Supplement to
The Listening Post
May 23rd, 1930

Official Summary
OF THE ATTEMPT OF THE COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT TO ABOLISH THE POLICY OF PREFERENCE TO RETURNED SOLDIERS
(Issued by the State Executive R.S.I.L., W.A. Branch)

At a meeting of the State Executive of the W.A. Branch, R.S.I.L.A., held on April 30th, 1930, the Vice-President, Mr. C. P. Smith, reported that some alarming news had been received by the press from Melbourne, indicating that the Commonwealth Government intended to abolish the principle of preference to soldiers on all Government works in order to give preference to Unionists. He, therefore, moved that: "This Executive views with grave concern the reported decision of the Commonwealth Works and Railways to abolish the principle of preference to returned soldiers, which has been observed since the war ended." This resolution was carried unanimously, and telegraphed to the Federal Executive on the 1st May, 1930.

Later in the day the following urgent telegram was received from the Federal President:

"Following negotiations Government resulting action Minister concerned deciding supplant clause tender contract form works Railways Depart-
ment with clause providing preference Unionists Prime Minister announced House to-day Government decided future policy employment one preference returned soldier members Unions two preference Unionists three preference other soldiers stop Obviously this decision definite departure principle preference returned soldiers and consequently urge immediate consideration your Executive with view advising what action I shall take stop Every effort made me prior announcement induce Government through Prime Minister restore clause involved stop Personally view gravely decision which involves vital change policy preference hitherto observed but desire receive opinion all branches object ensuring proper action stop Consider advisable hold special meeting Executive Friday ninth May.—Dyett."

In the Federal Parliament, at Canberra, on the same day, the Prime Minister announced that instructions had been issued that in the carrying out of work
under contract, preference was to be given, other things being equal, first to returned sailors and soldiers with satisfactory war service who were members of trade unions, and secondly to other members of trade unions.

On May 2nd, Colonel Cameron moved the adjournment of the Federal Parliament as a protest against the drastic change in Government policy.

The Prime Minister in reply, and in defence of his attitude, declared, inter alia: "The President of the Returned Soldiers' League, Mr. Dyett, had assured him that 80 per cent. of returned soldiers were Unionists." No reason or authority for giving this estimate has yet been supplied by the Federal President to the W.A. Branch.

On May 2nd, a Special Meeting of the W.A. State Executive was held, with almost a full attendance, although notices had not been issued, the meeting being called by a Press announcement.

After all delegates had spoken in terms of indignation at the declared threat of the Government to abolish this vital principle, it was finally agreed that:—

This Executive, representing all ex-service men and women of Western Australia, enters an earnest and emphatic protest against the withdrawal from them of a vital privilege conferred by a grateful people of Australia through successive Parliaments and Governments.

That an appeal be made to the Federal Executive of the League and all members of the Commonwealth Parliament to strenuously oppose the declared intention of the Government.

That a mass meeting of citizens and ex-service men be held in Perth without delay for the purpose of protesting against the unwarrantable action of the Commonwealth Government.

That all sub-branches throughout Western Australia be requested, where possible, by telegram to cooperate with local governing bodies and organise protest meetings, and to convey the resolutions of such meetings to the State Secretary, and by telegram to their Federal members.

That the Federal Executive be asked to initiate similar action throughout all other States.

Action was then taken to communicate with metropolitan and country sub-branches of the League, which, as soon as advice reached them, immediately set about holding protest meetings in cooperation with local authorities. In numbers of cases wires expressed in strong terms were despatched to Federal Members.

A holiday on May 5th delayed action in many cases. On Tuesday, May 6th, the following wire was received from Mr. Dyett, the Federal President, then at Canberra:—

"During lengthy interview to-day gave tentative assurance Prime Minister that in consideration Government restoring preference clause League will strongly recommend and urge working soldiers join Unions concerned stop In best interests harmony and unity Australia sincerely request endorsement my offer please wire me urgent Hotel Canberra earliest possible convenience as desire return Melbourne soon possible.—Dyett."

Upon receipt of this wire the State President called the Management Committee together. Its members decided that the proposal of Mr. Dyett to draw the League into the Industrial arena was not acceptable, and the following urgent wire was sent:—

"Consider injustice should be rectified without bargaining stop Your proposal to urge ex-service men join Unions contrary to spirit of policy
hitherto observed that is to keep clear of industrial arena stop Your suggestion not acceptable to this Branch.—Collett."

