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ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER  
MR. E.G. WHITLAM  
TO THE FIRST COMMONWEALTH CONFERENCE  
OF THE AMALGAMATED METALWORKERS'  
UNION MUSICIANS' CLUB, 94 CHALMERS  
STREET, SYDNEY, 11 MAY 1973

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UNIONS AND THE GOVERNMENT

This conference is the culmination of an historic process of change within the metal trades unions. It is also, I hope, the forerunner of a similar process of change throughout the whole trade union movement. The purpose of this change is to produce unions that are more effective, more efficient and more democratic. What you have achieved will have a far-reaching impact on the well-being of every Australian worker and his family. Its importance cannot be overestimated.

The Amalgamated Metalworkers' Union is indeed ahead of its time. It has put into effect, or is actively pursuing, many of the aims and reforms embodied in the industrial legislation passed by the House of Representatives this week. Your union has set the pace, and set an example, for the rest of Australia. You are not only the biggest union in Australia as a result of your recent amalgamation: you are among the most democratic in your internal administration. It is a remarkable fact that of the 144 delegates to your first Commonwealth conference this week, 85% have come direct from the work-bench. You have demonstrated that the amalgamation of unions, and the concentration of industrial strength in larger organisations, can be achieved without creating an unwieldy bureaucracy or diminishing the rights of individual members. The emphasis you have always placed on participatory democracy, on industrial safety, on the importance of industrial agreements, on trade union education, is reflected in the legislation introduced in the national Parliament by my colleague, the Minister for Labour, and passed this week. The success with which you have tackled these matters augurs well for the success of our bill. In the face of much strident clamour from our opponents, you have shown what can be done.

Today I want to announce some further plans of the Government to improve the rights and conditions of trade unionists and promote better industrial relations in Australia. But first let me deal with some of the broad principles underlying our approach to industrial matters. This year has been on the whole a harmonious one in industrial relations. There has been no major or prolonged industrial stoppage, and the general morale within the trade union movement is high.

I do not, of course, want to downgrade your legitimate grievances or fears. Many of them are shared by the Government, and I shall have more to say about that later. But you will all remember what our opponents were saying before the last election. There were all sorts of calamity-howlers predicting strife and dissension, union blackmail, industrial chaos and the breakdown of law and order if Labor achieved power. I hardly need to tell you how baseless and puerile these statements look now. Today we have a new understanding and a new trust between the Government and the unions. We want to ensure that the same understanding and trust prevail between unions and employers.

That indeed is the purpose of our recent conciliation and arbitration legislation. There can be no trust or understanding in industry if one side feels itself to be aggrieved or the victim of discrimination. There can be no trust or goodwill if union officials are open to civil prosecution for upholding their members' interests. There can be no trust or goodwill if the law makes a criminal of the working man who chooses to withdraw his labour. There can be no trust or goodwill if compulsory arbitration takes precedence over direct and amicable conciliation and discussion between the parties to a dispute. All these aspects of the old law are being removed. There is no need for me to rehearse the provisions of our legislation, which must be familiar to you all. I shall, however, mention our proposals on union amalgamation, since they are closely relevant to what your own union has been doing.

We give a high priority to efforts to encourage amalgamations. Even the Opposition supports amalgamation in principle, though they capitulated last year to the DLP's opposition to amalgamations when industrial legislation was before the Parliament. The Opposition had a chance to demonstrate this week that it was free of the shackles of the DLP by supporting our amalgamation proposal. They failed to do so, Yet we all know the benefits that amalgamations can bring. They can strengthen the negotiating power of unions and equip them for conditions of modern industrial bargaining between ever-growing corporations and large Government employers. It is absurd that we should have more than 305 separate trade unions in Australia with half of them having fewer than 1,000 members and only 14 with a membership of more than 50,000. In West Germany, with a much larger population, and with one of the lowest rates of industrial stoppages in Europe, there are only 16 unions. Their Metal Workers' Union has more than 2 million members. It is just as important that unions should be strong enough to withstand the power of big corporations as it is that Governments should be strong enough to withstand the same pressures.

The benefits of amalgamation have been demonstrated by your own union. We are determined that the opportunity for amalgamation should be cast as widely as possible so that smaller unions, in particular, will be able to avail themselves of this reform if they want it. In this way they can enjoy savings in administrative costs and the elimination of waste and duplicated work. They can afford higher salaries for their officials, and draw their officials from a greater pool of talent that a small union can offer. They would be able to afford libraries, research staff and independent economic and legal advice which may now be beyond their resources.

Let me quote what Mr. Lynch, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition, said about union amalgamations in Melbourne on 2 March 1972: "It is fair to say that provided the membership of industrial organisations does not lose effective control as a result of amalgamations, there are many advantages which can accrue from amalgamation. For instance, there are some 300 unions in Australia. Most of them are very small. It could facilitate the functioning of the arbitration system and relations generally between employers and unions if this number of unions decreased. I know of situations in which employers have sat across the table with no fewer than 15 unions in relation to one issue. Government departments have had this experience."

