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PRIME MINISTER'S WEEKLY BROADCAST

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WHO ARE THE CENTRALISTS?

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I made the point last week that Mr Fraser is having a hard time standing up to the bullying tactics of the Country Party and some of the Premiers on the question of passing the Budget. If Mr Fraser wants to prove himself a true leader of the Opposition he must take a firm stand on this issue and put an end to the damaging and irresponsible speculation about an early election. He certainly failed that particular test in his statements this week.

I mention that point again because we have seen in the past few days an even more glaring example of Mr Fraser's weakness under pressure. When it comes to matters of principle he gives in every time to the irresponsible elements in the Opposition. As you know, in Melbourne this week, there was another meeting of the Constitutional Convention. The Convention first assembled two years ago to study ways of improving the Constitution and making it a more modern and efficient instrument in our federal system. Every Government, Federal and State, every major political party, took part in that Convention. It appointed committees to get on with the work and agreed to meet again in Melbourne this week to review the progress made. Only a month ago Mr Fraser was saying in Parliament what a good thing the Convention was and how strongly the Opposition supported it. I'll quote his actual words:

"It is our hope - said Mr Fraser - "that this Convention will be a useful forum in which Federal and State representatives may constructively consider constitutional reform in a way which will advance the good government of Australia. The Constitutional Convention...will provide a place where constructive efforts may be made to work out Constitutional reform... The Opposition is glad that the Constitutional Convention will be reconvened in Melbourne in September."

Fine words. And that was just a month ago. But what happened? When the Convention met on Wednesday it was boycotted by the Opposition and the four non-Labor States. They didn't turn up. As soon as the Queensland Premier, Mr Bjelke-Petersen, decided in his usual way that he wouldn't take part, Mr Fraser went to water. All his lofty sentiments about "constructive efforts" and "good government" were forgotten. When the Queensland Premier decided to be obstructive, when the other non-Labor Premiers followed suit, Mr Fraser knuckled under to the Premiers and withdrew his own delegation.

It would be difficult to imagine a more craven and irresponsible attitude on the part of a national political leader. Years of work had gone into the preparation for this Convention. All the Premiers at the initial meeting two years ago were full of confidence and hope that the Convention would lead to practical reforms. Remember that the Convention has never been predominantly, or even half, a Labor Party affair. The initiative for it came from the Victorian Parliament. The Australian Government has never sought to dominate the proceedings and we would have been quite silly to try. We were seeking no more than a working consensus - an agreed basis for constitutional reform. The States would never have taken part in the first place if they had not accepted that some reform of the Constitution was necessary.

Fortunately the Opposition boycott didn't wreck the Convention altogether. The Australian Government, the Tasmanian and South Australian Parliaments and the Territories were all represented. So too was local government, - and it's here that we find the real reason for the hostility of the anti-Labor States. The Courts and Bjelke-Petersens of this world bitterly oppose the efforts of the Australian Government to make local government a full and equal partner in the Federal system. I remind you that when the Constitutional Convention was first proposed, back in 1972, I said in my policy speech on behalf of the Labor Party - before we were even a Government - that the Australian Labor Government would participate in the Convention only if local government was represented. We made that a condition and we stuck to it. We took the view that any reform of the Constitution in which the needs of local government were ignored would be a waste of time. The Constitution as it stands doesn't even mention local government. Would anyone drawing up the Constitution today make no mention of this vital area?

It's perfectly clear that the non-Labor States want to keep local government in its present financial straightjacket. As a national Government we've done our best to give a new financial deal to local government, particularly through a generous system of direct grants, made on the basis of independent advice, which local councils can spend in any way they wish. The States have done their best to frustrate these policies and dominate local government at all costs. They talk about centralism, but the real centralists are the State Governments who want to keep local bodies as their permanent, impoverished vassals.

When you look at our programs you will see how much they depend on local government cooperation and initiative. We recognise - which the States do not - that some things can only be done properly at the local level. For example, our health centres and child care centres involve local communities in planning and running these essential services. What we call the Australian Assistance Plan is a pioneering experiment in this sort of community involvement. The idea here is for local communities - with my Government's financial help - to seek out and meet needs for which the usual social welfare services make no provision. Our Area Improvement

Program is intended to improve the quality of life in nominated regions through projects determined by the people of the region. We don't want to run these local schemes. We want local councils and local groups to run them as they wish.

It's not just by boycotting the Constitutional Convention that the non-Labor States are attacking these plans for local community activity. They have challenged our legislation for them in the High Court. On top of that, Mr Fraser has just served notice that the Liberals, if ever they got back into power, would cut back drastically the grants made to the States for specific purposes. If one thing is clear from the so-called policy on federalism unveiled by the Opposition this week, it's their desire for a full-scale onslaught on local initiative, on local community projects, especially in the welfare area. I can mention any number of projects that rely on specific purpose grants from the Australian Government: child care, pre-schools, projects for aged and homeless and handicapped and Aboriginal people, isolated children, health centres, legal aid offices, nursing homes and home nursing, meals on wheels, flying doctor and blood transfusion services. All these programs are imperilled by the Opposition policies. In the past week Mr Fraser has shown his utter hypocrisy over the Constitutional Convention, his indifference to the real needs of local government, and his readiness to back down whenever the Premiers stand over him in defence of their State-run centralist empires.

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