



PRIME MINISTER

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ADDRESS AT TOWNSVILLE REFERENDUM MEETING

This is the last week of the referendum campaign. The opinion polls show that in every State, there is significant support for the referendums. The polls show that in Queensland, there is a solid majority yes vote on all four questions, notwithstanding the expensive campaign by the State Government. This is not surprising.

The four referendum proposals are sensible, just and well considered reforms. They will strengthen our constitution, a constitution of which we may all be justly proud. The founding fathers carefully provided us with the means to make necessary changes. They specifically built into the Constitution a mechanism for amending it. To ensure that the Constitution remains a living reality, continuing to meet changing needs.

In the referendums on Saturday we shall all have the chance to contribute to timely and necessary constitutional reform. Queensland have traditionally taken a leading role in constitutional reform. Queensland has voted in favour of 18 of the 32 referendums since Federation. I feel confident that by Saturday evening, that figure will be increased to 22.

The reason these referendum proposals are being put to you is that they are fair and necessary, and because they were considered and endorsed by the Hobart Constitutional Convention. At which all the States the Commonwealth and local Government were represented.

The Convention was initiated by a State Government, by the Victorian Liberal Government under Sir Henry Bolte, a stronger anti-centralist could not be asked for. The Hobart Convention was dominated by the States which had 72 of the 92 votes. It passed the principles of all four referendum proposals overwhelmingly.

The proposals have the support of all major federal political parties. The four proposals are also distinguished by a number of special features. None of them seek to increase the power of the Commonwealth, none will weaken the powers of the States or the Senate, none seeks more power for politicians.

If the four referendums are passed, the balance of powers between the Commonwealth and the States will remain unaltered. This is why, of course, the State dominated constitutional convention supported all four proposals.

There have been attempts to mislead voters by portraying the referendum proposals as in some way an attack on the States or the Senate. Nothing could be further from the truth. If there were any truth in it, the proposals would never have received the support of the States at Hobart. And they would not have received the support of Sir Gordon Chalk, Dame Annabelle Rankin and Charles Adermann.

They would not have the support of the National Party Organisation in Queensland. We deplore the Queensland Government's use of public money to run an intensive advertising campaign against the referendum.

The A.B.C. provides equal time for publicising both sides of the case. Two hours for the yes case to be put and two hours for advocates of the no case to put their views. No Federal funds are being spent on advertising the yes case.

Yet the Queensland Government is spending huge amounts of taxpayers' funds to mount an advertising campaign which grossly distorts the facts. We all know that Joh Bjelke-Petersen put the interests of Queensland first when he fought against the Labor Government's attempts to invade areas of States rights. And we applaud this. But his opposition to these referendums is completely unjustified.

The only way it can be explained is that having once, justifiably, got on the anti-Canberra horse he finds it difficult to get off, and this is tragic.

These referendums are our opportunity to ensure that the Constitution which we are all rightly proud of is strengthened and continues to serve the needs of our nation.

The four proposals on which we shall be voting next Saturday are these. First, that elections for the Senate and House of Representatives should be held simultaneously. This proposal was supported unanimously at the Convention. Those in favour included Mr. Knox, Mr. Hewitt, Mr. Lickiss, Mr. Porter, Sir Charles Court, and significantly Mr. Bjelke-Petersen.

Every representative of the Queensland Government supported the simultaneous elections proposal just 7 months ago. It is a matter of regret that those delegates have reversed their position. Because it is simply common sense that both elections should be held at the same time.

This proposal means you will not have to vote in as many Federal elections.

That you will only have to vote in a Federal election when you have to choose Australia's Government. Simultaneous elections protect the less populous states like Queensland.

When there are separate elections for the House of Representatives, political leaders will be tempted to confine their campaign to New South Wales and Victoria, which have over 60 per cent of the seats.

But if there is at the time an election for the Senate, in which all States are equally represented. The campaign must be vigorously pursued in to all States. Federal politicians will have to be more responsive to the wishes of people in the less populous States.

It is sometimes said that simultaneous elections can be achieved by bringing the House of Representatives election forward to coincide with that of the Senate.

