

PRIME MINISTER INTERVIEWED ON "NATIONWIDE", A.B.C. TV,  
ON TRUCKIES' DISPUTE

FILE

Interview with Ted Stevens preceded interview.

Question:

Prime Minister, you heard Ted Stevens say they want "the lot".  
What is your reaction?

Prime Minister:

I don't think anyone in the Australian community can demand  
to be paid just what he himself believes he is worth. Now  
whether that applies to you or to anyone else, or to me, it  
is just not going to work that way. We'd send the nation  
bankrupt.

Question:

What is the Commonwealth going to do?

Prime Minister:

These blokes in the industry have had a problem and State Ministers  
meeting with Peter Nixon and themselves on Saturday, basically  
agreed to a number of measures which would go a long way  
towards overcoming it. The States indicated that the road  
maintenance charge would be off; that they are going to look  
at leasing arrangements and licensing arrangements, finance,  
restrictive trade practices, better and fairer charging  
arrangments, competition from State railways -- a number of  
areas -- Governments have committed themselves, and the  
State Governments because they are the ones involved, to try  
to meet a number of the problems. Now whatever the merits of  
the particular case, it can't be solved by people blockading  
Australia's roads, trying to starve out the city of Sydney and  
causing immeasurable hardship to families, causing people to  
be stood down. Now it is basically a State problem at this  
point. State police are involved. The State authorities have  
the general responsibility to keep Australia's highways open.  
They would have a capacity to move vehicles. Mr. Wran introduced  
special legislation which would give him, one might almost  
say Draconian powers.

Question:

But there have been reports, Prime Minister, that you are ready  
to use the Army. Now can we find out what stage the Commonwealth  
is at?

Prime Minister:

Yes, certainly we can, but let me just make the point that the general responsibility is the States'. There are the State police who've got responsibilities for keeping highways open, for keeping traffic moving. The relationship of the truck drivers is basically a relationship with State Governments, much more so than it is with the Federal Government and on that interview that was, I think, plain for everyone to see. Now, we've said that if a State asks the Commonwealth to help and says "look, we can't undertake fully ourselves, we are deficient in resources", that we can well provide technical people -- engineers, mechanics, drivers -- that would enable trucks to be moved off the highways to the side of the road into a paddock where they could be impounded by the State authorities, the State police. There would have to be a request from a State Government and the State Government at the same time would have to make it perfectly plain that their own police force would provide whatever protection was necessary.

Question:

Are you saying that you feel that this is in fact what should happen -- that Commonwealth people, Army I suppose would be involved, should move in to move these trucks?

Prime Minister:

Let's not make too much of the point "Army" or defence service or Service personnel. We are talking of people who in fact would be mechanics to get trucks started; drivers; people with low loaders or tractors who could pull trucks that could not be started so that the sinews of commerce, the highways, could be opened. They are the sorts of people that we could supply if the States themselves thought they were unable to do so. The primary responsibility for maintaining law and order is the States and I have not seen any suggestion that that is beyond the capacity of the State police whether it is N.S.W. or any other State.

Question:

The Premier of N.S.W. has hinted that you could have indeed exacerbated the situation. He has said that it is the wrong time to make the sort of suggestions that you are making now, when he is very near, as he sees it, to resolving the dispute.

Prime Minister:

I think the States need to know what the Commonwealth is prepared to do. We have surveyed the resources available to us today and I don't really think that Mr. Wran can stay with that particular comment because right at the beginning of this dispute, instead of talking with the truck drivers he pushed quite Draconian legislation through the State Parliament which would give him power to have a \$1,000 fine, to confiscate trucks -- nobody knows under what terms and conditions they could be returned to the drivers -- and I think if anything flamed the dispute it was that particular action, when at that point,

Prime Minister: (continued)

at the beginning of the dispute, it should have been consultation, negotiation, but that wasn't Mr. Wran's first step.

Question:

If I could just bring you back to the point that you've been making that it's really up to a State to look after this, to the States generally to look after this, what then do you think of the role of your Transport Minister, Mr. Nixon for intervening when he did -- and indeed he has been pretty trenchantly criticised.

Prime Minister:

Obviously States criticise a Commonwealth Minister if there is a State problem. That's the normal course of events.

Question:

He would have seemed to have put you up for \$60 million would be not, by his comments that...

Prime Minister:

That's an old comment, an old attitude, and it ought to be understood that the States over the last three years have all reduced taxation in a number of areas very very substantially indeed. It has not, to this point, been on the States' order of priorities to reduce or to abolish the road maintenance tax.

