



PRIME MINISTER

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TRANSCRIPT OF PRIME MINISTER'S SPEECH - AUSTRALIAN WORKERS'
UNION JUBILEE CONFERENCE CENTENNIAL DINNER - BALLARAT
24 JANUARY 1986

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

A notice in the Ballarat Courier on the 12th of June 1886 was a model of precision. In simple unique terms it said:
"IMPORTANT NOTICE TO SHEARERS: A MEETING OF SHEARERS WILL BE HELD FERNS HOTEL, STURT STREET THIS SATURDAY EVENING AT 8 O'CLOCK. BUSINESS: RE-ESTABLISHING A SHEARERS' UNION - ALL SHEARERS ARE REQUESTED TO ATTEND. DAVID TEMPLE, SECRETARY PRO TEM."

When those first forty men (later in the evening the number swelled to something like 100) sat down in Ferns Hotel at 8.00 o'clock on that evening in June 1886, they could have had no idea that they were initiating what would become in fact one of the great elements and legends of the future Australian nation. They elected W.G. Spence as Chairman, David Temple as Secretary and a Committee of nine. They were the products of their time and they were reacting to the injustices of their time. And in that they provided great leadership. But like all leaders of greatness, their secret was in their capacity to get a glimpse of the future, create a vision and then, on that glimpse of the future, to establish the principles of organisation and the policies for action upon that perception of that future and to be relevant for that future. And this greatness - the glimpse of the future - those great leaders had was reflected in two central principles I believe enunciated by Spence and accepted from the outset by the Union. They have been referred to already this evening.

Firstly, as a central principle as they put it, the Union must be intercolonial, ignoring arbitrary political boundaries. Secondly, the policy of the Union was to be consultation and conciliation. And associated with those two fundamental principles came the commitment to political action through the Australian Labor Party, soon to emerge to share a similar unbroken history with the Australian Workers' Union. And it was because of that far-sightedness, because of their capacity to get that glimpse of the future which shaped those basic principles to which I have referred, that a new young organisation which became the AWU was able to grow. That organisation - your organisation - grew with Australian industry. It grew with a conciliation and arbitration system and it grew to the Parliamentary Labor Party.

Let me just briefly refer to those three aspects of its growth. Because those early leaders of the AWU had that glimpse of the future, the sort of organisational constitution which they established was one which lent itself to involvement with the diversification of the Australian economy which occurred from the turn of the last century. So through the constitution which they shaped we have seen throughout this century the ACTU going into a vast range of industries - and there's hardly any industry of significance of which the AWU is not either directly or indirectly associated. Secondly, as I said, it grew with the conciliation and arbitration system because of those early leaders that had the foresight to understand that the path in the future in Australia was going to be one in which the interests of those that they sought to serve would be best met by the processes of conciliation and discussion. And so, in their own constitution, they were ready to grow with that conciliation and arbitration system which in fact they were so instrumental in helping to establish.

And as the Judges of the High Court interpreted our constitution in a way which allowed that Court - the early Arbitration Court - to grow in a way which had never been envisaged by the founders of the constitution and those interpretations allowed the jurisdiction to be indited by the serving of paper demands from their rejection by employers, the AWU was there centrally involved in that growth. Because of that glimpse of the future that I referred to, the nature of the organisation of the AWU lent itself to involvement with the growth of the conciliation and arbitration system.

May I say by way of parenthesis about the greatest conciliation and arbitration system in the AWU, I still remember with amusement and, indeed with affection, the headlines in The Worker in 1959 when a young academic moved down from the Australian National University to become the advocate for the ACTU to take over the role of Dick Eggleston, Queen's Council. The Worker described the transition with the headline "From Eggleston to Egghead". I think in a very short time the doubts of my good friends in the AWU had been cast aside and together we were able to work in that position for the advancement of the working people of Australia.

Thirdly, I said the AWU grew with the Parliamentary Labor Party. It is a matter of well established record and fact that in the early days of the Australian Labor Party, both at the State and the Federal level, the AWU was synonymous with the growth of that Party. The people who learnt their politics in the industrial fields of the AWU quickly transferred into the Parliamentary halls of this country at the State and Federal level.

There were so many great figures that emerged - provided three Prime Ministers in Watson, Scullin and Curtin. A range of great figures - and that tradition has been maintained by one we have here tonight - Mick Young. I believe, when the story of the 20th century political scene is written, there will be very few, if any, to match Mick in the great wit, insight and humanity which he has brought to the Federal Parliament.

Let me say of that growth of the AWU, acquired with the growth of the Parliamentary Labor Party, it depended not simply upon those periods when Labor was in office - long period in the State Parliament, not so long in the Federal Parliament - but even when Labor was not in office, never let it be forgotten that it was essentially the Labor Party of this country that set the terms of the political agenda in this country. And that had to always have been true.

