

PREMIERS' CONFERENCE

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

It should be understood that today's meeting with the Premiers was recognised by all of us as a preliminary meeting. We will assemble again on June 1st to arrive at definite conclusions about the agreement which is to succeed the last one made in 1959 to regulate the financial assistance arrangements which have operated since that time.

Today's meeting was, therefore, exploratory. The Commonwealth welcomed it because we thought it most desirable that we should be put in possession of the views of the various State Premiers, both critical and constructive, so that we might have an opportunity of giving them proper study before June.

I would like to repeat what I said in the Conference, i.e. that I have never known a better meeting. Every contribution was thoughtful, extremely well-prepared and lucid. Nobody resorted to Party political arguments. Everybody felt that we were discussing problems of great importance not only to the States but to the Commonwealth; problems which we would all wish to solve in a co-operative fashion, due regard being paid to the reasonable needs of the Commonwealth which, as we pointed out, are not diminishing. This was, I thought, recognised all round. Nobody would deny that having regard to such rapidly growing items as defence expenditure and the limitations of the current loan market, the Commonwealth Government has quite a budgetary task ahead of it. Similarly, in a growing community, the States have great responsibilities and have a natural eagerness for progress.

We have agreed to meet again at the beginning of June. I have indicated to the States that some days before June - 10 days if possible - we will arrange to have discussions on the official level between Commonwealth and State Treasury officers. In the meantime, as I said to the Premiers, we will give the most careful attention to what has been said by them because, like them, we desire to have some sound conclusions arrived at before the financial year ends. This is the sixth year of the 1959 agreement and therefore presents the necessary opportunity to consider the terms and duration of a new agreement.

As I said to the Premiers, in expressing my appreciation of the way in which they had put their respective arguments, I cannot attempt to anticipate what our answers may be; but I am sure that the tone and temper of today's discussions will help us very considerably.

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CANBERRA.

22nd April 1965.