Press conference - New York

Transcript

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The Hon Anthony Albanese MP | Prime Minister of Australia

ANTHONY ALBANESE, PRIME MINISTER: Thanks for joining me. I want to update Australians on an incident in which an artificial intelligence agent has infiltrated an Australian Government website. This incident occurred in June of this year and involved an OpenAI agent gaining unauthorised access into the public-facing Medicare statistics reporting service portal, which is administered by Services Australia. The AI agent accessed both public and non-public files. A forensic investigation aided by the Australian Signals Directorate is now underway to ascertain more information, including what other government systems were affected. The Medicare Statistics Reporting Portal is a public-facing statistics portal that contains non-sensitive Medicare information relating to data and statistics such as spending. No personal information is believed to have been accessed at this stage, but investigations are ongoing. Evidence currently available is there is no broader compromise to the Services Australia network. Nonetheless, this situation is obviously unacceptable.

And today I spoke with the CEO of OpenAI, Sam Altman, to express Australia's extreme concern about this incident. And I also expressed my disappointment that it took the company way too long to inform the Government what had occurred and the nature of the way that that notification occurred as well was unacceptable. Today, I'm announcing the establishment of a taskforce to provide an urgent and immediate review into this incident to determine whether existing processes are appropriate to respond to AI-related cyber incidents. The taskforce will be led by my department and involve the National Cybersecurity Coordinator, the Office of AI, the Australian Signals Directorate, the Australian AI Safety Institute, and Services Australia. And we will release – Acting Prime Minister Richard Marles and Katy Gallagher will hold a media conference soon this morning and release the terms of reference into the review. The report will consider also possible law enforcement and legislative responses and how to ensure that incidents like this don't happen again. Further, we will refer the incident to the Joint Select Committee on Artificial Intelligence that has been established by the Parliament. We'll seek urgent advice on whether any offences have occurred and whether this should be referred to the Australian Federal Police. And insights from this incident will inform the development of our government's AI standards legislation.

As I said in my speech at the United Nations this week, and back in July at Sydney University, AI is changing the world. It is bringing enormous economic opportunity for growth, for productivity benefits, for breakthroughs in health, in innovation and other areas of science. But AI also poses significant risks and that's why we need guardrails to protect our way of life. We want to make sure that we shape AI rather than AI shaping us. Put simply, humans must remain in control. Now I understand that this development will be concerning for many Australians as it certainly is for the Government. I do want to reassure Australians at this time that the Government is taking every action possible to protect Australians. This incident is a clear illustration of why we are moving to establish Australian standards for AI, why we've established the Joint Parliamentary Committee as well. Standards to ensure that AI will work and deliver for people, not the other way around.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, there are 27 million Australians. How many of them have been affected by this?

PRIME MINISTER: As I said, at this point in time, there is no evidence that any individuals have been impacted. This website, to go through what's happened perhaps is useful. On June 18, OpenAI's research team used an internal model to conduct internet based research into public medicine spending. So, that's how this began. After encountering repeated blocks, so there's an AI agent looking for information, asking questions. There were blocks clearly which were coming back telling the AI agent, no. The AI agent found a way around those blocks. Didn't accept no for an answer, if you like. The model attempted alternative ways to

obtain the info that it wanted, and this led to unauthorised access into some other areas. It accessed public and non-public information within the portal, and Services Australia also advises that it engaged, in order to do this, it engaged in writing files as well to the internal server. And that's being further investigated because, as you would understand, this is a new world that we are dealing with.

JOURNALIST: You said the way the company informed you was unacceptable. Can you sort of go into detail on that? Was it a delay in letting you know or the manner of it, or both?

PRIME MINISTER: It was both. It was the delay, firstly. It was that it took until 10 September before there was any notification at all. And the notification was an email sent to just the public mailbox. And I had that discussion very frankly with Mr Altman. He accepted that that was –

JOURNALIST: How long did it take for the Government to take the email out of the public mailbox?

PRIME MINISTER: – then on 15 September, Services Australia reported the notification to ASD's Australian Cyber Security Centre. At that stage, of course it wasn't clear what the details were. And then just last week, at the end of last week, Services Australia got in touch with the Minister and informed her of the incident. Minister Gallagher, of course, looks after Services Australia as the Minister for the Public Service. And I was, me and my office were informed on the weekend. It wasn't clear what had occurred. And ASD have done, I think, great work as they do, very quickly in trying to get the facts out there. We are putting the facts to the Australian public as soon as it is possible and doing it in a way which is we're going through that detail because I think people have a right to know. There's obviously, some of these issues will be, if they relate to national security issues or those things, then they will stay confidential. But I think it's really important that people are aware that this has occurred in spite of, as I say, there's no evidence at this point in time that it's impacted anyone's, for example, anyone's Medicare details or any individuals.

