

INTERVIEW WITH LAURIE OAKES

QUESTION:

Prime Minister, your put the nation on notice that this dispute could go for a month or even more. Why do you think it will go that long?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I hope very much that it won't and I hope that commonsense will prevail over the weekend and that the votes on Monday and Tuesday unionists will take Commissioner Clarkson's advice and reject their Executive recommendation. The Commissioner has worked very hard to get a compromise proposal that's reasonable but we do need to understand and the community needs to know that as far as technical innovation is concerned, the members of this union have got a 10-year guarantee of no retrenchments as a result of new equipment. Commissioner Clarkson's proposals which were accepted by Telecom, involve a very adequate consultation, it involves trial periods for equipment and independent assessment. Against that background I would have thought that it's a very reasonable package.

QUESTION:

Does this tough line mean that the Government won't budge , no matter what. That if anyone gives in it will have to be the other side?

PRIME MINISTER:

We shouldn't look at it in terms of giving in. The Commissioner has put forward reasonable proposals. Telecom, even though it had misgivings about one or two aspects of it, accepted them and thought that it was necessary to do so in the interests of the public at large. But it's very important that Telecom be, continue to be able to advance, use new equipment, and make sure that the total Australian community can get the benefits of more efficient services and either services that contain costs or which, even in some of the circumstances, might enable the costs and charges to be reduced. And you can't do that if you are going to have some members of the Union making the point that there are no changes unless we agree with them. So it's out of that background that the dispute's begun.

QUESTION:

Let's assume that it's not settled next Tuesday. How long can Australia go without telecommunications?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, it's going to be very very difficult indeed. That's very plain now. At the same time I believe it's going to be of enormous significance and of enormous cost to Australia if Telecom were to give in or if the Government were to give in relation to an issue of this kind because there are many areas within Australia where a selected group of people have got a fairly significant influence in what happens and if they are to be enabled to overthrow the processes of arbitration and conciliation and of compromise and discussion to get to a resolution of the dispute, then that means that those select groups can hold the community to ransom. The ultimate cost in that to the whole community would in the view of the Government be much greater than having to continue with this particular dispute for some time. That's why last night, I thought it necessary to put the nation on notice that the dispute could go on at great inconvenience to businesses, to individuals and to families.

QUESTION:

You also said that the Government has no power to force people back to work. What do you have the power to do? What action can you take?

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't want to go into that in too great a detail. But there are obviously powers in relation to stand-downs and suspensions and there are extensive powers under Commonwealth legislation, some of which has been on the books for a long time, some of it not so long. No Government likes being forced into a position of using that sort of legislation but we felt it was only fair to the members of the Union themselves to indicate that the Government was determined - that we thought Commissioner Clarkson's proposals ought to be supported and that we did support them, but if - it takes two sides to support a compromise proposal such as the Commissioner put forward. Telecom has and if the union is not going to support it well the Government just can't stand by and do nothing at all while this goes on and the whole network deteriorates. You've got to take action in those circumstances which are designed to try and get an ultimate resolution even if it takes some time.

QUESTION:

If your worst fears are realised and it does drag on for a month or more, have you looked at what the armed services can do? Have they got any expertise?

PRIME MINISTER:

There's a task force at the moment examining to see what can be done and see what facilities are available for emergency

PRIME MINISTER: (continued)

communications. One of the things which I think should be some comfort to many individuals is that it is believed that the local networks are likely to - your local dialling - is likely to keep in operation for quite some time and that of course is very important in relation to emergency services and hospitals and other matters of that kind. So far as business communications are concerned, going from capital city to capital city, they are virtually non-existent now.

QUESTION:

I gather telexes are being affected too? Airlines...

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes, a number of telexes are seriously affected. You could get to the circumstances where your airlines are affected because you've got the facilities around airports which are sensitive.

QUESTION:

Given the seriousness of the situation, have you thought of calling on Mr. Hawke? Have you approached him in any way?

PRIME MINISTER:

Mr. Street has called a National Labour Consultative Council together. I'm not sure that a time has been fixed for a meeting just yet but I think it will be meeting quite shortly.

QUESTION:

Do you think that Mr. Hawke will involve himself after (inaudible) with the UTAH dispute?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I'm told that - well he's a member of that Council - and I'm told that he will be attending and I also understand that he is very concerned about the prospects. I think everyone ought to be concerned. While I felt it necessary for the Government to state its view clearly and state what it regarded as the national interest in this particular matter, we really do need, all of us, to remember that we are Australians first and we've all got an obligation to this country and that....(end tape).