need to be addressed.

The first of those is it shatters me that still, in this day and age, that a young woman can find herself in the vulnerable situation that she was in. Not her doing. And we have to do more, whether it's in this workplace, or in any other workplace in the country, to ensure that people can work safely in their place and be at their best and do what they went into that job to do. Brittany talked about it being her dream job. We are all privileged, whether it's members of Parliament, the people who work in our offices and indeed those who work in the gallery and do what we get to do in this place. It is a privilege, and we should be able to go about that important work safely. There should not be an environment where a young woman can find herself in such a vulnerable situation. That is not OK.

The second - and I'll address the actions after I've made these comments - the second is, and I must say despite what were the genuine

good intentions of all those who did try to provide support to Brittany, that clearly, by what she said last night, at the end of the day, she did not feel that way. And that is not OK. Then there is the issue of the matter of the investigation and the police matter that needs to be attended to, and that has always been the view of those who have had knowledge of these matters, that that matter should proceed to that level, and it should, and of course, the police would get every cooperation and should get every cooperation. But there are issues that Brittany raised about why that may not have been progressed. Of course, we want to respect the agency, particularly of women, in these situations, to make their own choices about how to proceed. But all options must be there for them, and they must feel they're there for them. That is incredibly important.

So there are a number of things we can do immediately, and I'll be speaking about this in our party room today. The first of those is we must continue to address the environment of this place. Now, I believe, over the last few years, since this occurred, there have been changes and there have been improvements, but I'm not naive enough to think, and I don't think you or anyone else in this place is naive enough to think, that that is not a position of vulnerability that can still occur. Whether it's here, or, frankly, in so many other workplaces around this country. So I hope Brittany's call is a wake-up call for all of us from that point of view. I've asked Celia Hammond, the Member for Curtin, previous Vice-Chancellor of Notre Dame, who has had experience of dealing with these issues in institutional settings and offered herself to assist me with this overnight, to lead a process, working with our chief whips and our whips to work with colleagues, ministers, members, in the Government, in the Coalition parties, to identify ways that standards and expectations and practices can be further improved so that professional behaviour in this place does not involve a young woman finding herself in the situation that she found herself in, that is unacceptable. We all have a role to play in that. I do. The members of this place do. Those who work in our offices do, in senior positions. Those who work in other offices in this place, all have that responsibility. And I'm looking to Celia to provide support and advice to her colleagues and to me, working with colleagues, and of course if Anthony Albanese and his team wish to have their process or engage in that, of course we'd welcome that, and that's an open invitation as to how that might proceed.

Secondly, in relation to the support that was provided to Brittany, and there is a good record of what all of this, and indeed, in those initial phases, Brittany had expressed her appreciation, particularly to a staff member, for the support she had provided. But clearly over time, she felt more alone in dealing with this and the trauma of this event and the way that that progressed clearly was not handled sufficiently. And so I'm going to ask Stephanie Foster, the Deputy Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, to assist and advise me on how better those processes can work to support people when incidents of this nature arise. Now, one issue I'm going to ask her to look at, and I don't think we should jump to a conclusion here, I think it should be well thought through, is that where there are incidents that involve alleged assault, particularly alleged sexual assault, then we should consider that such a matter be immediately, by matter of process, be referred to the Department and for the Department to step in so there is an arm's-length arrangement in terms of how the individual - in this case, Brittany - would be able to fully understand and be supported, completely outside that office, or any other office, for that matter. Because, at the end of the day, Brittany did not feel that that occurred. And that's what matters. That's not to reflect on the genuine efforts that I know were undertaken by Minister Reynolds and others, but at the end of the day, Brittany has said what she's said and that's what we have to deal with.

In relation to the police investigation, I'm advised that the videotape of that evening was provided and has been retained at the request of police and is still in the possession of Parliamentary Services, as is appropriate. There's been a bit of commentary around that, but they are the facts and Parliamentary Services and others can give you the details on that element. But, at the end of the day, I want to make sure that any young woman working in this place is as safe as possible, just as I would like my own daughters, if they ever chose to go down that path, or in whatever workplace they were working in, that they could have that confidence of their safety and, as a father, I could have that confidence of safety.

Happy to take questions. Sam?

JOURNALIST: In relation to Brittany Higgins, you said yesterday, a spokesman for your Government said it was not appropriate that she was called to that meeting in that room in Linda Reynolds's office. Will you now offer her an apology for that?

