
SPEECH

BY



The Rt Hon. HAROLD HOLT, C.H., M.P.,

ON

ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE VIP FLIGHT

Ministerial Statement

[From the 'Parliamentary Debates', 4 October 1967]

Mr HAROLD HOLT (Higgins—Prime Minister)—by leave—It would have become obvious, I think, to all members of the Parliament that in recent times lines of criticism have developed in certain sections of the Press and also amongst some members of the Parliament directed against the conduct of the VIP flight. This criticism has been directed in such a way as to give quite a distorted picture to the public of the way in which the flight operates and the extent and nature of its use. I felt that the Parliament should have an authoritative statement before it so that any comment that might be made in future would at least be made against the background of an accurate and comprehensive statement of the recent history of this flight. I propose in the course of my statement to give the House some facts showing how the flight has developed over recent years. I use the term 'developed' in the context of the aircraft currently employed. There were nine aircraft in the flight in 1958. When the replacements have been received and the planes that they replace have been removed there will be nine aircraft operating again in the flight. Recent history will show that this is not a matter which has suddenly leapt ahead in recent times and indeed it

will show that for several years Cabinet has been giving consideration to the problem which was arising with the obsolescence of some elements of the flight—the need to replace some and the need to have a more diverse range of aircraft for the changing and varying conditions to be found around the continent of Australia.

The VIP flight has actually been in operation for somewhere in the neighbourhood of 20 years, but it is over more recent times that criticism of its use has intensified. I, therefore, put these facts before the Parliament. I go back to November 1962 when the Cabinet decided to appoint a Cabinet committee to consider the replacement of the flight with modern aircraft. By April 1963 the committee had carried on its own investigation and had decided that there was a need, not only for replacement, but for a more ready availability of aircraft to assist Ministers and to deal with the increasing VIP traffic coming to this country. The committee authorised the Minister for Air to investigate the possibility of immediate replacement of or additions to the existing flight pending the introduction of pure jets. It was decided to recommend to Cabinet that an order be placed for three DH125 aircraft at that

time and that civil aviation aircraft supplement the operations of the Royal Australian Air Force flight. In point of fact, while Cabinet endorsed the recommendation in June 1963 for the purchase of the three aircraft to replace three Dakotas and agreed that consideration should next be given to the replacement of the ageing Convair Metropolitans by aircraft of the BAC111 type, it did not go ahead with the order of the DH125 aircraft because in January 1964 it decided in favour of Mysteres as being more suitable for Australian circumstances. It also at that time agreed that the suitability of adding Viscounts to the VIP flight be immediately investigated.

This consideration went on through 1964 when Cabinet decided to buy two Viscount aircraft to supplement the existing Convairs and Dakotas and to leave in abeyance the purchase of any jet aircraft. The Minister for Air was to keep the requirements of the flight under review, and in November 1965 Cabinet considered the whole question and authorised the purchase of three Mystere aircraft and two Hawker Siddeley 748 aircraft. These five aircraft were to replace five Dakotas which, at that point of time, were 20 years old. Orders were to be placed for two BAC111 aircraft to replace two Convair Metropolitans which, at that time, were 9 years old.

It will be seen from this recital of the facts that no aircraft actually has been ordered in the life of my own Government. I say that not because I do not accept full responsibility for, or approve of, the decisions which were taken earlier but because a picture seems to have been conjured up in the public mind that we have suddenly leapt into some expansion of the service here in Australia whereas, in fact, the decisions on which orders were placed were taken back in November 1965. I do not think that anybody who had any contact with my predecessor, Sir Robert Menzies, would ever argue that he was a spendthrift of the public money. I know of no public leader in my time who had greater regard for the careful use of public funds. I made the point that the fleet we now have was ordered back in November 1965. It replaced very old aircraft. In fact, my colleague the Minister for Air reported to Cabinet that the Chief of the Air Staff had told him that the Dakota aircraft had reached a point

at which they were below reasonably safe operating conditions for use as VIP aircraft and that in a short space of time would have had to be declared unfit for such use.

As to the capital cost of these aircraft—again there has been an attempt to conjure up a picture of a great splurge of expenditure in one year—this was spread over a period of three financial years commencing in 1965-66. It is perhaps typical of the kind of criticism we have had to face that one newspaper I saw recently stated that to increase the age pension by 50c would cost about \$20m a year whereas we were spending \$21.6m on these aircraft. Not only were the payments spread over 3 years; normally one can expect these aircraft to have an operational life of 10 to 15 years.

