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PRIME MINISTER'S PRESS CONFERENCE AT  
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA ON  
18TH FEBRUARY 1975.

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QUESTION

The N.S.W. Premier, Mr Tom Lewis, has announced that he intends to fill the Senate vacancy with a non-Labor Senator. Sir, what's your reaction to this, and secondly, is there any action that your Government can take to ensure that the convention is observed?

WHITLAM

My attitude to the matter has been made quite plain, of course, for very many years. I was a member of the Constitution Review Committee in the late 1950s which unanimously said that, where there was a casual vacancy then, and the former Senator belonged to a political party, then the new Senator appointed by the State Government or the State Parliament should belong to the same Party as the vacating Senator. I've always held that view. And it is also, I gather, the view of every Senator at the moment, and it used to be, hitherto, always has been the view of everybody who has been Premier. So there's no need to ask what my view is. I gather the Liberals in this Parliament in the House of Representatives also believe that Mr Justice Murphy should be succeeded by a Labor Senator. Perhaps I might quote what Mr Snedden, the Leader of the Liberal Party in this Parliament, said, I gather, at Randwick on Sunday: "I, Billie Mackie Snedden, have no power to determine who that successor will be. I have no power under the Liberal Party Constitution. I have no power under the Australian Constitution". And then he says something about that you press people find it hard to understand this. Then he says, "I have stated my view clearly, frankly, without fear, and without seeking favour. That is my view, and I maintain it, and if some of the commentators had the merest teeny-weeniest understanding of the Australian Constitution, and of the Liberal Party Constitution they would understand where the decision lies". I don't know where that leaves Billie Mackie Snedden. He would make a great Prime Minister. That is, the Leader of what would be the majority numbers in the Federal Parliament would have no authority whatever in a case such as a casual vacancy in the Senate. And - but it does seem to accord with general respect in which he is held by Mr Lewis, by Mr Bjelke-Petersen and by Mr Anthony. Because all of them have disagreed with him on matters of oil prices, and beef or coal exports, or Senate replacements within the last week. And he lets them go their own merry way.

QUESTION

Does any Premier have any power to conduct international trade agreements, or to conduct international trade agreements on behalf of his State with another country?

WHITLAM

Well no other country has ever thought so, and until the last week, I don't believe any Premier had that illusion either. The Federal Parliament is the one that has the authority over trade and commerce with other countries and among the States. That has always been the case. And here again, Mr Snedden himself has said it, but of course, apparently he has no power of persuasion over these errant Premiers. But of course, it's not just a question of what Queenslanders may think of their Premier. I notice that Mr Bjelke-Petersen, on "AM", I think it was, he wants to sell Queensland beef. He doesn't want the Japanese who want Queensland coal getting their beef from New Zealand or Tasmania. He was down in Tasmania just over a week ago, trying to rescuscitate the Country Party, or National Party, in Tasmania.

But the fact that he makes this reference shows the absurdity of it. Other countries buy Australian beef. They want that beef to be of acceptable standard and the national Government has to ensure those standards. Now you just can't take our commodities, whether they're mineral or pastoral or agricultural commodities, and classify them according to State compartments. We sink or swim as a nation. And Premiers have no international standing at all. None of them ever have. They certainly have functions, and important functions within Australia. But internationally, no Premier has any standing whatever. Premiers, for instance, have no standing with the British Government, except as heads of government of British colonies.

QUESTION

Do you have any plans, or are there any plans, to appoint other Senators to august positions, such as ambassadors or to the High Court?

WHITLAM

No. Incidentally, there have been other appointments of this character by our predecessors. You remember Senator Spicer was appointed as a judge. Senator Annabel Rankin was appointed as an ambassador. Senator Prowse chose to retire before the end of his term, and he was replaced by another Country Party Senator. This was only early last year, about 12 months ago. Now Mr Anthony, the Leader of the Country Party telephoned Mr Tonkin, the Premier of Western Australia, to make sure that if Senator Prowse, a Country Party Senator, retired before the end of his term, would Mr Tonkin replace him with a Country Party Senator. And Mr Tonkin said, of course he would. He would heed the convention.

QUESTION

... not only appointments of this nature - for appointments of this nature as well as for the convention of replacing with a Senator of the same Party?

