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VICTORIAN A.L.P. CONFERENCE
NATIONAL SCIENCE CENTRE, PARKSVILLE,
ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR WHITLAM,
SUNDAY, 23 MARCH, 1975.

THE CONTINUING LEADERSHIP CRISIS IN THE LIBERAL PARTY IS NOW IN ITS NINTH YEAR, THERE IS NO REASON TO BELIEVE THAT LAST FRIDAY'S DECISION HAS REALLY SETTLED ANYTHING. THE WAR OF THE LIBERAL SUCCESSION HAS BECOME WAR BY ATTRITION. THERE MAY BE, AFTER THE MELODRAMA OF THE LAST FORTNIGHT, A PERIOD OF TEMPORARY TRUCE, BUT IT WILL BE ONLY THE PEACE OF EXHAUSTION. FOR THE FACT REMAINS THAT IN ALL THOSE NINE YEARS OF STRUGGLE AND BLOOD-LETTING, IN ALL THOSE SEVEN CONTESTS INVOLVING CHALLENGES TO THE LEADERSHIP, THERE HAS NEVER BEEN A REAL DEBATE ABOUT ISSUES, ABOUT THE DIRECTION THE LIBERAL PARTY SHOULD TAKE OR ABOUT THE DIRECTION IT WANTS AUSTRALIA TO TAKE.

THE MOST DEPRESSING ASPECT OF THE CRISIS IN THE LIBERAL PARTY HAS BEEN, AND REMAINS, THE FUNDAMENTAL TRIVIALITY OF THE TERMS IN WHICH THE DEBATE HAS BEEN CONDUCTED. NONE OF THE PROTAGONISTS SEEM TO BE AWARE THAT A CHANGE IN PARTY LEADERSHIP HAS DEEP IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DIRECTION THAT PARTY WILL TAKE. AND THIS IS HOW IT HAS BEEN FOR NEARLY A DECADE.

THE DESTRUCTION OF SO MANY LIBERAL LEADERS GOES DEEPER THAN THE MERE CONFLICT OF PERSONALITIES AND PERSONAL AMBITIONS, PRETTY SAVAGE AS THAT HAS BEEN; IT HAS BEEN A DIRECT RESULT OF THE SHEER NEGATIVISM OF THE LIBERAL PARTYx

THE

EXCRUCIATING BARRENESS OF THE LIBERAL APPROACH HAS BEEN PAINFULLY EXPOSED IN THE PAST TWO YEARSx

WHEN THE APPARATUS OF GOVERNMENT WAS TAKEN AWAY AFTER 23 YEARS, THE LIBERALS HAD PRECIOUS LITTLE TO SAY OR TO DOx YOU REMEMBER THAT WHEN THEY FORCED ON THE MAY ELECTIONS THEY TOOK A WEEK OFF TO DEVISE POLICIES FOR THE ELECTIONx WE'VE HEARD NOTHING OF THEM SINCEx ALL WE HAD WAS A PRE-OCCUPATION WITH TACTICS - ELECTORAL TACTICS, PARLIAMENTARY TACTICS AND ABOVE ALL, ULTIMATELY FATAL TO BILL SNEDDEN, PARTY TACTICSx AND IN THIS SENSE BILL SNEDDEN HAS BEEN A VICTIM OF LIBERAL PARTY NEGATIVENESSx THE ABSORPTION WITH TACTICS, THE DELIBERATE DAMAGING CREATION OF ELECTION HYSTERIA, INEVITABLY MEANT A PRE-OCCUPATION WITH PERSONALITIES RATHER THAN POLICIES, PERSONAL CONFRONTATION RATHER THAN DEVELOPMENT OF RELEVANT POLICIESx YOU HEAR A GREAT DEAL OF TALK ABOUT PARLIAMENTARY PERFORMANCESx OF COURSE, THAT IS AN IMPORTANT ASPECT OF POLITICS IN A PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEMx IT IS A TEST, A VALID TEST OF LEADERSHIP - BUT IT IS ONLY ONE OF MANYx BUT IN THEIR SELF-CREATED OBSESSION WITH ELECTIONS, THE LIBERALS TOOK A SINGLE POOR PERFORMANCE IN PARLIAMENT AS A CATASTROPHEx