It is good to know there is an Opposition member on our side, who supports what your union has been doing. From what I hear, they are even talking now of amalgamations among the numerous Opposition parties. That applies to the DLP and the Country Party. The Country Party and the Liberal Party have not yet decided whether to amalgamate or not. They have only just settled the question of who is the second most important person in the Opposition. The example of the Metal Workers' Union should commend itself to them. I suppose there is always a risk in the eyes of the DLP that an amalgamated Opposition would fall under Communist control.

The other thing I should like to stress about our industrial legislation is that we have a clear public mandate for it. Our proposals were firmly stated in my policy speech for the House of Representatives election. They were publicly determined by the Federal Conference of the Australian Labor Party in Launceston in 1971. They have been given wide publicity. Mr. Cameron, the Minister for Labour, has expounded and explained them fully in speeches throughout Australia. In these circumstances we cannot and will not tolerate interference with our proposals from the Senate. In my press conference this week I made it clear - and I state it again - that the rejection of these proposals would have to be studied in the context of the provisions of the Constitution for a double dissolution. On a bill of substance such as this, we would not brook interference with our publicly-endorsed program to promote industrial harmony and to remove injustices against the working people who comprise the majority of our population.

There is another important area in which the national Government can protect the interests of the working man. That is in the control of prices and inflation. I spoke earlier of what I know to be your legitimate grievances and fears - and the fear of unjustified price rises is the foremost of these fears. Yesterday I attended a conference of the Premiers in Canberra, a conference called on the initiative of the Victorian Premier, at which I put forward a series of proposals designed to combat inflation in co-operation with the States. The Australian Government has already taken a number of measures, including revaluation of the dollar and the introduction of price justification machinery, in a determined program to keep prices down. But direct control of prices can, if necessary, only be taken as part of a national plan in which the State Governments co-operate fully. They alone have the powers.

There is a powerful body of opinion which believes that inflationary tendencies can be checked only by restraint on incomes, or at least by means of a combined prices and incomes policy. That view was put to yesterday's conference by three conservative State Governments. On the question of incomes I had this to say to Premiers in my opening statement, and I quote:

"Some take the position that the be-all and end-all of anti-inflationary policies is to fulminate against wage rises. That is not our position. On the contrary, we have moved to correct, in the areas under our own control, some evident anomalies and injustices. We have acted to increase social service payments to those who have been most cruelly harmed by inflation. We make no apology for acting quickly to honour our election pledges in these fields.

We are happy that in Tuesday's decision the Arbitration Commission has recognised the particular needs of low wage earners in giving them a substantial rise from the unrealistically low levels of the recent past. The Government does not take a rigid and doctrinaire position on these matters and our attitude to future wage claims, in National Wage Cases and elsewhere, will pay full regard to all of the circumstances, social and economic, which prevail at the time."

Let me tell you of some of the measures we contemplate to encourage a more informed and more efficient trade union movement and to improve working conditions in industry.

First, accidents. We are determined to reduce the incidence of industrial accidents and occupational disease. We have announced new plans for compensation but our prime concern is to prevent accidents rather than alleviate their effects. The Government will draw up a new uniform industrial safety code to apply throughout Government departments and instrumentalities and in all establishments in the A.C.T. With proper precautions accidents can be prevented. This has been clearly demonstrated by BHP, where there has been a 93 percent reduction in accidents in the past 15 years - and this in an industry, iron and steel, which must be ranked among the most dangerous.

Second, supervision. We are anxious that safety conditions - and all the provisions of industrial awards - should be more effectively supervised. We propose to appoint another 100 arbitration inspectors to police awards and safety standards. One-third of them will be trade-unionists with a working knowledge of their industries.

Third, trade union education. A well-educated and efficient trade union leadership is crucial to good industrial relations. Your union has taken the lead in this field by setting up its own training schools. Unions should have to dissipate their resources in this way. Such training should be a Government responsibility like all other forms of education. My Government will finance a national training college with a centre in each capital city to train unionists and offer overseas study scholarships to those with special talents.

Fourth, apprenticeship. The Government is concerned at the failure of some employers to engage sufficient apprentices to meet their needs. This was possible because, under old immigration laws, employers were content to bring in tradesmen from overseas while neglecting the training of our own workmen. The Department of Labour is studying the possibility of introducing one year's "block training" of apprentices, instead of obliging them to spread their technical education intermittently over four years. The year of "block training" would, if implemented, be followed by three years' apprenticeship on the job, making a total of four years altogether.

We believe these measures will contribute further to the well-being of workers and to enlightened and harmonious industrial relations. No Government has a greater interest than mine in preserving and strengthening the foundations of industrial peace in this country. No union has a greater interest than yours in ensuring the success of these endeavours. I am confident that Government and unions can work together - as they have in the past - for a more just and prosperous society.

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