

THE PUBLIC SERVICE

Statement by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Menzies, in the House of Representatives on Tuesday, 14th May, 1963.

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I do not propose to take very long to deal with what I must say is one of the most half-hearted attacks I have heard my friend, the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Calwell), make. Indeed, one might well be pardoned for speculating why this matter was brought before this House when it is coming before the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission on 28th of this month. Is the idea that the commission will be threatened and conditioned in advance? This is in the teeth of all arbitration principles.

The fact about this present matter - it is worth reciting - is that the case will come before the commission on 28th May. The reference of the case to the full commission was made at the request of the Commonwealth Public Service staff associations. I have already made it clear that, as distinct from a former occasion when we were experiencing very acute inflationary pressures, when this matter comes before the commission the Commonwealth does not propose to intervene. The matter will be contested and thrashed out between the Public Service Board - which, for this purpose, is the employer - and the Public Service organizations.

The honourable gentleman's idea of the arbitration for which the people for whom he offers to speak have asked is that the matter should be heard on 28th May and that there should be no intervention by the Public Service Board except for the board to say that it agrees to everything for which the staff associations have asked. Really, I begin to wonder whether, if he had the power, he would, in all the other applications which will crop up to extend the metal trades margins decision to other industries, tell the respective employers that they were not to intervene at the hearings except to say "Yes". This is a fantasy. I am really shocked that a man who aspires to be the Prime Minister of this country, and would then be responsible, as I am technically, for the Public Service administration, should be prepared to foment an idea of this kind.

Of course he went back a little and stated that in 1952 we introduced legislation, which the Parliament passed, to provide for an appeal procedure or a reference procedure to the full Arbitration Commission. Why did we do that? We did it to produce some consistency of results. The honourable gentleman rather conveniently forgets, if he will allow me to say so, that many people employed by the Commonwealth are doing exactly the same kind of jobs as are people employed in a variety of private industries. The oldest game in the world of industrial arbitration, with which I used to be extremely familiar, is to jack it up by getting an award from a limited tribunal and then telling the general tribunal that it must apply the provisions of that award generally, otherwise there will be anomalies and industrial unrest. I suppose those expressions are still being used.

We knew that there would be industrial unrest and anomalies unless some procedure was established under which there was co-ordination of decisions. There had to be co-ordination of the work of individual commissioners. There had to be suitable procedures for references to the full commission so that the full commission could co-ordinate what was being done by the individual commissioners. We felt that in the same way, on appropriate occasions, the commission could be charged with the responsibility of producing some co-ordination of what it was doing and what the Public Service Arbitrator was doing. We still have the Public Service Arbitrator. Listening to the honourable gentleman's speech, you would think we had abolished the Public Service Arbitrator. Listening to the honourable gentleman's speech, with its somewhat tenuous logic, you would think we had abolished all the individual commissioners under the arbitration system. Of course we have not. We have provided for co-ordination of their work and for the determination of the big basic problems at the top level.

How any one can complain about that, I do not know. How on this occasion the Public Service associations can complain retrospectively to 1952, I do not know. Their self-appointed spokesman, the Leader of the Opposition, has said to us, "You did a terrible thing in 1952. You wretched people wanted to produce some consistency between decisions over a wide field." Now his complaint is that there is not to be consistency over a wide field. When we say, on the application of the Public Service unions themselves, that we will go to the commission - the commission that made the first decision - and allow it to determine what should happen in these matters, they say, "That is a funny thing to do unless you agree to go to the commission and tell it to do what we want it to do." That is a pretty strange proposal, and all the more strange when one remembers that subsequent to the legislation of 1952 we had in 1959-60 the increase in salaries - margins if you wish to use the more precise term. That matter went to the full bench of the commission on the application of the public service association, just as this present application has. So apparently the new rule, as stated by the Labour Party, is: Ask for the matter to go to the commission and do your best to get it on in time. The unions cannot claim that we have held up their application on this occasion. The application will be heard on 28th May. The Labour Party then says, "Use parliamentary representatives to frighten members of Parliament or to have the commission itself feel that there is a great switch of opinion against it." We must be timid!

Mr. Speaker, I have noticed in the local newspaper a large and costly advertisement inserted by the Administrative and Clerical Officers Association of the Commonwealth Public Service. I must say I have had a happy experience of Commonwealth civil servants. I have not met one of the type referred to in the advertisement and I would refuse to believe that such people represent a majority of the men who work so faithfully and so objectively, not only for this Government but for the country as a whole. It is a novel experience for me to be told, "Come down quietly or we will convert ourselves into a political pressure group." A letter has been circulated, and a copy of it has been handed to me by my friend ...

Mr. Peters - Who is your friend?

SIR ROBERT MENZIES : The honourable member for Ryan (Mr. Drury). The letter is a fascinating document. I do not know a single Commonwealth civil servant who could have stooped to write -

"Should I not obtain salary justice on this occasion through the persistence of the Government's attitude ..... I must point out that as a retaliatory measure I will cast my vote against you in this electorate at the next election."

Do you suppose I will lose any sleep over that threat? If I were any other honourable member of this House I should take as an insult the suggestion that I could be frightened into changing my public policy - persuaded but frightened by these foolish threats. I do not believe for a moment that more than a tiny percentage of Commonwealth civil servants would dream of saying, not only to us, but also to all the other people of Australia who outnumber them:

"We are not concerned about the great issues that affect the safety and growth of the country. We are not concerned with any matter of public policy except our salaries. Give us what we are after."

Mr. Haylen - They did not say that.

SIR ROBERT MENZIES : They did say that. At least that is what the few people responsible for this concoction say. They say, "Unless you do what we want in this regard, we will convert ourselves into a political pressure group and vote against you." As far as I am concerned they are welcome to vote as they think proper. If I were in their place I should hesitate before I set myself at variance on these matters with the rest of the Australian people, but that is a matter for these people themselves to determine. All I want to point out, and in the simplest possible terms, is that these threats proceed in relation to a matter which in a few days will be before the lawful tribunal - the very tribunal that has already dealt with the margins application in the metal trades case. That tribunal will not be pressed by the government of the country by way of intervention. It will thrash the matter out and will arrive at a conclusion. Following its invariable practice the Government will accept the tribunal's decision. Is this a threat that somebody else will not accept that decision? This is something new. I do not for one moment believe that such an improper exercise of the forms of this House designed solely to bring influence to bear on the tribunal, will have the sympathy or support of either the general public of Australia or of 95 per cent. of members of the Public Service of the Commonwealth.

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