



## PRIME MINISTER

FOR PRESS

22 APRIL 1977

ADDRESS TO THE AUSTRALIAN PROVINCIAL PRESS ASSOCIATION, ADELAIDE

I am happy to be here tonight, talking to newspaper proprietors on a public occasion. I make the point about a public occasion because I am sometimes accused of spending too much time talking to newspaper proprietors in private. Some people appear to believe I have a great deal of influence over what newspapers print. They have good grounds for this belief. You have only to look at some of the highly favourable headlines that regularly appear in our daily newspapers, editorials which are almost invariably full of praise for the government's actions, or exceptionally flattering cartoon characterisations of me or my government, to gauge the full extent of my influence.

This evening's function is also the kind of opportunity that politicians should gratefully accept - a chance to talk directly to a large number of proprietors of newspapers that are published and printed in country areas all over Australia.

In many ways, a newspaper is the single, most important institution in a country town. It informs, enlightens entertains; it often acts as a social conscience; it is always an integral part of a rural community. You know better than I that newspapers in rural areas are read as closely and eagerly as a letter from a friend. Their columns touch the personal lives of their readers much more than a large city or national paper could ever hope.

Actually, I have made a contribution or two to the editorial columns of country newspapers over the years. Generally, I believe the quality of country newspaper has improved in both techniques and in terms of reporting.

Newspapers, of course, are not meant to make politicians happy. There is not a politician alive who would admit that his only real enjoyment left in life was waiting for the morning newspaper to arrive. To plagiarise some political words of wisdom, I think I have seen somewhere - newspapers are not meant to make life easy for politicians. On the other hand, I sometimes think that politicians were made to make life easy for newspapermen.

No newspaper can claim not to have had important political news to write in the last week or so. And it has not been just surface political controversy, but events which have been of historic importance. It is a rare occasion when the seven heads of government, of all political allegiances, can - however fleetingly - reach beyond partisan politics and find a consensus on an issue of national importance. The call last week by myself and all six Premiers for a three month halt in price rises - and a matching halt in wage rises - was such an occasion.

It had then, and I believe it still enjoys, the overwhelming support of the Australian people. There is a national consensus that the fight against inflation and unemployment must be won. A price/wage halt if, of course, only a supplement to the anti-inflationary strategy which the Commonwealth Government has pursued since taking office. But there can be no doubt that such a halt would hasten the success of that fight.

The Commonwealth has played its part. We have sought support from all major employer and employee organisations. We have halted all price rises by our own departments and authorities. We have asked the P.J.T. to defer all applications for price rises.

Initially, the Premiers cooperated well, by conferring with employer and employee groups to encourage compliance, by authorising their consumer affairs departments and bureaux to monitor price rises, and by freezing state charges of all kinds.

The reaction from employers was excellent. There has been substantial compliance by all price-setters in halting price rises throughout Australia. At a meeting I had with twenty five national employer organisations, there was unanimous support for the call by the heads of government. The Arbitration Commission last Tuesday recognised that employers had generally agreed to the price halt.

All that was needed - the last link that would have ensured the success of this popular initiative - was some measure of support from the unions. But instead, what happened? In his appearance before the Arbitration Commission, Mr Hawke refused to support the agreement made by all the Governments of Australia. Instead he made four proposals - you can judge for yourselves the merit they have.

1. He wanted amendments to the P.J.T. In fact, the Government had agreed to appoint a special committee of employers, employees and the P.J.T. to advise on the implementation of the heads of government agreement, including examining whether amendments to the P.J.T. Act were necessary.
2. He wanted a national conference to examine the whole Australian economy - this had already been rejected by the Premiers Conference.
3. He offered to defer an application for a wage rise based on productivity increases - this was irrelevant in the next three months.

4. Finally, he wanted a cut in direct taxes equivalent to the effect of the March C.P.I. increase in wages. This last proposal was clearly impossible. To use tax cuts to compensate the December quarter C.P.I. increase would have cost \$1,600 million in tax cuts. It is impossible to give tax cuts of this magnitude - and Mr Hawke knew it.

Mr Hawke wanted a price freeze and enormous tax cuts. And what did he offer in return? Nothing, except calling a union conference to consider whether the unions should forego the March quarter C.P.I. increase. And even then he said he could not deliver the goods.

