

PRIME MINISTER INTERVIEWED BY PETER HARVEY, CHANNEL NINE

CANBERRA

---

Harvey

It seems to a good many Australians, Prime Minister, that the climate of industrial unrest - particularly in key industries - is getting worse all the time. Things aren't getting better. You have criticised Neville Wran by saying that the State Government, in his case, should have taken greater action. But broadly, where are we going, and what can be done to prevent us from going further down the path of industrial anarchy?

Prime Minister

Everyone talks of course, about a peaceful settlement of disputes. They all talk about reconciliation and reason. That is very fine. But if those qualities are going to prevail, you have got to have parties on both sides of an industrial dispute prepared to be reasonable, and as the Commonwealth believes, prepared to accept that the normal laws of the country that apply to companies and you, and everyone else as individuals, must also apply in relation to trade unions. I made those comments about Mr. Wran because they do have very specific powers in relation to energy shortages. They could have used those powers. But even when they did have an emergency distribution system, as it later appeared it was the Transport Workers' Union that determined who, under that emergency system, was to be allowed to get petrol. Now, that is not a Government using its powers, using its authority, being prepared to protect the people of New South Wales. One of the problems we have quite plainly, is that when a dispute becomes of great and national significance people automatically think that we, the Commonwealth, have the power to resolve it or to handle the matter. I think everyone knows- or most people who are in the industrial environment- know that the Commonwealth power is a limited one. If the States will work in co-operation with us that is fine. Over a year ago we established working parties, set up by the Premiers' Conference, to try and get more sense into the duality of arrangements: the State's on the one hand, ours on another. If that did happen, I believe we could handle difficult situations much better. Mr. Wran proposed in the middle of the petrol tanker's dispute that there be a referendum to hand powers over to us. But he knew quite well that a number of States would oppose that. Therefore, the referendum may well not succeed. But he also knew that that could only be a long-term solution. He had powers, as of then, or as of now, and was not willing to use them. You have got to have Governments prepared to be resolute. If an employer has to stand up, he has got to be prepared to do that, but I think Governments need to be prepared to back a particular employer if they believe that a trade union is being unreasonable and exerting an irresponsible and undemocratic power.

Harvey

But when that criticism can also apply, as you have inferred, to an employer - as with the situation with AMOCO and Mr. Laidely - what do you say then?

Prime Minister

I have no brief for what AMOCO appears to have done at all. Because it seems to me the reason seems to be something like this: Mr. Laidely, as was his right, took out protection so that he could still go on being delivered petrol, so that his business could continue. The argument, let us not forget, was over which member of the State-registered Transport Workers' Union should do the job; not over whether a non-unionist should do it, or whether a member of some other union should do it; but over which particular members of a State-registered union. So the cause of the dispute, as I believe, was the height of absurdity. But then Mr. Laidely goes to the law, which has been deliberately placed there so that he could be protected in these circumstances - in relative terms a smallish company, a smallish employer. Then, the company comes to a view, under discussion involving the Arbitration Commission, involving the Transport Workers' Union - Mr. Laidely not being present - comes to the view that if it refused to supply Mr. Laidely there will be no reason for a ban by the Union, therefore, no cause for Mr. Laidely's restrictive Trade Practices action, and therefore no dispute. The only loser in all of that would appear to be Mr. Laidely. But not only Mr. Laidely, because the community has lost, as I believe, and lost very seriously. Because here we have a large company, and hence a relatively powerful company, virtually in cahoots with the union that caused the problem in the first place: to settle the matter to their mutual agreement and advantage, but at the expense of the little fellow. Now, that is not a circumstance that the Government is prepared to stand by and watch. I have called for a report involving the Ministers for Business and Consumer Affairs, the Attorney-General, and Industrial Relations. We will have that report and be examining the matter, because we are immensely concerned that a law that we passed in good faith, and will support in good faith, would to us, appear to have been subverted. In the process what has happened is that the little fellow has been grievously damaged.

Harvey

On the other issue that is causing concern, on the wool, aren't you - the Federal Government - in danger of causing damage to that situation by jumping in before the Commission has had a chance to finalise its hearings?

Prime Minister

We need to remember that the Full Bench of the Commission made a judgement, now many, many weeks ago. What has happened since is because the union, Storemen and Packers, has refused to accept that judgement. Again, defiance of the law, defiance of the processes of arbitration. What then do you do? The dispute has gone on for several weeks. There have been no normally rostered sales since before Christmas. The whole trade is disrupted. As a result of a breakdown in meetings in the middle of last week between the parties - the brokers and the Storemen and Packers' Union and the ACTU - we

Prime Minister (continued)

decided that we should have a meeting with all the brokers and the growers' representatives in Canberra. We came out of that with a joint plan of action: all the parties supporting each of the actions that are proposed. Our use of export controls was in fact proposed to us by other parties. They wanted that to back up the actions that they would be taking to give strength and validity to those particular actions. We pointed out the consequences to the industry of accepting that particular proposition. After examination, discussion, we decided that we should. So, in a sense, it is not the Government arbitrarily coming in and saying 'this is going to happen; export controls to take over the industry'. We are responding in a very real way to an industry request which wants to act in a unified way, in a concerted way, to overcome industrial blackmail by the Storemen and Packers' Union.

Harvey

But how do you do that Prime Minister? How is that achieved, by taking over the industry?

Prime Minister

Taking over is really the wrong term. It gives us power to exercise controls over the export of wool. As a consequence of our decision to do that, by acceptance of the proposition, the dismissal notices have been sent out to Storemen and Packers in other centres, because there was probably no way of this dispute being resolved, while Melbourne and Sydney were blockaded and other centres were technically working: technically working, but not in a way that was really getting wool moving, normal sales undertaken. Because sales have virtually ceased. Therefore, the dispute was, in effect, holding up the whole industry. Since the blockade of Melbourne and Sydney was holding up the whole industry, it was logical that the consequences of that hold-up should be felt by all the industry; not leaving the situation where people working in the centres other than Melbourne and Sydney, could go on working subsidising those who were on strike.

Harvey

The subsidy presumably stops, although the Union will have some sort of funds, money, to be able to continue. But what happens then to the industry. I guess my question is: aren't we in danger of cutting off the nose of the wool industry to spite its face?

Prime Minister

I do not think so. In a matter of this kind, if you are going to get to a reasonable solution of it, you have got to be prepared to match strength with strength. That is not seeking confrontation; that is not wanting confrontation. Nobody can accuse the Government of that. It is that people have been on strike for many, many weeks. They have been preventing the normal business being undertaken; who refused to accept a Full Bench decision. They have been confronting

Prime Minister (continued)

the other people in this industry and indeed, the whole Australian community. It is time that there was a greater degree of commonsense and sanity. It is time that people recognise that we do have an Arbitration system that is worthwhile. It is the impartial third person, the umpire, and its verdict ought to be accepted, even if you do not like them, they ought to be accepted. Employers are bound by law to accept it. But some trade unions think that they can just go on regardless. Now, the Government will be certainly exerting all its authority to see that the integrity of the Arbitration Commission is maintained, to see that it is upheld. In doing that, you also need a determination by the employers, a determination by the industry. Last Friday showed plainly in the wool industry that these two things are there.

---000---