Question:

Mr. Nixon's statements didn't embarrass you at all?

Prime Minister:

No, not at all. Of course not. There is no reason why they should because if this particular tax had been in the States' order of priorities for abolition they could have done it. They didn't. They had abolished other taxes instead over the last three years. In addition to that, of course, it is open to the States if they are only prepared to agree amongst themselves to have some kind of uniform licensing fee which gets away from the difficulties of the road maintenance tax but which at the same time would return the States' revenue.

Question:

You are buying into this dispute now after it has been running for a week. One wonders indeed whether you would have allowed the States' highways and the nation's highways to be blocked up so heavily indeed, if it had been unionists who had been involved.

Prime Minister:

A number of disputes are basically State disputes and the Commonwealth doesn't always get involved in those. Generally it stays out of them. There have been a number in N.S.W. in particular which have just been a matter between the State and employees, trade unions, in N.S.W.

Question:

The truckies in N.S.W. have been watching you thus far...

Prime Minister:

Yes, I know, but if I could just finish answering the question; I think that the Commonwealth's position has been a very plain one. We don't want anyone to be denied the right to arbitration. We don't want anyone to be denied the right to have a fair go for whatever cause or complaint they've got, but whether it is the Transport Worker's Union or whether it is the truckies in this particular dispute, they've got no right to stop milk getting to families in Melbourne and Sydney, no right to keep hospitals short of fresh food, no right to cause immeasurable hardship and harm to people who get stood down because there is now work for them to do at their normal workplaces and factories. Whether it is the Transport Worker's Union, who was condemned roundly by the Government some days ago, or the truckies at the moment, so far as that goes the principle is the same. Now whatever the merits we might feel about a number of the points that the truck drivers have put forward to State Governments, that doesn't avoid the fact that the tactics that are being used are wrong; are causing grievous harm and if they continue that will only multiply many times over the next few days.

(REPORT FROM SITE OF TRUCKIES' BLOCKADES)

Question:

Prime Minister, you've heard that they don't seem to believe that they are getting their message across, that the public understand them. Do you feel any sympathy for them. I mean, would you like to work an 80-hour week for less than the basic wage?

Prime Minister:

I think I said, when we were talking earlier, that there are very real difficulties in a number of the things that the truck drivers have put forward. That was recognised last Saturday by the State Transport Ministers when they met. A number of things, as I am advised by Peter Nixon, were basically agreed. I think it would be a good idea, since a number of truckies are watching this, to - if I could emphasise that - one, that the road maintenance charges will be replaced and two, that the road limits for the 38 tonne limit doesn't apply; it will apply, and that has been an important matter for a number of them, as I am advised. It was also agreed that urgent

Prime Minister: (continued)

action should be taken to improve the overall position with respect to freight rates of the owner-drivers. There have been problems there with cut throat competition amongst themselves and I think sometimes also some unfair competition with State Railways systems.

Question:

When you say that State road tax, Prime Minister, is going to be taken away, you said initially that there was no way that you would pick up the tab for this.

Prime Minister:

No, we're not going to. That's a matter that the States have decided. And they have decided that. That was their decision. But in addition to that, in terms of being able to charge a reasonable rate, we have indicated that we will look at the Trade Practices Act and also, another point, to enable an arbitration type system to be established covering owner-drivers' freight rates and conditions and a licensing scheme for interstate hauliers which might well greatly improve the system and stop the industry being over-trucked as we were told earlier tonight that it was; one final point, a road haulier's advisory service, it was also agreed that should be established. Now, they've got those points through to State Ministers, as I am advised by Peter Nixon. That's basically what the States have agreed to; that package of proposals. Now, why therefore, is it necessary to continue with blockades in N.S.W, in Adelaide and wherever else they might be. If milk and eggs get through to hospitals there is a question of the average family in the suburbs, there is also the question of people who get stood down in factories because they can't get the raw materials to keep that factory going.

Question:

The Commonwealth then seems to be basically leaving this up to the truckies' good nature...

Prime Minister:

Well, it's basically a matter for the States; also, as I said earlier, to do what they can to get the highways open. I know the States could do that if they wanted to. So far they have not moved. If the States say "this is beyond us", say that to the Commonwealth: "this is beyond us, we want some technical help from you so that we can move vehicles", then the Commonwealth is prepared to assist.

I think just one last point, I said the Commonwealth is prepared to assist but that is in terms of technical people, mechanics, who can move vehicles. We have never at any time suggested that the capacity of State police forces is inadequate and I am certain that it is not.