

PRIME MINISTER'S PRESS CONFERENCEBENDIGO, VICTORIA — 22ND NOVEMBER, 1966PRESS

Well gentlemen, I am sorry to have kept you waiting. We haven't been dallying I assure you, but there has been much to be done, and rather than hold you up while I make a lengthy statement on anything, I intend to give the discussion over to you for questions first — answers by me if I can provide them.

But there is one matter which I would like to open up with you, and you will be aware right through this campaign that there is very little coming from the A.L.P. leadership, or for that matter spokesmen for the A.L.P., about the detail of their Defence policy. Mr. Calwell did include some very brief passages in the Policy Speech, but there's been no attempt at definition of their proposals in the course of the campaign until we find that in this last week of the campaign, we have the Deputy Leader, Mr. Whitlam, putting an interpretation on their policy which I feel sure will come as a surprise to Mr. Calwell and certainly is entirely inconsistent with the general view that Mr. Calwell has been putting throughout the campaign.

He has made it clear that his intention is to bring Australian forces in Vietnam back to Australia — the National Servicemen or Conscripts — immediately, or as soon as practicable, and the remainder after consultation with our allies. In one speech I think it will be agreed that he made it evident that the consultation itself was not a consultation likely to lead to a retention of Australian forces in Vietnam: it would merely relate to the means of their withdrawal, and the timing of their withdrawal. And indeed, it might very well be the case that seeing that Australia has been allotted an area of responsibility related to the strength of the task force that once the National Service component which in some musterings would be a very substantial proportion of the total, had been withdrawn, those that remained might find themselves incapable, not merely of carrying out the responsibilities of the area, but of even defending their own position in the area, and consultation could in the result relate to the security with allied assistance, of our own remainder of regular forces left there.

PRESS (cont.)

That is one aspect of the matter which I think should be mentioned. The other is this interpretation which Mr. Whitlam, apparently without consultation of his Leader, and certainly without any prior indication from any policy-making source of the Labor Party has put on the policy that they would pursue but I am particularly referring to this evening — those other matters are of importance, they haven't quite the same novelty as one report attributed to Mr. Calwell which I have only seen in one paper, but it is a paper which I am sure Mr. Fitchett would accept as an authoritative source, and that is the Sydney Morning Herald. I would gather from it that it proceeds from the representative of the paper accompanying Mr. Calwell. It appeared in my edition anyhow, of the Sydney Morning Herald this morning.

It is headed "CALWELL PLAN FOR CMF 'LIKE NATIONAL GUARD'" and headed "Townsville, Monday," or at least under that heading appears "Townsville Monday. A Citizen Military Force of between 120,000 and 140,000 men was suggested tonight by the Opposition Leader, Mr. A.A. Calwell. This force would be in addition to regular forces at about the present level. Mr. Calwell" (and I am quoting from the report, of course) "was giving his first definition" (I stress that — his first definition of his Defence proposals since his Policy Speech 11 days ago, and it's because of this categorical statement by the writer that I assume he's somebody who's been accompanying Mr. Calwell on his tour. I don't vouch for that, but that's a reasonable assumption to make from the text. He said "the Australian Citizen Forces would need between 120,000 and 140,000 men in all services if ..." I'm sorry, "The Australian Citizen Force would need between 120,000 and 140,000 men in all services if it were to be given "real teeth" like the American National Guard," and again I give what is put in the quotation inverted commas therefore attributable to him, "The American National Guard flies supersonic aircraft and contains armoured divisions" He said "It is a fallacy to think of the part-timer as unskilled. The Citizen Forces should surely be given a chance to show their paces. The C.M.F. should be given special bonuses (just tell me if I'm going too fast on this, you can have the text later) ... the CMF should be given special bonuses such as housing loans and education grants to assist recruiting."

PRSSS (cont.)

Calwell said a Labor Government would reintroduce the Citizen Airforce, the Government's Defence Policy had failed to attract sufficient volunteers yet vast numbers of those who did volunteer for service within Australia were turned away on educational grounds. Mr. Calwell said the Government's Military advisers should examine the practicability of bringing these men up to a passable standard of education during the first 12 months of their training. This would give them an attractive Armed Services Career in which they could take a pride. "I have no sympathy for a Government which shouts about threats to Australia and then admits it cannot get enough volunteers," Mr. Calwell said.