It was reasonably clear at that stage that Mr Hawke only wanted to break the agreement. After all, in 1973, he and the ACTU had opposed the Labor Government's prices/wages referenda, and taken the position that under no circumstances would the union movement accept a wages/prices freeze.

Sadly, and incredibly, Mr Dunstan and the two other Labor Premiers supported Mr Hawke despite the agreement they had signed the previous Wednesday. We tried hard to get Mr Hawke's support.

If he had been prepared to give an in-principle commitment to the objectives of the income prices freeze, there would have been a national conference. If Mr Hawke and his colleagues could not speak for their unions, I said I would accept a personal commitment. He would not even give that. Clearly there was little point in proceeding since he could not even give this minimal commitment.

The initiative we have now taken is to ask the states to join with us in an approach to the Arbitration Commission. And we will be consulting with the states about this in the next few days. Two Premiers have given their support, and we are consulting with the other heads of government.

All business and other price-setters should hold prices until the outcome of this approach is known. One company - Leyland - announced price increases despite the call for a prices pause. The company's principal distributor - Bryson Industries - is however, reported as not intending to pass on the price increases. This is most encouraging.

The Government is nonetheless disturbed at Leyland's attitude. We think it should be known that under the Prices Justification Tribunal Act there is a power to conduct an enquiry into the prices changes by a company. During this enquiry the company is not permitted to make any price increases at all. This shows that the P.J.T. is an effective instrument.

In the national interest, the prices-income halt, must work. The wages/prices halt would allow us to overcome our economic problems more rapidly. That being so, it is no substitute for sound economic management. It is no substitute for actions that we are taking in other areas of economic activity where we have direct control. But it was an opportunity that was presented by the Premiers Conference that had to be grasped. An opportunity to break the inflationary wage/price spiral.

The move has been supported right through the country by government, employer organisations, business firms, families, housewives, trade unionists - people from all walks of life.

The wage/price pause does have clear and strong national support. Because it has this national support, it can still succeed.

Given events such as the price/income freeze and the importance of the economy, it is little wonder that economic issues are to the fore in newspapers. This however, distracts attention from government initiatives in other areas. Action, which is important, but less dramatic.

In just seventeen months, the government has made a number of significant reforms enhancing the position of Australians as individual men and women. And moving towards a situation where Australians can realise their capacities to the full. We seek to increase the capacity of people to make their own decisions - to choose. We do not seek to increase the power of government. We seek to give meaningful and effective assistance to the disadvantaged in the community - and not just to throw money at a problem and hope for some instant solution.

In the matter of civil liberties, we have acted on a number of fronts. A Human Rights Commission will be established. Its broad purpose is to promote individual rights and to make sure our laws are in line with the United Nations International Covenant on Human Rights.

We will introduce a Freedom of Information Act that will give as a basic and fundamental right - access to certain categories of government information. The Attorney General plans to introduce this legislation which will lie on the table of the House for some time to allow for full and open debate.

The Government has also decided to implement the report of the Law Reform Commission on Criminal Investigation. This is a particularly important advance in civil liberties for people detained for questioning, or arrested and charged with a Federal criminal offence.

There have also been references to this Commission on the protection of privacy; the law of defamation; and investigation into the possibility of applying Aboriginal customary law in criminal matters to Aborigines living in the traditional way.

An Administrative Appeals Tribunal has been set up, and the Commonwealth has appointed the first Ombudsman. The Government is also negotiating with the states so that legal aid is provided in the most effective manner possible. We believe this to be a fundamental right.

Aboriginal land rights legislation for the Northern Territory has been passed - a most significant advance for Aborigines. Our predecessors spoke about Aboriginal Land Rights, but we acted.

All in all, this is an impressive list that demonstrates our commitment to maintaining the freedom and dignity of the individual. Importantly, it also demonstrates our capacity to effectively carry out our policies. We are determined to provide assistance to those most in need in a way that does not make people more dependent on government. To make people more independent - to enhance their self-respect and dignity, not to destroy it.

The indexation of pensions, for instance, automatically retains their real value. The family allowance scheme is of incalculable benefit to about 300,000 Australian families who did not get the full benefit from the old system of tax deductions merely because their incomes were too low.

There has been a re-orientation of child care programmes to give children of working mothers and single-parent children, adequate care. In this often controversial area, what we are seeking to do is to simply provide the circumstances in which children are properly cared for.

Our housing voucher experiment scheme - that enables people eligible for assistance to choose their own housing - is another example of our concern for individual freedom and choice.

