



The Hon. Scott Morrison MP
Prime Minister

TRANSCRIPT
PRESS CONFERENCE
AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT HOUSE, ACT
THURSDAY 14 MAY 2020

EO&E...

PRIME MINISTER: This is a tough day for Australia, a very tough day. Almost 600,000 jobs have been lost, every one of them devastating for those Australians, for their families, for their communities. A very tough day. Terribly shocking, although not unanticipated. We knew there would be hard news as the pandemic wreaks an impact on Australia as it is on countries all around the world. And so it has been the case. And in the months ahead, we can brace ourselves and must brace ourselves for further hard news for Australians to take. But it's important on a day like today that we remember to support each other again, but also to seek to take heart. And to encourage each other in hope. Almost 600,000 Australians losing work can disappoint that hope. It can break hearts. But it is important as a country that we stand firm and we stand together, the plan that the government has been pursuing from the outset of this outbreak has been to fight this war on two fronts, to fight the virus and to fight the economic devastation that the virus brings. It has always been a battle on each of these that has been critically important.

On the virus, of course, we've made great progress. We're winning, but we have not won. When it comes to our economy we anticipated that this would be the impact. And so we did not wait to put in place the economic support and lifelines that would be needed, this was done many, many weeks ago and at record levels with both the expansion of JobSeeker to support those who could not stay with their employers. And for the first time for so many of them, they would seek unemployment support or indeed the JobKeeper program, which is doing exactly that. Keeping people in their jobs. A program of a scale this country has never seen before and I hope never has to see again, to respond to such a weighty economic blow as we've seen occurring in these recent months.

So those supports were there. They were put in place in anticipation of this day because we knew it would come, and more will follow. And these supports will remain vital in the months ahead as Australia works its way through. But a key component of the plan is not just to have the supports and fight the virus, but to reopen our economy. And that is happening. A national initiative. States and territories working together to reopen our economies, to get Australians back into the jobs, to get the hours back, to get the incomes back, and to get the Australian economy into a COVID safe environment, where the economy can support them and take them forward. And that confidence will build as we are already seeing occurring. The surveys, whether it's from Westpac or from ANZ or others, which shows that rebound occurring as Australians see the plan and can see the road ahead.

I've told you before, when I left university and soon after, we went into the last recession, I remember it. I remember friends, I remember family who lost jobs, who couldn't get jobs. It was hard. This is harder. We haven't seen this before. And for many young people who have never experienced that, this is beyond anything they could imagine. But out of that recession, Australia came back and has gone on to record the longest run in economic growth in recorded economic history, according to some. It shows the resilience of Australians to bounce back, to recover, to work, to support each other, their communities, their ingenuity, their hard work. That's the way out, it's always been the way out for us. And that's what Australians can take hope in today, that despite right now right here, Australians hurting today they can look forward knowing on the basis of our national character and our ingenuity and our resolution that we will see those better days and we will come through this together as we always promised that we would together. So I've asked the Treasurer to join me today. He can speak more specifically to the numbers. But I want to commend all of those who have been involved with the JobKeeper and the JobSeeker programs, because that is what holds the nation up at this point in time, as it should in times of emergency. And there will come a time where that won't be necessary. But for now, right now, as we work to rebuild our economy, that is where our focus must be. Those supports and the difficult task of reopening, to get Australians back on their feet. Josh.

THE HON. JOSH FRYDENBERG MP, TREASURER: Thank you, Prime Minister. This is a very tough day. And these unemployment numbers and to hear, as the Prime Minister said, some 600,000 fewer Australians in a job is heartbreaking. These are families, these are friends, these are neighbours, these are workmates. Now, Australians know that we have confronted this global pandemic, this economic shock, the size of which the country has never, ever seen before, from a position of economic strength. When growth was rising, unemployment was falling. The Budget was in balance for the first time in 11 years. And according to the Reserve Bank Governor, the fundamentals of the Australian economy were very strong.

