



PRIME MINISTER

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TEXT OF PRIME MINISTER'S ADDRESS TO THE MELBOURNE ROTARY CLUB

Today I want to talk about the role of the Government in political and legal and social reform.

There are many aspects of Australia's institutions where reform is needed. Reform is needed wherever our democratic institutions work less well than they might. Reform is needed wherever the operation of the law shows itself to be unjust or undesirable in its consequences. Reform is needed wherever our institutions fail to enhance the freedom and self-respect of the individual.

The Liberal Party chose its name because it saw itself as a Party which would provide not merely responsible management of the nation's affairs but also progressive and enlightened reform.

The Liberal Party in its turn inherited a great political tradition - a tradition which has been a major force in building one of the most democratic and humane societies in the world.

The great achievements of this tradition included in the 19th century: the ending of transportation and the establishment of a society of free people, responsible representative Government, the secret ballot, the factory acts which helped to secure decent working conditions for Australians, and later the system of tariff protection to secure employment opportunities the concept of a fair wage and the arbitration system.

Political leaders working in this tradition wrote into the Constitution the power of the Commonwealth Government to provide aged and invalid pensions and shortly after Federation they were introduced.

These moves show that Australia has always been a country where constructive reform has been welcomed and encouraged. Achieving a better life for all Australians through progressive reform will be a continuing concern of the Government.

The debate in Australian politics has never been over whether reform is desirable.

Australians, whatever their politics, are too much realists to believe that no further improvement is possible and too much idealists to refuse to take action where it is needed.

The debate has rather been about the kinds of reforms and the methods of reform which are desirable.

It is axiomatic that the costs of reform should not outweigh the benefits gained. In particular, reforms should enhance the capacity of people to cope with their problems, to achieve and enjoy a better and more satisfying life.

One of the most tempting approaches to reform for a politician is to try to solve problems simply by providing more and more money.

There is, of course, much that money can do but when inflation first gets under way the Government's coffers are brimming over with tax receipts - there is an almost irresistible temptation to start throwing money at every problem that is identified.

Difficulties arise when the limits on what money can achieve are ignored and the other consequences of rapid increases in Government spending are disregarded.

It is obvious that a very large number of problems which trouble Australians cannot be solved simply by spending more money.

This is because they are not financial problems, but rather problems of human relationships, of organisation and approach.

For example, a great deal has been spent on education in the last few years. School buildings and facilities have been improved. Yet despite this it is very evident that our system of education is still far from perfect.

The core of education remains the quality of the experience that children have at school - and that is affected by the quality of teaching, the way the school is organised, the attitudes of everyone in the school, the relationship of school to family and to the world beyond the school.

These are not essentially problems of money. Insofar as money can contribute to their solution we must ensure that the money we spend is spent in the best possible way to secure the kind of education Australians want.

Similar problems arise in the provision of assistance to disadvantaged people.

Money is not enough. The way in which assistance is provided is of critical importance. Assistance should be provided in a way that helps people to be independent - in a way which "expands the opportunities of people to participate in and determine their future."

The resources a poor family needs to break out of poverty include information about opportunities and the social security system as well as money. Government assistance should not feed dependence but as far as possible expand people's capacity to meet their family's needs as they believe is required.

An over-emphasis on the spending of money - and a failure by Government to make responsible choices among competing claims, can also have other unforeseen consequences.

It can set off serious inflation and unemployment which damages many other aspects of the lives of Australians.

The Report of the Poverty Inquiry warned about this. It said that Australian Governments should be wary of

"falling into the inflationary trap of attempting to carry out so many social reforms or other public expenditures at once that they accelerate an inflationary spiral that does more damage to poor people than the assistance provided by the reforms."

And again, it emphasised that:

"one element essential in any program to reduce poverty in Australia is that the rate of inflation be brought under control.."

Unfortunately, some of the weakest sections of the Australian community have suffered most as a result of the failure to see Government spending as being only one element in a program of responsible and progressive reform.

The measures the Government is taking to bring inflation under control and to expand employment opportunities are in part an expression of our conviction that this is an absolute prerequisite to helping important groups of poor people.

We are determined, despite our principal concern with restoring prosperity, to proceed with our program of reform, where this can be done without placing a further strain on the economy.

