



PRIME MINISTER

REGIONAL DAILIES ASSOCIATION DINNER

CANBERRA, A.C.T.

15 MARCH, 1972.

Speech by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. William McMahon CH,MP.

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I feel a little like Daniel as the guest of the regional lions. Mostly, I come face to face with the papers in the morning - an hour or so before breakfast. On this occasion, it is a pleasure to meet you at the end of the day, and in pretty distinguished company. I know you have no intention of spoiling my dinner as you sometimes spoil my breakfast.

As I see it, Mr. President, the regional dailies are to the Metropolitan press what local Government is to State Government. They are closest to the people. And like their Metropolitan brothers, they are free and independently minded, very independently minded.

We in Canberra respect the regional papers for the qualities they have. But please don't misunderstand me, I don't agree with everything you print, far from it.

Over the years, experience has tempered my judgement and I am now a fatalist where newspapers are concerned. From my experience, a reply to a newspaper article resembles the attempt of Hercules to crop the Hydra. There isn't the slightest chance of ultimate success. But I am an optimist too, and tonight I want to talk a little about why we are going to win the next election.

We have been through a difficult economic period. There are still plenty of difficulties around. But I can see daylight and so can many of the people around me. Not only in the Government, but in large sections of business and industry where the man who spots the trend early gets the advantage as the recovery gathers momentum.

I believe that as we generate more confidence, and we in Australia have greater reason for confidence and future prospects than most other countries I know, if we can have less industrial trouble and less wage and price movements, we can get smoothly into top gear again. Here the press has a vital, indeed critical, role.

You are professional newspaper people, and you have every right to say you are the best judges of what is news. What I can do is to make an appeal for a place for good news alongside the bad - to make an appeal for some priority for matters of substance over trivia.

Confidence has a psychological basis and you cannot beat this by Government edict and action alone. It needs to be attacked on a broad front with the intelligent understanding and support of the Press. People do believe what they read in newspapers and that is why those of you who belong to the honourable profession of journalism have a great trust to keep. You are a spur to governments and a voice for the people.

It is a year since I became Prime Minister and I confess it has been a tough year, tougher than I thought it would be. We have faced up to taking unpopular measures. We have accepted our responsibility to hold firm. We have set ourselves unmistakably against the social and economic evil of excessive inflation. And now we are finding some satisfaction in seeing the right trends beginning to emerge.

That is not my opinion alone. Remember what Mr Gibbs, the Managing Director of GMH said only this week about the upturn in the economy. His company is going to put on about as many men as it laid off in recent months. Two thousand are going back on the payroll. Mr Gibbs anticipates more people will be buying cars in the next few months as the stimulus measures announced at the Premiers' Conference work through. It is a hardheaded business assessment based on experience, facts and estimates. We support it.

Then there are signs, too, that the rate of increase in savings bank deposits is starting to slow down. As people get more confidence, they will be spending more. These are facts, not wishful thinking.

We heard nothing, I note, from the Leader of the Opposition this week about his famous prediction in January that we were going to see a further 50,000 people out of work in three months' time. Well, all I can say is that two months have gone by and in the first of those months, unemployment fell by 15,000. Unemployment is on the way down. And we can be sure that in this month of March there will be a further improvement. Mr Whitlam now seems to be whispering his predictions.

There has been a similar deafening silence on this subject from Mr Clyde Cameron who went even further out on a limb. He forecast 200,000 out of work. I know it is hard to believe. It was a completely irresponsible fear-promoting exercise that got about as far as Mr Cameron's other short-lived attempt at getting the Labor Party to agree on its industrial policy. His efforts as shadow Minister for Labour have not exactly been crowned with success.

The Labor Party is very fond of substituting wishes for predictions and speculations for certainties. We are going to see a lot more of it this year. When you do, take a moment to remember those predictions of theirs about unemployment.

But let us turn from their wishful predictions to more of the facts as we know them today.

- . The economy is healthy and growing
- . Look at the country. What a depressing outlook it was a year ago! The bottom had fallen out of wool, it seemed, and rural unemployment was high. Now wool and other commodity prices have got better and the rural depression is lifting.
- . Many companies are showing better results and the stock market is more buoyant, without the previous unhealthy speculative elements.
- . Overseas trade is healthy. Our reserves position is strong.
- . Interest rates are down. Money is available for investment.

