



PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

SUNDAY, 16 MARCH, 1980

ELECTORATE TALK

Over the past weeks, many Australians have suffered unnecessarily as a result of the blatant and selfish exercise of union power. Such behaviour is repugnant to the majority of Australians.

We have come, as a nation, through difficult times. Now, our inflation is down; our new international competitiveness means that overseas buyers want more and more of our goods. Billions of dollars of investment projects are about to go ahead in Australia.

The most important result of all this activity is obvious. Employment is up by over 130,000 in the last year. And there are prospects for future job opportunities. But there are selfish sections in the community who, if their recent behaviour is any indication, are prepared to sacrifice these gains by the abuse of union power and by adopting attitudes of self-interest.

As has been too often the case in the past, this unthinking, militant behaviour has been supported or condoned in areas where it should have been, from the outset, resisted, rejected and condemned.

Let me be specific. New South Wales in particular almost ground to a halt last week as a result of a strike by petrol tanker drivers, members of the Transport Workers' Union. This dispute was not about wages or conditions; not about a fight between unions; or between Federal and State Branches of a union; it was a fight within a union.

It centred around an Australian citizen, Mr. Leon Laidely, not trying to deny anyone business, not trying to say a non-unionist should do his work, not saying another union should do the work; but merely saying that one of his own employees, a member of the Transport Workers' Union should perform the job.

The Union wanted the right to say who would perform the job. It was to prevent this kind of occurrence that the Government introduced Section 45D into the Trade Practices Act. Simply, 45D is designed to stop organisations - unions or companies - from hindering or preventing commercial dealings between a third party and the boycotted company.

That Section enabled Mr. Laidely to obtain an injunction against the Union because it was refusing to allow some of its members to deliver supplies to Mr. Laidely.

As Mr. Street said on Friday, while welcoming the cessation of the dispute, the Government views with real concern the arrangements under which the settlement was reached.

In the settlement, it now appears that Mr. Laidely's supplier, AMOCO, is to deny him supplies thus making a union ban unnecessary, and rendering Section 45D irrelevant.

It also appears that the Company's action follows an arrangement made under the auspices of the Arbitration Commission.

The Government is obviously concerned that this kind of arrangement can escape the provisions of the Trade Practices Act, and will look at ways to overcome the problem.

Not only was last week's strike unnecessary, but also it was avoidable. The reason it was avoidable is simple. The New South Wales Government has the powers to face up to militant unions. For reasons known only to themselves, it fails to do so.

My Government has argued for some time that the difficulties and confusion created by the division of industrial powers between the State and the Commonwealth need speedy resolution. That resolution, important though it is, is in the future. For the present, the New South Wales Government has powers which it gave to itself. Last week, as in the past, it failed to use those powers adequately. In the national interest, such an attitude must be reversed.

The 1976 New South Wales Energy Authority Act provides that whenever it appears from any cause that available supplies of a form of energy were likely to become less than sufficient for the reasonable requirements of the community; or if it was felt that an emergency situation existed or was likely to exist in relation to supplies of energy, then the New South Wales Government has the power to control and direct the sale, the supply and the consumption of that form of energy.

It has the power to direct a person or persons to transport that energy and to distribute it. It has the power to enforce this provision throughout any part of New South Wales, or throughout the whole State.

Because these powers exist, it is unacceptable that the well-being of people in New South Wales has to be regularly sacrificed while the New South Wales Government, for reasons unknown, yields to powerful union interests.

As happened last week, the control over fuel supplies in New South Wales was determined by union leaders, not the Government.

After the strike was in place and it became clear that New South Wales was going to run short of fuel, the New South Wales Government did use its emergency powers to freeze supplies of fuel, and to forbid its sale to all but selected emergency customers. One might say that the New South Wales Government was exercising its proper powers in an emergency.

But now it is reported that the priorities - who was to get and who was to be denied petrol - had been determined by the Transport Workers' Union, not the New South Wales Government. This was a total abdication of Government responsibility and demonstrated that the New South Wales Government was not prepared to stand up and exercise its authority if it meant an argument with a powerful union.

The New South Wales Premier attempted to hide the abject behaviour of his Government behind a public-relations exercise by proposing a referendum to hand over all State industrial powers to the Commonwealth. Mr. Wran knew very well that a proposal of that kind - even if agreed to by the other States - would only operate in the longer term. It was not relevant to the current situation.

The New South Wales Government has special powers under its own Energy Authority Act to control fuel supplies to the community. Last week we saw these either not used, or used only under the dictates of a union.

In the oil industry - indeed in any industry - the ceding of such powers by the State Government to a union threatens the national economy.

I have said before, the New South Wales Attorney-General is quick to invoke the law against company directors who do not operate with the law - and so he should be. But why should union leaders who fail to respond to negotiation and conciliation be exempt from the provisions of the law.

There can be no prospect of long-term industrial harmony if Governments abdicate from their responsibility in the face of difficult decisions. The community must know that justice and the law can, and will be upheld.

As I said at the outset, there are difficult problems in the union movement. The notion of where Commonwealth and State powers begin and end is not always clear to the community. There is usually a belief that because a dispute has a national effect, then its solution is within the capacity of the national Government.

The Commonwealth Government does have powers, and will exercise them, as it must, in an effective and responsible way. But very specific powers are also held by State Governments and in particular by the New South Wales Government in relation to last week's petrol dispute.

Had the New South Wales Government at the outset made it plain that it would not yield to the absurd demands of sections of the Transport Workers' Union, then the public could have been spared the massive dislocation that overtook the State.

In the wool dispute - which has halted regular wool sales throughout Australia since Christmas - it was also necessary to resist unreasonable union demands - in this case the Storemen and Packers' Union.

Naturally, the Government is hopeful that the Conference now proceeding before Mr. Justice Williams in Melbourne will bring an early return to work, so that once again our wool industry can meet its export obligations.

However, the arrangements agreed to by the brokers, growers and the Government last Friday will be applied progressively from tomorrow morning. Their application can only be prevented by a return to work by the Storemen and Packers' Union.

The Government realises that by responding to the request by the growers and brokers to bring down regulations to control the export of raw wool, the entire industry could well be brought to a halt. The purpose of these regulations will be to ensure that the industry as a whole has a unified approach to the dispute, having regard to the gross disruption to normal trade that has occurred.

Needless industrial disputes, if allowed to continue, can have a profound effect on the economic recovery that is under way. What we have gained in the last few years can so easily be destroyed by industrial disruption: by harmful and damaging strikes.

It is in all our interests to put conflict aside.

Surely, with the opportunities in front of us, it is time to put Australia first; to think of the national interests before self-interest; to see that what we do enhances national well-being rather than damages it.