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PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
TOWNSVILLE TRADES AND LABOR COUNCIL
CENTENARY DINNER
TOWNSVILLE - 14 AUGUST 1988**

One hundred years ago next week a group of Townsville workers gathered at Grosskoff's Family Hotel here in Townsville for an historic meeting.

The bricklayers, carpenters, seamen, wharfies, builders, laborers, tailors and butchers who came together on 23 August 1888 carried this motion: "That they form themselves into a branch of the Trades and Labor Council of Queensland."

Tonight we celebrate the one hundred years of hard work, commitment and solidarity which that resolution initiated.

The Townsville Trades and Labor Council has played a major role since 1888 in defending and enhancing the interests of the working men and women of North Queensland. It has also played a massive role in all aspects of the labor movement at the local, State and Federal levels.

This century of achievement gives us much to celebrate at tonight's dinner and I am grateful for having been invited as your guest of honour to join with you in these celebrations.

It's appropriate on such an occasion to reflect on what it was that motivated those pioneers of the Townsville Trades and Labor Council - not for the purpose of engaging in idle speculation, but with the serious intention of measuring our achievements against their expectations, and of using the experience gained over the last one hundred years as a guide in preparing ourselves for the next century.

We can establish - with the invaluable assistance of hindsight - that these pioneers were motivated, first, by a perception that prevailing conditions, in their work place and in the broader society, were unfair and unjust.

And second, they recognised that this unfairness and injustice is not insuperable but can be overcome through the processes of peaceful reform if people of goodwill work together.

That is the truth contained in the words chosen as this Trades and Labor Council's motto: "Strength United is Stronger". Our pioneers saw that by working together we can achieve goals far larger than can be achieved by working separately.

This is the great truth of the Labor movement, which provides the founding principle of every branch, every union, every Trades and Labor Council.

And it is the truth which underlies the historic Prices and Incomes Accord that currently exists between the industrial and political wings of the labor movement.

It can fairly be said that never in the history of the labor movement has there been such a close and constructive partnership between the two wings of our great movement than there has been since 1983 in the form of the Accord. This partnership has allowed your Federal Labor Government to create one million new jobs, to implement massive improvements in the social wage, and to establish the foundations for genuine, sustainable, long-term prosperity in this country.

The third factor which must have motivated the founders of this Trades and Labor Council is related to the previous two: they were determined to seek industrial and political reforms which would benefit not just their immediate supporters but the wider community; they were determined to achieve not gains which could be quickly eroded by time but permanent gains which would help build a better Australia.

Over our entire history, the Australian Labor Party and the Australian trade union movement, in all their levels and in all their forums, have been dedicated to seeking reforms of that nature.

Just as we have always done, Labor today is seeking improvements not just for the present but for the future - achieving reforms in today's world which will make a better and more prosperous world for our children tomorrow.

I speak to you tonight as Prime Minister of a Government unashamedly proud of its achievements in this labor tradition of reform.

We are creating a more efficient and effective economy, a more efficient and effective industrial relations system and taxation system, a more efficient and effective system of educating and training young Australians, and of ensuring the health and welfare of all Australians.

There have been reforms achieved in the interest of all Australians and achieved with the cooperation of all Australians.

Tonight I want to speak to you about another essential reform task facing Australians: the task of creating a more effective and relevant Constitution.

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When the six Australian colonies federated in 1901 and created the Commonwealth of Australia, they established a system of Government which solved pretty successfully the problems and rivalries of that process of nation building.

But they did not establish - nor could they realistically be expected to have established - a system which would stand unchanged through the next century.

As Australia becomes a more complex and mature society, and as the demands of economic decision-making become sharper, the limitations and shortcomings of the Constitution become more apparent.

The need for Constitutional reform becomes more pressing.

On 3 September, Australians are being asked to vote on four referendum proposals. If they approve these proposals, Australia will be able to enter the 21st Century with a Constitution which provides a fairer and more up to date basis for the system of Government we inherited in 1901.

That is why we are seeking support for four proposals which will:

- . provide for four year maximum terms for both Houses of the Commonwealth Parliament;
- . establish fair and democratic Parliamentary elections throughout Australia;
- . recognise local government as an integral part of the system of government in this country; and
- . extend rights already in the Constitution so that they effectively cover all Australians.

These proposals cover four separate areas of our Constitution, but they share one key and overwhelming element: they are about benefiting people, rather than empowering governments.

That is the theme which unites these proposals, and it is the fact which gives me greatest confidence the four referendums will succeed.

Since 1945, a federal election has been held on average once every two years. This is universally recognised as too costly, not only in terms of the \$50 million that is now spent to hold each election, but also the increased economic instability and the restraint on good government imposed by the ever-present prospect of an election.