BECAUSE THERE IS NO ESSENTIAL UNDERPINNING OF A POLICY, OF A PHILOSOPHY, OF ANYTHING THAT COULD BE DESCRIBED AS A WELL MOTIVATED, PURPOSEFUL PARTY, PERSONALITIES HAVE BECOME EVERYTHING TO THE LIBERALSx

THE THREAT OF USING THE SENATE TO FORCE OUT THE ELECTED GOVERNMENT - TO FALSIFY DEMOCRACY ONCE AGAIN - WAS AN ATTEMPT TO MAKE US LOSE OUR NERVE; ALL THAT HAS HAPPENED IS THAT THE LIBERALS HAVE LOST THEIR HEADx I NOTE THAT MR FRASER HAS STATED THE CORRECT DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLE - THAT A GOVERNMENT SUSTAINED BY A COMFORTABLE AND ASSURED MAJORITY IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, THE PEOPLE'S HOUSE, SHOULD RUN THE FULL TERM FOR WHICH IT WAS ELECTEDx TRUE, HE QUALIFIES THIS SOMEWHAT BY CURIOUS REFERENCES TO CATCHING ME WITH MY PANTS DOWNx I'M SURE I DON'T KNOW WHAT HE MEANSx

THE PEOPLE ARE ENTITLED TO INSIST THAT MR FRASER STICKS TO HIS ORIGINAL UNDERTAKING - HIS FIRST PROMISE AS LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION - THAT THE DECISION THE PEOPLE MADE LAST MAY WILL BE ADHERED TOx AFTER ALL, IT IS MY PREROGATIVE AS PRIME MINISTER TO ADVISE THE GOVERNOR-GENERAL WHEN, AND ON WHAT GROUNDS, AN ELECTION WILL BE CALLEDx

IF I WERE ABSORBED IN THE BATTLE OF PARLIAMENTARY AND ELECTORAL TACTICS I COULD CALL ONE NOW. I HAVE EVERY GROUND\$ FOR IT. I ALREADY HAVE THE GROUNDS FOR A DOUBLE DISSOLUTION. I COULD TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE PRESENT DISARRAY OF THE LIBERAL PARTY. I COULD BE AS FULLY JUSTIFIED IN THAT COURSE AS SIR ROBERT MENZIES WAS IN 1955, BARELY A YEAR AFTER THE 1954 ELECTIONS. I FORBEAR. THE SMASHING ADVANTAGE WE WOULD HAVE COULD NOT JUSTIFY THE DAMAGE YET ANOTHER INTERRUPTION - A SUSPENSION OF THE PROPER BUSINESS OF GOVERNMENT FOR THREE OR FOUR MONTHS - WOULD DO. WHAT REMAINS TO BE SEEN IS WHETHER MR FRASER WAS REALLY STATING A PRINCIPLE OR AN EXPEDIENT. FOR IN HIS SITUATION IT IS CERTAINLY NO SACRIFICE ON HIS PART TO ABJURE AN EARLY ELECTION. THE REAL TEST OF HIS CONSTITUTIONAL PRINCIPLES IS YET TO COME.

AND OF COURSE ALL HIS REAL TESTS ARE YET TO COME. FOR A MAN WHO HAS BEEN IN PARLIAMENT 20 YEARS, MR FRASER IS CURIOUSLY UNKNOWN. THERE IS NOBODY SO PROMINENT IN PUBLIC LIFE WHOSE STANCE ON THE WIDER RANGE OF ISSUES IS SUCH AN ENIGMA. ONLY JOHN GORTON CLAIMS TO KNOW WHAT HE REALLY STANDS FOR.