PRIME MINISTER: Happily. Happily. I mean, that should not have happened. And I do apologise. That shouldn't have happened. That is one of, I suspect, many process issues that Stephanie Foster will, I hope, identify and ensure that those improvements are made.

JOURNALIST: Overnight, the Department of Parliamentary Services have given a statement to [News.com](https://www.news.com.au) confirming there was a police investigation into the decision to send in the cleaners to the Defence Minister Linda Reynolds's office within 24 hours of this incident occurring. Now, they say that the police investigated that and because they did not know at the time it was a potential sexual assault, that no criminality was involved, but they did investigate it, but whether or not it was involved in trying to essentially conceal evidence of a crime. Are you happy, do you think there needs to be more questions asked or investigations into how Parliament dealt with this at the time?

PRIME MINISTER: I'm happy for those investigations to take place and they should be done transparently and with full cooperation. That shouldn't lead to any assumptions about any acts that were undertaken. I mean, cleaners go through offices every morning, as

people know, and at that point, at that precise point in time, as I understand it, and I'm fairly recent to these events, there was, you know, not full knowledge of what had actually occurred. So to suggest that something had been done to interfere with the environment, I don't think that's established either. But I'm very happy for those matters to be fully investigated.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, you talk about setting up an arm's-length process through DPS...

PRIME MINISTER: It would probably be through the Department of Finance, I would think. But yeah.

JOURNALIST: Yes. Would it still not be the case that unless there was a cultural change, where alleged victims didn't feel they had to make a choice between their job and lodging a complaint, that even an arm's-length process may not solve the situation?

PRIME MINISTER: That's why the first point I made today, Phil, was ensuring that we continue to strive to have an environment in this place, in which every single person who works here has a responsibility in creating, from me down, and I accept that. We've made changes in how ministers' behavioural codes are operating over the last few years. I believe that's had a positive impact. I think there are changes to be made here as well and I would welcome that as well. So yes, I do agree, Phil, that that is clearly a contributing factor. No member of staff, and particularly a young woman in this situation, should feel even if it were not the case, as I believe it was not the case on this occasion, that her employment would ever have been threatened. After the election, and we were successful, she was employed in a new role and worked there for some years. What saddens me is that over time, and I think there were communications issues here, that she felt increasingly alone to deal with the trauma of what had occurred. And that's where I think the ongoing supports have not been successful and as a result she found herself in the situation she has. You know, listening to her talk about how she, you know, had to go through those security gates and the reminder of... I mean, that is, I understand that, and that is tremendously upsetting. So I get it and that's why I think understanding how that process could better work. But equally, I don't want the situation to be such that a young woman or anyone else in that situation would feel that they'd be reluctant to come forward on something like that, if it meant triggering a whole range of things that they felt uncomfortable about. We cannot, we cannot ignore the importance of the issue of agency of women in these situations. They need the power in these situations to make the decisions that are best for them, and we clearly have to do better about that.

I'll keep going around, Sam. I'm happy to come back to you. Yes?

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, you started your prime ministership with issues over Julia Banks and Ann Sudmalis, and we saw allegations against some ministers last year on ABC's Four Corners and now we've seen this claim from Brittany Higgins aired very publicly yesterday. Does the Liberal Party have a problem with women? And what are you doing to make it a comfortable place for women to be employed here and to run as members of Parliament?

PRIME MINISTER: I think I've already addressed that in the comments I've already made today. I think anyone in this place who thought these issues were specific to any one party or any one element of how this building operates I think would be being very naive. This is an issue that I think goes right across the span of all political parties, all offices, including, I suspect, even in the media. So let's not kid ourselves here. This is a problem we all have and all must address together. Certainly I'll be doing that as Prime Minister and leader of my own party.

JOURNALIST: When did you first know about the Brittany Higgins allegations?

PRIME MINISTER: 24 hours ago.

JOURNALIST: Have you spoken to Linda Reynolds about her handling of this case? And why hasn't she apologised for holding that meeting afterwards in the same room where the alleged assault happened?

PRIME MINISTER: I've just done that now and I've done that on behalf of myself and of the Government. Linda and I have had a conversation about this and, in fact, we discussed it as a Cabinet last night as well, the seriousness of this and I will discuss it also with my party room today. So I don't want there to be any doubt about particularly that point and I suspect where there are others that arise, we'll address those as well. Sam?

JOURNALIST: Can I just ask in relation... Obviously your office was involved in managing this situation from the beginning as a security breach, as a security incident, with two staffers in there overnight. Now, the person who was the Chief of Staff in that office was seconded briefly from your office...

