

PRIME MINISTER'S QUEENSLAND BROADCAST NO. 6DEFENCE

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Since the recent unhappy turn of events in Indo-China the Opposition parties in Canberra have been rubbing their hands in glee in the belief that they can capitalise on a supposed weakness in Australia's defences. They have fostered the myth - the damaging myth - that our defences are neglected and run-down. Of course, where defence matters are concerned, I don't suppose we should take much notice of the men who bungled the F111 deal and got us disastrously involved in the war in Vietnam. But it's important that their latest accusations be promptly nailed. Here in Queensland there are more major defence bases and installations than in any other State. Defence is a natural concern to you. The fact is that Australia's defences are strong and vigorous. We have highly trained, well-equipped professional forces - better peacetime forces than ever before.

And the important thing to remember is that under a Labor Government our defences have been maintained without conscription. One of the first things we did was abolish the detested and inefficient call-up of Australia's youth. We can take it that the Opposition don't object to that decision because they have since told us - after some prompting - that they wouldn't reintroduce conscription themselves. So let's look at the figures that really matter - the volunteer forces, the professional servicemen who are making service life their career. In December 1972, when the previous Government went out, the volunteer strength of the three services was 69,195. Today it is actually a little higher - 69,200. And the increase we have authorised in the army strength will take it from 31,500 to 34,000 by the end of next year - the biggest peacetime army Australia has ever had.

Or look at it in money terms. In the last full year of Liberal-Country Party government, Australia was spending \$1217 million a year on defence. This financial year we'll be spending almost \$1800 million - the equivalent of \$5 million a day. We're not wasting that money on unhappy young conscripts. We're spending it on the arms, the equipment, the professional training that will make our defences as good as those of any comparable country.

The Opposition make much of the Government's supposed belief that Australia faces no threat for 10 or 15 years. No one has ever said that an attack on Australia is impossible.

We have concluded, on the basis of the best advice available, that such an attack is highly unlikely within 10 years or more. That is the advice the previous Government received and it came from the same authorities who advise my own Government on the strategic situation. That situation is constantly under review. Of course there will always be uncertainties from time to time. No one can guarantee a period of full uninterrupted peace. But that's no reason for believing that an external threat is imminent. To assume that what is possible must be probable would mean putting the country on a permanent war footing - with all that would mean for the economy and the welfare of our people. We have to be quite realistic about this - and realism doesn't mean fearing the worst, or, as I sometimes suspect, hoping for the worst. I have no time for those who want to whip up panic, weaken the people's faith in the strength of our forces and the morale of the forces themselves.

Our whole emphasis has been on efficient organisation, modern equipment and well-paid professional servicemen. One of our first actions was to amalgamate the separate service departments into a strong, combined Department of Defence. Further reorganisation is still to come. We have set about a major program of defence procurement. Last year we announced plans for two new patrol frigates, 53 replacement tanks for the Army, long-range maritime patrol aircraft and 45 new fire support vehicles. We are ensuring that Australian industry has a fair participation in our procurement of equipment from overseas. To date, the total value of orders placed on Australian industry under reciprocal purchasing arrangements exceeds \$72 million. We are not just buying hardware from abroad.

We have many other plans for defence equipment and the modernisation of defence facilities - dockyards, naval bases, training centres and the like. But, first and foremost, we recognise the need for dedicated, well-paid, secure and professionally-minded manpower. Only by making service life attractive and rewarding will we develop the basis of a sound defence effort. Sometimes I think that retirement benefits for officers were made so attractive that too many of them left the services to take advantage of them. Nevertheless, we have established a generous new defence force retirement and death benefit scheme. There is a \$1000 tax-free bonus for re-engagements; wider eligibility for defence service housing loans; a wider application of repatriation benefits; approval for credit unions in the services; progressive upgrading of married quarters and other living accommodation; improved resettlement benefits. We have appointed an ombudsman for the services whose job is to investigate complaints of unfair treatment or miscarriage of justice.

In short we are laying the basis for a happy, secure life in the peacetime forces of our country. As one who spent four years in the services I know how important that is. And with the other reforms we have made, and the equipment programs under way, I have no doubt that Australia is in a better position than she has ever been to meet any military threat or military obligation in the foreseeable future.