Of course it is a matter of great pride now that in so much of Australia, including at the Federal level, Labor is in power and we are setting that agenda directly and not indirectly. It was true of the AWU as it grew in the way to which I have referred that it grew with Australian industry. And it grew with the conciliation and arbitration system as it grew with the Parliamentary Labor Party. It is true of the AWU that it rejected the extremes of political philosophy. It was essentially a Party committed to the democratic socialism, social democracy (describe it as you will). But essentially it was a movement and organisation committed to the Parliamentary system and if you wanted to find one single proposition which would describe, I believe, the philosophy of the AWU from its beginning right through its history, you don't have to get into complicated philosophies, but simply to say, it essentially believes in the equality of opportunity. It believes in an Australia where young people, irrespective of the background and income level of their parents, should have that equality and opportunity.

We can say at the end of this 100 years that things have changed, and with those changes and growth has consistently developed and grown the AWU. We can say that things have changed but we can also say that things have stood still. Because just as I was looking at a few notes in the last couple of days about the early period of the AWU, I was reminded how much, for some people, things have stood still. Those of you steeped in the history of the AWU will recall in those latter days of the 1880s and the early days of the 1890s that the one central cause of conflict was the question of freedom of contract.

It is fascinating, isn't it, how the conservatives throughout history have had this facility for tying up the most reactionary and conservative position in the most beautiful and liberal language. They talked about the freedom of contract. That's what they were fighting for. When they talked about the freedom of contract what they were talking about is the right of the boss to exclude the union and on their terms to ensure that they got labour on the worst possible terms.

And that's what the AWU fought about. They have living proof to the concept of unity being strength. They weren't going to leave individuals to be exploited to the whims of people waving the great flag of freedom of contract but under that delightful banner being permitted to establish conditions socially unacceptable. The AWU fought against that contract of so-called freedom of contract in the 1880s and the 1890s.

As I say, things have not changed because, if you look around today, you see the same sort of people wanting to talk about freedom of contract, to push the unions out of the way, to give the right as they say, to people just to deal with their employees.

Now it sounds marvellous but it's just the same in 1986 as it was in 1886. It's still founded on exactly the same principle - that employers should be allowed under that process to deal with individuals in a way to try and ensure that they will not get the sort of benefits that they are entitled to get from their involvement in the productive process. So I say nothing has changed.

It always makes me amused when I hear people in that sort of context say why should they have anything to do with the trade union. The very basis upon which those people start is from the standards which have been established over the years, the generations beforehand, by the millions of Australian working men and women who, through their association in great unions like the AWU, fought together to ensure that there shall be decent standards in this country. And I believe that as far as Australia is concerned today, they are no more in 1986 going to succumb to the blandishments of this misguided and deceptive language than your predecessors did in 1886. We will not be decluded by language like that.

Throughout your 100 years you as a Union and those before you set your sights on objectives which should be pursued to advance the cause of ordinary working men and women and those dependent upon them. You have not been static or unimaginative in the perception of where the duty of the organisation lay in meeting those interests. And if I could bring you up-to-date on a matter which is perhaps not so generally understood as it should be. When we talk about superannuation it is the AWU which in recent years has been in the forefront of advancing that concept. You saw that, because of the nature of some of the industries in which many of your members were involved, being under very considerable difficulties, they should receive justice in terms of retirement benefits.

A decade or more ago you devoted yourselves to developing schemes which would give universal coverage wherever your members went. In terms of superannuation you have been so successful I understand. Industries, employers and others have asked you to drop the AWU exclusivity provision so that you can bring to bear the benefits and the very considerable experience that you've developed in that area. It is appropriate therefore that you should have taken the lead in an issue which is going to be predominant in the industrial field in the next year or so.

Let me make it quite clear that the Government, as is obvious through its discussions with the ACTU, totally endorses the principles that have now been arrived at. Remember what the facts are in regard to superannuation in this country. Half the people, that is working people have it. But it's very inequitably distributed in terms of the income levels of those who enjoy it. Of those who are on \$480 a week or more, over 70 per cent have superannuation. So if you look at those with an income of \$280 or less a week, less than 30 per cent of those have superannuation. Now that sort of situation is not tolerable and it was inevitable, given a democracy such as ours, that there was going to be a push to make superannuation general. It is not only in the best interests of those who currently have not got superannuation, but it's also in the interests of the community as a whole that the extension of this benefit should now be pursued in a coordinated, regulated way which has regard to the varying capacities of sections of the Australian industry. And that's what is at the centre and the heart of the Accord that's been reached between our Government and the ACTU.

