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PRIME MINISTER

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THE REFERENDUM

Tomorrow is a day on which Australians can make sensible changes to the 77-year-old Federal Constitution. It is an opportunity to modernise the constitution and reform it in a down-to-earth fashion.

I urge all Australians to make the most of this opportunity by voting Yes on all four questions.

Four questions are being put to you tomorrow, as a result of agreement reached in Hobart in October last year at the Constitutional Convention. All political parties in all Australian Governments, State and Federal, took part in that Convention. There were 72 delegates from the States, 16 from the Federal Parliament and four from local governments. There was overwhelming support for the principles behind the questions which are being put forward tomorrow.

That Convention was a genuine attempt to achieve constitutional reform, on the basis of common sense and co-operation. The principles behind the four referendum questions were non-controversial. The arguments in their favour are simple and clear-cut. The arguments against them are mixed and confused, basically because they are so weak.

I regret that the spirit which motivated all delegates in Hobart is no longer present in some of them, but this does not alter the fact that the proposals being made by the Commonwealth are fair and reasonable.

They make good sense, and I believe that tomorrow the people of Australia will show that they too recognise that these questions are a commonsense approach to constitutional change.

The four questions which are being put tomorrow are:

- (1) That elections for the House of Representatives and the Senate should take place at the same time

If this is not passed, there could be four Federal elections over the next four years - elections which the country does not need or want. In Hobart, this proposal was supported

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by every one of the 72 State delegates - Liberal, Labor and National Country Party, Government and Opposition; every one of the 16 Federal delegates from both Government and Opposition, and every one of the local government representatives. They all saw it for what it was - a matter of simple common sense designed to strengthen the Parliament as a whole and to enhance the authority of the Senate. Holding the House and the Senate elections at the same time means that the parties must put forward policies applicable to all States. For instance, no party could calculate on winning power by concentrating on the two major cities of Sydney and Melbourne.

- (2) The second question is that, should a vacancy occur in the Senate through death or retirement, the nominated replacement should be of the same political party serving out the balance of the full term of the Senator he is replacing.

This was a convention for many years in Australian politics. Again, it is a matter of plain fairness to ensure that a decision made by voters at elections is preserved.

- (3) The third question is that electors in the Northern Territory and Capital Territory should have a vote in referendums like other Australians.

It is quite wrong that people in the Territories should be denied basic democratic rights. Referendums are counted in two parts. The votes of Territory residents would be included in the overall Australian verdict, but not in that part of the count which requires a majority in four of the six States. In the year 1977, denying political rights to a section of the Australian community is sheer nonsense.

- (4) The fourth question is that High Court Judges should retire at the age of 70 and that a retiring age also be set for other Federal Judges.

The States have retiring ages for their own judges. It is only fair that after the age of 70 judges in the Federal arena should pass the job on to younger men.

These proposals are all designed to enhance the authority of the Senate and of the Parliament. The important distinction between these referendum questions and some referendums in the past is that there is absolutely no attempt to increase the power of the Central Government at the expense of the State Governments.

All these referendums are designed to strengthen the democratic institutions and enhance political stability in our country.

They would remove a means of manipulating the system of proportional representation as took place at the time of the Gair affair.

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They will give millions of dollars in unnecessary separate Senate elections. They will give the Territory residents an elementary right which they should have had long ago. They do not in any way diminish the power and authority of the State Governments or of the Senate. They are fair, reasonable and sensible proposals.

I believe they deserve your support, and I ask tomorrow for a Yes vote on all four questions.
