

Part Branch

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PRIME MINISTER ON HSV7'S THIS WEEK PROGRAM
SUNDAY 28 SEPTEMBER 1975

You will have noticed that in Melbourne this week - Wednesday, Thursday and Friday - there was a second meeting of the Australian Constitutional Convention. The first meeting took place in Sydney in September 1973. That meeting, the Convention set up, unanimously, committees and working parties to prepare for the next meeting. And then over the last three months all the Premiers in Australia and I have co-operated in arrangements for this meeting of the Convention in Melbourne. We all drew up an agenda which we thought we should make in order to make more modern and effective arrangements between us for the government of Australia. These arrangements were in fact supported by the Federal Opposition. A month ago Mr Fraser, the Leader of the Opposition, spoke in the House of Representatives in these terms:

"It's our hope 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."

Now those were fine words. I agreed with all of them. And yet what happened? When we came along to Melbourne last Wednesday, all the Liberal leaders were absent. The agenda had been announced three weeks before by the Deputy Premier of Victoria, Mr Thompson, and he expressed the hope which we all share, that this will be a fruitful meeting of the Convention.

But the very next day, after Mr Thompson spoke, Mr Bjelke-Petersen, the Premier of Queensland, said that Queensland wouldn't be sending a delegation. Then the next day the Premier of Western Australia, Sir Charles Court, said that Western Australia wouldn't be sending a delegation. And then Mr Lewis did the same for New South Wales and last of all Mr Hamer for Victoria. And then bringing up the rear, Mr Fraser let it be known that he wouldn't. So all the noble words, all the work of two years went to nothing. Nevertheless there was a full delegation from South Australia, a full delegation from Tasmania, a full delegation from local government throughout Australia, a full delegation from the Northern Territory and from the Australian Capital Territory and of course, the Australian Government.

Now the idea didn't come from the Australian Government; it came from the Victorian Parliament in 1972. It wasn't a Labor gathering; a majority of the people who should have been there and a majority of the people who were, in fact, there, didn't belong to the Labor Party. But nevertheless we went through the agenda, we agreed on proposals for the Federal Government to put to the people to reform the Constitution. We agreed on proposals for the State Governments to refer matters to the Federal Parliament under the Constitution.

Over the road on the opening day the Liberal leaders throughout Australia met and issued a statement on Federalism. It's amazing they didn't choose to turn up and debate it and discuss it with us. But the significant thing about it was - and this is the real reason why they boycotted the Convention - on the agenda was provision for local government. Because, obviously, if you're looking at constitutional arrangements in Australia today, you ought to make it possible for the Federal Government to have financial relations; to borrow money, to make assistance available to local governments as well as to the State governments, and that's what we decided at the Convention. And this is the key to the Liberal objection, because the Liberal Governments, starting with the Victorian State Government, have been opposing Federal financial assistance for local government. They've challenged this in the High Court and programs, for instance, for child care, preschools, projects for aged, homeless, handicapped and aboriginal people, isolated children, health centres, legal aid offices, nursing homes and home nursing, meals on wheels, flying doctor services, blood transfusion services, all these are under challenge in the High Court, by State Liberal Governments. The Liberals if they got the chance would cut off assistance for local government and for community providence.

That's why they boycotted the Constitutional Convention this week in Melbourne.