But today's unemployment numbers reveal the real and painful economic impact of the coronavirus. The participation rate has fallen to 63.5 percent. As the Prime Minister said, 594,000 fewer Australians are in a job. 325,000 of those were women. The youth unemployment rate has risen to 13.8 per cent, up from 11.5 per cent. But this reiterates why our financial commitments to respond to the coronavirus was so important and are so important. The cash flow boosted over \$30 billion dollars, helping to keep businesses in business. The JobSeeker payment, the \$550 coronavirus supplement, effectively doubling what was known as Newstart, the 50 per cent wage subsidy for apprentices across the country and, of course, the \$130 billion JobKeeper program. And I can inform you that today the number of employees covered by those businesses that have formally enrolled in the JobKeeper program now exceeds six million. So we have 1.6 million Australians who are on JobSeeker and Youth Allowance and now we have six million Australian employees that are covered by the more than 860,000 businesses that are formally enrolled in the JobKeeper program. And as the Prime Minister said, the lifting of these restrictions, albeit gradually and based on the health advice, will help get people back to work. Some 850,000 people will be back in work as a result of stage 1, 2 and 3 restrictions being lifted. And also, as a result, the economy will be better off by 9.4 billion dollars a month.

So as the Prime Minister has said, there is still a long way to go and the economic numbers will get worse before they get better. Today, our thoughts are with those Australians who are doing it tough, but they know that their Government has their back.

PRIME MINISTER: Phil?

JOURNALIST: [Inaudible]

PRIME MINISTER: Well, it's a demand-driven program and so it is extended to all of those to whom the parameters provide for. And we had estimated that we would have a need of this order and that has proved to be true and they were hard numbers when we saw them the first time, Phil, and we knew that that was likely what would be required. And when you're running a program that is asking of taxpayers more than \$20 billion a month, that's a big load but Australians are carrying it, and they're carrying it for their fellow Australians. And so we will continue to run the program as we've set it out to provide that support on a demand-driven basis. So it is built to take up the load that it is designed to carry.

JOURNALIST: You've said that there'll be a review of the JobKeeper program in June. What will that review encompass? Will it look at the possibility of longer taper for sectors that are harder hit, such as hospitality, when restaurants won't necessarily be able to make a profit like they used to under the remaining restrictions on gatherings?

PRIME MINISTER: Sure. The review was built into the process when we started the JobKeeper program, when the Treasurer and I announced it here and the Treasurer, I'm sure will comment as well. This was a program that, while brought together at a very quick pace, was not one that was done in undue haste. It was done carefully. There was important design work that was done that accorded with the principles that are set out in early March to ensure that these were temporary measures, that they relied and drew on existing payment mechanisms and in this case through the Australian Taxation Office and that were scalable and this is all the case. But when you move a program as quickly as this, then you anticipate that there will be some anomalies and issues that need to be addressed along the way and we've been doing that and the Treasurer has been doing that and the review will take into account those issues as we move forward. The timeframe for this was set out at the time it went through the Parliament and the review will provide an opportunity to see how the program is going and the experience on the ground and to make any amendments that are necessary. The Treasurer, I think.

THE HON. JOSH FRYDENBERG MP, TREASURER: Thanks, Prime Minister. Yes, the review will be conducted at the end of June and obviously the money is going out the door as fast as possible and you heard from the Secretary of Treasury at the COVID Committee that this is record-breaking pace for money going out the door.

JOURNALIST: On the job numbers today, 36 per cent of the total 593,000... 594,000 come from the 15 to 24 age bracket. What's your plan to ensure the youth of Australia won't be the biggest casualty of this crisis on the other side of it, and how many more jobs could be lost if we don't sort out the current tensions that we have with China?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, let me make a couple of points. Our plan is to reopen the Australian economy and bringing the National Cabinet together to ensure that we are working together - states, territories and the Commonwealth level to ensure we're all heading in the same direction, which is exactly what's occurring at different paces, dependent on the caseloads and circumstances in each territory and each state. But all are moving to reopen the economy and I would urge people to not underestimate the scale of that task. It's one thing to close things down. It's entirely another to open them up again and to do so in a COVID safe way and that's why we can't get too far ahead of ourselves here. The task we have now is to reopen these businesses to get employees back into their jobs and to do so in a COVID safe way so that it's sustainable for many years, potentially, if that is what is required. And so the task and the message I have for those young people is that's why I have been so forward-leaning. Whether it has been the reopening

of schools which has been, on Treasury's advice, one of the most key areas to unlock and reopen our economy and based on the health advice, which has always been so consistent. That has been a necessary step. And I know, sure, I may have been pretty insistent about this, but the reason I was is I know how important it is to open up those jobs again and get those young people back into work. Now, once we go through that process of reopening the economy, it is also then to ensure that the skills and the training and the businesses they work for and that will be looking to employ them and rehire them or increase their hours or restore their positions can do so in a competitive way. We don't want an Australian economy that's propped up by subsidies. We want an Australian economy that's propped up by strong businesses with strong markets and with great products and services that are competitive in a global marketplace. Australia is one of the great trading nations of the world, and that's why we've always pursued trade in all countries wherever we see those opportunities. You stand still long enough next to one of our trade ministers in recent years, they would have sought to do a deal with you and that's what we've done and we'll work those trading relationships. But what we will never do is trade away our values.

