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**Australian Financial Review**

**Rt. Hon. Boris Johnson**

**Moderator: Jennifer Hewett, National affairs columnist, AFR**

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**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Well, good evening everyone. It’s an absolute pleasure to be here tonight and, of course, to interview Boris Johnson. I know he’s shy, he hardly speaks at all, but he’s made a special effort for tonight.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Thank you very much, Jennifer. Can I just begin by thanking Peter for that extremely generous introduction?

I apologize everybody for my improper attire tonight. I did fly out with a black-tie suit in my luggage, but when I took it out, I could not have gotten into that suit at any age over the age of 11. I’m sorry. I just thought it wasn’t – I tried it, but I looked even more like a chimpanzee, so I thought. Anyway, I apologize.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** You’re forgiven.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** No disrespect to this great event, but it just wasn’t looking good.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Well, you were instinctively an optimist, obviously.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yes.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** But I don’t want to put you on a downer, but what’s your biggest regret about politics?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** My biggest regret? You’re already on regrets.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Just to start. It’ll go up from here.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yeah, no, listen, well, I –

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** You don’t have any?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** No, I think, look, I would have liked, in an ideal world, to have gone on to deliver all the things that I wanted to do in the 2019 manifesto, which my great party should now be sticking to. Unfortunately – we did a lot of stuff. As Peter just said, we got Brexit done. We won a huge majority. We delivered the fastest vaccine rollout anywhere in Europe, anywhere in the world probably, in any comparable country. We launched a huge program to level up the UK and to invest in infrastructure and change the outlook for lots of parts of the UK that are left behind.

People don’t realize this about Britain very much, people who don’t know. The UK is the most imbalanced of all the major Western economies, in the sense that so much of the wealth and productivity is concentrated in London and the southeast, which never used to be the case in Victorian times. Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, these were powerhouses, absolute powerhouses. So much of the UK is not firing on all cylinders, and we had a big, big program to level up. Of course, if you ask me my regrets, I am frustrated that we haven’t delivered that.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Despite your big win in 2019 and the demolition of the Red Wall, etcetera, I know, of course, you would never speak about the prospects for the Sunak government and the general rather depressed feeling about them, pessimism.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, I think I might well speak about it since you say I won’t. What I would say is that politics is a very, very, very unpredictable game, as I’ve discovered, and you never know what’s going to happen. Actually, there’s a long time until they have to have an election.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** But how does the center right –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** A lot of things can change.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** But how does it get –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** For Rishi and those guys, it’s by no means over yet, absolutely not.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Okay. But how do you appeal, how do you get that broad appeal as a center right government? Is it by saying you’re going to level up.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yes. Yes, absolutely. I think one of the reasons we won so big was because in those areas that I was talking about, like around the great northern cities in the West Midlands, what was happening was a phenomenon not unlike what happened in the 1980s when we had this Essex man thing. Do you remember this? You probably don’t remember, but I’ll tell you.

Essex man was a Thatcherite. An Essex man wanted good public services, good NHS. He wanted decent transport. But he wanted a bigger house with a bigger garden and a good private sector job. That was starting to happen in all sorts of areas that had previously been full of people who were basically working in the public sector. A change was happening in aspiration in the UK and we wanted to capitalize on that and give those people the opportunity that they saw.

I think what conservatives need to do, and it probably applies, by the way, to conservatives. I know there’s really conservatives in this room. When I say conservatives, I mean you call them liberals here. I think. I don’t want to put my foot in it more than normal. You know what I mean, center right people.

What center right people need to do is realize that for the younger generation in my country, the biggest single problem is that they cannot get on the housing ladder. They cannot get a home. They cannot get the keys to somewhere they own in the way that I could 30 years ago. And that’s a massive change. I don’t know what it’s like here, but is it the same?

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** It’s the same, exactly.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** How can it be the same? Have you flown over Australia? I just have. It’s enormous. It took me 4.5 hours to get from one part of Australia, from the left to the right. There is room here. Have you thought of that fix? Is there some issue with your planning laws or something?

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** There certainly is.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Can you not have a campaign on the Australian Financial Review?