- WHITLAM I don't believe that, since proportional representation was introduced for the Australian Senate, that there has ever been a Senator who has not been replaced by a Senator of his own Party. There has never been such a case. Senator Murphy's resignation produced the 26th casual vacancy. The previous 25, that is, since proportional representation was introduced in 1949, had all been succeeded by persons belonging to their own Party. 10 of them were appointed by a State where they were political opponents of the Government of the State.
- QUESTION Prime Minister, are you considering moving to have a referendum to take the power of the States to appoint Senators in a casual vacancy, away from them? And secondly, are you considering a referendum removing the power of the Senate to block Supply?
- WHITLAM No. I suppose your question derives from an article in one of the newspapers which said that a couple of university lecturers had written to me on this subject. So, insofar as the matter's come in correspondence, I can be said to be considering it. But a copy of their letter was also given to the press, so that's the origin of that story.
- QUESTION Mr LEWIS has indicated that his appointment may be what may be called non-political. Is such a thing possible?
- WHITLAM It would be extraordinarily difficult, I imagine, for a politician to find a non-political appointee. I think Mr Lewis went further - I think he said he would appoint a political neuter. I'd assume that we would not only have a Senator Withers, but a Senator Wethers.
- QUESTION The Sydney Morning Herald in a leader this morning suggested that perhaps Mr Lewis might delay appointing a Senator at all until the next elections, which they seem to think might be an acceptable solution. Do you think that would be an acceptable solution?
- WHITLAM Well I naturally regard any suggestion by the editorial writers of the Sydney Morning Herald with the greatest respect and reverence. I notice on this matter, the Sydney Morning Herald is the only newspaper in the whole of Australia which has given any editorial support to Mr Lewis. Every other metropolitan newspaper has editorially condemned him.
- QUESTION Sir, how much longer are you going to tolerate Mr Stonehouse using Australia as a sanctuary?
- WHITLAM I don't like commenting on individuals on an occasion like this. If a question like this was asked in the Parliament, I would require it to be put on notice. Now a question was asked of the Minister for Labor and Immigration about this, at question time today.

(cont.)

You have his answer to it. I don't know all the details of these matters. As I understand it, Mr Stonehouse, M.P., has committed no breach of Australian laws. As I understand it, until - I don't know what's happened this afternoon - no country has sought to extradite him. There are procedures for extradition if he's broken any laws of any other country. As I understand it, he has not broken any laws of our country. I know it's a very easy thing on which to comment. Anything I said on this subject would get very great coverage. You don't mind if I don't rise to that lure.

QUESTION

Do you see any merit in those two referenda?

WHITLAM

I haven't considered them. I have one referendum proposal before the Parliament which I think is a very urgent and necessary one. Namely, that whenever there is an election for the House of Representatives, there should also be an election for that half of the Senate which is first due to face the people. We must bring to an end this absurd situation where we have an election - a national election - every year and a half at the most.

QUESTION

Mr Prime Minister, Do you have under consideration any plans to delay the Supply bill or in any other way circumvent the Senate's rather easy way of sending the Government to the people?

WHITLAM

My whole procedure is to act according to the ordinary practices and proprieties in these matters. Supply will be sought in the ordinary way. If the Senate chooses to reject Supply, that will be another breach of Constitutional conventions. I think we ought to realise that the constant suggestion that the Senate may reject Supply, as it threatened to do in April last year, is no justification for refusing Supply. We should never accept that this is a proper or a normal or a principled thing to do. It has not, it had never happened in Australia before. The fact that it has happened once does not make it proper to do it or to threaten it again.

QUESTION

Does that mean, Prime Minister, that the Opposition if you had any say in it, the Labor Party in Opposition would not reject Supply in the Senate if it had the numbers?

WHITLAM

When we were in Opposition, and this proposal to reject Supply was put, I successfully opposed it.

QUESTION

I was talking, Sir, in the future tense.

WHITLAM

I don't contemplate - I am not going to hypothesise on that matter. You know what I have done. In 1967 there was this suggestion. You remember it - it was in the context of post and telegraph charges, and there was the suggestion in the Australian Labor Party - in the Caucus, then in Opposition - that we should vote against the money Bill. And I successfully led the opposition against that move.

QUESTION

You have spoken very strongly today, Prime Minister, against two State Premiers on the stands that they've taken on two issues that we've spoken about here today. And you have obviously taken great delight in their disagreement with Mr Snedden. But do you think in any way that Mr Lewis and Mr Bjelke-Petersen do, in fact, represent the views of the people of their States - their stands on the beef and coal and on the Senate vacancy.