There are many important areas where the reforms required do not involve major new spending commitments.

We intend to push ahead in these areas.

Let me now discuss some of these.

The first of these areas is political reform.

Apart from the economy, the Government has been very concerned at certain trends in the way our political institutions have been working.

Our major concern in this area has been with the increasing centralisation of power in the Federal Government.

Over time the Commonwealth has acquired a strong revenue base while the states have had constitutional power to act in a number of key areas.

This divorce of funding from responsibility has been almost universally conceded to be an undesirable development.

The Government believes that the proper approach to reform here is to restore appropriate financial autonomy to the States and to Local Government.

As Australians become increasingly interested in political issues it is vital for the health of our democracy that there be readily accessible avenues for effective participation in Government.

This cannot occur if more and more of the effective decisions on policy are made in Canberra.

The Government believes that key decisions should be taken as close as possible to the people affected.

There is no virtue in uniformity if it frustrates the efforts of people to participate effectively in Government decisions which concern them.

Accordingly, we are already beginning to implement one of the most radical and progressive reforms of our system of Government since Federation, designed to give the States once more a flexible and expanding financial base and Local Government as assured source of revenue.

This reform has already been considered at two Premiers Conferences, remarkable for the enthusiasm with which it has been welcomed - on both sides of the political fence.

The major principles of the new scheme have already been agreed upon.

When it is fully implemented I believe it will be a major contribution to the health and efficient operation of our political system.

A second concern of ours in recent years has been the inability of the House of Representatives to adequately scrutinise the Government's spending proposals.

The ultimate power of Parliament over the Executive is control over, and scrutiny of, the Government's expenditure.

This is a fundamental principle of our democratic system. Without it the people's ultimate control over the Government is lost.

In order to strengthen the Parliament's hand, the Government has moved to establish a Committee of the House of Representatives to review expenditure.

This Committee has been based on the experience of the British House of Commons.

The Committee will conduct its investigations throughout the year. It will therefore be able to explore more deeply selected areas of Government activity.

The Committee will probably seek to cover a limited number of areas each year.

But the very fact of its existence and lack of knowledge of the area for the next investigation will have its own salutary effect.

Over time the Committee should make a very significant contribution to efficiency in Government spending.

Let me also mention briefly a further deep concern of ours - the great unlegislated increase in the personal tax burden which results from a combination of inflation with progressive tax scales.

Governments which want to increase the tax burden should have to say that this is what they want to do - and legislate accordingly.

As a result of inflation this has not been necessary.

The reform of personal tax indexation we will be introducing will make Governments honest again.

It will also strike a blow at one of the sources of the present inflation.

I now want to turn to our policies to protect individual rights.

A cornerstone of the Government's approach is a great concern with individual freedom.

Policy in this area requires a balance to be struck between legitimate community interests and the fundamental importance of freedom to the self-respect of the individual.

One of the most highly valued possessions of western man is his privacy - his right to exclude others from having knowledge of things that are his personal concern.

Increasingly privacy is eroded in an age of technologically sophisticated data collection.

It is time to weigh very carefully the interests of some people in having information against other people's right to withhold or restrict access to that information.

The Government is committed to legislate for the protection of privacy.

The Law Reform Commission has been asked to examine and report on unwarranted invasions of privacy in areas under the control of the Commonwealth Parliament.

For example, invasions arising from information collected, recorded or stored by the Commonwealth Government Departments, Authorities and Corporations.

The Commission will also examine what changes are needed to the laws of Commonwealth Territories to provide adequate protection for the individual with respect to: credit reference systems, medical, employment, banking and other records, listening, optical, photographic and recording devices to name but a few.

Proposals for uniformity between Commonwealth and State Laws will be considered by the Commission.

The issue of access to information has another side to it.

Ministers have also been requested to make themselves available wherever possible to the media, and to ensure that their Departments make the greatest efforts to supply the public with information.

A flow of information is vital for effective decisions, and the Government places great weight on consultation in the formation of policy.

This is important of course, not just in the formation of Government policy. Adequate communication and consultation lies at the heart of good industrial relations.

Our Industrial Relations Policy aims to encourage the formation of continuing mechanisms for communication in industry.