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** I think we do. It doesn’t do any good.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** That’s what you need to do, sort out the planning laws.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Speaking of Australia and distance, Nigel Farage just, I think, got paid 1.5 million to spend two weeks in in bucolic Northern New South Wales, being on *I’m a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here*. Are you tempted by that?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, if I had 1.5 million, I think I might well spend it on avoiding that.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** That leads me to my next question. Some of your conservative MPs suggest that it would be great for you two to join up and go back into politics together.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** For me to?

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Yes. No? Not interested in that?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, let me be absolutely clear. I’m a Conservative, right? That means I’m a member of – I think I’m a member of the Conservative Party. I mean, I was Conservative prime minister. I’d better check my membership. And I’ve always been a Conservative. If anybody else wants to become a Conservative, that’s entirely up to them. But until such.

I don’t think, and look, I had a wonderful exchange with Nigel Farage about 30 years ago, when he and I – and it’s quite literally the only time we’ve met and had a long conversation. It was in a pub. He said to me, “You need to join this new party called” – I think it was called Ukip in those days. And I said to him, “No, no, no, no, no, you need to join the conservatives.” And that was it. That was the end of our –

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** So some of your MPs, or former MPs –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Say again?

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Some of your former Conservative MPs are dreaming of it.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yeah, look I think this is a media thing. I get on with Nigel. I think actually he deserves credit for battling for a very long time for my country to take back its democratic independence. He really does. But that’s as far as it goes.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** All right.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** It’s a long time since I’ve talked.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** You said you’re frustrated. Does this mean your political dream is over, that you’ve sworn off it now?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yeah, no, look, I’m proud to say I’ve been written off a lot. The first time that somebody – I think it was Michael Portillo. Michael Portillo wrote a very good column in the *Sunday Times* in 2004 saying “Boris Johnson is finished,” I think was the introductory sentence. “There is no political way back for him now.” Look, I treasure that column. There’s hope. There’s hope for us all.

You saw the other day that my old friend David Cameron, Julie – by the way, isn’t it wonderful to have Julie Bishop here, my former colleague? There’s some old friends from Oxford, Mike Rennie and Ticky Fullerton. Did you know that?

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Yes, I do.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** They were both at Oxford with me. Ticky has taken the precaution of owning the Fullerton Hotel, where I’ve been staying.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** And marrying Michael Stutchbury.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** That’s a very good point. Yes, that’s absolutely right.

Where was I? Cameron. Yes. David Cameron, my old friend, has just come back to the –

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Were you as astounded as anyone else?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** No, I think, look, it’s great news for has-beens and retreads everywhere. I think it is, isn’t it, it’s fantastic? It shows that across the nails that are banging off the coffin lids and the graves are yawning open and the sheeted dead are gibbering in the streets, and the political ghosts are coming to life again, and that’s good news for us political ghosts. It shows there’s life after death.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Well, you were at the Covid inquiry recently, and you apologized for the pain and suffering caused and apologized for some of the mistakes. Do you think you should be forgiven for those mistakes?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I think that people must draw their own conclusions about that. As I told the Covid inquiry, I think when you look at what actually happened in the UK, given the great elderness of our population, the fact that we have a lot of very elderly people, we have lots of co-morbidities. We’re one of the most densely populated countries in the whole of Europe, and I think second only to the Dutch.

Actually we finished up in terms of excess mortality well, well down the table. This is not to say that every death was a tragedy, but if you look at what happened in the UK, all I can say is that we were on a par in the end with other comparator countries. If anything, I think we were able to save quite a few lives.

I’ll tell you, I shall tell you how we saved quite a few lives is that we had a program of vaccination that was faster than any other comparable country. The reason we did that, by the way, because I noticed that when Peter said something about Brexit, there wasn’t an absolutely overwhelming round of applause for Brexit.

But Brexit was incredibly important in that vaccine rollout. I don’t think people have quite recognized this. We were able to approve a vaccine, an effective, licensed vaccine, faster than any other country. Literally, we were able to put Pfizer and AstraZeneca into people’s arms before any other European country by a matter of two and a half months, because we’d come out of the European Medicines Agency and we had our own medical health regulation agency.

Literally, by March 2021, we’d vaccinated 45% of the British population, and the EU had vaccinated about 10% of their population. There were long stretches when we’d vaccinated more people in the UK than the rest of the than the EU combined.

