

PRIME MINISTER'S ADDRESS TO VICTORIAN STATE COUNCIL - AS DELIVERED ¹⁵Prime Minister:

Mr President, Mr Premier, my colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, - I can't necessarily say I am particularly pleased to be here on this occasion, but I hope you won't misconstrue that. I hope you also won't misconstrue it if I apologise for Tamie and say that she is unable to be here.

There are one or two things I would like to say. First I would like to congratulate the council for getting its new organisation launched. The elections were held yesterday, and I think the omens for the future are good. An enormous amount of work went into the preparation of the new administrative committee and the policy assembly, and the arrangements involved in that, and I am sure that the party is going to be strengthened by the resolve which I believe we all have to make sure the organisation is strengthened and made more effective.

I would also like to say how strongly the Federal Government is standing with and behind Lindsay Thompson. I haven't got the slightest doubt that Lindsay is going to win the next State election and win it well. I also believe that sometimes, Premiers' Conferences aren't all that they ought to be, and I would be the first to acknowledge that, but I believe that the last Premiers' Conference showed that the kind of discussions that the Premier and I have been able to have, have advanced the cause of the State of Victoria, and was delighted to see that Lindsay himself acknowledged that when he came away from that last Premiers' Conference and Loans Council. We will be seeking to act in that vein and do everything to do everything that we possibly can to advance the cause of the Liberal Party in this State throughout the coming months.

The current industrial situation is obviously one of enormous difficulty. Two or three years ago when the Transport Workers Union, on strike at the time, disrupted milk supplies in this State, Tony Street armed the Commonwealth with legislation that could lead to a speedy deregistration but which would also enable the Commonwealth to exercise considerable powers in a number of ways. It is Section 143A and it involves seeking a declaration from the Arbitration Commission that a particular union has, is threatening to or is damaging the safety health or welfare of the community. We believe, in consultation with the State government last week that such a declaration ought to be sought against the Transport Workers Union. It had in fact been an earlier Transport Workers Union strike that was instrumental in that clause being put when Tony was Minister for Industrial Relations, into the Conciliation and Arbitration Act. At the same time, we have become a little tired of our own employees conducting bans and limitations throughout various areas in the Commonwealth Public Service and therefore, we have made up our minds to use the suspension provisions for all of those involved in industrial action, the suspension provisions, again, of a new Act that was introduced while Tony Street was Minister for Industrial Relations.

They have been getting around no work no pay provisions because one person would disrupt services one day, another the next.. Nobody paid much penalty except the community who paid an enormous cost for the services that were not delivered as they ought by people whom the community were in fact paying. People sometimes say that they are government employees. Really, they are not. They are employees of all of you. They are paid for by the taxes that are taken from all of you. I believe that tax payers have the right to expect that people will in fact do a fair days work and fulfill their normal responsibilities when they are being paid for by the generality of Australian tax payers. So, we made the decision to use those suspension provisions and I think about 2,000 people had been suspended and it was for an indefinite term which would have been for the period of whatever the industrial action might be being undertaken by their union. So, in some unions, that could be or could have been in force for a considerable period of time.

Now, at this point, the President of the ACTU, Mr Dolan, ran me, and I pay full credit to him for doing it. I have got to say it has been pointed out by some of the journalists his predecessor would not have done so and he asked that we have the discussion about these matters because we had recognised, as the State government had, that the operation of the wage indexation principles and guidelines was tending to make some people feel that they were shut out, that they couldn't have their case heard, adequately or reasonably, before the Commission, because of the guidelines. That is not a question of blaming the commission, it is just stating a fact, and I think it was widely recognised in a number of disputes involving both the State and the Commonwealth and private employers. So, in the discussions that I have had with Lindsay Thompson, his Ministers and mine, and with this organisation about a week or so ago, we virtually agreed that there needed to be some modification of the operation of the guidelines to try and take some of the heat out of the industrial disputes and the damage that was being caused as a result. Now, building on that, the arrangement that we came to when we met with the Australian Council of Trade Unions was that we would call off the action that we had instituted the suspensions, that we would not continue with action, we would put aside action under Section 143A and move to do so providing there is progress in the Arbitration Commission tomorrow morning - I think it is down for hearing at 10.30 - and we will jointly, with the ACTU, recognise that there needs to be some adjustment to the guidelines, and they for their part, would recommend and use all their energies to achieve a full return to work in all these major disputes without any bans or limitations.

I think it is common knowledge that the ACTU has run into one or two difficulties, and having that fulfilled as quickly as I believe that they would want, but I haven't got any doubt at all about the sincerity of the ACTU and of their officers in carrying out their commitment and agreement with the Government which I believe is a reasonable and a sensible document which hopefully can open up a new and much better era in industrial relations than we have had for quite some time.

The Premier has been involved and I have been involved this morning in discussions. I spent a good deal of yesterday on the telephone, and also involved in discussions, mostly related to the Transport Workers Union, and it is expected - if I may say, provided Mr Hodgson can be found - it is expected that there will be discussions that could lead to a statement later today that might advance the situation quite considerably. I hope very much that that is so and I will continue to hold myself available in case further discussions are needed later on in the afternoon.

I can't really say very much more than that, but it does bring you up to date. I think progress is being made, even though, if you are listening to the newspapers or as I am told reading the Sunday newspaper, which I don't and haven't read, in fact, you might believe that there is a worsened situation. I don't really believe that because to have a position in which the Australian Council of Trade Unions with its full authority is working for a full and complete resumption of work, without any bans or limitations, is a very considerable advance indeed, and I think it is the first time that that has been achieved.

We might have to expect that some of the disputes will be easier to resolve than others. They are not all going to be solved at exactly the same minute, but they understand the need, the urgency and the speedy resolution so that Australia can get about its business in a proper way. I hope, and I believe they hope, we can build on that for the future and establish a better situation.

If I can say that one of the things that really does concern me a little bit is that there are going to be 100 heads of government in Britain this week who all know that it is industrial disputes that have stopped the Australian Prime Minister being in London. That is something which does concern me because it is not good for Australia's reputation. Quite apart from that, the newspapers centre on the great event of a royal wedding, and that obviously is a once in a life time occasion, but I had organised through the course of this week and on my return with Mrs Gandhi in Delhi because she is not able to leave India, a very substantial range of discussions with a number of heads of government, obviously with Margaret Thatcher, and Pierre Trudeau and a number of other leaders from the Commonwealth, about issues of great importance to Australia, the holding of a Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in this city in a month or two's time, and those discussions no doubt would have eased the path of that meeting because I think we are all aware that there are some sensitive issues to be handled. I have confidence in the good sense of the Commonwealth in coming to that, but in particular, I would have been having discussions in Britain and with Prime Minister Trudeau about the Sinai and requests that have been put to us and to other people. Those discussions would have been of very real importance, in ultimately helping Australia come to the appropriate decision. So, also, for these reasons, I regret that it has not been possible, in one sense, what I should have been doing, but if I had been, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to be here and wish this organisation well as it does embark on a new chapter

with a new organisation which I believe will serve the State of Victoria, the Liberal government and continuation of that government, and the continuation of the Federal Government in the years ahead.

I would like to take this opportunity of thanking you all for the work that has been done in the organisation in the past, and thank you also in expectation of what I know you will be doing for the future.

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