



PRIME MINISTER

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ELECTORATE TALK

The rank and file members of the Australian Telecommunications Employees Association are on the eve of a momentous decision. It's a decision that will touch their own lives, and the lives of their families. It is a decision that will affect every Australian. It must be weighed with care, calm and reason.

The members of this union have a serious responsibility to Australia. They work in an utterly vital service industry which is at the heart of this nation's life.

Australia needs their skills. There is no denying that. But the men must remember that they need their employer, Telecom, for their jobs and their security.

It is clear they are unlikely to find other jobs as well paid - and as secure - for which they are specially trained and qualified.

This point about job security is important. I suspect the general public is not aware that Telecom has given a cast-iron 10-year guarantee to the union membership against any retrenchment as a result of technological change. What other industry, what other employer has achieved that for its own employees.

The issues in this dispute have been widely canvassed. The central issue about loss of jobs through technological advance is important. It is of concern to this union, every other union - and to the Government.

Commissioner Clarkson recognized this point in his six-point peace proposal that the union rejected. His proposal involved independent assessment, trial period and full and proper consultation with the union. I would have thought that was a fair deal - something reasonable and worth discussing.

This weekend, Mr. Street called the National Labour Consultative Council to inform them of the Government's concern and advise them of the state of the telecommunications network in Australia.

The Government wanted to leave no doubt that if the men were to decide to continue the ban then the Government would be compelled to use whatever powers it has under the law.

Following this briefing by Mr. Street, the National Labour Consultative Council unanimously decided that the parties - the ATEA and Telecom - together with the other peak councils, should enter into discussions in an attempt to resolve the dispute using Commissioner Clarkson's six-point formula as a basis.

The fact that these discussions are continuing is a hopeful sign. All Australians hope it will lead to the men eventually being able to return to work.

What seems to have been forgotten in this particular dispute is that we would not have a telecommunications industry at all without the advance of technology.

The men would not have had their skilled and secure jobs without technology - a technology that will lead to improved services and lower costs to the consumer.

The argument that this union has with its employer has been heard before Australia's arbitration system. Regrettably, the union's executive has turned its back on the umpires decision.

Commissioner Clarkson has proposed three separate settlements to this dispute. Telecom accepted each of these proposals in principle. But the Union Executive has blocked every attempt to negotiate a settlement. The Federal Executive has thumbed its nose at Australia's long-standing system of arbitration - it has thumbed its nose at the Australian people.

I have made the Government's position plain. We fully support the decisions taken by Telecom, which has been reasonable in a most difficult situation. Telecom has fully supported Commissioner Clarkson's proposals for settlement. We fully support Telecom's policy of no work, no pay.

Some 3,500 employees are already off pay because they have refused to do the work they are paid for. The number will inevitably increase significantly. Wages are now being lost at the rate of \$1.6 million a fortnight. So the hardship on ATEA members alone is considerable and is bound to increase. That pay is lost for all time. It will not be made good as part of the settlement.

The Government also endorses the decision of Telecom to commence deregistration proceedings against the union.

In a statement to Parliament on Thursday night, I said the Commonwealth had a range of legal powers available to it if members of the union do not accept their responsibility to the community. That position remains.

It is now time for the rank and file membership to take stock. It is time for the men to look ahead, seriously, at the consequences of a continuation of this ban. It is time for the men to think of the families in isolated areas cut off from the cities, from suppliers, from essential services.

What would happen if a Cyclone Tracey struck a northern outpost, or a flood or fire swept through a tiny country town or settlement? How would the innocent residents call for help? How could they mobilise forces to save life and stock?

It's time for the men to think of Australians cut off from police services, from hospitals, from doctors ... cut off from help. It's time to face these consequences ... because this is what faces Australia.

I have made the point before about the fair-mindedness and commonsense of Australia's working men and women. Now is the time for the rank and file members of this union to demonstrate those qualities.

I am sure the wives and families of the men understand that the longer the dispute goes on the more wages will be lost, and the more their personal and family position will be prejudiced. The Government has no option but to stand firm in this matter. We are completely resolute.

Whatever the harm, whatever the difficulty the continued deterioration of communication services causes in Australia - the ultimate harm in caving in to minority blackmail would be much greater.

I look to the men voting on their Executive's decision to think of their families, to think of their friends and to think of all Australians. I call on them to allow the process of arbitration to work.