JOURNALIST: A couple of things from what you said. Is this something that AI originated itself, or is there a state actor behind this or someone else behind this inquiry? And the timing, you said you now revealed this as soon as you could, but was it that you wanted to speak to Mr Altman first before you made it public, or because people would be suspicious that this is a time when AI and the boundaries and countries like the US and China are rejecting and that you are proposing – maybe your argument may be elevated by these events?

PRIME MINISTER: This was about ascertaining the facts. And as soon as the facts have been known, I'm telling you. So, in what's been a busy week, I've been keeping informed of these matters, and we're now in a position as well to have, as I say, we'll release today the documents with regard to the terms of reference for the inquiry. We've had discussions. I've spoken with the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister Gallagher as well. Mr Altman, I wanted to speak to. I told him that I would be doing this press conference today. My understanding from him, he obviously will speak for himself, but my understanding is he will make a statement after this press conference.

JOURNALIST: The origin of this, is it a state actor or is it just the AI agent acting on its own?

PRIME MINISTER: This is the company, OpenAI, doing research using artificial intelligence and the agent, frankly, not doing what it was supposed to do or doing it, but doing it in a way which when it was blocked, sought ways around the blockage.

JOURNALIST: In those discussions with Mr Altman, what other concerns on AI were you raising with him? And given you were saying before that no personal Medicare details were kind of leaked out through this AI –

PRIME MINISTER: That we know. The evidence – that's why we want to be really clear with where it's at, but we want to also be clear that the investigations are ongoing and this is not something that has precedence. So, we're dealing with very complex issues. We're doing it in a way with, we are very fortunate that we have ASD. It's fortunate that we've established in the bodies that are looking at this issue is useful as well, including the AI Institute as well as the body in my department as well. But further info, that's why we want the parliamentary committee as well as the organisations to be involved.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, you said it was without precedent. What do you mean by that? Do you understand this to be the first time that AI has managed to get into the Government across the world?

PRIME MINISTER: I am not aware – I'm not asserting that. Had a bit on in the past few days rather than do research, but we could not find – one of the issues here is we could not find precedent for this. But others, there may be, but not that we're aware of.

JOURNALIST: Can you just give us a sense of that discussion with Sam Altman and his response? Does this change your view at all about OpenAI, doing business with OpenAI? Is it a trusted partner on data centres and other issues?

PRIME MINISTER: I think OpenAI know that they need to have better protocols in place. And they're one of the businesses that themselves have warned of the risks which are there. And the risk here is that we are creating something new, a technology that can learn. And in this case, a technology that has written material, a technology that has got around blockages which are

on the website for good reason. I've got to say, I've never looked at this particular portal. It is for statistics. So, the basis of looking at it and using AI would seem to be benign, that this is a research area. There is no suggestion of foreign actors here. This is a research project that has got into areas that it shouldn't have.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, is it your understanding that a crime has been committed? If so, who is punishable and who is culpable? Is it Mr Altman? Do we have any cyber defences that should and could have prevented it? And can I ask you about the Ukraine agreement you signed today? President Putin has been invited to the G20 this year, which I'm sure you will be attending. Does he deserve a place at that table given what your statement said about Russia's illegal invasion? And if he does go, what will you say to him?

PRIME MINISTER: Just a few questions.

JOURNALIST: Sorry.

PRIME MINISTER: Firstly, on this matter, we will have an investigation. As I've said, part of the investigation will be whether there are any issues that need to be referred to the Australian Federal Police. And it would be entirely inappropriate for me to preempt that. There will obviously be legal consequences on it. The discussion I had with Mr Altman was a very frank discussion, courteous in both directions, but very frank about what I saw as Australia's national interest and what I saw as a failure which occurred here. And Mr Altman has acknowledged their issues with protocols. The agreement with Ukraine is a really positive one. It's something we've been working on for some time. Australia stands with Ukraine. We have from the very first moment that the invasion occurred. I was Opposition Leader, backed the Government of the day, the Morrison government, standing with Ukraine. And it's continued to be a bipartisan position in Australia. And I'm sure that the agreement that we've reached today will be bipartisan, as is the increased support that we're getting to Ukraine. With regard to Mr Putin, I have no intention of having discussions with Mr Putin. I think that his actions have been reprehensible and inflicted enormous damage, not just most importantly and directly of course on the people of Ukraine, but also on respect for international law. And I have been at various forums, I'll be at ASEAN and APEC - will occur before the G20. And Russia has been represented at those by Mr Lavrov. And I have made Australia's view very clear.