Brexit saved lives, right, because there were tens of thousands of elderly people who were vaccinated speedily, who might not have been, and whose lives were protected. That’s a difficult thing to say, but it happens to be true.

And so, when I look at what Brexit ultimately will achieve, I think it will give governments of all kinds flexibility in the UK to do things differently, to cooperate with Australia, for instance, in a different way, but also to regulate and to legislate differently.

Don’t necessarily swallow all the stuff that you’re hearing from the slight air of gloom and negativity that you get from the BBC. I love the BBC. I love the BBC, but you get from some of the coverage of this matter. Because actually it has delivered many, many benefits, not least by the way, not least, cutting 43 million pounds from the duty charged on Australian wine coming into the UK. Did you know that?

Amongst the many, many other things it has done, including the fastest vaccine rollout in Europe, including AUKUS and all the other things, actually it’s already made Australian wine more affordable for British people.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Excellent.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** If that isn’t a benefit of Brexit, I don’t know what is.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** All right. One of the things that you do need international kind of cooperation on obviously is dealing with climate change. You’ve obviously been a passionate advocate of net zero. I noticed that Rishi Sunak has been winding back some of your initiatives, including the timetable for phasing out the internal combustion engine.

Even though COP28 has kind of now got consensus on transitioning away, whatever the word is I think, from fossil fuels eventually, do you think that there’s a delay in realizing the soaring kind of ambitions and rhetoric of a couple of years ago, and is this just kind of economic and technology reality keeping up – sorry, kind of taking over? Or are you still as confident in the timetable?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** The timetable of humanity getting to net zero by 2050 is obviously extremely aggressive and difficult. It will be very hard for us to do. But progress can suddenly reach a point of acceleration, a tipping point when it becomes exponential, and things can change.

The UK, I know everybody says that it’s impossible to wean ourselves off of hydrocarbons, but actually when I was – in 1990, when most of us were pretty sentient beings, in 1990, 70% of UK electricity came from coal. Do you know what the figure is now? Less than 1%. That’s no disrespect to all the big coal interests here in Australia. We’ve been able to move past it.

In November 2022, just after I’d ceased to be prime minister, there was one day, I think, in which 70% of our electricity, the entire consumption of UK electricity came from offshore wind. We are the Saudi Arabia of offshore wind. We have a huge forest of windmills all over the channel – not the channel, the North Sea. This is not to be sneezed at.

I’ve got to be honest with you, though, Jennifer. I don’t know where you are on this particular journey, but I was a skeptic about all this stuff in my pieces in the *Telegraph* that I wrote for over many years. I probably, like many people around this room, I kind of poured scorn on windmills and on green, on the idea of reducing our CO2 output. I did compare it to a strange Aztec religion, and I did say that wind power wouldn’t pull the skin off a rice pudding. I said all this stuff, but –

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** You’ve changed.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I have changed, and I tell you why. I tell you why. Because flying over Australia is amazing. Because you can’t believe how few people there are. Where is everybody? As Peter said, it’s just unbelievable.

But I was Foreign Secretary, and I flew to 132 countries. I have to tell you that I did notice the change in the natural world that humanity is bringing about. When I was born, I think the world had about 3 billion people. It’s now got well, well north of 9 billion. You fly over Africa or Asia, even Latin America, you see it, and you’re physically aware of the destruction that we’re doing.

Whatever your views about the science of climate change, intuitively you start to see that humanity is having a colossal impact on quite a fragile and small ball in space. It took me quite a long time to get here, but it was incredible how quick it is when you when you consider how far away it is. We’re literally on the other side of the world. This is a very small, vulnerable planet. We’re producing huge amounts of pollution. We can fix it. That’s what I think. And I think we have the means to do it.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** I hope so.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** We do. And Australia has the means to do it. You have uranium, you should be going nuclear.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** You should be going.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** That’s what I think.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Is it possible to actually decarbonize the economy without going nuclear?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** No. Well, I think you need nuclear fuel baseload. Look, I think the transition may take longer than we may hope. I think there’s no doubt that we’re going to depend on gas for an appreciable length of time. I think coal you can power past. But ultimately we will get there.

