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PRIME MINISTER

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It's easy enough for Canberra politicians to make pronouncements about great national and international issues. It's easy enough to make speeches about "confidence returning" and "recovery proceeding". The myriad sets of official figures and surveys provide a sound enough basis for these statements. But that's only part of the picture.

Surely, the only real measure of a nation's pulse is its people -- what we are trying to achieve, what we feel and how we look ahead to next week, next year, the years beyond that.

This cannot be found in any list of figures, or reports or surveys. Only by spending time with people, in their own backyard, can leaders in the community and leaders of Government gauge the real hopes and fears of Australians.

As Prime Minister, I have a responsibility not to lock myself away in Canberra. I have to ask myself constantly - are our policies meeting the real needs of our people spread over a vast continent?

Over the last few days, Tamie and I have been talking with school kids, parents, businessmen, farmers, pensioners, blokes in bars -- people from all walks of life -- in the south-west corner of Australia and in Bundaberg on the Queensland coast.

These areas are thousands of miles apart. The people we spoke with had very different problems - they had very different needs. Yet the over-riding impression was one of enormous confidence - of great faith in our country.

Men and women were looking ahead with the kind of spirit and optimism that I haven't seen in Australia for a long time.

"We all know there are still problems, but we are going to make the most of what Australia has to offer", was the kind of comment made over and over.

Of course, people are concerned about different things. The young people I spoke with at schools and on a television program showed a concern -- a natural concern -- about uranium policies and about our international obligations to refugees. They looked at these issues with intelligence, sensitivity - and a moral force - that says something most telling about Australia's future.

They were looking for explanations to questions that they had thought about deeply - to questions that governments think deeply about.

Many of the older and harder heads of the men in the Workers Club at Norseman were worried about wages and wage justice. I was disappointed to hear they had been told that the Arbitration Commission would never listen to them unless they reinforced their case by going on strike. Of course, that is nonsense. The Commission looks at the merit of a case -- and a strike simply isn't part of the merit.

Many of the blokes who were striking realised that the Arbitration Commission is the umpire - and that they would get a fair go from the umpire. They know they are only losing money -- and harming their home life -- by using the strike weapon as a first step.

Of course, Australians generally speak their mind with direct language and frankness. We will always argue about issues - we will always have a go at government. But today, we understand that governments have many complex and difficult problems to face up to and overcome. There are always problems to solve. People look at the worth of government by how it goes about tackling those problems.

As a Government, we are committed to responsible management of the nation's affairs. We will not shirk the tough decisions. We will not govern through the popularity polls. From what I've heard in the last few days talking to average Australians, we would fail as a Government if we took any other course.

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