

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE RT. HON. SIR
ROBERT MENZIES, K.T., C.H., Q.C., M.P., IN THE
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

1ST OCTOBER, 1965.

STEVEDORING INDUSTRY BILL

1965

Mr. Speaker, I hope that I will be allowed to pay a short tribute of admiration to the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Calwell, for the technical quality of the speech he has just delivered. How any man at half past nine in the morning could produce such a torrent of adjectives and old political jokes is beyond me. I think it is a wonderful performance, but through it all I thought that I detected a slight note of hostility to my colleague the Minister for Labour and National Service, Mr. McMahon, and therefore perhaps I should begin by correcting the Leader of the Opposition on that point.

This Bill, the Stevedoring Industry Bill, is the product of very considerable close study in the Cabinet. It is not one man's frolic. It is a Bill produced by this Government and supported by this Government, and indeed, by honourable members who sit behind it. In the second place, I think it is only proper to add that the second reading speech delivered by my colleague, the Minister for Labour and National Service, was a masterly presentation, not only of the narrative behind this Bill but of the quality of its provisions, and every word that he had to say about it certainly has my support and I believe has the support of every honourable member on this side of the House.

Now, there is a very curious thing about this debate. Last night the spokesman for the Opposition devoted his time, very properly, because it is a large matter, not to attacking the transfer of the right of recruitment to the Stevedoring Industry Authority and away from the Waterside Workers Federation - I could not detect that he said anything about that point - that seems to go by silence, and he also said nothing about the rights of appeal or disciplinary procedures that I could detect; but he came down, as the Leader of the Opposition did this morning, entirely to Part III of the Bill. If anybody is to make any inference from this, the inference is clear that the Labour Party in this House is taking its real exception to the deregistration proposals but is not prepared to argue against the merits of the other and major provisions of this legislation. Indeed, one can understand why. I will come to that point in a moment.

All the Labour Party does in this House, having concentrated its fire, a great deal of heat, and some abuse on Part III of the Bill, is to come along with the old proposition that there ought to be nationalisation and until there is, nothing good will occur. There will never be industrial peace until there is nationalisation, it says.

This is a new kind of unity ticket because that is exactly what the Communist Docker said to the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, practically in these words. My colleague the Minister quoted what had been said by Docker. The Minister said that Docker told the Commission that if the Waterside Workers Federation -

"would determine how it would act to secure its claims; and that even if all its industrial claims were granted, frequent disputes could be expected until the industry was nationalised."

As I understand it, Docker now has the backing of the Leader of the Opposition for that proposition. This is indeed, as I have just said, a new sort of unity ticket.

Now, Sir, how hollow this argument about nationalisation being the panacea is, obviously, to anybody with any experience of industrial problems, even as a spectator over a term of years. When did nationalisation of an industry eliminate strikes? We have seen them in Australia time after time, strikes in nationalised undertakings. We have seen strikes in ships run by the Government Line, the Australian National Line; and strikes in Sydney and Newcastle transport services. We had transport strikes in Victoria several times in the post-war period. There have been hold-ups in the New South Wales and Victorian power stations, troubles in our Post Office, and from time to time in Defence establishments. These are all nationalised.

The experience in Australia is precisely the same as the experience in Great Britain because its experience has proved that nationalisation does not stop strikes. Great Britain has had transport problems in nationalised industries time after time. So, Sir, let nobody run away with the idea that by nationalising an industry you usher in a period of industrial peace.

Now, Sir, the real issues in the Bill are plain enough, although the Opposition has sought to avoid several of them. Should the Waterside Workers Federation retain its monopoly right of recruitment? Just let us remember - indeed everybody does - that under the existing legislation this Federation has a position of privilege, described just now by the Leader of the Opposition as a unique position. It has the sole right to recruit or nominate - I do not care what word is used - the selection of the person to be presented in the first instance is made by the Federation. It has the right of recruitment. I do not know of any other trade union that has this right. There may be one somewhere, but this one stands out.

Should the Federation retain this right? That is the real and central question. There has been no serious attempt, in the face of the facts put before the House by the Minister, to say that the Federation should retain this right. It has yet to be said by the Opposition, if it is ever going to be said at all, that it wants the present state of privilege for the Federation to continue.

Of course, on the merits as distinct from the question of debate between the two sides of the House, well, "by their fruits ye shall know them". The Federation has had an industrial privilege. The privilege carries with it, surely, an industrial responsibility in an industry which is of great importance to the whole of the Australian economy, domestically and internationally. I will just take one or two figures. They have been mentioned, but I recall the attention of the House to them.