I’m not a scientist, but I think intuitively that humanity is capable of doing vast, vast amounts of damage to this planet. If we can insure ourselves against that by going towards green technology, which will deliver millions of good, high wage, high skilled jobs, then what’s wrong with that program?

What I’m doing is I’m sticking up for net zero. And yes, it’s going to be difficult. Yes, it may take longer than we think. But I think it’s the right path to be on. I wouldn’t allow natural human skepticism about this to divert us from that ambition because I think it’s fundamentally the right way to go.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Another issue; you mentioned housing. I know illegal immigration is obviously a big issue in the UK. I think you mentioned that you think that’s the reason that people are not in favor of immigration. But I think in general, Australia, many Australians, like many people in the UK, are now actually not wanting those record numbers of immigration. The Sunak government has actually changed, making it harder.

Given that you actually want more legal immigration, do you think that those measures that they’ve just introduced should succeed?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Look, I think several questions. The UK has got 67 million people already. Last year we had a huge figure for legal.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** 750,000.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Now, that figure was partly inflated because the previous years had been flat because of COVID. If you remember, there was nobody going anywhere because of COVID.

You’ll also recall that there were a lot of people saying that the EU nationals would all disappear from the UK, and that we would have no one to harvest the fruit and do all sorts of important jobs. That turned out to be complete nonsense.

But what happened was that the Treasury and the Migration Advisory Committee, in particular, who are the people who have to try to set the minimum threshold for the earnings of migrants to the UK, they just miscalculated. They didn’t realize how attractive the UK would continue to be, and we undercounted the number of EU nationals in the UK by about 2 million. Literally, we thought there were 3 million, and there turned out to be 5 million. Those factors basically explained those numbers.

You’ve got to control it. What people were voting for in 2016 in the UK was exactly the same principle that John Howard spelled out in this country way back in whenever it was, 2001. We decide who comes to this country and the circumstances under which they come here or something like that, he said. I think I’ve got that right. That’s what the British people want.

That, by the way, is the reason that we have wholly expropriated and stolen your policy of trying to turn back the boats, by having offshore processing centers. We have this famous Rwanda policy, which I started up when I was prime minister, and I think Rishi is doing completely the right thing in trying to make it work.

It’s very, very difficult because unlike Australia, we really are circumscribed by international jurisdictions, particularly the European Court of Human Rights, and it does fetter the ability of the House of Commons, of Parliament to do what the British people so obviously want us to do.

This is not another argument for Brexit. Of course it is.

You have in Australia a power to do something, an untrammeled, unfettered power to do something that we still envy in the U.K. and probably we’re going to have to find a way of taking.

I’ve got to say, if you think back to what happened in Australia with that Nauru idea, I remember when this thing broke. Everybody thought it was crazy around the world. Do you remember? Everybody thought it sounded inhuman to send people off to this lump of rock that was made of guano, as I understand it. Isn’t it? It was widely, widely attacked.

But what’s happened now is that that policy has become so accepted that it is not politically controversial in Australia, or if it is politically controversial, nobody really dares question it.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Question it, no.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** That, I have to say, is, I think, an amazing, amazing political achievement. That’s fundamentally what we need to do in the UK, and we need to deliver the Rwanda policy.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Okay. The other thing you talk about is the fact that we’re living in kind of darker times and requiring liberal democracies to stand up to autocracies. But democracies also seem to be kind of condemning themselves internally as well. Witness the contortions over cancel culture. Democracy is heading down a dangerous path themselves as well.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, I think we’re now 2023. It’s a long time since the end of the Cold War. I think everybody’s realized that the ideas we had, that democracies were inevitably going to take over everywhere, they were just wrong. I mean, Julie, wouldn’t you say, nobody believes that?

I don’t think any of us now think that China or Russia anytime soon are going to become Western orientated, liberal capitalist democracies, and I’m afraid many other countries fall into the same category. 70% of the world’s population are governed by autocracies probably. Democracy is quite a is quite a fragile thing. But I do think it’s the most successful model we have.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** I was going to say, speaking of democracy, of course, much of the world democracies are looking with great trepidation about the idea of Donald Trump taking over, becoming the next president again of the of the U.S. What does that do for democratic values?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, everybody’s – I heard someone sort of snigger there, you know? Or maybe they didn’t snigger; maybe they were laughing appreciatively at the idea.