JOURNALIST: Just on youth unemployment, there was little movement in the youth unemployment rate even prior to the pandemic over the years the Coalition's been in government, in fact, despite the multi-million dollar jobs path program. Is it time to review some of those youth unemployment measures, given that they haven't really worked, especially now that we're nudging 14 per cent?

PRIME MINISTER: I don't agree with the premise of your question. I mean, the premise of the facts of your question are just simply not right. So we had seen quite strong falls from the peaks of youth unemployment under the policies we have put in place, including the ones you referred to. So I'm sorry, I can't share your analysis. So if I don't share it, I can hardly comment on it.

JOURNALIST: [Inaudible] you just see people on JobSeeker start seeking work as the economy reopens?

PRIME MINISTER: Sorry, I just didn't hear the start of that.

JOURNALIST: How important is it for you that people on JobSeeker start actually seeking work as the economy reopens and restrictions are lifted?

PRIME MINISTER: This is a very important question and the Treasurer might want to comment on this as well. The Minister for Employment will be having a bit more to say about this today. And it is very important that as the economy starts opening up again and as we start getting out from under this doona that we're under, that people do go back and start seeking those opportunities. Now, in how that relates to our employment programs, we will take that at a fair and even pace and I'll let the Minister for Employment speak more to that. But it is important. It is also important that when you have what are effectively unemployment benefits through JobSeeker at the levels that they are, that when you do that, that can provide in normal circumstances a disincentive with payments at that level for people to go and seek work. And that's why these arrangements with the COVID supplement are temporary arrangements. The reason the COVID supplement was put in place was because we knew that those who would otherwise be on JobSeeker who might in better times be able to go and find employment, that during this period that would be very difficult. So we understood that. But as the economy reopens and as opportunities open up again, then, of course we would want to see people taking up those opportunities when they present. And so we will do that, I think, in a fair way and recognising that still, still there are few opportunities that are out there at present. But we're looking forward to seeing those opportunities reopen.

Rosie?

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, what do you say to Andrew Leigh's comment yesterday that Australia was acting as the deputy sheriff to the US by leading calls for an investigation, an international investigation into the origins of the coronavirus?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, if the Labor Party want to share the criticisms of Australia by our critics, then I think that is really something for them to reflect on.

JOURNALIST: Do you believe Australia has been?

PRIME MINISTER: No. We have always been independent. We have always pursued our national interest. And we always will. We will always be Australians in how we engage with the rest of the world. And we will always stand our ground when it comes to the things that we believe in and the values that we uphold. We will always reach out to the rest of the world and seek to deal with them fairly and honestly and openly. And that's exactly what we're doing right now. And Australia, in the way we engage on our terms, in our interests, with our values, is something that we as a government are very proud of. And I think those who have been so supportive of that position, including the AWU.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, still on China, George Christensen, Nationals MP, has suggested that the Port of Darwin lease should be put on the bargaining table in this trade tensions with China. How helpful is that contribution and what does it say about the state of the relationship that the Trade Minister and Agriculture Minister can't get a phone call back from their Chinese counterparts?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, this is obviously a difficult time as we deal with one particular set of trade issues that relate to anti-dumping, as well as the what is effectively the administration around beef exports to China and our agencies, our officers, our Ministers. We will just work through all the normal channels. And we've always been available to make it very clear that Australia will always do the right thing when it comes to respecting other country's laws. The great thing about sovereignty is we always respect the sovereignty of other nations and we simply expect the same in return. And I think that's a pretty fair deal.

Jen?

