



PRIME MINISTER

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ADDRESS TO AUSTRALIAN LIBERAL STUDENTS FEDERATION, SYDNEY

I have been following with interest and enthusiasm the growing strength of your Federation in recent years. It has come a long way since its formation by my friend the late Ivor Greenwood and others some 30 years ago. Its recent extension to nearly all tertiary educational institutions has heralded a new era of activity, varying from meat pies for the men of the U.S.S. Troxtun, to your campaign to bring responsible leadership to the Australian Union of Students. Your Federation has built up a strong tradition of maintaining liberal ideas amongst students.

Liberal ideas and ideals, which originally emerged in opposition to autocratic power and entrenched privilege, are of the greatest relevance to the issues and problems facing contemporary society; to the problems of human freedom; to the problems of the relationship between the individual and the large organisations that dominate our society; to the problems of inequality and disadvantage; and to the problems of achieving meaningful change and reform.

In the last 18 months since being elected, this Government has acted to bring about reforms which implement Liberal principles, which translate liberalism into reality. We have acted to increase individual freedom and choice, to provide effective assistance to people who are disadvantaged or in need, to provide equality before the law, to preserve fundamental civil liberties and to encourage individual initiative. In the social welfare area, for instance, the cornerstone of our approach has been to give priority of assistance to those most in need, and make sure that aid is provided to people in ways that increase their independence - in ways which allow them to choose how they will use the aid to most benefit themselves.

Need and disadvantage is not merely a problem of material resources. It is also a matter of limited choice, limited opportunity. Any effective programme that seeks to assist the disadvantaged must provide both material aid and the opportunity for choice. Otherwise it will not have succeeded.

One example of our approach is our Family Allowance Scheme. This scheme has been widely recognised to be one of the most significant advances in the Australian welfare system since Federation. We abolished tax deductions for children, which were only of use to those who had sufficient taxable income to benefit from such deductions, and substituted direct cash payments to every mother in Australia. This scheme brought about a significant redistribution of income in favour of the poorest in our community. It was

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particularly beneficial to such groups as single parents, migrants, aborigines, and all low-income groups. We re-orientated our child-care programme towards the area of greatest need by providing day-care facilities, to provide children of working mothers with adequate care; and particular emphasis is being given to low income families. We have protected the aged against the erosion of their pensions by inflation. The age pension now amounts to a higher percentage of average earnings than at any time in Australia's history.

It is sometimes difficult to determine in advance whether a new programme which promises to increase people's choice will actually do so. Thus where necessary we have been prepared to devise experimental programmes to test their effectiveness. We are at the moment preparing to launch "H.A.V.E." - the Housing Assistance Voucher Experiment. This programme will assist low income earners by paying to them, in cash, subsidies towards the cost of their family's accommodation. It is up to them how they use such subsidies. They may rent housing commission flats or they may prefer private accommodation. The choice, and the responsibility is left to the recipient.

Another experimental programme is our migrant resources centre in Melbourne. Instead of the Government bureaucracy running the centre, we have contracted out this responsibility to a voluntary organisation, the Greek Welfare Society. Early indications are that the centre is working well and that some other ethnic groups see the centre as a possible model for their own operations.

The Government has recognised that there are many activities which public servants cannot conduct as effectively as voluntary organisations, particularly the personal warmth and personal assistance that many people in need or distress really need. Voluntary organisations also provide opportunities for participation and involvement that public bureaucracies, because of their very structure, find it almost impossible to provide.

Our policy of placing greater emphasis on voluntary organisations is designed to strengthen the capacity of voluntary organisations to provide the disadvantaged with such opportunities. In an age in which Government has grown considerably, sometimes appearing to dwarf the individual citizen, substantial reforms have been required to counteract the powerlessness that citizens feel in the face of the size and power of the Commonwealth's bureaucracy.

We have acted to ensure that people dealing with the Government are treated fairly, promptly and according to the law. That adequate redress is available for those who have genuine grievances, and to increase the citizens access to information. The first Ombudsman has been appointed - and the Administrative Appeals Tribunal has commenced operation. We have reformed our court system by introducing the new Federal Court, and we are moving to simplify Court procedures and certain archaic forms of writs.

We shall this year introduce freedom of information legislation to provide, as of right, access to certain categories of information held by Government affecting individuals. The Government has also introduced various law reforms to enhance civil liberties. Unfortunately, they are too often taken for granted in Australia. Constant vigilance is required to see how they can be improved, and adapted as our society changes. We have introduced legislation on criminal investigation which is an important advance in civil liberties.

We have extended legal aid, by redirecting it towards the most in need. Despite constraints in Government spending, our allocation to legal aid this year was increased 23%. We have instituted land rights legislation for aborigines in the Northern Territory. We have undertaken to establish a Human Rights Commission to ensure compliance of Federal law with the UN International Covenant on civil and political rights.