Look, first thing is, like everybody in this room probably, I have a problem with what happened on January the 6th, whenever it was. I find it very hard to reconcile myself with the idea that the head of state, the leader of the free world, can ring people up and so on and so forth, not accept the result of an election.

But all that said, if the American people vote for Donald Trump, as they may well do – as they may well do, I think everybody is going to have to reconcile themselves with that giant fact and look for the positives. Here’s the thing: I think that there will be a lot of positives.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** What will the positives be?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well – okay.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** I think that was a snicker.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Okay. Well, you laugh, you laugh, but I think seriously, if you look at American foreign policy under Donald Trump and you compare it with American foreign policy under Barack Obama, I’m being absolutely candid with you now, I think you can make a very strong case that Trump, by being robust, was of more value to the world than the Democrats by being flexible and supple. I’m absolutely, absolutely serious.

If you look at questions like Syria, who was it? It was Barack Obama who decided in 2013 not to punish Assad for using chemical weapons. Who did finally bomb Syrian chemical weapons capabilities and do huge damage, actually, to their air force? It was Donald Trump. Having used chemical weapons several times against his own population, after Trump did that, Assad never did it again. Right?

Ukraine. Who let Putin take Crimea, take Donbas and did nothing about it. Who?

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** But you think –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Right. Well, let me finish this point.

Who was the first person, even ahead of us in the UK, to give the Ukrainians shoulder launched anti-tank weaponry? It was Donald Trump.

Look at the Abraham Accords. Whatever you say about the Trump administration, I think that was a big step forward for the Middle East. I think the whole process of reconciliation between Israel and those Arab states is incredibly promising. I think, of course, that was one of the reasons why Iran backing Hamas wanted to destabilize it.

Anyway, all this to say, I think you can make a strong case for saying – and Julie says he was tough on North Korea. I remember you and I working together a lot on that. I would say that was one of the projects where it wasn’t entirely clear what we finally delivered.

But, yeah, I mean –

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** (Off mic.)

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Correct.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** But he was quite keen to have good relations with Putin, for example.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yes. But I think here’s what I would say about this. I think that the difference is that with Donald Trump, I think that the bad guys of the world, who are far too many and who have been pushing people around for too long, the bad guys of the world will know that they have a strong president in the United States and somebody who is willing to do some difficult things.

I can’t prove this, but I would be surprised, if not amazed, if Putin had done what he did on February 24th, 2022, if Trump had been in the white House, in invading the rest of Ukraine. I would be very, very, very surprised.

I agree with you, there are problems and there are things we need to work on, but I think the sort of glib assumption that a Trump presidency is just going to be a force for –

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Evil, bad?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** – anarchy, are completely wrong. Completely wrong.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** And do you think –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** That’s my view?

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Do you think he would do damage to the alliances that the Biden administration has been trying to build up?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Which ones in particular?

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Well, I think with Europe, in the Pacific, India, you name it. I mean, they’ve been trying to build up a lot of – Japan – doing a lot of alliances.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** On the contrary, I think that, look, by the way, none of this should be taken as meaning that I don’t think the Joe Biden has done a great job too in many respects, and I had a very, very good relationship with him.

But no, I think Donald Trump will want to be a dealmaker, and he’ll want to do a lot of good things with countries around the world. He’s tough on NATO. He’s tough on saying to us and the Germans and the French, we should be spending more on our defense. But he has a good point there. That’s a reasonable and respectable thing for a U.S. president to say.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** If we come into the Middle East, I know that you went – I believe you invited Scott Morrison over a beer.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I did. He came.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** You said, what are you doing on the weekend? Why don’t you come to the Middle East with me or to Israel with me? Scott Morrison said that it’s not possible to walk both sides of the streets in this conflict. I take it you agree?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I totally agree, and I think there’s a real risk that we’re losing moral clarity about what happened on October the 7th, and it’s all getting lost, and people are failing to focus on the giant fact that Hamas terrorists killed, tortured, maimed more people in the biggest terrorist atrocity against Jewish people since the Second World War.