Realising that quite often government bureaucracies are unable to provide the kind of personal aid necessary, we have placed great emphasis on the work of voluntary organisations. We have for instance, initiated two significant experimental programmes with migrant communities.

Migrant resource centres have been set up in Sydney and Melbourne to see if we can get more effective contact with migrants and get a better delivery of government services to migrants.

I emphasise the programmes are experimental, but I believe they are well worthwhile and I am sure we will learn much from them. This Government will continue to apply this kind of approach to individual liberty and to those in need.

We are also taking significant initiatives in the field of Constitutional reform.

On 21 May, all Australian voters - except those resident in the Territories - will have the opportunity to vote on four referendum proposals to amend the Constitution. Unlike previous referendums, these proposals do not mean more power for Canberra; they do not diminish the power of the States. Rather, they are sensible, practical reforms to meet inadequacies in the Constitution which have become apparent over the years.

(1) The first proposal is that there be simultaneous elections for both Houses. It is commonsense that House of Representatives and Senate elections be held together. If this proposal is carried, there will only be meaningful elections - at which the country's government is at stake.

If the proposal is not carried, we could have four Federal elections in the next four years; two of which could not alter the Government. The power of the Senate will be maintained - all the States will continue to have an equal number of Senators; the Senate will retain the same power as it now possesses to defer, amend or reject ill-considered legislation.

Simultaneous elections will mean that the Senate will more accurately reflect the latest will of the electorate. Thus conferring greater authority on the Senate to review government decisions.

If the Senate uses its ultimate power to force the House of Representatives to a poll, at least half the Senators will, themselves, face the voters. The Senate will not be immune from the consequences of its own actions.

Some of our opponents claim that this referendum is unnecessary. That if I could only persuade the Governor General to call an early election for the lower House, elections for both Houses would be back in alignment. Even if a premature election for the House of Representatives was in the national interest - which might not be the case - this referendum is the only way to ensure that elections are always held simultaneously in the future.

(2) The second proposal is that a Senator whose seat falls vacant should be replaced by a person of the same Party and for his full term. This proposal ensures that your Party choice at a Senate election cannot be altered.

The balance of the Parties in the Senate can be changed only by the voters, not by accident or manipulation. Because replacement Senators will be appointed for the full term of the Senator replaced, room for manipulation will be curtailed. There will be no more Gair Affairs.

This proposal has long been a convention. This referendum seeks to make that Convention law; to ensure your choice at each election is maintained.

(3) The next proposal is that voters in territories be permitted to vote at referendums. By historical accident, voters of the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory are presently denied a basic democratic right. The right to vote in referendums, all of which affect them just like all other Australians.

This proposal will overcome this anomaly. At Federation, Australians living in what are now the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory, had the right to vote at referendums. This proposal simply restores that right which was taken away when the territories were created. 150,000 voters in the territories should not be treated as second-class citizens.

(4) The fourth and final proposal is that High Court Judges should retire at the age of seventy; and that Parliament should be empowered to set a retiring age for other Federal judges.

Most jobs in our community have retirement ages, for good reason. All State Judges are subject to a mandatory retiring age, in recognition of the fact that old age does impair ability. Judges are as affected by old age as everyone else. The independence of the Judiciary is still guaranteed; because judges will still have guaranteed tenure.

They cannot be forced to resign just because their judgements may be unpopular with the government of the day. No one suggests that State Judges who are subject to a retiring age are not truly independent.

Some have asked why did we oppose simultaneous elections in 1974? In that year, the simultaneous election proposal was part of a package designed to change the whole system of government in Australia as we know it.

Labor then tried to control methods of electing State Parliaments; gerrymander electorates; control local government from Canberra; and enable amendment of the Constitution without the approval of a majority of the States.

Because the majority of Labor's proposals was disastrous, we didn't want a split-ticket. We felt at that time, that the only way to ensure defeat of these proposals was to oppose the whole package. There is every reason to vote "yes" on all four proposals. The States are protected; the Senate is protected and strengthened.

These proposals were fully considered by representatives of the States at the Hobart Constitutional Convention and were approved without a dissenting voice. To sum up: All four proposals are sensible and practical; supported by all the major Parties; and were supported overwhelmingly in principle at the Hobart Constitutional Convention.

They are considered and necessary Constitutional reforms.

22 April, 1977.

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