References have been made to the Law Reform Commission on a number of issues, for example - protection of privacy, reform of the law of defamation, investigation of the possibility of applying aboriginal customary law in criminal matters to aborigines living in the traditional manner.

This is an impressive list, and amply demonstrates the depth of our commitment to maintaining civil liberties and increasing Government's responsiveness to the people. Perhaps even more importantly it illustrates our capacity to translate that commitment into reality. The Government has also instituted historic political reforms.

We have commenced a programme of progressively handing over powers to the legislative territories of the Northern Territory and the ACT. We aim to ensure full statehood for the Northern Territory by 1981.

We propose to strengthen the power of Parliament to scrutinise public expenditure. As a first step, we have established a public expenditure committee which has already commenced its task of carefully vetting particular areas of public expenditure. And of course we are committed to constitutional reform.

Next Saturday, Australians will vote on four proposals to amend the constitution. If all four succeed, we will at one stroke have almost doubled the number of successful amendments to our constitution. I am confident that they will succeed because the proposals are patently sensible, fair and just. The principles of the four proposals were supported at the Hobart Constitutional Convention. They are supported by all Federal political parties, and they will improve the operation of the constitution. The four proposals may be simply stated and justified.

The first proposal is that the House of Representatives and Senate elections be held simultaneously. It is simply common sense that these elections always be held at the same time; that Australians should only have to vote in a Federal election when Australia's Government is at stake. Unless the constitution is changed, the only way to bring the elections together would be repeatedly to cut short the term of the House of Representatives. The three year term is however relatively short - one of the shortest Parliamentary terms in the democratic world. Further reducing it would damage good government. This proposal does not in any way affect the powers of the Senate. It in fact increases the authority of the Senate to check a bad Government, for it will no longer be possible to claim that only the lower House reflects the latest will of the people. Further, if the Senate should ever again use its ultimate weapon of forcing the Government to the polls, at least half the Senators will themselves have to face the voters to have their actions judged at the polls, and it is only fair that this should occur.

The second referendum proposal is that whenever a Senator dies or resigns, he will be replaced, for the remainder of his term of office, by a member of the same party. It will guarantee that your choice of parties for the Senate cannot be altered by accident or design. Under the constitution as it now stands, a Senate vacancy can completely change the party balance. But only the people should determine the balance of the parties in the Senate. Once this proposal is accepted, the people's choice will be preserved until they have an opportunity to make another choice at the next election.

The third referendum proposal is to give voters in the Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory the basic right to vote in all future referendums. This is a fundamental right all other Australians have. I know of no rational or reasonable argument for denying it to Territorial voters. They have the same obligations as other Australians. They pay taxes; they are obliged to observe the laws of the Commonwealth; they vote for Members of Parliament; and the outcome of referendums affect them as much as they do other Australians. Restoring this right will strengthen Australian democracy.

The fourth and final referendum proposal is to set a retiring age for Federal justices. High Court justices would retire at 70 and the retirement age for other Federal Court judges would be determined by Parliament. The proposal does not affect the terms of judges already appointed to the bench. Most jobs have retirement ages, and for good reason. Judges are as affected by old age as the rest of us. This principle has long been recognised by the States, all of which have compulsory retiring ages for their own judges. It is only fair that after the age of 70 responsibility should be handed over to younger people. That is even more important, now that the new system of Federal Family Courts has been set up, placing a premium on judges' ability to keep up with changing community.

All four referendum proposals are fair, just and reasonable. They have been extensively considered. They have the support of all major Federal parties. They do not involve further power for Canberra. They will strengthen the Senate and ensure that it can better look after the interests of the States. They will make the constitution work better.

On Saturday, I am sure that a clear majority of Australians in a clear majority of the states will vote Yes in these four referendums. But those of you who think the referendum propositions should be passed, cannot afford to be complacent. The referendums will not pass themselves. All people who care about constitutional and political reform in this country have a responsibility to work for the referendums. If we all do this, then the referendums will be passed, and we will have a constitution which serves Australia's needs more effectively.

The process of change and reform in our society is a continuing one, and in this process we are constantly seeking innovative ideas which effectively translate our ideals into reality.

The Australian Students Liberal Federation has a significant role to contribute in making Australia a better and more equal society. I believe that our society has unique advantages because of the wealth of our natural resources, our history of egalitarianism and democratic traditions, and the general level of equality and opportunity which

prevails in Australia - a level of equality that is unmatched in almost any other society. But our advantages should not be a cause for complacency. Rather, they should be a challenge.

Against this background of comparative wealth and equality, the social problems which do persist in Australia stand out all the more sharply. We should have the ingenuity, the resources and the determination required to come to grips with them effectively.

In our early history, Australia was regarded as one of the world's most advanced and enlightened democracies. We have the chance to recapture that position by devising new solutions to the problems of our society which put people's wishes and self-respect first. This is a task in which we need your help - the help of all Australians