Mr Duthie—What was the cost?

Mr HAROLD HOLT—They cost \$21.6m. I will refer to that matter in a moment. This was the cost of the aircraft only, the fly away cost, and included the price of spares and matters of that sort. I do not need to go into too much detail about the Dakota aircraft. They are well known to honourable members. They were great work horses in their time. When the time came for them to be replaced, the Minister pointed out that for our VIP aircraft there were two principal requirements. In the majority of cases the use of VIP aircraft involves the carriage of small numbers of passengers over the main routes of Australia. This is their role for a good deal of the time and for this purpose we need a small, fast, reasonably comfortable aircraft. Secondly, there is a small but significant number of operations which involve the use of relatively undeveloped airfields of limited length. For these operations an aircraft equipped with turbo propeller engines was required; an aircraft with better takeoff and landing performances. The Mystere met the first requirement and the Hawker Siddeley 748 met the second requirement.

The Mystere is described customarily in the Press and by some of our parliamentary critics as a luxury jet. I have flown in this aircraft several times. It has the great merit of speed. When I heard a member from another place talking about the chicken and bubbly and so forth which were available in the aircraft I wished he had been

with me on Monday. We were flying over the Australian Alps. He would have had great difficulty in controlling either of those commodities at that time. The standards of catering are similar to those which have always existed in the aircraft. I am sure some could paint a pretty picture of the services and standards provided. But as one who has been a very regular user of the VIP flight, I find that salad, in which the ice has not been quite thawed out, and lacking the flavour of a home cooked meal, soon loses its appeal. When we were coming back from Western Australia recently, after attending the opening of the North West Cape naval communication establishment, my wife thought that, in order to secure a change of diet for us, she should order some pies and sausage rolls. That was the luxury meal that we had on that occasion.

For the replacement of the two Convair Metropolitan aircraft, the Minister recommended the BAC111 which was somewhat cheaper than the generally comparable DC9. As I have said, the need for special air transport available to the Commonwealth Government has been recognised for some 20 years and the business of Government would be certainly less efficient if the most senior Ministers had their work and travel restricted to the rigid timetables of the commercial airlines. I illustrate this point by a look at the Canberra airline schedules. There were no commercial flights to Sydney today between 9.30 a.m. and 12.30 p.m. There is a 3-hour gap in the morning and a 4-hour gap in the afternoon on most days to Melbourne. There are no daily flights to Sydney after 9.15 p.m. or to Melbourne after 6 p.m. There are no daily flights into Canberra from Sydney after 8.15 p.m. and none from Melbourne after 6.30 p.m. At weekends, when the business of government, certainly in my own case, and in the case of most of my other Ministers, still goes on, the normal schedules are even more limiting. The schedules to other capital cities are even more restricted.

The work of government goes on around the clock and I think I can fairly claim to average an 80-hour working week. Work must continue even while we are flying to a destination. I am sure the Leader of the

Opposition (Mr Whitlam) could confirm this from his own experience. The aircraft serves as a flying office, with staff available. The use of executive aircraft is common to governments of most other countries. This is particularly the case in the United States of America and Canada, where industrial development and distances provide comparable problems with those experienced in Australia; and the availability is certainly no less in Great Britain and other European countries.

I mentioned earlier that when the decision was made in 1965 to re-equip, the VIP flight then consisted of nine aircraft, as indeed it has since 1958. We purchased 2 Vickers Viscounts second hand that were built in 1959 and 1960, 2 Convair Metropolitans and 5 Dakotas. The Convair Metropolitans and the Vickers Viscounts are no longer in production, so that even had we chosen to replace the ageing aircraft with others of the same type we would not have been able to procure them. The VIP flight remains a flight of nine aircraft, and for some time still it will include the two Vickers Viscounts, which however have only a limited operating life to run.

I can give the House some idea of the extent of use, and, indeed, the character of use, of the aircraft. From January to June of this year the aircraft were used by the Governor-General of Australia on 41 occasions, by myself on 46 occasions, by the Treasurer (Mr McMahon) on 30 occasions and by the Minister for Trade and Industry (Mr McEwen) on 22 occasions. It will be seen that apart from those relating to the Governor-General—who is required to make frequent journeys for ceremonial purposes—those figures relate to the three most senior members of Cabinet. No other Minister reached double figures in his use of the aircraft, and seven Ministers did not use the flight at all. Other users were visiting VIPs. The service is available to, and has been used by, the Leader of the Opposition and the Deputy Leader of the Opposition (Mr Barnard) and by officials, including the Service chiefs.