BUT HIS CRUCIAL TESTS IN THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE ARE THESE:-

- HIS ATTITUDE TO SENATE OBSTRUCTION
- HIS RELATIONS WITH THE COUNTRY PARTY (REDISTRIBUTION)
- HIS ATTITUDE TO THE IRRESPONSIBILITY AND SOCIAL SABOTAGE OF THE ANTI-LABOR STATES.
(VIC. CHALLENGE : MEDIBANK)

THESE THREE MATTERS ARE CLOSELY CONNECTED_x AFTER ALL, ONE OF THE FUSES WHICH SET OFF LAST WEEK'S EXPLOSION WAS MR ANTHONY'S THREAT TO BLOCK MEDIBANK IN THE SENATE_x AND THE REFUSAL OF THE ANTI-LABOR STATES TO CO-OPERATE IN MAKING MEDIBANK WORK RAISES A GREAT NATIONAL ISSUE WHICH, HAD WE BEEN FORCED INTO IT, WE SHOULD HAVE BEEN PERFECTLY PREPARED TO FIGHT ON - FOR THE FOURTH TIME_x

MR FRASER HAS ACKNOWLEDGED THAT MEDIBANK IS THE LAW OF THE LAND AND THAT THE GOVERNMENT HAS THE RIGHT TO BE ABLE TO APPLY THE LAW AND COMPLY WITH IT_x BUT HIS GESTURE IS MEANINGLESS UNLESS HE IS PREPARED TO USE HIS INFLUENCE ON HIS COLLEAGUES IN THE NON-LABOR STATES TO GET THEM TO STOP SHILLY-SHALLYING AND TO STOP PLAYING AROUND WITH THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF THE AUSTRALIAN PEOPLE_x

THE VICTORIAN PREMIER AND THE VICTORIAN MINISTER
FOR HEALTH, MR SCANLAN, NOW PLEAD FOR MORE TIME_x

WHAT ARE THE FACTS?

THERE WERE INITIAL MEETINGS BETWEEN BILL HAYDEN AND
THE VICTORIAN HEALTH MINISTER ON MEDIBANK IN OCTOBER AND
NOVEMBER 1973._x

I WROTE TO MR HAMER ON 15 AUGUST, 1974 SETTING OUT
OUR PROPOSALS_x I SAID:

"NOW THAT THE HEALTH INSURANCE ACT HAS BEEN PASSED
BY THE AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT, I AM NOW IN A POSITION TO
PUT TO YOUR GOVERNMENT A FIRM PROPOSAL FOR AN AGREEMENT
WITH MY GOVERNMENT CONCERNING THE PROVISION OF HOSPITAL
SERVICES AND THE FINANCING OF PUBLIC HOSPITAL OPERATING COSTS_x

".. THE OBJECTIVES OF THE AGREEMENTS WILL BE TO
ENSURE THAT EVERY PERSON HAS ACCESS TO COMPREHENSIVE HOSPITAL
CARE, INCLUDING MEDICAL TREATMENT, PROVIDED FREE OF CHARGE
IN STANDARD BEDS OF PUBLIC HOSPITALS IN A WAY THAT WILL NOT
PLACE ANY IMPEDIMENT IN THE WAY OF PERSONS BEING ABLE TO
SEEK PRIVATE TREATMENT IN PUBLIC HOSPITALS, IF THEY SO WISH_x

"TO THIS END, THE TERMS OF THE AGREEMENTS WILL VISUALISE THE REMOVAL, WHERE APPLICABLE, OF MEANS TESTS WHICH DECIDE ELIGIBILITY FOR ADMISSION TO STANDARD BED PUBLIC HOSPITAL ACCOMMODATION AND TREATMENT; ABOLITION OF STANDARD WARD FEES; THE PROVISION OF FREE MEDICAL SERVICES TO HOSPITAL PATIENTS; THE METHOD OF PAYMENT OF DOCTORS PROVIDING MEDICAL SERVICES TO HOSPITAL PATIENTS AND THE SETTING OF SPECIFIED FEES TO BE CHARGED FOR CERTAIN CATEGORIES OF INPATIENTS_x

"FOR ITS PART, THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT WILL UNDERTAKE TO MAKE PAYMENTS TO BOTH INDIVIDUAL HOSPITALS AND STATE PUBLIC HOSPITAL AUTHORITIES WHICH WOULD AMOUNT TO 50% OF THE NET OPERATING COSTS OF THE PUBLIC HOSPITALS IN THE STATE_x"

I RECEIVED AN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT_x ON 5 SEPTEMBER BILL HAYDEN WROTE TO MR SCANLAN SETTING OUT THE MATTERS TO BE SORTED OUT AT THE OFFICIAL LEVEL_x