On Wednesday morning, May 7th, the following notification was received from the Federal President, Canberra:

"With unsurpassed feelings pleasure desire advise Government has restored preference clause hence meeting Executive abandoned.—Dyett."

To which the W.A. Branch replied:

"Suggest that for information State branches you issue at once full and frank statement of your negotiations with Government re preference clause. —Collett."

In requesting a full statement from the Federal President the State Executive had in mind the early negotiations hinted at by the Prime Minister when declaring in the House that the Federal President had assured him of the 80 per cent. returned soldier unionists.

Reporting to the State Executive at the next meeting the Management Committee’s action was endorsed, and it was agreed to remind the Federal President again of the necessity for making a frank statement for the information of branches. The Perth West Australian, of May 8th, contained four columns of discussion which took place in the Federal House of Parliament on the previous day when the Prime Minister, Mr. Scullin, declared that the Government had agreed to retain the “preference to soldiers” clause intact. The Leader of the Opposition congratulated the people of Australia and the returned soldiers upon the retreat of the Government from an untenable position.

Mr. W. M. Hughes, who was Prime Minister of Australia when the policy of preference was first conceded, said amongst other things:—“There are some things that cannot be done and there is now no single institution more firmly entrenched in the national and industrial life of Australia than preference to returned soldiers. The battle has been short, but the victory has been decisive.”

After the telegraphed announcement that the Commonwealth Government had decided to withdraw from the position it had taken up, all sub-branches were communicated with by wire in the following terms:

"Please announce receipt advice Commonwealth Government restored policy preference soldiers stop No further action necessary.—Benson."

The Executive, at its meeting of the 14th May, in referring to this question, touched on the vital points involved, and it was generally admitted that as a League we had passed through the gravest crisis in our history.

It was agreed on the resolution of Rabbi Freedman, seconded by Rev. Riley: "That a summary be drawn up of the proceedings, both Federal and State, in connection with the withdrawal and restoration of absolute preference to soldiers by the Federal Government, and that the summary, after being approved by the State Executive, be recorded in the minutes and distributed to sub-branches, preferably through the Listening Post as a special supplement."

On May 19th, the State President received a letter from the Federal President, dated May 10th—two paragraphs of this letter are quoted:

"The General Secretary has sent the State Secretary a copy of my wire to the Prime Minister prior to my deciding, after interviews and telephone conversations on Sunday, to proceed to Canberra with the object of making a personal appeal to him. The decision of the Government obviously renders re-capitulation of the discussion thereat unnecessary. Of course I realise that you share my great pleasure and keen satisfaction at the result of the efforts of the League, and my hope that in the Commonwealth’s best interests the unpleasant incident will
rapidly disappear into oblivion."

This brief record of a regrettable incident, prepared and issued by the State Executive of the Returned Soldiers' League of Western Australia to its members, will, it is hoped, convince members that prompt and effective action was taken by the governing body of the League in this State in defence of a vital principle. It is intended to continue the attempt to obtain from the Federal President a frank statement of the purport of the discussions between himself and the Prime Minister. In that connection the following letter, dated 22nd May, has been written by the State President and forwarded to Mr. Dyett:

"With reference to your circular of the 10th May, and telegram of May 21st, the State Executive of the W.A. Branch does not consider them sufficiently enlightening, and has asked me to press for the fullest information in regard to your negotiations with the Prime Minister.

"We are led by the press reports to believe that the matter of the abolition of preference was discussed between you before any announcement was made by the Government, and we are anxious to know what were the grave dangers to "Harmony and unity Australia" (your words), which induced you to give Mr. Scullin the tentative assurance that the League would cease to be non-industrial.

"The W.A. Branch is gratified at the decision the Government finally arrived at, but feels that that decision was formed as a result of the great pressure of public opinion engendered by the action of this and other branches of the League. Under the circumstances, and in view of the serious threat against the status of ex-service men generally, any justification for secrecy in the matter seems to be entirely lacking.

"I trust, therefore, that you will be able to see your way clear to act in the manner suggested in my telegram of the 17th May."

By authority,

D. M. BENSON,
State Secretary, W.A. Branch R.S.L.

May 24th, 1930