

INTERVIEW ON WESTERN AUSTRALIAN DISPUTE AND NSW OIL DISPUTE

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Question

Mr. Fraser, the ads in the national press today are said by the Acting Premier of Western Australia to have been suggested by you. Is that a fact?

Prime Minister

What I told Mr. O'Neil when he spoke to me sometime ago and gave the facts as he understood it, I said "well, look that's not understood in the Eastern States. I don't know if you are making any effort to try and make sure that what you believe to be the situation is understood and if that's your story I think you should try and tell it". It didn't go any further than that. But I think we need to understand that in relation to Thursday's national stoppage and the Kurnell refinery dispute which we will both be discussing in a short while, that the AMSWU and one or two other major unions had already made up their own minds to have a national stoppage of their own unions in support of what I am advised was a \$40 a week wage claim. Now, that is obviously totally destructive and totally irresponsible. We have an arbitration system and the Government has said on a number of occasions it's necessary and important that that arbitration system be accepted and supported. Individual trade unionists do not need to lose wages. They do not need to penalise their families and damage their own industries and destroy the prospects of increasing jobs by going on strike in an utterly destructive and irresponsible manner. The point I am making is that a large part of the prospective national stoppage on Thursday is going to take place straight out in support wage claims, and we need to have that clearly in mind.

Prime Minister

I think that says something about the mood of some of the trade union leaders in relation to it.

Question (Peter Harvey)

On the immediate petrol issue though...

Prime Minister

Could I just stay on Western Australia for a moment. It might be better if we deal with the issues separately because they are quite different.

I said a couple of days ago that whatever the nature of the dispute we need to understand that the damage done to Australia, to Australian industry, is just no way justified by the nature of the dispute itself. Tens of thousands of people in hardship and difficulty, and industry is damaged. When there were major disputes in Victoria a year or two ago a number of private firms, small firms, were just not able to re-employ the numbers they had employed earlier because they had been so damaged by that major dispute.

One of the matters that I understand the ACTU Executive is considering is the prospect of continuing bans on the State of Western Australia. I also understand that one or two Labor Party Conferences have supported continuing bans on the State of Western Australia - sea, rail and air, and transport. Quite plainly, the idea of a continuing ban on any particular State would be something new in industrial anarchy within Australia and for any State Labor Party convention or council to support that is pretty much beyond my comprehension. I am reasonably hopeful after the discussions which I think you know that I have had with the Secretary, Peter Nolan, that that additional step of a destructive and damaging kind will not be supported by the ACTU. That's what a good deal of the discussions over the weekend between Peter Nolan, Ian Viner, and Doug Anthony and myself was involved in trying to achieve - a realisation that whatever happens on Thursday ought to be the end of it. I don't think I've got anything more to say about the national strike, until we have a discussion about the matter...

Question (Laurie Wilson)

Just one question - the legislation at the centre of this. Do you feel it should be repealed or do you support it?

Prime Minister

Sir Charles Court has said that the legislation will be reviewed. Now that's been a commitment given and I think that commitment ought to be accepted. But it will be reviewed. There are many different stories about what actually happened at Karratha and I find it difficult - we didn't have our own direct observers there - and there are different stories. But the Western Australian

Prime Minister (continued)

Government has indicated that legislation will be up for review and again, against that background, against the fact that on Thursday it is most unlikely that those court cases would be brought to finality, if the normal course of events is followed, they would be adjourned for quite some time. Now, that would be the normal course of events. Now, against those two contingencies it seems to me all the more unreal to seek to de-mobilise the whole nation for a while as a result.

Question (Laurie Power)

Mr. Fraser, Mr. O'Neil said that he thought he had your support after talking with you on Saturday morning. Does the Commonwealth still adopt an impartial view in this national dispute?

Prime Minister

I don't think I want to say anymore than I have at the present time. I do say, in the strongest and most categorical terms, that the proposed strike on Thursday or the nature of a dispute which has given rise to this in no way condones a dispute, a stoppage, of the kind that is contemplated for Thursday and whatever view one takes of the nature of the dispute, that can't be justified. And continuing bans on the State of Western Australia all the more seriously cannot be justified because that would establish a new precedent I think in industrial anarchy in this country and if that were to be the decision, it's a matter that I think all Governments would have to take with the utmost seriousness and would have to consult with each other as to what should be done in relation to it.

If I could turn now to the Kurnell Refinery. Here we have a long history of industrial disputation as you know. There are many people who believe that the only possibility to end that industrial disputation is to get under one award, and obviously if its to be one award it has to be the Federal award because it is an industry that extends beyond the boundaries of one State.

I think - well I am glad now - to see the more forthright statements by the Premier, but I really believe that this dispute has simmered and has broken out in this way because the State Branch of the AWU, which has its own internecine fight with the Federal Branch of the AWU, which it is not really affiliated with, has believed that up to know it has had the support of the State Government. That just isn't good enough. Quite plainly, if there is a separate jurisdiction for the Kurnell Refinery, there is going to be the prospect of leap-frogging and playing off one award against the other and that was the circumstance before it came under a Federal Award. And what the State AWU are fighting for is the right to play that game again on a continuing basis down into the future. Now, the Commonwealth Government has said on many occasions that in these matters we've got an umpire. We don't always like the umpire's verdict but we ought to accept that verdict when we like it and when we don't like it. That applies very much in the Kurnell Refinery case. The judgement has been made; it's under the Federal Award and it is just as much up to Mr. Neville Wran,

Prime Minister (continued)

Premier of N.S.W., to accept that umpire's verdict, as he should have done weeks and weeks ago -- make it perfectly plain that he offers no semblance of moral or material support to the State Branch of the AWU. I believe that if he'd done that, the prospects and hope for victory through industrial turmoil and industrial anarchy in N.S.W. would have faded, and the chances of this dispute would have been very much less. But now, as a result of walking down the centre of that particular fence instead of being firmly on the side of arbitration, firmly on the side of the umpire, we have a dispute which is potentially much much more damaging than the national one-day stoppage on Thursday, because we all know the seriousness of the world oil situation; we know that our supplies are stretched thin; it is difficult to keep refineries going; if oil can't be passed through those refineries it's going to be very difficult to get the additional oil to make up the backlog at a later point. And the people of N.S.W. are going to start feeling the very real difficulties and problems that are coming out the Kurnell dispute virtually forthwith.

Question: (Peter Harvey)

Prime Minister, it's not only the people of N.S.W. it is starting to spread to the other States as well. Mr. Wran has already taken emergency measures. The Federal Government has powers to look after the rest of Australia. Are you going to start exercising those?

Prime Minister

In many of these emergency areas it is State powers that you have to rest on - the Commonwealth's major emergency powers come under a Defence Act and they don't apply under current circumstances as you would understand, but you are right when you say that some of this will start to be felt by other States because plainly N.S.W. would be seeking additional supplies from other States as they would believe, for a more equal sharing of the burden. Now, I strongly believe that if Mr. Wran is to expect that to occur, he should come down fairly and squarely on the side of the Federal Arbitration Commission and support the one-award situation throughout the oil industry. Quite plainly, the Commonwealth will have to be doing what it can to see that hardship is minimised, to see that difficulties are faced in an equal and reasonable manner.

Question

So you will use the measures under the Defence...

Prime Minister

You are, I think, running down a very odd street. The Defence Act is there for defence purposes.

Question

...power to transport.

Prime Minister

Yes, but whether -- I think you would find difficulty with those powers in the current circumstances. The States have total emergency powers in civil circumstances. To talk of the Defence Act in these circumstances is not really relevant.

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