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**PRIME MINISTER**

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CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

The non-Labor parties are demonstrating once again their contempt for the democratic system by boycotting the Constitutional Convention which opens in Melbourne tomorrow.

The cynicism and hypocrisy of the Opposition is all the more extraordinary because they have chosen the opening day of the Convention to release details of their so-called policy on federalism. The Liberal and National Country Party leaders, Federal and State, will be in Melbourne tomorrow for that purpose. By boycotting the Convention they are doing their best to frustrate the one procedure by which a truly modern and creative federal system can be evolved.

The boycott is another example of the Opposition's abuse of political proprieties. Not content with blocking Government legislation in the Senate, not content with threatening to block supply, not content with flouting the rules on Senate vacancies, not content with abusing these constitutional conventions, the Opposition and the non-Labor States are now denouncing the Constitutional Convention itself. They are serving notice that under no circumstances will they even discuss changes in a Constitution which their own spokesmen have acknowledged is in need of reform. They are not only sabotaging the Convention; they are thumbing their noses at the Constitution.

The Convention has never been solely a Labor Party concern. The initiative for it came from the Victorian Parliament. The Australian Labor Government took up the suggestion and organised the first meeting of the Convention two years ago in Sydney. Its purpose was to examine self-evident deficiencies in the Australian federal system. Every State, as well as Opposition delegates from the Australian Parliament, attended the Convention. Useful progress was made. The Convention established machinery for continuing work on the Convention with the apparent support of all delegates.

Until a few weeks ago all States and our opponents in the Australian Parliament were pressing for the Convention to be reconvened. Senator Greenwood said in a press statement on 24 March 1975:

"The Federal Opposition wants the Constitutional Convention to continue its work. The immense amount of research, deliberations and really worthwhile effort already contributed should not be wasted...

The Opposition parties accept that there is a need for constitutional change. Experience has shown that changes will more readily be accepted if a consensus can be arrived at as to the particular changes needed. This is what the Convention can achieve."

The Leader of the Opposition said in the House of Representatives only a month ago, on 21 August:

"It is our hope that this Convention will be a useful forum in which State and Federal representatives may constructively consider constitutional reform in a way which will advance the good government of Australia...

The Constitutional Convention does present an opportunity to identify areas where change is needed. It will ascertain what sort of consensus exists for change. It will provide a place where constructive efforts may be made to work out constitutional reform. For all of these reasons, the Opposition is glad that the Constitutional Convention will be reconvened in Melbourne in September."

The timetable and agenda for the resumed conference were determined, not by the Australian Government, but by the executive committee of the Convention on which the Australian Government was represented. There were representatives also of the Opposition, of every State Parliament, the Legislative Assemblies of the A.C.T. and the Northern Territory and local government. The date, place and agenda for the resumed meeting were all agreed upon by 13 August.

Yet on 28 August I received a telegram from the Premier of Queensland advising that Queensland Government delegates would not attend the Convention in Melbourne and that the Premier would be moving that the Queensland Parliamentary delegation should not attend. Western Australia, New South Wales and Victoria subsequently took a similar attitude. No good reason has been given for their change of view.

Despite the obstruction of the non-Labor parties, the Convention will go ahead. It will meet tomorrow in the Windsor Hotel since the Victorian Government has now cancelled its invitation to use Parliament House. I believe that useful results can still be achieved by the plenary meeting. For its part, the Australian Government will press for agreement on amendments to the Constitution to expand the provisions for the inter-change of powers and to amend the Constitution to permit the Australian Parliament to make grants to local government bodies and raise loans on their behalf.

I believe the Australian Government's attitude to local government is at the root of the Opposition's boycott. The non-Labor States and the Opposition opposed even having local government represented at the Convention. They are now frightened that the Convention will lead to a proper, developing role for local government in our federal system.

Strong local government has a key role to play in the provision of needed services. From personal experience I know the cost of living and working in suburbs long deprived of proper health, transport, sewerage, housing and child care services - all the things that make for the betterment and happiness of the Australian people. In my 1972 policy speech I pledged that local government would be made a genuine partner in the federal system. I declared that direct representation of local government at the Constitutional Convention would be a condition of the Australian Government's participation. In spite of the resistance of our opponents, we are honouring those pledges. We are determined to have strong local government properly financed and properly responsive to local community needs.

Far from being centralist, the Australian Government has proclaimed its determination to bring decision-making closer to the people. The real centralists are the non-Labor States who have attempted to frustrate local government. The non-Labor States want to dominate local government at all costs. They have even challenged the right of the Territories to representation and votes in the Federal Parliament. They have tried to close off our support for local community groups. This is why the Victorian Government is leading the High Court challenge to the R.E.D. Scheme and the Australian Assistance Plan - a challenge which imperils a whole range of local schemes which the Australian Labor Government has implemented.

In designing innovative programs like community health and child care centres, the Australian Government has been conscious of the need for community groups to plan and run their own projects. We want community participation through community action. This will be achieved by vigorous local government working in harmony with Australian Government programs. These programs will go ahead despite the Opposition's boycott of tomorrow's Convention.