It might be of some interest to the House to have an indication of the actual VIP use of this flight in the past 12 months. The users included Prince Charles, the Prime Minister of Thailand, the Queen

Mother, the New Zealand Minister of Defence, the New Zealand Deputy Prime Minister, the Canadian Secretary of State, the British Secretary for the Colonies, the President of the British Board of Trade, The Prime Minister of Malta, the Prime Minister of South Vietnam, the Governor of the National Bank of Cambodia, the Malaysian Minister of Defence, the British Secretary for Commonwealth Affairs, Princess Alexandra, the Duke of Edinburgh, the Foreign Minister of Israel, the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Prime Minister of New Zealand and the Indian and Pakistani parliamentary delegations. Some of these visitors had large retinues and official staff. For instance, on one occasion it was necessary for us to provide two Viscounts and one DC3 in order to transport a visiting party around Australia. For ceremonial visits there is always a large number of persons to be carried and a large quantity of luggage, and this often necessitates the provision of more than one aircraft.

Particularly in relation to VIP users of the service, the serviceability of the aircraft at the time is a matter of importance. These people are holding to tight schedules on significant public occasions. I found, in arranging to welcome the Prime Minister of New Zealand, that two of the aircraft we had sought to make available to him were unserviceable, and a third aircraft had to be found. Last Friday, when I had to attend in Sydney with the President of Italy, I found that two of the Mystere jets, one of which I would have normally used, were unserviceable, and a third aircraft had to be made available. In other words, some margin of utility has to be available if these tight schedules are to be met. In the case of visiting VIPs in particular we usually have to have standby aircraft—this applies most certainly in the cases of members of the Royal Family and visiting Prime Ministers—in case they would otherwise be unable to carry out their commitments.

The use of these aircraft is strictly limited and controlled, and only two Ministers have authority in relation to this. Other than in my own case and that of the Governor-General or a member of the Royal Family, the use of the aircraft is part of the responsibility and exercise of ministerial authority

of the Minister for Air. In cases where he entertains some doubt as to an application he consults with me, so that, between us, we exercise, on behalf of the Government, the responsibility in relation to this service.

In simple terms, thanks to this service, Ministers can travel long distances quickly, they can work on their way in reasonable comfort and with security for classified documents, and when they travel together they have useful opportunities for continuing discussions and for consultations. The use of executive aircraft is common these days, not only with governments but with large companies in various parts of the world. I know of one European company with a turnover smaller than the defence vote of this country which maintains a flight of the same dimension as ours. There would be at least half a dozen American companies that maintain a flight of the same dimension as our own. Proportionately, I would say without hesitation, the flights maintained by the governments of the United States of America, Canada and the United Kingdom would all be considerably larger—even taking the difference of population into account—than the Australian flight.

What is often lost sight of, quite apart from the service provided for Ministers, officials, the Leader of the Opposition, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition and others, is the role that the flight plays in the training of Air Force personnel. It provides a valuable training medium in a variety of directions, and many transport pilots have received a course of training in VIP aircraft before passing on to the work of transport pilot in the Air Force proper. The hours flown count towards the qualification of airmen in various aspects of their air service. It is this training role which makes the problem of costing, to which I will refer in a moment, complex if a clear and not misleading picture is to be available to the public.

As to the use of these aircraft by VIPs coming to Australia, it will be a matter of common knowledge that the number of such persons is increasing considerably as Australia's significance and economic importance grow throughout the world. I am sure that all honourable members will have been struck by the increase in interest which

heads of government, senior political figures and senior industrial figures from other parts of the world are manifesting in Australia these days. Aircraft of the VIP flight, as I have indicated, are available to Royal Australian Air Force pilots from all branches. These aircraft provide training for pilots in modern aircraft and a necessary opportunity to build up their flying time to the level required by the Service.

