

PRIME MINISTER'S COMMENTS TO PRESS IN PERTH
(TRUCK DRIVERS DISPUTE)

FILE

Prime Minister:

...Neville Wran's been up on Razorback apparently most of the day, or a fair bit of it. He's not said what's come out of that and at the moment the truckies aren't saying so either. But the information I have from Peter Nixon is that they put what was basically decided on Saturday but which the State Ministers didn't put out in terms of a statement. In other words, if they go back to work the road maintenance charge would come off. The States would look to see what alternative charges could be put on and that might be a uniform license fee or a uniform registration fee or might even be some sort of petrol franchise charge, as it was reported to me. Now, if we can help in the States coming to agreement on any of those aspects of course we will, but these are matters that are in the State areas of responsibility and if they can come to agreement - as I am advised - they could now or could have over a long period worked out some sort of uniform charge so long as it was related to the wear and tear on roads caused by interstate transport. The other aspect which we are willing to look at is the extent to which restrictive trade practices legislation might prevent the truck drivers getting a reasonable charging structure and that's related to some of the other problems in the industry as you know -- the ease sometimes, with which finance can be available; somebody gets into trouble and to stay alive they just cut rates further and that compounds the problems for the whole industry. State railway charges are also very much related to that because that establishes a competitive position between railways and interstate transport. I think that is basically where the matter lies at the moment.

Question:

Sir Charles has said that the position as far as the Eastern States has got is out of control, that there is two (inaudible); a taxing problem and physical problem of the trucks blocking the road and they should be treated separately. He says as far as the Eastern States go the States should ask the Commonwealth to use whatever physical resources they have available to clear the roads. If you had any approach either individually or collectively from the State Premiers, what would be your position?

Prime Minister:

The States, neither individually or collectively have asked us to do anything in that vein. The only request they had put to us, earlier of course, was to pick up their loss of the road maintenance tax and we said we are not going to do that through an increased fuel tax which would be an increased charge on every petrol user. We've got no intention of doing it

Prime Minister: (continued)

and that has been made perfectly plain, because this is in an area of State responsibility, they could have -- and have known of the problems coming up for a long time and they have also known that there are alternatives open to them. They shouldn't have got themselves in this position. The physical problem of the trucks is worst in N.S.W. and that was handled worst by the N.S.W. Premier, who instead of getting his police to move trucks on as they started to pull up -- and they all have plenty of powers under their normal processes of doing that because the trucks were obstructing traffic -- spent the time instead passing legislation which he is not prepared to use, as I am advised. If there was a request from the States to the Commonwealth, that is obviously something that we would consider very seriously but it would need to be a request from the States. It is in fact something that I discussed with Sir Charles earlier this afternoon. But he said that he had no problem because the Western Australian police have in fact been moving trucks on and making sure that they don't obstruct traffic.

Question:

Sir Charles blames Mr. Nixon very heavily for having told the States to take off the road maintenance tax without any suggestion of an alternative.

Prime Minister:

That's been said on a number of occasions, but really it was the Premier of Queensland who spelt the end of the road maintenance tax because once he made the decision he did - which is entirely his independent Queensland decision - I think it meant the end of the road maintenance tax. I've made it perfectly plain that the Commonwealth doesn't want to be a party to negotiating under pressure. Mr. Nixon has said he will not speak with the truckies until they are back at normal work and that is the position as it will be. If truck drivers at Razorback are staying out because they believe the Commonwealth will pick up some bills for the States, I think by now they would be totally disabused because we are not going to. Whether it is truck drivers or whether it is some other union, we are totally opposed to negotiating under pressure and I regret that the States put themselves in the position of appearing to concede under pressure; and that is irrespective of the merits of a particular case. It's always possible to hear a case - if it is in the normal industrial processes - through arbitration and you don't need industrial pressure to strengthen the logic of it. In this particular instance, the matters can be argued without disrupting tens of thousands of other people and families and businesses and causing harm to the public. Let me just make it plain, the Commonwealth - or Mr. Nixon for the Commonwealth - will not be speaking to the truck drivers until this is over and I regret that there is the appearance of the States making concessions to this particular industry under threat. It's worth noting that once the States went down that particular path the truck drivers expanded their demands very considerably into the abolition of sales tax on tyres and matters of that kind. Those matters are not open for negotiation at all.

Question:

Just on the question of physical resources to move the trucks. One would presume that would include the Army. Have you considered that as an option, among the resources you would have to...

Prime Minister:

Let me only say that the Commonwealth has over the last couple of days, been looking to see what it could do if there was a request to clear the highways by the States. I think it is natural enough that we would examine our own resources in relation to that.

Question:

Do you have a contingency plan, sir?

Prime Minister:

Not at this point. We are examining our own resources.

Question:

Are you happy that you have the resources at the moment?

Prime Minister:

There will be a report waiting for me when I get back to Melbourne - or first thing tomorrow morning.