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Title:

Speech to the Federal Conference of the Federated Miscellaneous Workers Union

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SPEECH TO THE FEDERAL CONFERENCE OF THE FEDERATED
MISCELLANEOUS WORKERS UNION - 20/10/75

MR. CHAIRMAN, DELEGATES, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

Thank you for inviting me here this morning.

I had intended today to speak on industrial relations in South Australia, and of our very comprehensive plans for the development of worker participation in industrial management. However, it does not seem, at this stage, an appropriate thing to do.

Your Conference is being held at a time of unparalleled political crisis in Australia - and accordingly I believe it is proper for me - as Premier of this State, as a Leader of the Australian Labor Party, and as a member of the Labor Movement - to speak today of that crisis.

It is a crisis that affects every man, woman and child in this country - for it concerns the very legal and constitutional fabric of our governmental system and thus our notions of liberty and of parliamentary propriety. For the fact is that we are faced now with a grab-for-power by a group of ruthless and unprincipled men. They are men who act as if under the delusion that they were born to rule. They are men dedicated to the narrowest view of parliamentary and governmental responsibility - men whose vision is clouded by privilege and distorted by the demands of vested interests.

And what they have done is decide that in their lust-for-power they will disregard those very delicate conventions and understandings that are essential to the parliamentary system. For our parliamentary and governmental system is not absolutely determined by written constitutions - is not fixed in some book of rules - but, like every Parliament and Government adhering to the Westminster system, it is also determined by, and subject to, complex notions of consent, precedent and principle. These conventions are vital to the functioning of constitutional democracy, even though they are not clearly written into the formal document we call the Constitution.

The past two years have seen the State Governments of New South Wales and Queensland and the Australian Senate conspire to ignore such conventions. Firstly, Mr. Lewis, and then Mr. Bjelke-Petersen, with the tacit support of

Mr. Fraser, have defied the convention accepted by Labor and Liberal alike since 1949, that a mid-term Senate vacancy is filled by a member of the same political party as the previous Senator. Now those same Premiers are prepared to help Malcolm Fraser distort the conventions and processes of Parliament once again by refusing to issue the writs for a half-Senate election which would normally, in terms of parliamentary convention, be held at this time of year.

Future years will remember Malcolm Fraser as the man who brought democracy and Parliamentary Government to the lowest point in our history. I don't believe he will ever be forgiven. He has tampered with the essential balance of parliamentary trust and political honour.

So I think it is worthwhile in the matter to pause and consider the full ramifications of the situation we face. Firstly, we have a popularly-elected Government with a majority in the House of Representatives - the Lower House, the House of Government wherever the Westminster System holds sway. The Government has presented finance appropriation Bills to that House and they have been passed. The Bills have now been sent to the Senate, the Upper House. The universal Parliamentary Convention in this matter is that only a Lower House - a House of Government has the right to reject money Bills.

In the Australian Parliament, that convention has been followed since Federation by all parties and all Governments - with the dishonourable exceptions of the Snedden and Fraser Oppositions. So the convention has been thrown away and the Budget rejected. No amount of semantic distinction between deferring and rejecting can alter the fact that the Senate has rejected the Budget of the democratically-elected Government which still has a majority in the Lower House.

Truly, this is the most amazing and dangerous grab for power by men who are obviously prepared to render hollow and powerless the nation's democratic institutions and traditions. Mr. Fraser's actions alone are reprehensible.

Every Australian must realise the practical results if the course Mr. Fraser has arrogantly adopted becomes accepted Parliamentary practice. The threat of an election whenever supply bills come before a Senate will produce chronic instability. How can a Government take measures which may be

electorally unpopular in the short term, yet vital for the country's long term prosperity, if it must look over its shoulder every six months to see what a hostile senate will do?

Instability in the political system poses a grave threat to each of us. Just think of the confusion in the community if Governments cannot plan ahead any longer than six months.

The business community will lose its confidence in the political system, and the programmes of all Governments - State and Federal - will lurch along without any realistic forward planning being possible.

The school in your neighbourhood could get half-built and then abandoned; the local hospital may not have enough money or confidence to start an expansion programme; the road system might get repaired, or it might not: all these things, and many more, will be thrown into confusion if political stability is jettisoned in favour of cynical grabs for power every time the Government does not have a majority in the Senate.