JOURNALIST: These numbers don't really paint the full picture, do they? How many people of the 6 million that are on JobKeeper have been laid off but are effectively unemployed?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, I'll let the Treasurer speak more to this, when you get underneath the numbers I think what you'll see is that the estimates the Treasury have put together earlier are reflected in these numbers. While the headline rate is at just over 6 [per cent]. When you have almost 600,000 people exit employment that is a devastating set of numbers. And when you look at hours worked and all of those issues as well, what you do see is an even deeper impact. And I think that's reflected in what the Treasury was saying. What I would add to that, though, is that the reason that people have been able to stay connected to their employers has been because of the JobKeeper program and clearly the JobKeeper program has been incredibly effective. I mean, 6 million Australians have been supported at their worst moment and hundreds of thousands of businesses. Now, I, granted, there will be issues that are raised at the margin on a program of this scale. But let's not lose sight of the forest for the trees here. I mean, this is a program of historic proportions that is helping 6 million Australians right here right now.

Josh?

THE HON. JOSH FRYDENBERG MP, TREASURER: Well, the median market expectation for unemployment today was at 8.2 per cent. So it's come at a significantly reduced number to that. But that reflects the success of the JobKeeper program, that reflects the fact that we are maintaining the connection between employees and employers, even though some of these businesses have had to close their doors because of the restrictions. And the Prime Minister and I and the government have been constantly talking about building the bridge to recovery and to get these people back into a job as fast as possible, we need to start easing those restrictions based on the health advice, because that is what is going to get hundreds of thousands of our fellow Australians back into work.

PRIME MINISTER: John?

JOURNALIST: [Inaudible] the use of Queensland taxpayers' money to make a bid or indeed purchases an equity stake in Virgin Australia?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, I'm not going to buy into that. What we have done and the Treasurer, I'm sure will want to comment on, is the process we've engaged in, and that is ensuring that Virgin will keep flying and will fly into the future. And we resisted what were, I think, very pre-emptive and I think rather dangerous calls for the Commonwealth to engage in this area on behalf of taxpayers at that early phase. And I think as a result of that good judgement to allow this process to do its job, which is what is occurring, there are many bids that are coming through the process, Treasurer, and we welcome that. We want a competitive aviation market here in Australia. We want to see these two airlines flying and competing and giving a great deal to the flying public and to ensure that the freight keeps moving around this country. And we believe that will be the outcome. And we look forward to the best of the best arrangements being accepted ultimately by the administrators. And for those Virgin employees, I think that's what they're seeking and they are looking forward to. And I'm sure that that will be the outcome for them. And so we're going to let the process run. We're not going to put a commentary on this bid or that bid. And what we want is a commercial airline that can stand on its own two feet and employ the thousands of Australians that it does and be successful.

Josh?

THE HON. JOSH FRYDENBERG MP, TREASURER: Well, thanks, Prime Minister. Well, as we've said before, Virgin is not Ansett. This is not a liquidation. This is voluntary administration. And indeed, the voluntary administrator has said that they are shortly going to narrow down the list of interested parties and then to welcome them into the next stage of this process. The federal government's not in the business of owning an airline, we're interested in a market solution.

JOURNALIST: Firstly to the Treasurer, is 10 per cent still your expected peak for unemployment? And Prime Minister, what is your response to Kim Carr saying that calls from within your government for more oversight of Chinese military science collaboration with Australian scientists are reminiscent of campaigns directed against science by far right politicians in Europe in the 1930s?

PRIME MINISTER: Well I'll let Josh speak first.

THE HON. JOSH FRYDENBERG MP, TREASURER: Well, Treasury forecasts are still for unemployment to reach around 10 per cent, but importantly, Treasury have also said, but for the JobKeeper program it would be 15 per cent. And that's really important to understand.

PRIME MINISTER: Those were very disappointing remarks. He has a bit of form on this too, I note, which is also disappointing, but that's a metaphor for Mr Albanese to address. And for the Labor Party to address, I suppose. But look, Australia is a nation of free speech, and that means that people say things from time to time and even under privilege of this place, which people can find deeply offensive. And I'm, I have no doubt that people have found that deeply offensive, and that is for, something for Senator Carr to reflect on. But our values are important to us as a country, and that's why we stand up for them each and every day. And we're about transparency. We are about fairness. We're about market-based economies. We're about a globalised world which respects the individual sovereign states that makes it up and enables for the free engagement between those nation-states. And that's what we're about. And that's why I think Australia is held in high regard that it is and people can always expect Australia, especially under our government, to act always in that way.

Thanks very much, everyone.

[END]

**Contacts: Press Office, (02) 6277 7744
The Hon. Scott Morrison MP, Sydney**

Press Office of the Hon. Scott Morrison MP, Prime Minister, Canberra