Just briefly, there are three things I would like to say about that, picking up some of the totally misguided criticism that has been made about the agreement that's been reached between the Government and the ACTU. Firstly, it is said that this is ignoring the rights and the role and the responsibility of the Arbitration Commission. I want to say before his Hon Mr Justice Madden that that Accord is not so.

Both the Government and the ACTU have a very clear and proper understanding and respect for the role of the Commission and there is a total role for the Commission in its consideration of the way in which this benefit which is enjoyed by half the working population of Australia should be extended - the timing and placing and so on. It is accepted and understood by us and, I believe, by the Commission, that there is a proper role for the Commission in that regard.

Secondly, there is the misguided proposition which says there is no capacity, that the Union is talking about past productivity and that's been used up. Let me make it quite clear that the cooperation of the trade union movement in the past two or three years, which has brought Australia to a position where it has the highest rate of economic growth of any country of the OECD, has only been possible because of the constructive cooperation of the trade union movement of this country. And it's appropriate that now arrangements should be arrived at whereby over the next two years productivity increases which occur in that time should be distributed in part to the workers of this country whose efforts have made our economic growth possible.

The third thing I should say about it, in terms of the misrepresentations that have been put about superannuation, is that there is concern as to the way in which the superannuation scheme should be run. The Government has had serious discussions not only with the ACTU but with the representatives of business. We are developing guidelines. We have talked with those representatives about these generally, and in regard to the tax treatment and those guidelines, where necessary, will in turn be put into legislation so that not only will workers and employers be able to have confidence in the integrity of these schemes, but so will the community as a whole.

If you look back at the history of the 100 years of the AWU, there is one consistent threat that you can find in terms of the things you have sought by way of improvements for those that you represent. That one consistent thing is that it has always been said about what you thought was appropriate gradually to improve the conditions of your members either could not be afforded, it wasn't the right time, or it was going to bring disaster.

It is right that the trade union movement should be required to have regard for the economic circumstances of the time and there is no trade union movement in the world today which has more constructively and cooperatively been prepared to have that regard. But we say as a Government that it is appropriate that in the next two years ahead of us this benefit, now enjoyed predominantly by the relatively more affluent in the workforce, should in this coordinated and responsible way be extended to the rest of the workforce. I have said that it is a matter of great pride for me now that I can come to you as you celebrate your 100 years, as you look back on so many barren years in terms of our non-occupancy of the Treasury ventures, as a Labor Prime Minister and report to you on what is now nearly three years of very considerable achievements.

I repeat that that achievement - the most outstanding feature of which is the creation in the five months ahead of schedule of over half a million new jobs - has only been possible because the people of Australia, through their great organisations, have responded to our call for cooperation and constructive conciliation. And foremost of course in that has been the trade union movement.

And the AWU has been so important within that framework because of the call that I made to the people of Australia, on your behalf, for cooperation and conciliation. I hope in its small way that as well as being a glimpse of our future in Australia there is a glimpse of the future founded on an understanding of the past. Because I knew from studying the history of our great Labor movement in this country, particularly the sort of commitment that you Union has had to the processes of conciliation, that that approach could work. And your Union is entitled to draw much pride from the fact that it's your experience, it's your commitment to that principle which has been part of enabling us to get a vision of where this country can go in the future.

And as you've now finished your first 100 years and you look to that next 100 years I firmly believe that those great principles of those early leaders which they enunciated, and which were embraced by the membership of this Union, will clearly serve you in the years ahead and serve this country as well as they have in the past. Because we must, like those early leaders of the AWU, ourselves attempt to get that glimpse of the future. What is the sort of context going to be within which your Union, our Government are going to be operating. We know that it's going to be a more complex, more competitive, tougher environment, but one of great opportunities. There is no country in the world better placed to meet those challenges, to grasp those opportunities than Australia.

We are uniquely blessed with resources. We have a great people and we have a commitment to decent processes and the resolution of conflicts. So as you look back with pride from those 100 years, as you remember the way in which your founders tried to glimpse the future and were successful and were to produce such results, I hope that you will join with us in Government in similarly trying to understand what that future's going to be. Try with us to apply those principles to which I have referred and I believe that if we do that we are going to be able to hand on to those who come after us a great country, a great opportunity and a more equitable distribution of wealth within it.

Let me conclude by saying this: that because I and my colleagues in Government are so conscious of the achievements of this great organisation; because we understand that you have in part become an intrinsic element of this nation; that you've become part of its tradition; that you've served its people so well; we want to identify with you in this your centenary year. I therefore have pleasure in announcing my Government will provide financial assistance in support of up to \$10,000 for specific projects being planned by the AWU during 1986.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I again congratulate this great organisation on its achievements and I wish you and those that you will be serving well in the next 100 years.