"Our Armed Forces are in such a pathetic condition that if the whole lot were thrown into some overseas action they could make no significant contribution. We really have nothing with which to defend our country. The Holt Government's Defence establishment is a shambles, that's why we are leaning so heavily on American policy."

Well, there's comment that could be made on all the latter part but the significant aspect I think for immediate purposes is that here is a new line of policy statement which appears in the last week of the campaign. There is no indication that it has proceeded from any of the official policy-making sources of the Labor Party. I'm going to give you in a moment the actual militia figures in the three services so that you'll see what kind of an undertaking Mr. Calwell is putting. I have here the Defence Report for 1966, and you will gather from this that neither of the two regular services of the Navy and the Airforce rely to any substantial extent upon citizen force components.

The Navy at June 1966 had just under 3,800, that is, 3,797. The Airforce at that point, June 1966, had 865, and the Army had 32,702. The total in the Citizen Forces in three services was 36,708. Now there are a few points to be made about that.

One is, of course, that the Army strength has been greatly increased in the CMF as a result of the choice which is now available for those who would prefer to join the CMF to taking the risk of being balloted into National Service under the National Service Scheme arrangements, and if you look at th^e

PRESS (cont.)

figure for June 1965 when, as I understand it, the National Service Scheme became effective, the figure then was 28,146, and the year before 27,500, the year before that 27,300 — so it's pretty clear that this sharp lift of just on 4,000 between 1965 and 1966 was attributable to the incentive that the existence of the National Service Scheme provided.

Consequently, if you abandon National Service, then I think the realistic figure to be looking at in relation to Mr. Calwell's 120,000 to 140,000 is the figure of the total of Citizen Forces at June 1965 of 32,632. Now a few points immediately ...

DO YOU MIND IF I HAVE A QUESTION THERE SIR? ARE YOU ADMITTING BY THIS THAT YOUR CMF IS A FAILURE, YOUR RECRUITING PROGRAMME IS A FAILURE FOR THE CMF UNLESS YOU HAVE THE THREAT OF NATIONAL SERVICE?

No. What we're saying is that the target for the CMF is a target of 35,000 at the present time, and on the latest figures the Citizen Force expectation is that we will have reached that target by June 1967.

DO YOU THINK SOME OF THE RISE THERE COULD BE ATTRIBUTED TO PATRIOTISM OR SOME MOTIVE LIKE THAT, ARISING OUT OF THE FACT THAT THE INTERNATIONAL SITUATION HAS DETERIORATED SOMEWHAT?

Well, that could be so, but it wasn't all that good in 1964 for example. I'm not I'm saying that undoubtedly the fact that there was a National Service Scheme has assisted in producing the higher total and I don't argue by any means that the scheme has proved - or the recruiting has proved - a failure because as at 1962 for example, it was less than 21,000.

Well, it's been moving up year by year until it has reached this figure of - I'm sorry, 1963: 27,000. It was fairly static around '63, '64, '65, you must have in mind that there is a time period of service in the CMF, and you have to replace therefore those that are moving out, so what has happened in the period from June '65 to '66 is, there's not really been a replacement of the normal wastage, but quite a significant lift in the strength of the forces, but what I'm really wanting to get at in this comment is that again you have a Labor Party policy undertaking which has no relation to the realism of our current situation.

FRBS (cont.)

To train 120,000 to 140,000 people in Citizen Military Forces, particularly when you'd removed from the Regular Force that National Service element and therefore reduced your Regular Force to between 24,000 and 25,000 you'd need a very large proportion of your regular force for the training of your Citizen Military Force. This was one of the limiting factors we found when we set out to increase our own Regular Army. The number of the regular -- more experienced regular servicemen who had to be allocated to training, limited the contribution we were able to make in respect of our various commitments and if you're to have 120,000 to 140,000, well first of all there are the various munitions and supplies, uniforms and equipment required for such a vastly expanded force, and then the draw on the skilled personnel of the Regular Forces for their training.