The Government believes that through improved communication there will be a better understanding of the common interests of employees and employers.

We are in a position to provide a lead in this area.

The Government will be asking all Commonwealth Statutory instrumentalities to establish continuing mechanisms for consultation with employees.

Unless measures such as this are taken there is a risk - as Government and business organisations grow ever larger - that close understanding between management and employees will become increasingly difficult.

This must not be allowed to happen.

Another issue raised by the growing scope of Government activity concerns the rights of citizens in relation to Government officials.

The Government is concerned that people directly affected by the decisions of officials should have adequate rights of appeal and recourse.

The Administrative Appeals Tribunal Act will be brought into operation later this year.

The Tribunal will provide an independent review of the way ministerial and official discretions are exercised and will deal with appeals against administrative decisions on as wide a basis as possible.

The Coalition Parties have consistently advocated and pursued this reform.

When in Opposition, we also supported the concept of a Federal Ombudsman. The Ombudsman Legislation lapsed when the Parliament dissolved last year, and the Government is currently reviewing the legislation.

The Ombudsman's task would be to investigate complaints or to initiate inquiries concerning administrative actions of departments and prescribed authorities and report to the body concerned.

Provision could be made for the Ombudsman to report to the Prime Minister in cases where, in his opinion, adequate and appropriate action has not been taken with respect to his recommendations.

The growing complexity of Government, makes it very difficult for many people to know how best to get redress when problems arise. Lack of information is a particular problem for some disadvantaged groups and migrants. This makes the appointment of an Ombudsman all the more important.

The Coalition Parties have long been concerned at the implications of the growth of bureaucracy - both public and private - in Australia.

While the rights of Governments and others to information about individuals should be carefully controlled, citizens must have proper access to information about the activities of Government.

If the Australian electorate is to be able to make valid judgements of Government policy, it should have the greatest access to information possible.

I have requested that a submission be made to Cabinet which will provide the basis of framing legislation to this end.

The Government is waiting in this area also for the Report of the Royal Commission into Government Administration.

Alongside specific measures we have taken to check the growth of bureaucracy we are determined to ensure that citizens have adequate means of redress against unjust decisions or actions of the bureaucracy.

The Administrative Appeals Tribunal and the Ombudsman will be significant steps towards that objective.

Particular problems of securing protection for individual rights arise in the case of disadvantaged groups or those in real economic need.

The Government is committed to the view that those in need must have access to adequate legal aid.

No one must be denied justice because of their economic position.

The Attorney-General is at present reviewing the legal aid situation to determine the most efficient, economical and simple system of legal aid, which will enable all those requiring assistance to receive it.

In some areas the Government believes that the current legal rights of some groups should be increased by new legislation.

That is the case with land rights for aboriginals.

The Government believes that effective action must be taken to secure land rights for aboriginals.

The Government will introduce legislation to implement the policy of land rights for aboriginals.

Details will shortly be brought to Cabinet.

There was a suggestion that legislation should pass through the Northern Territory Assembly, not through Federal Parliament. While some form of complementary legislation may be desirable, I would regard any move to shift the locus of legislation from Canberra to Darwin as a complete abdication of our responsibilities.

The legislation will be introduced along with thorough consultation with all the people it affects.

Recognition of the need to consult fully is basic to this Government's approach to Aboriginal Affairs - and it has been a major point raised in our discussions with the Queensland's Government over Arukun.

I have only been able today to touch on a few of the areas where the Government believes reform is necessary.

They are all areas where significant forward steps are possible alongside the Government's economic strategy.

Indeed, this strategy is itself a major set of measures to improve the quality of Australian life.

We believe that our approach to reform truly expresses the social responsibility of Government.

The reforms towards which we are working focus on the requirements of individuals for institutions which are responsible, adaptive and sensitive to their needs.

Together they will help reverse the dangerous trend towards an ever more powerful, more centralised and intrusive Government.

Along with our policies in other areas they will help to build an Australia in which people can confidently build their own lives.

Despite our present economic problems we have an extraordinary opportunity to build in Australia a society of unmatched equality and opportunity based on a commitment to freedom and concern for the individual.

This Government will play its part in achieving this great objective.

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