It is a fact of life that where - as in Australia's case at present and for some time to come - economic reconstruction is needed, the pain always precedes the gain.

So the first referendum seeks 4 year maximum terms for both Houses of the Commonwealth Parliament.

This will allow Governments to take those tough decisions without being deterred by the short-term criticism those decisions almost inevitably inspire.

In other words, success for this proposal will ensure that governments can get on with governing. That is why, over the last few years, four-year terms have been adopted by every State Government - except perhaps not surprisingly Queensland.

If this referendum succeeds, it will not alter the powers of the Senate, including its powers to review, amend or reject legislation. For better or worse, the Senate's power to force a Government to the polls will remain untouched. But in such a circumstance, a Senate would itself have to face the electorate at the same time.

And the proposal will remove one of the chief causes for early elections in recent years - the need to bring the timing of elections of the two Chambers back into line.

The second proposal - for fair elections - goes even more directly to the issue of democracy.

At this point in the late twentieth century, as we celebrate our Bicentenary, you would think it would be taken for granted that a democratic government should be based on equal representation of its citizens.

Yet this is not the position in Australia today - at least not in Western Australia, Tasmania and, starkly, here in Queensland.

Indeed, some of the most extraordinary imbalances in the Queensland electoral system occur here in Townsville:

- . one of the three most populous Queensland State seats - Thuringowa - is located here in Townsville, 1500 kilometres from Brisbane;
- . it takes more voters to elect the member for Thuringowa than it does to elect the three members for Roma, Gregory and Balonne combined;
- . three seats based in Townsville contain only 10,000 fewer votes than the eight seats which comprise the Western and Far Northern Zone; the Townsville seats have an average enrolment of just over 23,000 voters while the eight Western and Far Northern seats have an average of just under 10,000 voters; and
- . the vote of a Townsville elector in the Thuringowa electorate is worth only half the vote of a resident of Charters Towers, one hour's drive away.

The proposed amendments to ensure fair and democratic elections are simple.

They will ensure that the number of voters in each electorate is within 10 per cent of the average number of voters in all electorates in each State and Territory.

The huge imbalances, the unfair elections, the blatant denial of individual democratic rights, the Queensland gerrymander, will all be consigned to the history books.

Redistributions will occur at least every 7 years, or more frequently when required.

This point must be clearly understood by people in North Queensland - one of the fastest growing regions of Australia. Without electoral redistributions, for every new person who decides to settle here, the existing voters effectively suffer a reduction in the value of their electoral representation in State Parliament.

In other words without redistributions, Townsville gets electorally punished for its success as a growth centre.

These amendments do not impose Commonwealth laws on the States. They impose constitutional requirements on Commonwealth and State governments alike.

What they will do is protect the rights of the people by ensuring that their voices are heard equally on election day, in Federal elections as in State elections, including - for the first time in many decades - here in Queensland.

Residents of rural Australia do not need a gerrymander to recognise their invaluable contribution to the lifestyle and the prosperity of this State and this nation.

Indeed, it should be seen as an insult to country people that a gerrymander has for so long been seen as the substitute for relevant and effective rural policies.

It is my proud claim - our proud claim - that no Government more than this Federal Labor Government has provided those policies to protect and enhance the true welfare of Australians living outside the major cities.

This proposal also seeks to fill one of the more glaring gaps in the Constitution - its failure to guarantee the right to vote. Currently, the qualifications for voting in any election for a parliament are whatever that parliament chooses.

A "yes" vote for this question will ensure that all Australians have the constitutionally-guaranteed right to vote, subject to existing legal disqualifications such as mental incapacity or imprisonment.

In 1988, it is surely time to enshrine the right to vote in the document that is the basis of our democratic government.

The third referendum proposal seeks to provide, at last, constitutional recognition of the third tier of government - local government.

There are more than 850 local councils around Australia. In the last financial year they spent more than \$6.5 billion on providing the basic community services that only local government can provide.

The fact is that local government exists, as a valid, democratic, accountable and respected tier of administration in Australia. This referendum will provide a long overdue and thoroughly legitimate recognition of its status in the Constitution.

Local government organisations throughout Australia are backing this referendum wholeheartedly - not least in decentralised Queensland, where local government has always played such an important and constructive role in administration.

The Mayor of Brisbane, Sally-Anne Atkinson, has declared her support for it.

Townsville of course is where the Minister for Local Government, Senator Margaret Reynolds, cut her teeth in local government.

So I was particularly pleased to hear that in the last month, the Townsville City Council lent its support to the proposal and is now giving practical assistance through public statements and media releases.

The fourth and final referendum proposal is as simple, modest and practical, and as equally deserving of support as the previous three.

This question asks voters to ensure the rights of:

- . trial by jury for people facing serious criminal charges;
- . fair compensation for property taken by any government; and
- . freedom of religion.