Responsible politicians realise the enormity of the damage such uncertainty can create. In South Australia, for example, as a result of a constitution which for almost a century gave the vote in Upper House elections only to wealthy landowners, my Government has never had a majority.

We still don't, even though we have thoroughly reformed the Upper House to give the vote to everyone over 18, although the next State election should see our reforms completed and give the Government the representation its voting strength entitles it to.

Had that unrepresentative, undemocratic bastion of conservatism taken the course Mr. Fraser now advocates, my Government - the popularly-elected choice of the people - would have been constantly in crisis, even though we controlled the Lower House. But even the most implacable of my Upper House opponents realised the serious consequences of rejecting appropriation Bills, and so the convention that the Supply must be granted to a Government with a majority in the Lower House was always followed.

The strains put on our Federal Governmental system by the unconstitutional course adopted by Malcolm Fraser are incalculable in their effect. It is a fundamental convention that a Senate does not reject a Government's source of money.

To disregard it is to usher in the twin dangers of chronic political instability and political cynicism.

But if Mr. Fraser cannot see the effects of his actions, many others can. John Gorton, a former Liberal Prime Minister - and a former Senator - has condemned the Opposition's actions and warned of the fearful consequences. Mr. Gorton is no Labor Party supporter - the record of his Prime Ministership bears that out - but he is a man committed to democracy. Senator Steele Hall, who was a former Liberal Premier of this State, has also spoken out strongly and correctly against this perversion of democracy. As Senator Hall said, "It is a very sleazy road to the Prime Ministership which Mr. Fraser has chosen".

These men see the issues - they have publicly warned of the grave consequences of the Budget being rejected. Many other people of integrity and concern for Australia have taken a similar stand - and what we must all do now is ensure that their views reach every single Australian. If the country must vote on whether it endorses the disgraceful actions of the Liberal and Country Parties, every one of us must be fully aware of the consequences of that endorsement. To a large extent that task will fall back on people of principle acting individually in the community.

For the fact is that in this the media, especially the newspapers, call not for Constitutional propriety, but for a general election. And why is that? Well, the fact is that in the implementation of its policies vested interests have suffered, and the advertising dollar speaks louder than words.

The Labor Party has always played by the rules, even when those rules were hopelessly weighted against it by gerrymanders such as the one Sir Thomas Playford arranged in South Australia, and on this Mr. Bjelke-Petersen has engineered in Queensland.

Throughout our 23 years in Opposition federally, Labor accepted the fact that it must gain office properly if it was to implement its programmes. Never did the Labor Party suggest it would reject a Budget or Supply Bill, never did it countenance damaging the system for its own short term gains. But now, after less than three years in Opposition, the Liberals for the second time are making a naked and cynical attempt to do just that.

Until now, I have concentrated on the alarming implications for the nation of a Budget rejection, but we cannot ignore the effects of this action on the Labor Party and the majority of people who voted Labor at the last two Federal elections. For they now ask: "What hope has a Labor voter got of democratically electing a Government?" They see Gough Whitlam elected for a three year term only 17 months ago, and the conservative forces not accepting the verdict of the people. They have seen the Opposition make the process of Government unmanageable in the Senate, and with the help of people like Bjelke-Petersen and Lewis, defy the expressed intentions of the Senate electorates. They see the perversion of democracy and the disenfranchisement of more than half the Australian people.

And what the Labor Movement must do now is warn the people of the threat to their way of life which Mr. Fraser poses. We must lead the fight to preserve democratic conventions in Australia, because if they are destroyed then our Movement is threatened. We must seek to preserve parliamentary democracy to ensure that the Australian worker and voter has equal rights to shape the course of his or her country. I cannot stress too greatly the dangers of the present situation. Already there is talk of general strikes, and people have expressed fears of disorder in the streets. That is not the way.

However, I believe it is necessary for us to demonstrate publicly and clearly our refusal to have the Liberal and Country Parties overthrow the Constitution of this country and deny democratic rule.

Today, there will be a rally in Victoria Square, and I urge you to take part and express your view in support of democracy. We must take the situation to the people, through rallies, pamphlets and each of us making our voice heard clearly and angrily within the community.

Every Australian, no matter what party they support, must be made aware of the enormity of the action Mr. Fraser and his Senate henchmen propose. When the country recognises Malcolm Fraser for the cynical power seeker he is, he will be rejected and reviled.

Thank you.