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LABOR CONFERENCE DECISION

Statement by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Menzies

The resolution carried by a very narrow majority in the Labor Party Conference deserves very close examination. It is, in fact, made up of the most dangerous ambiguities.

Approval of the American radio-communications station in the North-West has been secured only by acceptance of conditions which threaten the establishment of the station by our friends and allies - the United States of America. As has been repeatedly stated, the purpose of the station is to provide means of radio-communication with naval vessels in the Indian Ocean and in the North-West Pacific.

It must be clear to anybody that the existence of these facilities for the United States will become of crucial importance if they become involved in hostilities in this part of the world.

What the outside Parliament of the Labor Party has now decided is that if such an event should occur, the Americans cannot use these facilities except with the concurrence of whatever Government may then be in power in Australia. It will be clearly seen that this is a most dangerous and frustrating condition. What it means is that if the United States which is, I repeat, our ally and a most powerful friend, becomes involved in hostilities with some common enemy, and the Australian Government is disposed to isolate itself under the cloak of neutrality, a direct blow will be struck against the United States and against its effective conduct of naval warfare.

I wonder if the Labor Party believes that we would establish at great expense such facilities for ourselves in an allied country on the condition that they could be rendered useless by the decision of that country. In matters of life and death for Australia, surely we know who our friends are and what side we are on in relation to them. I can only hope that this miserable compromise will not inflict serious damage on the security of our own country.

There are, of course, other aspects of this matter. The people of Australia have had a sharp reminder that an Australian Labor Government would not be responsible to the people or even to its own judgment, but that it would be bound hand and foot by the decisions of 36 people forming the A.L.P. Conference, not elected by the people of Australia and in no sense responsible to them.

I sympathise with my friend, Mr. Galwell. For the leader of a Party and an aspiring Prime Minister of Australia to be compelled to hang around in hotel corridors until his masters inside have given him his instructions is a complete denial of leadership.

I notice that already Mr. Calwell is being consoled by the assertion that he has had a notable victory. He is expected to derive comfort from the fact that a fraction less than half of his governing body wanted to adopt a policy which would throw the United States and its communications station out of Australia and that an equally narrow majority has been persuaded to accept the station only on conditions which are both dangerous and contradictory.

The people of Australia will not have failed to observe that the whole incident throws light upon how Labor policy is created and upon the purely nominal and subservient role which a Labor leader is expected to play.

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CANBERRA,

21st March, 1963.