JOURNALIST: Do you think Mr Putin deserves an invitation? Are you worried about what that message sends?

PRIME MINISTER: It's not up to me to make comments about – I assume that the host country, President Trump is responsible. What I'm responsible for is Australia's view, and Australia's view is very clear, which is Mr Putin would not be welcome in Australia.

JOURNALIST: PM, did Sam Altman apologise to you in this meeting you had? And secondly, there's been a number of trilateral and bilateral meetings the US has had. Ukraine, UK, France. Not Australia. Did Australia seek a bilateral meeting with Donald Trump?

PRIME MINISTER: I had a very positive engagement with President Trump last night. It was very constructive, as it always has been. And I had a bilateral meeting, of course, with President Zelenskyy. We've been working on finalising this agreement and it was very positive. I find it extraordinary, the courage and bravery that the people of Ukraine have shown under enormous pressure and suffering. They are fighting for their sovereignty, for their dignity and for their lives literally. And I think that the fact that this has been going on for far too long, we continue to have a very clear position as a nation.

JOURNALIST: Could you just clarify, did our security agencies completely miss this breach? We only found out once the company actually told us the breach?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, to be very clear, the way that this occurred was not in a way that would likely – I mean, this is not a security website where there is – this is a Medicare statistics portal. And for the fullness of detail as well – I expected to get this in a question to be able to get this out – but the Government is aware as well of three other systems that may be impacted. One is ours, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare may have been impacted. Also the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research and the Victorian Department of Health. And I spoke last night, Australian time. I spoke with Premier Carroll and Premier Premier Minns to inform them and to ensure they will get a full briefing today from cybersecurity about those issues.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, there's a worry that we only found out about this because the company told us. Does it mean that other government websites could have been implicated, and we don't even know about it? Does it show a gaping hole in our cybersecurity architecture?

PRIME MINISTER: We're talking about – well, that's why you have a rapid review into Australian Government arrangements about all of this. But be clear, this is not something that I'm aware of happening anywhere else. So, when you have new precedents set, that is one of the reasons why we need to take all of these issues very seriously.

JOURNALIST: Sam Altman has said to the UN Security Council that we're at a turning point on AI. Is that an understatement given what we've seen here? And is Donald Trump not getting it? Is that a major issue here that he's not accepting this is the

risk? And what do you say to Australians watching this morning who might be really disconcerted, worried, afraid about this development?

PRIME MINISTER: The Australian Government's got your back. That we're aware of the risk of artificial intelligence as well as the significant potential benefits as well. And the fact that it's a health website, and one of the great benefits and I have seen it demonstrated, the great benefits of artificial intelligence will revolutionise and have a potential to make an enormous positive difference to the world. But we need to make sure that systems are put in place and protocols are put in place as well. And Mr Altman certainly has acknowledged and has said that, invited further discussions with them as well, that their protocols were not up to scratch here. And that needs to happen.

JOURNALIST: Sorry, what about Donald Trump?

PRIME MINISTER: I speak on behalf of the Australian Government.

JOURNALIST: Are you out of touch with his views on AI, given this –

PRIME MINISTER: I speak on behalf of the Australian Government.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, because OpenAI is an American company and this is one of their agents that's gone rogue, will you raise this with the Trump administration? And are you confident that your concerns will be heard given Donald Trump thinks that people who are worried about the concerns of AI are guilty of fearmongering?

PRIME MINISTER: Our Ambassador has informed the administration, including informing the administration that this media conference will be held.

JOURNALIST: Did you raise it with the President last night?

JOURNALIST: Just two details. You didn't answer Benedict's question whether Sam Altman had apologised. Did he apologise to you today?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes, he clearly – we can get into word games, but he clearly accepted that the company had not done good enough.

JOURNALIST: And just to clarify, the incident happened on 18 June. The company emailed the Government on 10 September. Are you aware of when the company learned that its agent had gone rogue?

PRIME MINISTER: I'm aware of – all of the details will come through. We'll do a forensic examination, and Minister Gallagher has been dealing, as has Richard, both with his, particularly with his responsibilities as Acting Prime Minister.

JOURNALIST: Following up from Katina's question, is it possible that it's been burrowing away for three months? Because it's gone into three other departments.

