

EMBARGO: 5PM

**PRIME MINISTER**FOR MEDIASUNDAY, MARCH 15 1981ELECTORATE TALK

On Friday, the Transport Workers' Union removed the last bans on Qantas. Qantas employees had voted earlier in the week to go back to work, and the airline had been getting back to normal operations. But the residual bans of the TWU were still causing difficulties, and staff labour was still having to be used.

Now Qantas can proceed without distraction to try to make good the damage that has been done - although some of the damage will be permanent.

On behalf of the Government and the overwhelming majority of Australians, I want to thank Qantas staff and management for the magnificent way that they have kept Australia's flag carrier operating in the face of grave and serious difficulties.

There have been reduced services, but the efforts of the staff have kept reductions to a minimum. This achievement is an enormous tribute to all those who have been involved.

The principle for which Qantas was fighting throughout the dispute stands intact. It is a vital principle, one which must be maintained. This principle is that Qantas must reserve the right to use staff labour, in the face of industrial disputes and strikes, in order to keep the airline flying for reasons of safety and for the convenience and comfort of the travelling public.

Against the background in which there is a process of arbitration, against the background in which there are dispute settling procedures, I fail to understand why the ACTU and some sections of the union movement do so much to promote industrial disruption at great cost to their own members, at great cost to the reputation of Australia and the Australian community as a whole.

Of course, Qantas must keep its aircraft flying in the face of strikes. The overwhelming majority of Qantas employees want to keep the aircraft flying. Unless a very few people are to obtain a totally unreasonable power to disrupt Qantas operations, the right of Qantas to use staff labour in these situations must be maintained. And, of course, the Qantas board and management as well as staff have stuck by that principle and they have not conceded anything in relation to it.

During the dispute I appealed to all those who were involved to think of Qantas as Australia's international flag carrier. Qantas is a great airline that is owned by the Government on behalf of the people in Australia. As I have said - and I cannot stress it too strongly - it is time that Qantas' service to the public and to Australia was put first. It is time for all Australians to recognise that our fundamental interests are held in common.

These interests are not competitive, but complementary. Anyone who seeks to damage Qantas by grounding its aircraft damages us all. The damage is not confined to the airline or even just to Australia's reputation, but extends to the Australian people in its entirety.

During the course of the dispute, the Government ordered the RAAF to lift passengers across the Tasman - and the New Zealand government and the New Zealand Air Force gave full co-operation in this airlift.

I want to thank both the RAAF and the New Zealand Airforce for what they did. Nearly 4,000 passengers were transported. They may not have enjoyed the comfort which the Qantas fleet provides. But they did have all the care and consideration which the Air Force was able to provide with the C130 Hercules aircraft.

I have no doubt that this relief operation prevented a great deal of personal hardship. It was an operation which had the full support of the Australian people - it was greatly appreciated by those stranded people who were flown home.

And, as one would expect, the RAAF - which this year celebrates its 60th anniversary - did a great job.

At the end of this dispute, those who were striking have really gained nothing that would not have been open to them if sensible discussion and negotiation had taken place. I think we all hope that better dispute settling procedures between Qantas and the unions that represent its employees will be established and discussions will be continuing to achieve that.

Qantas set out to defend a vital principle for the operation of the airline and for the safety of the travelling public. Qantas has conceded nothing of that principle. Qantas made it plain - and the Government fully supported it in this - that it would not let go of that principle.

Yet the dispute went on, and only finally ended last Friday. How many thousands of dollars have been lost in wages? How much harm has been done to family budgets? Only the individuals and families concerned will actually know.

Perhaps there is a lesson in this for a great many other people apart from those who were involved in this dispute. Let me say again that it is time for all of us to put Australia first. It is necessary for all of us to understand what is important for this nation, what is essential for progress to continue; and for the well-being of all Australians to receive proper care and attention.

We have an unparalleled future in front of us.

I don't know any other country better placed than Australia to look boldly at the 1980s.

We can face the future with tremendous confidence and optimism. If we fail it will be because of ourselves - because we have not been able to act as one people united in common purposes.

We all owe Australia something better than the kind of disputation which has plagued Qantas for the last three weeks and which is so prevalent in other areas of national life at this time.

We all know that our fellow Australians deserve something better than this.

It is time to take stock and ask how our own individual actions are affecting Australia and the future of our families.

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