

NEW YEAR MESSAGE

Statement by the Acting Prime Minister,
the Rt. Hon. J.D. Anthony, C.H., M.P.

The fact that 1983 will be a difficult year should not cause us to throw in the towel but make us ask ourselves what we can do to minimise our problems and make the most of our opportunities.

We would be foolish to try to hide the difficulties Australia and its people face in the coming year.

Yet despite the problems the outlook beyond the immediate future is anything but gloomy. We have an abundance of natural resources and great productive capacity. We also have the human resources necessary to enable us to take advantage of world economic recovery when it occurs.

Our current economic problems are partly the result of the world-wide recession as a result of which unemployment is at very serious levels in virtually all developed countries. In Australia, our own situation was worsened by excessive wage increases which occurred when production was not rising. These increases added to costs and inflation, they undermined our competitiveness, and contributed in a major way to the rise in unemployment.

But there are some things we can do to help ourselves. As events in New South Wales in the last few days have shown, if we are prepared to attack a serious problem when practical means are available to do so, excellent results can be achieved.

Random breath-testing, despite the concern some people have about it, does appear to have achieved a most important and worthwhile reduction in the road toll over the Christmas period.

This demonstrates that if the community is prepared to accept a radical approach and the disciplines and limitations such approaches demand, very worthwhile results can be achieved.

The wages pause which the Commonwealth is seeking to have put in place is, for Australia a radical approach to our economic problems, and in particular the problems of unemployment.

It is an approach which involves discipline and even a degree of sacrifice on the part of those who have jobs, in the interests of helping those who want jobs, or are anxious about losing jobs.

If we are all prepared to make the wage pause work, it can be of real value. If some of us are not prepared to give it a

fair go, and seek to undermine it, there is no chance of its working, and achieving the results it is capable of achieving.

Last week's decision by the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission to implement a 6-month pause in federal award rates is a welcome reflection of the consensus which is developing in our community. Some State tribunals have made similar decisions.

Unfortunately, some union leaders have attacked the tribunals' decisions and have announced their intention to ignore or circumvent them. Such an approach would be selfish and misguided. I do not believe thinking Australians will support this sort of approach.

To circumvent the Commission's decision, to ignore a measure which all governments have agreed is necessary, by campaigning for over-award wage rises, by threatening industrial action, will not help our economy to recover and will not create jobs.

I ask all wage and salary-earners to give the wage pause a chance to work. We all owe that to our fellow Australians who are suffering real hardship.

For many Australians, the New Year, unless good rain falls soon, will see a continuation of an already desperate situation.

The drought that is ravaging a large part of Australia is affecting not only many thousands of individual farmers and their families, but also the communities of which they are part, and the nation as a whole.

The scope of the disaster is perhaps not yet fully grasped, nor is the extent of the economic consequences of the drought fully apparent. It is certainly adding to the severity of the recession and adversely affecting the whole economy.

The Commonwealth, and the various State Governments, are doing a great deal to try to help people get through the drought, and this is costing the taxpayer a lot of money.

There may be a need to do more. The Government will respond to such needs as they become evident.

Wheat growers need finance to plant their next crop and, when the drought ends - and we all hope that will be very soon - farmers will need help in financing re-stocking. I am confident the banks and other financial institutions will be as understanding as they can be of farmers' needs, and indeed of the needs of every section of the community affected by the drought. The Government will be giving close attention to these requirements.

As we enter 1983, the challenge is to remember that our future lies largely in our own hands.

We can put the blame on everyone else, or on things we cannot control - or we can look for things we can do to help put Australia back on a strong economic footing.

We often speak of the need for all Australians to pull together in times of difficulty. The wage pause - even though it is but one element of our efforts - gives us an opportunity to do just that: for everyone who receives a wage or salary, or who receives a professional income, to join together in an exercise in restraint.

Here is something we can do. Let's do it, and let us all put our efforts into making Australia in 1985 a more productive efficient and rewarding place for its people.

Canberra
31 December 1982