

NEWS CONFERENCE IN PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE
ON TELECOM DISPUTE

Prime Minister

The Government this afternoon has surveyed the general industrial scene, especially as it affects the Government's own employees, whether in the Public Service or in instrumentalities such as Telecom, Australia Post, or the Australian National Railways. In all those areas there are disputes proceeding which are inconveniencing the public and doing a very great amount of damage. Especially in Telecom, where the disruption to normal communication and normal business has been very, very severe over the last few days.

There was a significant delay in having that matter referred to the Full Bench, for reasons that we all know and understand. I have already indicated that we will be legislating in the Budget Session to make sure that Sir John Moore has power to take over any particular case if he requires it or if believes it to be in the national interest. That legislation will be introduced at the very beginning of the Budget Session.

I am glad to see that Mr. John Ducker has applauded that particular move to strenghten the President of the Arbitration Commission.

It is quite clear that the general stand-down procedures, the general no-work, no-pay provision, in a number of instances is not a particularly effective weapon. It is not strong enough when particular trade unions to seek to support their own wage claims or claims for changes in conditions, with bans and limitations which cause great difficulty for the public. Especially in areas of public service employment where there is a need to continue to supply services to the public.

What the Government has sought to do over recent times, and throughout its period in office, is to support the arbitration system, to support the Arbitration Commission.

It is worth noting that equivalent support from the Australian Council of Trade Unions was sought last Friday and was rejected by the President of the ACTU. It didn't seem to the Government to be too much to expect the Australian Council of Trade Unions to support the general strength of the arbitration machinery and to exhort their own members and affiliates to respect arbitration, respect conciliation and not to resort to bans and limitations which so much damage Australia's reputation. But that support from the Australian Council of Trade Unions, from Mr. Hawke, was not forthcoming.

The Telecom dispute has gone on far too long. The processes of arbitration, under a Full Bench and under Commissioner Clarkson have now begun. The Government has no wish to take actions that will interfere in that particular process throughout the course of the next day or so. But there are limits to the Government's patience. There is certainly a limit to the community's patience. There are very real limits to the hardship which the community can be expected to endure while these bans and limitations continue.

Prime Minister (continued)

Since the matter is now before arbitration, since the matter is now being heard by Commissioner Clarkson, it would have reasonable enough to expect the union concerned to lift the bans, to lift the limitations, so that normal communications could be returned in Australia.

If the bans and if the limitations are not off by first thing on Friday morning, we will be seeking an Executive Council decision to proclaim the Commonwealth Employees Employment Provisions Act. That will be proclaimed and proclaimed forthwith if there are bans and limitations still in place by Friday morning of this week.

Question

Prime Minister, what will that mean? In lay terms, what would...

Prime Minister

That greatly strengthens the employing authority, it greatly strengthens the Public Service Board, and the Government, in relation to stand-downs, in relation to suspensions. Ultimately, in relation to dismissals of people who are disrupting essential services. It applies to Commonwealth employees. It will apply to statutory instrumentalities of the Commonwealth. It would give employing authorities a general power which the Government now believes, in these circumstances, those employing authorities and the Public Service Board, ought to have.

Question

But won't you be risking a massive confrontation with Public Service unions and the whole union movement?

Prime Minister

There has been a massive confrontation caused by the union movement, caused by the Telecom union, with the whole Australian people over the last few weeks and days. The Government has been patient. The Government has been tolerant. Some would say, tolerant in the extreme.

Question

Will this get Telecom working?

Prime Minister

Using a power of this kind obviously cannot guarantee getting Telecom working on Friday morning, but if a trade union is to cause great inconvenience to the Australian public, if members of that trade union are not to work to supply services to the people of Australia - as they are employed to do, as they are paid to do - they cannot continue to get paid. They cannot continue to get supported. They will have to learn that there is a cost to themselves. If that means for a while that the public could be without the service - and that could be the result - then the Government accepts that and I believe the public will also accept

Prime Minister (continued)

it. I think that in the final result, we would get to a saner situation. But we cannot allow people to continue to inconvenience the Australian public virtually at no cost to themselves.

Question

Do you intend to implement that legislation immediately on Friday, if the unions haven't lifted the bans by then.

Prime Minister

That would be normal management prerogative and the prerogative of Government. The powers conferred by that particular act would be within then the general weaponry available to employing authorities in industrial disputes.