These are ingredients for success. But the fight against inflation must go on. As we have said often, the remedy lies in wage restraint together with increased productivity.

Before the year is out, we will be going to the polls. I will say I believe we will win, and win on our merits. We will fight and win on the vital issues of the day - on the economy - defence - social welfare - national development.

I do not yet want to nominate a priority of issues. They are all very important. We will show how wide the gulf is between the Government Parties and Labor on issues like immigration, industrial lawlessness and the ANZUS Treaty.

Only yesterday, the Presidential envoy, Mr Marshall Green, re-emphasised the closeness of the trust which has been renewed between ourselves and the United States. Australia is a close friend with whom we share our confidences to a degree we do with no-one else, was how Mr Green put it, on arrival in Sydney.

We will also show how fundamentally our philosophies differ - ours - the philosophy of individual rights and free enterprise -- theirs - Labor's - the dominance and supervision of the state.

Who governs this country? The elected representatives? Or a small band largely nominated and dominated by the Left Wing Unions? That is another major issue.

We all know industrial lawlessness took the edge off the reduction in actual unemployment last month. And it remains a constant threat to the pick-up in the economy to which I have just referred.

I note what Mr Hawke has had to say about industrial action in an election year. He won't hold off to help his political friends, as the Labor Executive meeting showed. He is a law unto himself in these matters. He has encouraged certain unions to go in for non-industrial strikes.

We have already had enough industrial strikes for non-industrial reasons. The public is sick of them. Only the noisy minority with motives of their own support them. They climb on any lawless bandwagon that comes along. Some of the Left-Wing unions go beyond the bounds of all reason and commonsense.

There are other issues. We will show we are real federalists with true respect for the rights of the States. We will remind Australians that our commitment to the sanctity of our foreign relations is firm, and that we will not, like Labor, brush aside the arrangements we have in Asia and the Pacific.

At the same time, we will show that we can progress step by step towards more normal arrangements with foreign powers having political philosophies alien to ours.

These are some of the issues to be argued this year. We will do so against a background of an impressive record of constructive legislation.

We have done a lot in a year despite economic difficulties - difficulties of a type which have taxed the best economic managers in the Western world. The list is available. I want to mention just three examples which show conclusively I have not hesitated to grasp the nettle.

First: Trade union amalgamations. We are determined to stick to our policy not to interfere, despite apparent political advantages.

Second : The doctors. We did not hesitate to appoint the Arbitrator once it became clear that negotiation was not going to settle the common fee issue in New South Wales.

And third : The Public Service unions. I was accused of political cowardice for not acting in the postal workers disputes. For the first time since Federation, we have now introduced reasonable legislation which can, if necessary, be used in such situations.

Does anyone seriously suggest that such actions - taken in an election year - are those of an indecisive Government? Does it also show indecision to stand up and state our belief that wage increases must be curbed to control inflation - and then to back up our statements by intervening in every major wage hearing?

What rubbish! If our critics can't come up with something better than that, we won't have to worry much about which way the votes will go..

In the same way, the Parliament has recently been misused by time-wasting and quite childish arguments over the interpretation of one word or another. Some may say that is fair game in politics, but it reflects no credit on the Opposition or dignity on the Parliament. Opposition members ought to have more respect for themselves as Parliamentarians than to operate as a "jeer squad" in the House.

I also emphatically reject Labor's recent pathetic and transparent manoeuvres to show some contrived differences within the Ministry and the Party. It was ridiculous to suggest a rift between the Treasurer and myself because he gave a paper to the Taxpayers' Association meeting that I hadn't read first. There was no earthly reason why he should. He was not committing the Government. I don't read advance copies of every speech responsible Ministers make.

In the Party room, as in the Cabinet room, I encourage the freest discussion. That's the Liberal way. We stand for the rights and freedoms of the individual. Not like the straight-jacket policy fastened on the Parliamentary Labor Party by its outside Federal Conference.

The Coalition, too, is as solid as a rock. My colleague, the Deputy Prime Minister, who is at this table tonight will, I am sure, agree with that.

He will also agree that together we are going to win the election.
