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PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

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ELECTORATE TALK

This past week has been a lesson for the Australian nation. We have seen the country brought to the brink of industrial chaos. We have seen the whole continent facing virtual paralysis.

For a great nation to be faced with such a situation has shocked Australians who might well have asked: "Why should we try to tear ourselves apart in this way?"

But just at a time when the situation seemed at its most hopeless the determined efforts of men of goodwill brought results.

What this past week's events have proved beyond any doubt is that if men with responsibility put the interests of this nation first then every problem facing this nation can be solved.

We have heard a good deal in the past about union bashing. This Government has been accused of wanting to bash unions. There have been wild accusations of Governments seeking to encourage and provoke industrial disputes in order, so it is alleged, to gain political advantage. These accusations are based on the most dangerous nonsense.

The people of Australia know only too well who suffers in times of strikes and industrial disruption. No-one escapes. Everyone is a victim: the working men and women of Australia, the old, the sick, the young, the disadvantaged, the poor.

Business can be made bankrupt. Small businessmen in particular who haven't got vast resources to cushion them against heavy losses are the ones who can suffer most.

It is against this background of the heavy loss to the nation as a whole that this Government views with the gravest concern any action by any union which could lead to industrial disruption.

In the lengthy discussions I have had this week with leaders of the Australian Council of Trade Unions it became obvious that efforts at conciliation can succeed even though the outlook might seem dark and pessimistic.

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The representatives of the Australian Council of Trade Unions came to the conference table in Canberra with a job to do. As representatives of the industrial movement they were concerned at what they regarded as a threat to the right of assembly. As a Government we were able to sit down and have a sensible discussion with them. There was no grandstanding. The meeting produced results. Bans and threats to blockade Western Australia and to stop vital exports were lifted. It was a fine example of the way relations ought to be conducted between the union movement and the Government.

This is the lesson we should all have learned this week. Reckless union action no longer has a valid place in the Australian industrial scene. The costs are too high for this nation to bear. The sufferings by ordinary people are too great. The damage to industry is too severe.

We have achieved much in this country in the past three years in setting right the economy. There are difficulties ahead. For Australia to improve further her present position great efforts must be made. We can see how the industrialised nations overseas are facing new and serious economic problems. In this climate it is all the more important, all the more imperative for Australia to maintain its battle against inflation, to pursue relentlessly the economic course we have taken.

At a time like this it would be a national disaster for trade unions to embark on a policy of industrial disruption.

We have in Australia a long-established and elaborate industrial conciliation and arbitration system. The machinery is there for all industrial disputes to be solved.

It is through that system that industrial disputes can and should be solved. There are still problems to be dealt with. One of these concerns the differences which can arise between State and Federal awards. That is why this week the Federal Government offered to explore the possibility of States referring to the Federal Government the States' powers in industrial affairs, if only for a trial period. In so many disputes, people believe the Federal Government has power and responsibility when in fact the power and responsibility presently belongs to the State.

The aim of this Government is to achieve industrial peace in this country. We know, as all Australians know, that only through industrial peace can the people of this country achieve the prosperity they seek. The people of Australia are sick and tired of strikes and stoppages, of hold-ups and lost pay. There is another way. A much better way. This Government will pursue that way with all the strength and influence at its disposal. I ask all Australians to follow us along the path to industrial peace. It is a time for all Australians to work together.