PRIME MINISTER: No, that is not what is suggested, as far as I'm aware. I don't think that is the suggestion. I think the suggestion is that it went in on – I've given very specific, given you as much detail as we have –

JOURNALIST: It's alarming. It's three months ago now.

PRIME MINISTER: So, 18 June. Now, how long it took, that detail as well, perhaps Minister Marles or Gallagher will be able to answer that question –

JOURNALIST: Why didn't our systems detect it?

PRIME MINISTER: – in coming days. All of that – that's why you have an inquiry. But this is something new. And when you have something new happen, that is why we need to mitigate the risks here.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, personally, when you found out this breach had occurred, how much of a shock was it to you, given you've been talking about AI for quite some time?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, it was – how can I put it accurately? It was a shock that it occurred, because it was real and serious. But it also, I think, was something that had been predicted, including by the AI companies themselves have said that one of the risks that we need to deal with here is that artificial intelligence can go its own way. And that's the basis of the debate that we're having throughout the world. This isn't something where we're doing this in isolation. And Australia has tried to lean in, if you like, with the speech that I gave in July at Sydney University. And since then, the setting up of the office, the setting up of the parliamentary committee chaired by the Member for Maribyrnong with Senator Duniam, making sure that there's bipartisanship there as well. And encouraging, you would've seen, before I was aware of this, I've given a number of answers in Question Time where I've said every member of Parliament needs to examine this, because this is going to change the way that the world operates.

JOURNALIST: You spoke to Altman today – was it US time you spoke to Altman?

PRIME MINISTER: Yeah, I spoke to Mr Altman between – we organised a time. He was I think speaking –

JOURNALIST: He's here.

PRIME MINISTER: Yeah, he's here in New York.

JOURNALIST: So, face-to-face?

PRIME MINISTER: No. It was an organised phone call.

JOURNALIST: And the other three suspected times, they're OpenAI as well?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes, it's the same incident. It's the same incident. The question is when it was trying to harvest data, did it go into these other sites? So, we're not confirming that that occurred. These sites are all, it's all looking for data on medicines, data on health. Now, why that was the case? I assume commercial reasons of why it's looking at how much has been spent on particular medicines. Is it increasing spending? Is it decreasing spending? Those issues as well.

JOURNALIST: Can I just ask quickly about the Digital Duty of Care? You've been very careful so far to say it's not about limiting political speech or anything like that. You've said it's about giving people control. You did go off script briefly yesterday and mention the political extremes and the damage algorithms are causing. Do you want to clarify for that? Because your critics are saying back home that this is potentially going to limit political speech.

PRIME MINISTER: Well, it's nonsense. This isn't about government control at all. It's not about misinformation or disinformation. What this is about is giving people control, giving you, when you've got that device in your hand, control over what algorithms you want to receive, whether it's everything –

JOURNALIST: Why did you link the two yesterday then?

PRIME MINISTER: I didn't link the two yesterday. I didn't link the two. I spoke about the technological challenges which are facing the world. And one of the issues that is facing the world is increased polarisation, and there is no question that social media is playing a role in that. Now, that's a very different question from then government taking action to control what you receive. Now, if people want to receive far right or far left material, we're seeing a massive rise. The Australian report on it all the time, as you should. We've seen with the rise of antisemitism with – look at anyone's feed. Look at my feed at random of any site, and I can be talking about the football and I will have something on there that is full of hateful rhetoric. So, that's just a fact. And as public office holders, I think we have a responsibility to talk about that.

JOURNALIST: Did you raise the breach with Donald Trump last night, Prime Minister?

JOURNALIST: Why won't you engage on President Trump's position on AI given that he and Xi Jinping are the only ones who can really hit the brakes on development of this technology?

PRIME MINISTER: My job is to do my job as Australia's Prime Minister, and I do that. I put our case, I put our arguments, I do it respectfully, I do it publicly, and I do it privately –

JOURNALIST: Did you raise it with Trump? Did you raise it with the President?

PRIME MINISTER: – and I do it privately –

JOURNALIST: Last night, with the President?

PRIME MINISTER: – and I have a relationship with President Trump where we have conversations and we, to some people's surprise, it must be said, have a very good relationship, because we do have conversations –

JOURNALIST: Did you talk about this, though, the AI breach?

JOURNALIST: Did you raise it? In our interests?

JOURNALIST: Did you raise the breach last night?

PRIME MINISTER: – where we engage with each other as leaders respectfully, I intend to keep that. Thanks very much.