There is a difference between the actions of those Hamas terrorists and the actions of the Israeli Defense Forces trying to stop them doing such a thing again. I’m just amazed that people can’t see that. People were out protesting about Israel before Israel had even taken steps to protect itself. I just find some of this stuff incredible at the moment.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** We’ve obviously just had this UN vote, the UN resolution. The UK abstained and Australia supported it. Should the UK not have abstained?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I’m not going to comment on the – this is a great, great, friendly country, Australia, and I’m not going to get into Australian foreign policy. We have the closest possible relations. The Australian government will make up its own mind how to deal with these things.

I’m just giving you my point of view. My point of view is that I think we need to focus on what happened on October the 7th. Hamas wants to destroy Israel. I think that the attempt to build up a kind of moral equivalence between Israel and Hamas is absolutely nauseating, and I don’t understand it. I think that some of the stuff that we’re seeing in the great universities of the United States, we’re starting to see the reemergence of anti-Semitism, and it really, really needs to be dealt with.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** But even Joe Biden, for example, said that Israel was losing support because of its indiscriminate bombing. The statement that Canada, Australia and New Zealand put out, supported by others, said price of defeating Hamas can’t be the continuing suffering of all Palestinian civilians. How do you not think that Israel is losing support over this, and people are – you say that they’re losing moral clarity? There’s a lot of kind of countervailing forces, aren’t there?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yeah, I accept that completely. But I think that the facts are what they are. The facts are that 1,200 people were killed in an absolutely pitiless attack. People were burned alive. The kids were abducted, some of whom have yet to be returned.

There’s a difference between – I accept what people say about what’s happening in Gaza. But there’s a difference between setting out to maximize human pain and suffering and humiliation and trying to minimize human suffering. I think there is a huge moral difference between what the Israeli Defense Forces are trying to do and what Hamas did. I think if we lose that clarity, then we’re all in real trouble. I think what’s happening at the moment is that there’s a kind of fog that has descended. Anyway, you can take it which side I’m on, right?

Of course, I bitterly regret and grieve for what is happening in the whole area. And I grieve for what’s happening in Gaza. But if you’re a democratically elected Israeli politician, you’ve got to do something to protect your population from further terrorist attacks. Given what they did last time, the question is what do you do?

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Is it possible to exterminate Hamas by military means? Doesn’t it just breed another generation?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I’m not going to pretend that there is an easy solution, or any easy answers to this, but you’ve got to do something to render them incapable of doing it again. What else can you do? You’re the government of a population that has just suffered the most appalling trauma, and you have to try to stop it happening again. It seems to me reasonable that you go after the people who authorized it, who planned it and who perpetrated it. What else can you do?

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Do you think that Netanyahu’s government’s failure, or in fact, encouragement of settlements in the West Bank led –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Sorry, but nothing excuses – nothing excuses –

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** No, nothing excuses –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** No, that’s the answer to your question. Nothing excuses it. Okay?

I’m utterly fed up. I’m utterly fed up of all these saving clauses and extenuations that people are trying to enter for the murder and torture and killing done by Hamas. Unless we just crisp up our brains a bit and focus on what happened, we are going to get into an absolute mess. I feel this very, very strongly.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** AUKUS, you’re obviously a very big promoter of it with Scott Morrison.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yes. I mean, he was really the progenitor of it, and he brought it to me, and we sold it to Joe, and its time has come. It makes complete sense for Australia and the UK to collaborate on building these submarines, but we’ve got to do much more. Pillar one is one thing of AUKUS. We’ve got to be doing a lot more together.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Also we’re told about the threat being current, the most dangerous circumstances we’ve seen in generations, but a lot of that development of AUKUS will be years and years or decades to come.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** It will be.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Is that a contradiction? How do you manage that?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, look, by the time we deliver the SSNR SSN-AUKUS submarines together, I think I’ll be in my 90s. Maybe not quite in my 90s, but I’ll be pretty far gone. It’s this massive project. It’s going to take a long time. That doesn’t mean it’s not the right thing to do. There are lots of other chapters in the AUKUS agreement that we need to be developing, on cyber, on AI, on other sharing of technology that we need to accelerate. But the subs are huge and there’s no other solution. We have to have the subs, and it really makes sense to do it together.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** All right. Do you think the Trump administration would imperil domestic support in the UK and Australia for AUKUS.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Why? Why would that happen, Jennifer? Why would a Trump administration – hang on a minute? What is it about? Look, I’m a former prime minister of the UK. I get on with all American presidents. That’s the constitutional duty of UK prime ministers. But why would any particular president imperil AUKUS?