Unless the Constitution is changed the only way to bring the elections together would be repeatedly to cut short the term of the House of Representatives. The three year term is however, already relatively short, one of the shortest parliamentary terms in the democratic world. Further reducing it would damage good Government.

Most importantly, this proposal will maintain and strengthen the Senate and its capacity to protect the States. I tell you in all seriousness that if this proposal is not passed, the future of the Senate will ultimately be put in jeopardy.

It was an accident that in 1975 there were bills enabling the Governor-General to dissolve both Houses and make them both face the people. Had Senators not been able to face the people themselves so that their actions might be judged, a number of Senators would not have agreed to block supply.

I, myself, would never have sought the blocking of supply from a Senate that would not itself have also faced the people of Australia.

The Senate's powers are great, and anyone who wants them to remain a living reality will campaign for simultaneous elections and vote for them on Saturday week.

For unless the present situation is changed, I can foresee two alternative consequences. The Senate might refuse to check a bad government unless there happened to exist the circumstances which would permit a double dissolution.

Alternatively if Senators were to make the House of Representatives go to an election without facing the people themselves, then there would be a public outcry against the Senate which could lead to the Senate's powers being restricted or abolished. Either of these alternatives would be bad for democratic Government, bad for the States and bad for Australia. That is why it is important that this referendum be passed.

The second referendum proposal is that whenever a Senator dies or resigns, he will be replaced, for the remainder of his term of office, by a member of the same party. This will guarantee that your choice of parties for the Senate cannot be altered by accident or design.

This will guarantee that your choice of parties for the Senate cannot be altered by accident or design. Under the Constitution as it now stands, a Senate vacancy can completely change the party balance.

It is fundamental to our democracy that only the people should determine the balance of the parties in the Senate. And I need hardly repeat that it is vital to Queensland that it be impossible for any Government to tamper with the party balance in the Senate. For it is in the Senate that the less populous States have the strongest vote.

The importance of this cannot be understated, and the example Evan Adermann put to me last night brings it home.

He often travels home from Canberra in the same aeroplane as almost all the Queensland Senators. What would happen he asked if the aeroplane were to be involved in a tragic accident? Would the people of Queensland, of any State, be content to make the Party affiliation of their Senators depend on some State Government observing a convention that might be breached by considerations of political advantage.

Constitutions are supposed to make laws for this sort of situation. NOT allow it to depend on the political calculations of State Governments. Once this referendum proposal is accepted the peoples choice will be preserved until they have an opportunity to make another choice, at the next election.

The third referendum proposal, is that voters in the Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory should have a vote in all future referendums.

This is a fundamental right all other Australians have.

I know of no rational or reasonable argument for denying territorial voters this basic right.

Territorial voters have the same obligations as other Australians. They pay taxes, they are obliged to observe the laws of the Commonwealth, they vote for Members of Parliament, the outcome of referendums affect them as much as they do other Australians.

All Liberal and National Party M.P's from the legislative assemblies in both territories unanimously support this referendum and ask for our support, I believe we should give them that support.

The fourth and final referendum proposal, is to set a retiring age for Federal Justices. High Court Justices would retire at seventy and the retirement age for other Federal Court Judges would be determined by Parliament.

The proposal does not affect the terms of Judges already appointed to the bench. Most jobs have retirement ages, and for good reason. Judges are as affected by old age as the rest of us.

It is only fair that after the age of seventy responsibility should be handed over to younger people.

This is even more important now that the new system of Federal Family Courts have been set up. All Queensland State Judges are subject to a retiring age of seventy. That system has worked well in this State, and would work well in Federal Courts.

All four referendum proposals are fair just and reasonable. They meet all the requirements for success. They have been extensively considered by representatives of all the States, they have the support of all major Federal Parties, they do not involve more power for Canberra, they will make the Constitution work better.

If you agree with me that it is vital that all four referendums should be passed on Saturday, I ask you in these few remaining days to play your part in this campaign.

Talk to your friends, explain to them that these four simple propositions are necessary fair and just and give us your active support on polling day.

If we all do this, then the referendums will be passed and we will have a Constitution which serves Australia's needs more effectively.

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