

FOR PRESS

P. M. No 11/1970

COMMONWEALTH/STATE JOINT ENQUIRY ON REEF

The Prime Minister, Mr Gorton today replied to a telegram which he received late on Friday from the Premier of Queensland, Mr Bjelke-Petersen, on the subject of a Commonwealth/State Joint Enquiry into the danger of drilling on the Barrier Reef.

Following is the text of Mr Gorton's reply, which was sent by telegram this morning:-

"I HAVE YOUR TELEGRAM OF 16 JANUARY CONCERNING THE SUGGESTED COMMONWEALTH/STATE JOINT ENQUIRY INTO POSSIBLE DANGERS TO THE REEF AS A RESULT OF DRILLING FOR OIL ON OR NEAR IT.

I SEE NO NEED FOR THIS PROPOSAL TO BE CONFUSED WITH YOUR GOVERNMENT'S COMMUNICATION TO ME OF JUNE 1968.

THAT COMMUNICATION INFORMED ME OF YOUR GOVERNMENT'S INTENTION TO SET UP A COMMITTEE TO EXAMINE A NUMBER OF BROAD MATTERS CONNECTED WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE REEF AREA AND TO REPORT TO YOUR GOVERNMENT.

IT WAS SUGGESTED THAT THE COMMONWEALTH MIGHT APPOINT ONE MEMBER TO THE ELEVEN MAN COMMITTEE ENVISAGED.

THAT SUGGESTION DOES NOT SEEM TO ME TO BE IN FACT A JOINT COMMONWEALTH/STATE ENQUIRY NOR IS IT SPECIFICALLY CONCERNED WITH DRILLING FOR OIL ON THE REEF. I BELIEVE THEREFORE THAT AS FAR AS WE ARE CONCERNED IT SHOULD BE LEFT IN ABEYANCE AT PRESENT.

THE PROPOSAL BEFORE US NOW IS THAT DRILLING BE SUSPENDED ON OR NEAR THE REEF PENDING A TRULY JOINT COMMONWEALTH/STATE ENQUIRY WHICH WILL REPORT TO BOTH OUR GOVERNMENTS AND WHICH WILL MAKE PUBLIC ITS REPORTS.

THE COMMONWEALTH IS PREPARED TO ENDORSE THIS SPECIFIC PROPOSAL AND I SHOULD BE GLAD IF YOU WILL LET ME KNOW WHETHER THE QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT IS ALSO PREPARED TO DO SO.

2.

IF THE QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT IS PREPARED TO DO SO I SUGGEST THAT DISCUSSIONS MIGHT BEGIN ON THE SIZE OF THE COMMITTEE, THE NUMBERS OF COMMITTEE MEN TO BE APPOINTED BY EACH GOVERNMENT, THE INTERESTS TO BE REPRESENTED, THE DATE OF COMMENCEMENT, AND SIMILAR MATTERS.

I WOULD BE GLAD OF YOUR EARLY ADVICE. "

Following is the text of Mr Bjelke-Petersen's telegram, received on Friday:-

"I HAVE YOUR TELEGRAM OF YESTERDAY CONCERNING AMPOL EXPLORATIONS, SUGGESTED OIL DRILLING ENQUIRY AND HAVE NOTED THE TERMS OF YOUR OFFER TO MR LEONARD. IN SO FAR AS MY GOVERNMENT IS CONCERNED A BASICALLY SIMILAR BUT WIDER PROPOSITION REGARDING DRILLING ON THE BARRIER REEF WAS PREVIOUSLY PUT BEFORE YOU IN MY PREDECESSOR'S LETTER OF 7TH JUNE 1968 TO WHICH A DETAILED REPLY IS STILL AWAITED. THE PROPOSALS THEN MADE AND THE SUPPORTING INFORMATION GIVEN WERE AND STILL ARE PERTINENT TO THE QUESTION OF REEF DRILLING AND THEREFORE I SEE NO REASON WHY THEY SHOULD NOT APPROPRIATELY PROVIDE THE BASIS FOR ANY JOINT COMMONWEALTH/ STATE INVESTIGATION NOW. CONSEQUENTLY YOU WILL APPRECIATE THAT UNTIL SUCH TIME AS YOU FURNISH ME WITH YOUR GOVERNMENT'S VIEWS ON OUR PROPOSAL OF 7TH JUNE 1968 OR ANY ALTERNATIVE YOU MAY CARE TO ADVANCE I WOULD NATURALLY PREFER TO DEFER A DECISION ON YOUR TELEGRAM OF YESTERDAY DATE. "

CANBERRA
19 January 1970