The Constitution does not give a right to trial by jury for offences against State or Territory laws or for a number of serious Commonwealth offences; and it gives no right to fair compensation when property is taken by a State, Territory or local government or by the Commonwealth in a Territory. There is no common law protection of the right to religious freedom.

This referendum will rectify each of these shortcomings.

My friends,

Each of these four proposals stands as a valuable and significant element in a much overdue renovation of Australia's Constitution.

Together however they represent something even larger - what I referred to earlier as their shared intention of benefiting not Governments, not Canberra, not any political party but, simply, the people.

Since federation, thirty eight referendums have been put to the Australian people, of which only eight have been approved.

I have never believed that this poor track record accurately reflects the capacity of the Australian community to achieve sensible and vital Constitutional change.

In the past, referendum proposals all too often seemed to emerge from on high, without prior consultation with those who were being called upon to vote on them.

It was a process almost guaranteed to arouse the suspicions of the political opponents of the Government of the day, as well as of those cynics who automatically interpret any change as a plot to enhance the power of Canberra.

They were seen as having been formulated by politicians for politicians.

Our proposals have been developed by the people for the people.

In 1985 we established the Constitutional Commission - a bipartisan community-based group - to study what could be done to achieve essential constitutional reform.

Specifically, they have been developed by the Constitutional Commission, chaired by the former Solicitor-General, Sir Maurice Byers, on the basis of an unprecedented process of public consultations.

Contrast this against the stance being taken on these referendums by the Opposition.

I can't help thinking of Robert Menzies' efforts in 1944, during the Curtin years, to create the Liberal Party. In a speech in Canberra in that year he had this to say of the contribution the conservative Opposition had been making:

"... on far too many questions we have found our role to be simply that of the man who says "no". ... there is no room in Australia for a party of reaction. There is no useful place for a policy of negation."

That was Robert Menzies in 1944. But there must be a large number of Liberals who agree with those sentiments today, and who are appalled to see their party's current position on these referendums.

Because now the Liberals have turned the full circle; here they are again, more than four decades later, as the party of reaction, confronting new challenges with the oldest word in their dictionary: "no".

What is even more astonishing is that they are saying "no" to proposals which they actually support.

The Federal Liberals in the past have urged constitutional recognition of local government. Now it is actually proposed in a referendum, they oppose it.

They have urged extending the rights of trial by jury for serious offences and fair compensation for property acquired compulsorily by government - but now these are proposed in referendum, they oppose them.

The Liberals have supported longer parliamentary terms. But now, asked to support a referendum to achieve that very reform, they oppose it - on spurious grounds about an alleged attack on the powers of the Senate.

The Liberals have also supported the concept of one vote - one value. But again, given the chance to achieve that reform, their support has turned to opposition.

That's a reversal of policy that a number of Liberals including the Queensland Liberal leader, Angus Innes, haven't been able to stomach.

As in so many issues, what the leaders of the Party say is being questioned and undermined from within the Party.

The reason for this series of reversals and somersaults attests to the leadership vacuum in the Federal Liberal Party - quite simply, John Howard was rolled in the party room by the Nationals. His principled support for constitutional reform - like so many of the erstwhile Howard principles - has been jettisoned in favour of shortsighted, self-defeating determination to oppose for the sake of opposing.

To hide its cynicism, the Opposition makes the extraordinary claim that these proposals constitute a grab for power by Canberra.

As I have said in the past, the truth is that opposition to the proposals means retaining the privileges and powers of politicians and entrenching the inefficiencies of the present system:

- . Opposition to the four year term proposal means support for disrupting the nation with elections far more frequently than even our Constitutional founders would have expected or ever intended.
- . Opposition to the one vote-one value proposal means allowing politicians to retain the power to manipulate electoral boundaries.
- . Opposition to the local government proposal means turning a blind eye to the existence of the third tier of government and refusing the benefits of closer cooperation among Local, State and Federal Governments.
- . Opposition to the rights and freedoms proposal means allowing State politicians to retain the capacity to deny people a number of essential rights.

For too long, the people have been absent from the mainstream of the Constitution-making and Constitution-changing processes of this nation.

On 3 September, I believe the people will return to that mainstream.

By giving constitutional reform back to the people, we have ensured that the issues being put on 3 September reflect their priorities.

If these four proposals succeed, the real winners will be the people of Australia.

My friends,

One hundred years ago, with the foundation of this Trades and Labor Council, our forebears showed they were men and women with a vision of the future.

They were determined to ensure they were not hidebound by the unsatisfactory patterns of the past.

Subsequent generations have been the beneficiaries of their vision and determination. Today, we are their beneficiaries - and that gives us a responsibility to continue their work of reform.

This referendum campaign offers us a tangible means of fulfilling that responsibility and it is an opportunity we cannot afford to forego.