Question

What will you achieve if you stand down the very people, the only people, that are capable of running telecommunications systems.

Prime Minister

They are not working the system now. It is not working now. They are taking it out on the people of Australia in support of a claim that can be heard by arbitration and conciliation. I hope you are not supporting that kind of action against the interests of the total Australian community.

Question

How long will it run when you do that. How long is it going to run?

Prime Minister

It will run when the union learns that it cannot produce this kind of action without a cost to themselves. It is as simple as that.

Question

It has been suggested in some newspapers, no doubt wrongly, that you want this industrial confrontation as an election issue. dispel that kind of suspicion, will you give us a guarantee that there will no election this year.

Prime Minister

I don't want any industrial confrontation as an election issue.

Question

Will there be an election this year.

Prime Minister

That's not something that is going to run.

Question

Despite some (inaud) that have been made by the Federal Government on previous occasions to get Mr. Bob Hawke to (inaud) intervene in this situation, have you consulted with him on this issue.

Prime Minister

Mr. Hawke has intervened on one or two other occasions, after the Government had indicated that it would use this legislation, or other legislation. It has been after that that the disputes have been resolved.

Question

You've threatened to proclaim this legislation before and you haven't. Is there any reason this time why the union should think you would go ahead with your threat.

Prime Minister

We hadn't proclaimed it on earlier occasions because the disputes were over within the time limit given by the Government. But if this dispute, if the bans and limitations are not over within the time limit that I have stated, the legislation will be proclaimed, and let nobody mistake that.

Question

Why not proclaim it in any case, if you are saying you will do it on Friday, why not have it...

Prime Minister

Principally because the Government did not wish to interfere with the processes before Commissioner Clarkson.

Question

Why not wait until they are concluded.

Prime Minister

Because it is fair enough to let the parties know what the consequences will be if the bans and limitations continue.

Question

This legislation was passed last year.

Prime Minister

Two years ago.

Question

Why didn't the Government proclaim it when it was passed. What were the reasons for waiting.

Prime Minister

Because we thought it would be better unproclaimed at the time.

Question

You say, the Government has said in the past, that when unions take industrial action while matters are before the Arbitration Commission that that is tantamount of blackmail. Would you accept the point of view that this type of action now, while this situation is before the Arbitration Commission, is also tantamount to blackmail to the unions.

Prime Minister

No I wouldn't. I would say it is tantamount to the Government taking to itself the powers that are necessary to Government and to employing authorities to make sure that the services Governments must provide to the people of Australia can be supplied to the people of Australia. Telecom is not owned by the employees. They are working in that particular organisation to provide a service to the people of Australia. It is time the people of Australia were placed first.

Question

(Inaudible)

Prime Minister

The principle provisions of this legislation are suspension and stand-downs. Quite plainly, any of the people trained to work in Telecom are necessary for the operations of Telecom. But at the same time, their special skills are ones that are appropriate to the Telecom organisation. So they need Telecom. They need the jobs that they can get in that particular organisation if they are to have the kind of remuneration to which they have been used. I think it is time that the members of this particular union learnt that they owe some obligations to the people of Australia and they ought not to use their power in an important instrumentality to continue to inconvenience and disrupt the business and life and livelihood of the people of Australia, as they have over the last few days and weeks.

Question

...first of the unions you are going to take on?

Prime Minister

I would hope that people would be able to learn from a lesson.

Question

...you will follow on with others?

Prime Minister

If this legislation is proclaimed, well then it is proclaimed and the powers within it are generally available to Commonwealth instrumentalities, and the Public Service Board.

Question

Why was the legislation better unproclaimed two years ago when it was first passed by both Houses of Parliament.

Prime Minister

It might still not be proclaimed if the bans and limitations are lifted.

Question

But why was it better unproclaimed?

Prime Minister

Because we believed it better to play it that way.

Question

Could you expand on it?

Prime Minister

I don't think there is any need to expand on it at all. There are powers in this particular legislation which normally you would prefer not to have to use, but against the background of the kind of disputes that we have had over recent times the Government believes that it needs those very powers.

Question

But why is proclamation so crucial?

Prime Minister

Because the powers can't be used unless it is proclaimed.

Question

If that legislation is proclaimed will you proceed forthwith to instruct Telecom to stand down all employees that it cannot gainfully employ?

Prime Minister

There will be no doubt that the powers conferred by the legislation would be used by Telecom.

Question

Forthwith

Prime Minister: Yes.