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Support, no, support.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Why would he imperil domestic support for AUKUS?

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Because I think a lot of people in the UK and Australia are rather nervous about what a Trump administration would do.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Hang on. I just want to take the temperature of this distinguished audience here of business titans of Australia, a country I absolutely love. I think this place is so full of massive, massive common sense that I believe that Australians can see through a lot of the kind of froth in the media about Trump.

Who is really alarmed about the possibility of a Trump presidency in the way that Jennifer has described, this group? And you’re so alarmed about it that you think – what is it about? What is it exactly?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Climate change.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Climate change.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** January 6th.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Okay, January 6th I’m with you. Okay, I accept that point. If and when that happens, we’re all going to have to limbo dance under that moral blockade because it’s going to be a problem.

Apart from January the 6th, which may be an insuperable obstacle for some people, but look, if the American people vote for Donald J. Trump, what else?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** (Off mic.)

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Which coup?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** January 6th.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** (Off mic.)

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Julie says free trade. Julie says free trade. Hang on. I’m not here to – Trump can more than defend himself.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** We’ll look at Trump next year.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yeah, exactly. On free trade I agree with Julie, we all need to be doing much better. But here’s a better idea. Rather than everybody getting spooked about this or that American president, why doesn’t Australia and the UK team up, as we can in the CPTPP and really make sense of that? Why don’t we work on whichever president gets into the white House, whoever it is, to get them into the CPTPP? That’s the logic.

Because I think the sad thing is that the WTO is probably becalmed at the moment, and the CPTPP really offers the prospect of some exciting agreements. Let’s do that, whoever is the president. I’m going to back off this U.S. presidency thing because I can see it’s controversial, and there will be different views, and it’s not our country. But let’s work together on the CPTPP. That’s a fantastic opportunity.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** What about another president, the Chinese president? Should we be spooked by that president?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I think the UK policy on China has clearly changed, and –

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** David Cameron wants to change that again.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** No, no, I don’t think so. And it’s evolved in the sense that I think in a way, we’ve come to sort of follow what Australia was very strong on, which is trying to disaggregate your relationships with China so that you don’t allow China into your critical national infrastructure. And so, we’ve done deals with them to sort out the nuclear side of things and also Huawei, the 5G, as everybody knows, which is very expensive and uh difficult.

You’ve got to be vigilant about China. You’ve got to be tough on the things that matter, like Hong Kong or freedom of navigation or Tibet and so on and speak plainly to China on these things.

But I think once you’ve got a new balance and a new equilibrium, you’ve got to recognize that China is a gigantic fact of our lives. China’s a fifth of humanity, if not more, contains many, many people, huge numbers of people of brilliance and genius, with whom we’re going to want to trade and do business. Of course we are. The UK has a huge, huge volume of trade with China, a huge economic relationship with China. What I’m saying is, there’s a new balance to be struck, but it certainly should not involve a new Cold War with China or anything like that.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** As an optimist, you don’t think there’s going to be a real confrontation over Taiwan, for example?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, I sincerely hope not. I really do. I think that this is another area where our governments are plainly going to have to cooperate very closely, because it’s one where I think we have pretty much identical positions. As everybody knows, the lead in this issue will inevitably be taken by the United States of America, but we will all be wanting to take the same position.

I hope very much that everybody can see, and I hope that Beijing can see as well, that any kind of violent or military solution is not what the world needs. It’s the last thing the world needs. It’s why the whole Ukraine argument is so important. I hope that what’s happened in Ukraine is evidence to Xi Jinping that the risk of some kind of irrational act in the in the Straits of Taiwan is too high. I think that that risk is – I hope – I hope it’s been sufficiently escalated now in the minds of Beijing.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** All right. We’re coming to the end of 2023.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** We are.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** What’s your big wish, either personal or professional, for 2024?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Oh, geez, that’s a question. Well, I’m living a life of blissful, rustic repose in South Oxfordshire, when I’m not making speeches or being interviewed by a brilliant journalist in Sydney.