ON 2 DECEMBER I WROTE AGAIN TO MR HAMER SEEKING AN EARLY DECLARATION OF THE VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT'S ATTITUDE_x

ON 12 DECEMBER MY DEPARTMENT RECEIVED AN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
FROM THE SECRETARY OF THE PREMIER'S DEPARTMENT_x

AND ON FRIDAY (21 MARCH 1975) I AT LAST RECEIVED A
REPLY FROM MR HAMER SAYING, "MR SCANLAN IS SEEKING EARLY
DISCUSSIONS WITH MR HAYDEN TO CLARIFY THE OUTSTANDING ISSUES."_x

THAT'S HOW HAMER MAKES THINGS HAPPEN_x

...9/.

WE ARE ALSO ENTITLED TO KNOW MR FRASER'S ATTITUDE TO THE POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES OF THE VICTORIAN CHALLENGE IN THE HIGH COURT TO THE VALIDITY OF THE AUSTRALIAN ASSISTANCE PLAN. THERE ARE 57 PROGRAMS IMPERILED BY THIS CHALLENGE - SOME OF THEM INITIATED BY THE GOVERNMENT OF WHICH MR FRASER WAS A MEMBER. THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS CHALLENGE IS THAT IT IS ONE OF THE MANIFESTATIONS OF THE VERY RAPID SHIFT TO THE RIGHT, THE SHIFT TOWARDS REACTION WHICH IS TAKING PLACE IN THE LIBERAL PARTY, NOT LEAST HERE IN VICTORIA. MR FRASER'S STANCE ON THIS MATTER - NOT JUST THE CHALLENGE BUT ON ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR WEAKENING THE NATION'S WELFARE SYSTEM - WILL BE A CRITICAL TEST ABOUT WHERE HE REALLY WANTS TO TAKE HIS PARTY.

...10/.

JUST AS CRUCIAL FOR THE FUTURE OF THE LIBERAL PARTY WILL BE MR FRASER'S ATTITUDE TO OUR FIGHT FOR EQUAL ELECTORATES - THAT THE VOTE OF EACH AUSTRALIAN WILL HAVE EQUAL WORTH WHEREVER HE OR SHE LIVES.

ONE OF THE REAL SIGNIFICANT RESULTS OF LAST FRIDAY'S DECISION WAS TO REDUCE TO ALMOST NOTHING THE REPRESENTATION OF METROPOLITAN ELECTORATES AT THE LEADERSHIP LEVEL OF THE COALITION IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES. OF THE FOUR ONLY MR LYNCH NOW REPRESENTS SUCH AN AREA. SO I DON'T SEE MUCH REASON TO MODIFY THE STATEMENT THAT METROPOLITAN REPRESENTATION - THE EFFECTIVE VOICE OF AREAS TYPICAL OF WHERE MOST AUSTRALIANS LIVE - HAS BEEN REDUCED TO ALMOST NOTHING.

...11/.

MR SNEDDEN LEFT OFFICE ON FRIDAY - AND HE DID IT WITH ADMIRABLE GRACE - SAYING THAT THE LIBERAL PARTY "HAD ENTERED A NEW ERA" x THERE IS CERTAINLY A FAIR AMOUNT OF AMBIGUITY IN THAT x MR GORTON OBVIOUSLY AGREES THAT IT IS A NEW ERA FOR THE LIBERAL PARTY AND IT IS ONE IN WHICH HE DOES NOT WANT TO TAKE PART x WHATEVER IT MEANS FOR WHAT IS LEFT OF THE LIBERAL PARTY, IT DOES MEAN FOR THE LABOR GOVERNMENT AND THE LABOR PARTY AT ALL LEVELS, A GOOD OPPORTUNITY TO GET ON WITH THE JOB FOR WHICH WE HAVE BEEN TWICE ELECTED, TO GET ON WITH THE BUSINESS OF IMPLEMENTING THE PROGRAM WHICH THE PEOPLE HAVE TWICE ENDORSED AND TO CONTINUE THE JOB OF DEVELOPING FURTHER POLICIES TO ENSURE YET ANOTHER TRIUMPH FOR OUR CAUSE AT THE NEXT ELECTIONS x

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