WHITLAM

No, I don't think they do. But what does appal me - let's assume that Mr Bjelke-Petersen does represent the views of Queenslanders on this matter. I do believe that Australians in general should understand the implications of what he is putting. It is not, I believe, acceptable to Australians to say that, if our biggest customer, Japan, doesn't buy beef from Queensland, then Queensland will not sell coal to Japan. After all, coal comes from other States, beef comes from other States. But surely, in international trade, we act as one nation. But it's really an idle speculation, because Mr Bjelke-Petersen has been condemned on all hands by this - or should I say Mr Snedden and Mr Peacock have begged to differ from Mr Bjelke-Petersen. They don't agree with him. The fact is that any Australian Government could prevent this course of action by any State Premier. The - any Prime Minister, any Australian Government, the Australian Parliament have authority over the trade and commerce with other countries and among the States. And if they choose to act or legislate then any State action or legislation would be nullified. It would be void to the extent of any inconsistency. So Mr Bjelke-Petersen should know that he couldn't do it. The difficulty is that, in order to attract some support, presumably in his own State, he is creating unnecessary tensions between Queensland and the other States and he's also casting a cloud over the - our relations with other countries. I think, however, Japan knows quite clearly with what Government in Australia it has to have all its relations.

QUESTION When will you expect this Session's Supply Bills to be introduced into Parliament?

WHITLAM At the ordinary time.

QUESTION Mr Whitlam, you mentioned before that when Senator Prowse retired from the Senate, that Mr Anthony contacted Mr Tonkin to make sure that the normal convention would be followed. Did you contact Mr Lewis to take the same precautions?

WHITLAM No. The only conversation I have had with Mr Lewis on this matter was by telephone on Sunday week. I told him that a letter was being delivered as the Constitution requires, by the President of the Senate, to the Governor of New South Wales. And I said I thought he would like to know, because he would have to advise the Governor as to his response. And that's the only conversation I have had with Mr Lewis on this matter. I gather, from the newspapers that he then rang the Premier of Victoria, Mr Hamer, who gave him certain advice, which Mr Lewis chose to ignore.

QUESTION Mr Prime Minister, do you approve of guns being taken to the Cabinet Room? Were you aware last Friday that Mr Bjelke-Petersen took an armed bodyguard into the Cabinet Room? Do you know if the Queensland Premier obtained permission from the presiding officers of the Parliament to bring an armed man into the precincts of Parliament House? And do you intend to have members of the Queensland Party frisked at the next conference?

WHITLAM I believe nobody was in Parliament House. The presiding officers or the Treasurer and I who respectively presided over the Loans Council and the Premiers' Conference were informed that Mr Bjelke-Petersen had an armed body guard with him. I don't propose to take any action about this matter. I should imagine Mr Bjelke-Petersen would have got the message here that no posses are required.

QUESTION Prime Minister, there have been suggestions from a number of quarters that the Government should take a much tougher stand this year. If the Opposition does try to block Supply, that it should resist that, and that it should try to stay in office. If Supply is rejected, do you think this is possible? And is this being considered by the Government?

WHITLAM I have seen such speculations. I'm not going to respond to them.

- QUESTION Prime Minister, following the Federal Conference decision at Terrigal on the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam, have you had an application from them for the establishment of any sort of an office here?
- WHITLAM No.
- QUESTION Does the initiative, in fact, rest with them?
- WHITLAM Yes.
- QUESTION What is the progress, if any, on the take over of the State Railway system? Have you come to any financial arrangement with South Australia? And if not, when is such arrangement likely to come about?
- WHITLAM There were some pretty thorough discussions on this matter at Terrigal between Mr Dunstan and Mr Vergo the Tasmanian Minister for Transport and also between Mr Nielson, the Tasmanian Deputy Premier and Mr Batt, the former Tasmanian Minister for Transport, with Dr. Cairns and Mr Jones, my Minister for Transport and me. And I would be pretty confident that the discussions which have gone on for over two years now will soon be successfully concluded.
- QUESTION Sir, following your rejection for the second time of a visa for Mr Wallace to come here, do you think it likely that the Australian tour of South Africa will proceed?
- WHITLAM I think it will probably not proceed. After all, the Australian Cricket Board of Control would be influenced very much by the decision of the International Cricket Association in July last year, that there should be no tours of South Africa until cricket there was multi-racial. Furthermore, if Australia were to send an XI to South Africa, it is quite likely that no Australian XI would be received in the Carribean countries; India or Pakistan - or that any teams from those countries would visit Australia. There's a very great deal at stake in this matter as far as cricket is concerned, quite apart from the general question of what the nation's attitude should be and the extent to which the Government should safeguard the nation's interests and reputation.
- QUESTION Prime Minister, did Cabinet accept a proposal yesterday from Mr Johnson, for additional expenditure on welfare housing? If so, for how much? And secondly was the proposal vetted by the Expenditure Review Committee?

