

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER,
THE RT. HON. HAROLD HOLT IN THE
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

19TH MAY, 1967



"VOYAGER" INQUIRY

I am sure the House would have wished the Government to move as speedily as it could in resolving terms of reference which could be submitted to the inquiry I announced yesterday. It is our desire, as I am sure it is the desire of every member of the House, that these matters should be investigated expeditiously and findings given upon them. Consequently I bring to the House what we propose by way of terms of reference. My colleague the Attorney-General (Mr. Bowen) will set as speedily as he can about the business of finding what judges would be available for this purpose. We would hope to make an announcement about that as soon as this can be arranged.

I shall comment on one aspect not covered by the terms of reference after I have given their detail, since it relates to a matter raised in the debate by the honourable member for Hindmarsh (Mr. Clyde Cameron) as spokesman for the Opposition and was mentioned, if a little obliquely, by the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Whitlam) when he was questioning me yesterday as to what the terms of reference would cover. We felt that in order that this matter could be dealt with with reasonable promptitude and so that there should not be uncertainty increasing the distress of affected persons, we should concentrate upon those matters which we believed were exercising the attention and concern of the Parliament and of the public. We recommend that the terms of reference of the inquiry be :

To inquire into and report upon :-

- (1) Whether any of the allegations made by Lieutenant-Commander P. T. Cabban in the document attached -

That is the document to which the Leader of the Opposition made reference yesterday; I think it ran into about nineteen pages -

regarding the drinking habits and seamanship of Captain D. H. Stevens were true and being true established that Captain Stevens was unfit to retain command of HMAS "Voyager".

- (2) If it is found in answer to question (1) that Captain Stevens was unfit to retain command of HMAS "Voyager" :
 - (i) Did the Naval Board know or ought they to have known of such unfitness to retain command and were they at fault in failing to relieve him of command?
 - (ii) Should the findings made in the report of the Royal Commission relating to the loss of HMAS "Voyager" be varied and, if so, in what respect?
- (3) Whether the allegations in the document disclosed evidence which was available to counsel assisting the Commission and was improperly withheld from the Royal Commission.

I think honourable members will agree that this concentrates the inquiry on the salient matters which were of concern to them. The other matter to which we did give consideration, but for reasons which I shall outline we did not include in the terms of reference, was the aspect raised by the honourable member for Hindmarsh as to the circumstances in which the Government came to settle a number of claims of dependants of those who went down with the ship. I think a little reflection by the House will confirm the soundness of the view we have taken - that to include an item of this sort would prolong the inquiry indefinitely and would confuse the issues on which we have concentrated in the terms of reference that I have read out. The Government has no desire, in this particular aspect, other than to see that the inquiry is able to concentrate on the matters which primarily engaged the attention of the House.

Concerning the aspect of the settlement of claims, the Attorney-General (Mr. Bowen) would be entirely willing to confer with the Leader of the Opposition and his colleagues or, for that matter, other interested members, explaining why this procedure was followed. I am sure that most honourable members will be able, from their own practical good sense, to come to the conclusion that this was the desirable and sensible course to pursue.

Firstly, there was a Royal Commission which was taking evidence and which necessarily would extend over a considerable period of time. Litigation is inevitably a protracted process and even dealing with the claims by way of settlement has, in some instances, been drawn out since the disaster until either late last year or even early this year. Thirty-nine claims have been settled and I think one claim remains outstanding because the claimant has not yet furnished certain particulars which were required. If each of these claims had to be litigated upon, or even if some of them had to be litigated upon, in a period in which there was a Royal Commission with its findings to be resolved, then there not only would have been delays which would have been inconvenient to dependants in need of financial assistance, but the whole process for them would, I suggest, have been of a more harrowing, painful and, indeed, embarrassing kind. So this was the background to the course of action which the Government pursued.

If further detail is required on this aspect then, I repeat, the Attorney-General will be happy to supply it. Of course, it is always open for the Opposition, if for any reason it felt dissatisfied with the course pursued, to take appropriate parliamentary action in relation to it. I do not believe the Opposition will do this. I think that on reflection members opposite will agree that it was not appropriate for this matter to come into this particular set of terms of reference. The inquiry will necessarily take the form of a Royal Commission, because it is under the legislation concerning Royal Commissions that we can set up the inquiry. To do it any other way would call for legislation.

Mr. Hayden - It will not be another whitewash, will it?

PRIME MINISTER : That remark is quite unworthy of the honourable gentleman and it would not be echoed by his colleagues. I hope I do not have to stress again that the purpose of my predecessor, as it has been of myself and my colleagues, has been to see that the truth emerges and that justice is done.