PRIME MINISTER: Well, that's actually not right, Sam.

JOURNALIST: She's now back in your office and after that event, Brittany Higgins says your Chief of Staff and his EA were in the office dealing with the aftermath of Fiona. Not in relation to a sexual assault, but with the issues with the office, of dealing with, you know,

the security breach and so on. So given that you have at least two or three or more people in your office that were involved in this in the beginning, and certainly Linda Reynolds was aware that there was an alleged assault back in April 2019, she never told you? Do you have some sort of 'don't ask, don't tell' policy? Why did you not know until recently that there was an alleged sexual assault?

PRIME MINISTER: That is a very valid question and I can assure you that there is no such policy and I'm not happy about the fact that it was not brought to my attention, and I can assure you people know that. I can assure you people know that. Now, in relation to the involvement, as you suggested, of some who are now employed in my office, at the time they were employed in Minister Reynolds's office. They were not seconded from my office. They were actually employed in that office. They came to work in my office at a later time. And the initial incident which was, to the best of our knowledge, at that point, was a security incident, was dealt with swiftly. Let's not forget there's an alleged perpetrator here. There's an alleged perpetrator. And I do not want us to lose focus on the fact of the justice issue here that needs to be addressed. That this alleged perpetrator has undertaken these things and you've all heard the accounts, but it's a matter for a proper investigation to deal with that. Then, ultimately, accountability rests with those who seek to perpetrate these acts.

JOURNALIST: Is there a structural issue...

PRIME MINISTER: And that person was sacked.

JOURNALIST: You said this conversation really hit home when you had it with Jenny and thought about it as a husband and a father. Shouldn't you have thought about it as a human being? And what happens if men don't have a wife and children? Would you... do they reach the same compassionate conclusion?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, look, in my own experience, being a husband and a father is central to me, my human being. So I just can't follow the question you're putting.

JOURNALIST: Well, didn't you think yesterday, as a leader of this country, that it was abhorrent? It had to take being a father?

PRIME MINISTER: And I did. And I said so yesterday. In reflecting on what she said last night, I hadn't seen her account until last night. I didn't get to see it because I had events and other things I was dealing with until late last night and I had the opportunity at that point to see. I had discussed it with Jenny. She had seen it and we discussed it. That's how we deal with these things. I think Australians know that I'm pretty honest about these matters and I seek to deal with them as human a way as possible and my family helps inform that, as I suspect it does most people.

JOURNALIST: Can I ask you one on the vaccine, please?

PRIME MINISTER: I'm going to deal with that later, but yes, if you like.

JOURNALIST: What do you say to Australians who, they're not anti-vaxxers but they're genuinely concerned about getting the vaccine, so much so, now that they're refusing to get it, they don't want to get it. What do you say to them to put their mind at ease?

PRIME MINISTER: To listen to the medical advice. We have the best medical experts in the world. They are the ones who are making decisions about what is safe to take and whether it will be effective to support their own health. These are the same people that make decisions about the vaccines that we take our children to have vaccinated with. These are the same people. It is another vaccine, admittedly at a scale that we haven't seen in this country before, but they're the same people, the same experts, that you've trusted with your own children. They're the same people you can trust when it comes to this vaccine. And they're the people I'm trusting, both with me, my family, my mother, my mother-in-law, for their health and for their safety and all of those, particularly at the outset, those front-line workers who will be first in that process.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, can I just understand your process a little better that you've outlined this morning? A number of women who have run into difficulties in this building, from trivial to very serious, say that departmental officials already have the scope to investigate complaints.

PRIME MINISTER: They do.

JOURNALIST: But they have no power to take action. Or recommend changes that are implemented. That is a structural flaw that goes to the way that staffers are employed in this building. Can you explain to me whether that process will not only be arm's length from the Government but have the capacity to make concrete recommendations that are then acted upon by the people with power in the building ie. yourself and your colleagues?

PRIME MINISTER: This is what I'll be asking Stephanie to undertake, that process, and provide me with that advice. I ask my

Department for advice every day and I'm in the habit of taking action when they provide that advice. That's why I'm asking them to do this. And I would expect them to address many of the issues you've just raised and I hope they do. We all want the same thing here. I want the same thing that you do. I want young women, in particular, but women, men, to be able to come and work safely in this place and do the important work we do in this place. That's what I want. I know that's what Australians want and I'm committed to achieving it. Thank you very much.

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