The test as to whether a reasonable use is made of the flight is, I suggest to the House, a matter of the responsibility of those directly concerned, and they are the Minister for Air and myself. If I felt that the Minister for Air was not behaving responsibly in relation to the service, I could take action. If the public thought that I was not behaving responsibly in the role which I play in relation to the service I have no doubt that it would take action against me. This has a bearing on the problem of costs. I have looked into this matter to see whether a dissection of costs is feasible as between uses of the aircraft, including training purposes for which the aircraft are used, and to make a dissection in such a way as to present a realistic picture. I have no doubt that the Air Force could come up with a figure showing the total cost of operating the service, but if you wanted a realistic picture there would necessarily have to be some division between the training role of the aircraft and its other uses. The training costs would vary, in respect of a particular aircraft, almost from flight to flight, depending on which members of the crew are undergoing training and the duration of that training. If there were several Ministers in one aircraft, should the cost be spread over the various departments which they administer? If there were in the one aircraft three or four senior Service officials—perhaps the three Chiefs of Staff—do you spread the cost through each of the Services?

It is my understanding that the Public Accounts Committee, having looked at this general problem in other directions, has come to the conclusion that it is not satisfactory to try to spread over a number of departments the cost carried by a particular department for services rendered to those other departments. But I have no wish to deny to the public or to the Parliament

information which should reasonably be available to them. It has never been my practice to do so. This flight operates as an essential element in the structure of government. If ways and means could be found of determining costs in a realistic way—not a misleading way which would present a false picture to the public—I would be only too willing to see that course pursued. I do not know which would be the most appropriate body to do this. I imagine that the Treasury contains more expertise on these matters than any other area of government that I could point to and I would be willing to have the matter examined there.

Before I conclude perhaps I could deal with what I might term some of the mythology that has developed around this subject. I have already given one or two illustrations of how far fetched some of the criticism has been. Seeing that I have been involved in one or two of these criticisms perhaps I could give the facts. I know that a picture has been conjured up in the public mind of frequent use of these aircraft by members of my family. There has been only one instance since I became Prime Minister on which members of my family have travelled on an aircraft which was not an aircraft carrying me to my destination. In that instance the aircraft was proceeding to Melbourne to pick up four Ministers for the return journey to Canberra. That was the extent of the incident about which criticism was raised on that occasion.

One or two of my friends opposite have been making gibes about the use of an aircraft for a fishing trip. The facts of the matter are that being in Rockhampton—nobody has challenged my use of the aircraft to go to Rockhampton—I proceeded in the aircraft to Townsville. It was not necessary for me to proceed to Townsville in that aircraft. I was picked up in Townsville in a privately owned aircraft and taken to my destination, which was Dunk Island. The aircraft belonged to a friend, who had come from Sydney earlier, and he could just as easily have picked me up at Rockhampton as at Townsville.

What critics overlook is that a Prime Minister is never able to divorce himself from his job. He is never in a real sense absent from his duty. I had to have staff

with me from Rockhampton to Townsville. Wherever I go my staff must be available. They have to keep in touch with the enormous machine that runs the business of this country. They were stationed by me. I repeat that in a very real sense a Prime Minister is never off duty. I only wish that sometimes I could be. That particular weekend was the first in three on which I had not been tied up with official functions. I hope that not too many honourable members opposite will begrudge me an opportunity to have a little recreation and fresh air occasionally at the weekend. That is the extent of the incident for which they would level criticism.

The other matter about which I would like to clear the air is what I regard as a malicious and cruel presentation of an episode in which my colleague, the Treasurer, was involved when his young daughter was seriously burned. His doctor advised that she should be taken as speedily as possible to a Sydney hospital in case skin grafting had to be carried out. The allegation was made that an aircraft was specially provided for this purpose. An aircraft had been previously ordered for the Treasurer, as was his entitlement. He travels around with a

mass of classified documents and normally works while on his journeys. All that he did on this occasion was advance the aircraft's departure time by half an hour in order to see that his young daughter was given a proper opportunity to have hospital treatment. Some of the newspaper editorials directed towards this episode showed how malicious and unreasonable some elements of the Press can be when a public figure or a politician is involved in a matter. I take this opportunity to put the facts before the House.

I hope that I have given honourable members enough detailed material to enable them to see the operation of the service in its true perspective. If there are to be criticisms let them be honest criticisms, not politically motivated or designed to demean the politician in the eyes of those who are always too ready to accept criticisms of those of us who sit in this place. With this background I hope that honourable members will be better equipped to deal with comments about this matter when they come under their notice. I present the following paper:

Royal Australian Air Force VIP Flight—Ministerial Statement, 4 October 1967.