What I would like to do, I’ve got to finish a book. When you’re writing a book, it’s a terrible, terrible pressure. And the book takes – have you written? You must have written loads of books.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** No, I have not.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Have you not?

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** No. How many books have you written?

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** It’s too hard. I’ve not written any.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Jennifer. Is that because you’re chained to your column?

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** I am chained to my column. Yes, exactly.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Can’t you produce an anthology of columns? Have you thought of that?

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** I haven’t thought of that, no. I might.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** It’s money for old rope. I thoroughly recommend it. Just get them to publish your back numbers. Because there were some good stories that you guys have been breaking.

I’ve got to dispatch the book. The book is dominating. It’s a nightmare. I’ve got to slay it and then offer it.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** And then send it off now.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Offer it on a slab to the apathetic reading public.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Now, I know the emcee is telling me, but if you could just tell us –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** What’s the emcee doing?

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** He’s waving me, saying I’ve got to stop, but –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** He wants you to push me more on Trump.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** On Trump, that’s right. No, no.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** He wants more detail.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** What I want is I can’t resist asking this, and if you could tell it briefly, though, that wonderful story of how you ended up in Monash as a visiting professor.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Oh, yeah. Well, I said that last night. That’s absolutely true. The first time somebody was so rash as to invite me to come and talk to an audience in Australia was literally 30 years ago, 31 years ago. I got a letter. I was then the Brussels correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*, which was a position of unbelievable power, without responsibility, as you can imagine. I got a letter, and I was writing all sorts of great stuff about Brussels plan to ban the prawn cocktail flavor crisp and the British chocolate and all that sort of thing.

I got a letter from a professor, a very distinguished professor, who’s still there, by the way. He’s now an emeritus professor. So obviously it wasn’t fatal to his career. I got it saying, would I come and be a visiting professor of European thought at Monash University, Melbourne?

I was then in my 20s, and I looked at this thing and I thought somebody was obviously pulling my leg. I was thrilled, but I immediately wrote back and said, you bet. They sent me the air tickets, and I forgot that you lose a day when you fly to Australia. I didn’t work that out. I managed to arrive with about one hour before I had to give my first speech or lecture, which was a pretty kind of bizarre sort of Eurosceptic rant, which I gave to this audience in Melbourne.

I remember meeting the Vice Chancellor of Monash University after this lecture, and he looked at me, and he was largish, sort of looked a bit like Les Paterson, actually, sort of. I should be careful what I say. But anyway, he said, “Are you it?” Because he was a bit amazed.

I have to say that I started to worry that there had been a case of mistaken identity. I looked at the letter that I’d been sent, and he said how much he’d enjoyed my articles about Europe in the pages of *The Spectator*. Of course, that was a period when the pages of *The Spectator* were full of people called Johnson. There was a guy called Paul Johnson who was a famous historian. This guy called Frank Johnson, who went on to be editor. But there was also there was me, Boris Johnson. But there was also a distinguished professor of French politics called Douglas Johnson, who wrote more articles about Europe, in fact, than I did. I have a terrible feeling that Monash University got the wrong Johnson. Anyway, they were much too polite to say so, and they were very kind to me.

But I tell you what else, I took a bet with those academics because at the end, after about two weeks of war, of enduring my professorship, they took me out to the pub, and I was there with the professor of Norse and the professor of Sanskrit from Monash and professor of Old High German and Greek philosophy and all the other professors.

They all bet me that by the year 2000, which was then eight years distant, Her Majesty the Queen would no longer be the head of state in Australia. By the way, I’m not offering a view about this matter. And I haven’t offered the view about hardly any matters, by the way, today.

I did take their bet, 100 apiece, and I won convincingly because 2000 came and went. But they didn’t cough up, which tells you. I have made repeated appeals every time I’ve come because I can’t actually remember their names. I’ve made repeated appeals for them to honor this debt. But I’ve now decided to absolve them.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Good.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Anyway, they’re forgiven.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** Well, we certainly did not get the wrong Johnson.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I’m glad to hear that.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** It’s been wonderful to have a discussion with you.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Thank you very much. Thank you. I enjoyed it.

**JENNIFER HEWETT:** I’d like you to join me in thanking him.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Thank you very much. Thank you.

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