My colleague, whose figures have not been seriously challenged, I think, drew attention to the grave fall in the average net gang rates of work per hour. This is not something that can be laughed off by saying that it has to do with machinery or with port equipment. This is the gang work per hour. You would expect it, in the course of time, to be increasing, but as his figures show, there has been a steady decline. Was this unconscious? Was this unplanned, or was this desired by the Communists who are the real directors of the Federation?

Mr. Curtin - Get off that. (Interjection)

SIR ROBERT MENZIES - They are the real directors of the Federation. The honourable member would hardly deny that. All the facts that have been put before us prove it.

Then, Sir, take work stoppages. I want to emphasise these figures. Over the last ten years to June, 1965, in all industry - taking the whole mass of industrial occupation in Australia - workers lost on the average less than two hours a year because of industrial disputes. This is a remarkable record. It demonstrates that, among other things, if we look at the whole of industry we find that the trade unions have been honouring the law, have been availing themselves of the normal industrial rights that they have, and have been able to go to the Conciliation Commissioners or to the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission itself freely and effectively. However, in the case of the Waterside Workers Federation, the union that has these tremendous and unique privileges, the loss has been 55 hours a year. That has been the loss as a result of industrial stoppages, not rain.

Sir, these facts demonstrate absolutely and conclusively that the trade unions generally are recognising the industrial laws. They are not under attack in this legislation. Indeed, it is part of this exercise that we should draw a contrast between the general body of unions and these people with this sorry record who have enjoyed a privileged position. In other words, we are considering a special case which is not to be confused with some wild, whirling words about an attack on, or hostility towards, the trade union movement. To suggest that we are attacking the trade union movement is, of course, utter nonsense. We have made a selection and have demonstrated the reasons for making that selection. Those very reasons and the fact that we make a selection is the best evidence that trade unionism on the whole is perfectly safe. It has justified that position.

When one mentions the Communists, there is always a cry to the effect that some Red-baiting is going on. Does not everybody know that on the waterfront some of the peculiarities that have led to the results that I have been mentioning are consciously fomented by Communist officials? Would anybody care to deny that? Is it not clear that the worst record is to be found in the two ports in which Communism is most active at the official level - Sydney and Melbourne? The facts speak for themselves. This appears to be similar to what goes on in Great Britain. Some reference has been made to the Devlin report.

The big transport workers union in England is the T. and G. - the Transport and General Workers Union. It is one of the biggest unions in the whole of Great Britain. According to the Devlin report -

"The T. and G. is one of those unions which does not allow members of the Communist Party to hold any official position. Their experience is that the Communist official will subordinate the interests of the union to the party line."

Later on the report had something to say about a man called, curiously enough, Dash, who was an acknowledged Communist, being the leader of the Communist element, and who had set up a liaison committee, bless you, in order to further his activities. The Devlin report continued -

"There may be some in these unofficial organisations who are traitors in thought, if not in deed. There may be others for whom the docks are only a convenient battlefield on which to wage class war; and others with a genuine concern for the welfare of the industry but whose belief in some particular remedy - for example, nationalisation - is so fanatical that they would rather pull the whole industry down than compromise or temporise."

They are not my words; they are the words of the very distinguished Commission that was presided over by Lord Devlin, who has never been accused of being a reactionary. I shall continue the quotation -

"There may be others who find any industrial agitation a satisfactory way of life, bringing personal influence and prestige and whose concern it is to make sure that there is always something to agitate about. All such men, whatever their motives, are wreckers."

That is a pretty pungent statement. The whole clash, the whole conflict - and this, I think, is all that I need say - is between the Communist attitude on the waterfront, the Communist desire to disrupt, the Communist pride in having a record loss of manhours on the waterfront, the Communist satisfaction in holding up the industries of the country and increasing the costs of industries - the conflict is between that and the Government of the country which, after all, is the elected Government of a free people. Who is to be in control of peace? Who is to be able, where necessary, to take steps to forward peace and continuity of work in this vital industry, the Communist wreckers or the Government of the country?

Therefore, I conclude by saying that the Communist Docker, to whom I have made a reference before - the advocate of the Federation - summed up the whole position with singular lucidity. I have never denied the Communist leaders' talent. However misguided, they have great talent, and this is beautifully expressed. He says -

"There is no future in the Arbitration Commission so far as wages are concerned. Anyone who suggests we should arbitrate is either a fool or is misleading the workers."

I repeat, this is the advocate for the Waterside Workers Federation. This is not some fellow going on a frolic of his own. This is their advocate, the man who represents them before the Commission. So I repeat what he says -

"There is no future in the Arbitration Commission so far as wages are concerned. Anyone who suggests we should arbitrate is either a fool or is misleading the workers. We are fighting the Government on these matters."

That is the way he puts it. Very well. There is an official challenge on behalf of the Waterside Workers Federation. There is something, the authenticity of which cannot be denied, and as a challenge we accept it, and we shall defeat it.