WHITLAM There will be, quite soon, a Bill for additional housing grants to the States under the Housing Agreement, partly for Housing Commission or Trust houses and partly for Home Builders' account loans. And half of the amount to be appropriated was announced last November. I mightn't have the particular States precisely in mind, but I think in November, the additional amounts were announced for Qld., S.A. and in respect to housing commission houses, N.S.W. There will now be home savings - home builders' accounts grants for - announced for each of those States, and both categories for Victoria. But this is under an arrangement which was made last June. You will remember at the Premiers' Conference last June when preliminary grants were announced by my Government under the housing agreement with the States. We stated that if additional amounts could be spent in erecting houses we would consult with the States again. And when the States made such proposals, we did consult with them. That was the arrangement concerning housing agreement finance. You remember that in 1973, we allocated record amounts of money for housing agreement purposes, but the States in fact, built fewer houses than they built for those purposes for about 10 years. So in June last, we said we didn't mind, in effect, how much money was provided, as long as it could be spent in housing. Not just put in Trust Accounts.

QUESTION To take up the point on the Expenditure Committee,

WHITLAM I think this the first question I think you've ever addressed me. For months.

QUESTION Two weeks, I think sir. To take up the Expenditure Committee, it met, I understand, on Thursday last week, and then you told the Premiers on Friday that any "ons", as they say, would have to be matched by "offs". When might we expect to hear what the "offs" are?

WHITLAM I don't think you will hear them. They occupied quite a deal of the Cabinet's attention yesterday.

QUESTION Could you give us some idea of the amount of money involved.

WHITLAM No.

QUESTION Mr Whitlam, in the light of the decision yesterday on the Capital Gains Tax, or land tax, could you comment on a proposal put forward by Mr Cameron I think about 18 months ago, that the Cabinet considered a Holding Tax on land and a flat rate holding tax on unoccupied land?



- WHITLAM I don't remember the proposal.
- QUESTION Could you amplify that point about how we won't find out about the "offs"?
- WHITLAM No, I am not going to announce what proposals were in Minister's submissions which have now been deferred or modified. After consideration and report by the Expenditure Review Committee. That's what I have said.
- QUESTION I thought decisions had been made.
- WHITLAM No. I should - I thought it was clear to you what was involved in the Expenditure Review Committee's operations. It is to look at proposals between Budgets. The Budget is - the Budget discussions are the appropriate time to fix priorities between competing claims. And this Committee will particularly scrutinise submissions by Ministers for the Cabinet which would involve additional expenditure this financial year - that is, before the next Budget discussions are held.
- QUESTION Did Cabinet yesterday, decide to cut back on existing programs?
- WHITLAM It scrutinised the prospects of expending the full amount allocated for some programs.
- QUESTION Are you of the opinion that statements being made by Messrs. Anthony, Lewis and Bjelke-Petersen since Mr Justice Murphy was sworn in to the High Court were in contempt of Court? And if so, will you refer them to the Attorney-General?
- WHITLAM Yes - No. I believe the dignity of the High Court would be better served by ignoring the comments which the gentlemen that you name have made.
- QUESTION On the expenditure question, Sir, isn't one of the aims of your announcement about the Committee of Ministers to curtail expenditure? That it would be providing something of the sort of leadership which is required for the States to curtail their own expenditure? To let the private sector know that you have an answer to the criticism that Government expected to have expenditure was going unchecked? Sir, why can't we find out, in aggregate terms, the amount of money that this mysterious committee administers is saving?

WHITLAM Now, I am not going to respond to your kind invitation. The fact is, that if I was naming any of these items, I'd immediately be swamped with pleas to continue the particular item which is being deferred. You know that perfectly well, so I am not going to ...

QUESTION Sir, does that mean ...

WHITLAM No, you have had your question.

QUESTION Well, to follow up, does that mean, sir, that you are no longer on the election hustings in asking Mr Snedden to stipulate on what he would cut back on expenditure?

WHITLAM Well, I notice that he is proposing to cut back expenditure on tertiary education, to introduce fees and to cut education allowances. I'm - you can see - I think you asked him a few questions on this - what was it, Monday wasn't it? And he came out with that bright idea. I can assure you that we will not be bringing back tertiary fees, technical fees. We will not be retrenching educational allowances for those that can survive the means test which is there in operation.

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