

PRIME MINISTER' S WEEKLY BROADCAST

THE DRIFT TO DISASTER

Sunday 9 November 1975

I want to suggest one very good way of describing the present behaviour of the Senate - of putting that behaviour in perspective. It's a comparison that should appeal strongly to Opposition members themselves. The Liberals and the Country Party are fond of condemning Australian workers whenever they go on strike. They love to get up and fulminate about the evil of strikes. I wonder if it ever occurs to them that the Senate's present behaviour amounts to a strike. The Senate won't pass the Budget; they won't reject the Budget; they won't suggest any amendments to the Budget. They won't do anything about the Budget at all. They refuse even to consider it. In other words, the Opposition in the Senate are refusing to do their job. They have gone on strike.

Now whenever workers go on strike - for whatever reason - the Opposition are always the first to condemn them for anti-social behaviour. But look at the anti-social consequences of the Senate's strike. Their strike is infinitely more disruptive and dangerous than anything contemplated by the unions. The Opposition in the Senate are holding the country to ransom. They aren't just disrupting a particular industry; they are threatening the whole nation with chaos. They are totally indifferent to the damage and hardship they are causing to the Australian people, to business, to industry, to the economy as a whole. The main thing that's different about the Senate's strike is that the Senators are getting paid for it.

It can't be emphasised too often that although the Opposition Senators are refusing to pass the Budget they are also refusing to reject it. And we know why they won't reject it. They won't reject it because a minority of Opposition Senators have made it plain to Mr Fraser that they won't go along with rejection. So Mr Fraser has been forced to adopt these phony stalling tactics - this repeated deferral of the Budget. And because of this he has been forced into a monstrous inconsistency - a complete logical absurdity. The Opposition says it will pass the Budget - but on certain conditions. Remember how they attacked and denounced the Budget when the Treasurer introduced it? Remember Mr Fraser's words when he announced his dangerous and irresponsible course? He said: "The Budget has been an admitted failure." Well the Opposition now tell us that this same Budget will be passed by the Opposition provided I hold an election. Suddenly our Budget is good enough for the Liberals. It's not a failure after all! The Opposition knows very well the great benefits and advantages contained in the Budget - the tax cuts, the tax reforms, the benefits for children, for the aged, for pensioners, for migrants. They don't dare reject

these benefits for the Australian people. In fact only last week, the Senate passed our tax reform bills, but won't pass the Budget which will permit the expenditure of these taxes.

It's frightening to contemplate the havoc and personal hardship, the business disruption, the uncertainty, the social and economic chaos which the Opposition is causing to the whole community. And make no mistake - these effects are already being felt. They are happening now. They are already reflected in a downturn in consumer spending as the Christmas holiday approaches. For who can blame the Australian people - especially public servants, who depend on the Government for their wages and salaries - for cutting back their personal spending when the outlook is so uncertain? Who can blame businesses for cutting staff when Government orders are in jeopardy? Even if the Senate called off its strike tomorrow, irreparable damage to the economy would already be done. In Parliament this week, the Treasurer, Bill Hayden, drew attention to the disastrous effects of the Senate's behaviour on rural local government, especially on local employment projects funded by the RED scheme. Bill Hayden made it clear that unemployment levels early next year are bound to be higher than anticipated because of the failure to pass the Budget. Inevitably there will be effects on other economic indicators. The whole difficult and delicate process of economic recovery is being wantonly jeopardised by the Opposition. It is heartbreaking to ministers like Bill Hayden and Jim McClelland - it is heartbreaking to me and all my colleagues - that the very real progress we've been making towards economic recovery is being set back by weeks, by months, perhaps even longer, by the irresponsible policies of the Opposition. I can think of nothing more likely to cause dismay to the business community than this needless prolongation of our economic difficulties. Everything that business and unions and the Government have been working for has been put at risk. In its efforts to overturn the elected Government, the Opposition is dragging this country to the very brink of catastrophe. There is no other way to describe what Mr Fraser and his cohorts are doing.

As soon as the crisis began, the Government took stock of its responsibilities and immediately began looking at ways of avoiding unnecessary hardship to the public. We decided to do everything in our power to minimise disruption and suffering to innocent people - especially to loyal public servants, who are carrying on their work out of a sense of duty to the Australian people. Quite plainly, it would have been a total abdication of the Government's responsibilities if we had sat idly by and done nothing in this emergency. Of course there are limits to what we can do. Without the Budget being passed, the normal conduct of Government services is impossible. Nevertheless, we expect, with the generous cooperation of the banks - the private banks as well as the Commonwealth and State Government banks - to make arrangements that will ensure as far as possible that public servants and contractors receive normal wages and payments for their work.

I don't regard this as a solution to the crisis. Of course it is not. These will be temporary and in some ways awkward arrangements. They do not resolve the underlying problem. Yet Mr Fraser went into a lather of indignation the other day because the Government took steps to see that public servants and others are not made bankrupt or destitute by the Opposition's action. I make it clear that all these emergency arrangements will be legal and constitutional. It is the Opposition's behaviour that is defying the Constitution and subverting established parliamentary convention. It is the Opposition's behaviour that is bringing Australia to a standstill.

There is and always has been one basic issue in this dispute: that the elected Government, the Government in the House of Representatives, has the right to govern for its normal three-year term. Three weeks ago Mr Fraser wanted the Government to resign immediately. Last week he made another proposal. Now he's saying - this was his incredible proposal last week - that the Government can have another six months in office by grace and favour of the Opposition - another six months in office providing we resign by the end of June.

Mr Fraser and his supporters dressed up this preposterous suggestion by calling it an "offer"; or a "compromise" or a "concession". It was nothing of the sort. Let's assume for the moment that the proposal was genuine. What are its practical implications? It can only mean this: Mr Fraser is now proposing, in the midst of the uncertainty and hardship he has already caused, that from this moment on, from now for the next six, seven or eight months, the nation should be involved in a continuing election campaign - and should suffer all the paralysis of normal administration and the normal decision-making processes which inevitably comes from an election and its aftermath. I rejected this suggestion. I shall reject any other attempt to obscure or compromise the basic principle for which I am fighting - the right of an elected Government to govern, the right of the House of Representatives, the people's House, to determine the Government of this country.

I shall not yield on that principle. I shall not give up my fight to defend and preserve our democratic institutions. I know I can count on the support of the overwhelming majority of typical decent Australians.