Mr. Calwell talks about training them in the use of supersonic aircraft, and the other -- the armoured divisions and so forth in the American National Guard -- well what sort of draw this would make on Australia's comparatively limited resources of equipment of this kind, if it can be imagined, although no-one could put a precise estimate on it.

The conclusion I think, has to be drawn from this, is that both the leader and the Deputy Leader have been so shaken by the criticisms and analyses of their policies that on the one hand the Deputy Leader has sought to rationalise their situation by adopting interpretations which certainly have not come from the mouth of the leader of the Party. On the other hand, the Leader of the Party has come up with a scheme which I'm sure will have struck Mr. Whitlam with as much surprise as Mr. Whitlam's interpretation brought surprise to his Leader. There's nothing in what has been said, so far as I'm aware, by any Labor spokesman earlier to suggest that they had in contemplation a home force programme of the order of 120,000 to 140,000 men, so once again you get the vagueness of Labor's proposals which when spelled out by them reveal themselves as completely unrealistic. They seem to have been panicked into making these -- putting these proposals or these explanations forward, and I think the public will treat them both with the reservation that they deserve and see in these again an indication that the Labor Party hasn't thought through its policy sufficiently clearly to be justified in giving -- being given the responsibility for implementing them.

PRESS (cont.)

WHY PANIC, MR. PRIME MINISTER? YOU MENTIONED THE WORD "PANIC."
WHY PANIC?

Because they can feel that the tide of public support is running against them, and this is where they believe themselves to be most vulnerable. They know that the public has been troubled by the prospect of Australian Forces being withdrawn by the concept of fortress Australia, in which Australia would be looking to its own resources.

Mr. Whitlam tried to answer this by pointing out that their policy doesn't necessarily mean withdrawal of our regular forces, Mr. Calwell on the other hand, who clearly intends that it should, is driven to finding some satisfactory answer and he comes up with a greatly expanded home guard. Now, he kept saying that he wouldn't resort to conscription for his purposes. We have employed all the methods that occurred to us including improved pay and conditions, various benefits for the militia and until the introduction of National Service it had produced a total of 28,000 as at June 1965, so what methods he proposes to adopt to get 120,000 to 140,000 are still wrapped in the mists of mystery.

YOU FIND THE 140,000 IMPOSSIBLE, AS I UNDERSTAND IT?

I find it an impracticable target in relation — having regard to the training requirements, the provisioning, the draw it would make on the economy at a time when the economy is fully employed. It would be putting the country on — well if not on a war footing, it would make very heavy drains on the national resources at a time when his other policy proposals suggests that he would be drawing heavily on resources to give effect to them.

I'll probably be saying something about this tonight as well, but thought I'd give you — in an atmosphere where the matter could be put without interruption — the figures as I have them.

Now, over to any general questions: -

PRESS (cont.)

MR. PRIME MINISTER: COMMONWEALTH OFFICES ARE PLANNED FOR BENDIGO TO BRING ALL DEPARTMENTS NOW SCATTERED TO ONE HEADQUARTERS. COULD YOU SAY WHEN THE BUILDING WILL BE ERECTED?

No, I'm afraid I couldn't. It's not a matter which falls within my own province, but have you sought that answer from the Minister directly concerned?

NO SIR.

I could try to get it for you when the campaign concludes -- in fact, we'll try and get it for you tomorrow.

SECONDLY MR. PRIME MINISTER: THE COMMONWEALTH ORDINANCE FACTORY IS ONE OF BENDIGO'S BIGGEST INDUSTRIES. WITHOUT IT BENDIGO WOULD SUFFER A MAJOR COLLAPSE. WHAT IS THE LONG-TERM PLANNING FOR THIS FACTORY? WILL IT REMAIN AT ITS PRESENT WORK FORCE OR WILL ITS DEVELOPMENT BE EVEN GREATER WITH THE NATIONAL DEFENCE PLANNING?

Well, we've gone to some trouble over the years in order to keep the factory going. We've regarded it as valuable both to the industrial development of Bendigo itself, and the employment which it gives, but also it's been regarded as a useful element in the Commonwealth's munition-making capacity and I would without having technical answers with me, think it reasonable to assume that it would have an expanding rather than a diminishing role. I'm speaking without reference to the Minister concerned. The Minister for Supply would be the Minister directly involved in this.

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