

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE RT.
HON. HAROLD HOLT IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
18TH MAY, 1967



"VOYAGER" ENQUIRY

I told the House last night at the conclusion of what I had to say on the "Voyager" matter that the Government would be taking the opportunity this morning to consult with members of the Government parties on the course that it could recommend to the Parliament, and I am now in a position to indicate the course that we believe should be followed.

My colleagues and I have considered the various possibilities that are open to us. We have considered, among other questions, whether an inquiry should be conducted by a select committee of this Parliament. I think most honourable gentlemen will have concluded that, having regard to the involvement of so many members in the debate and the quality and content of the debate, this would not be the most suitable tribunal to consider a matter of this sort.

There is room for a view that the matter, having been thoroughly debated here and all aspects that honourable members could see as being relevant having been canvassed, little useful purpose would be served by a committee of the Parliament conducting a further inquiry. The Government has considered that view, but it believes that, though the detail of these discussions has been well known to us and perhaps to those who have carefully read all that has appeared in the Press, there will be many members of the public who will be left with a feeling that more should be done to satisfy their minds regarding the matters in dispute.

So the Government has concluded that there should be a further inquiry and that it should be a judicial inquiry conducted probably by three judges. I have not yet the precise terms of reference which later we will be putting to the House, and I ask that I be not held strictly to what I now say as to the substance of matters which the Government thinks should be covered by such an inquiry. Clearly, it should be directed to the allegations made against Captain Stevens and the questions arising from them - that is, whether he was incompetent to command the "Voyager", whether his command of that ship left him open to criticism, whether the allegations have sufficient substance for these matters to have been known or whether they should have been known to superior naval officers who would then have been in a position to deal appropriately with him, and whether they should have dealt with him according to the evidence in their possession. The question arises also as to whether any evidence was improperly withheld from the Royal Commission, and if so, whether that would have substantially affected his findings.

I have not attempted to put what I have said in strict legal parlance. It is the substance of what we believe should be considered by such an inquiry. Our own view is that there is no need for a second "Voyager" inquiry in the full sense of the one that was conducted before. I believe that the public generally is satisfied that there was a competently conducted inquiry which has covered most of the matters in issue at that time. But this is a special area which has been the subject of debate in this Parliament, and the Government thinks that the issues and the allegations can be satisfactorily resolved only by an inquiry conducted on the lines that I have proposed.
