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PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

WEDNESDAY, 15 SEPTEMBER 1982

ADDRESS TO RSL NATIONAL CONGRESS, CANBERRA

Thank you very much for the opportunity of being with you this morning because I think as you know the Government values very greatly the role of the RSL, not only in what it does in pursuing the interests of ex-servicemen, not only in what it does in keeping governments honest to see what they do what they ought to in relation to ex-servicemen, but the RSL makes a much wider contribution than that.

It often serves to remind us of things that are important that other people may forget. The organisation reminds us on a number of occasions throughout the year, on Anzac Day in particular, of the effort and the sacrifice of many tens upon tens of thousands of Australians in many different conflicts.

I am very glad indeed that we have been able to do something more for the War Memorial. I have been aware for some time of the problems of the collections, the paintings, the need for conservators and many other things and I am glad that it is possible to persuade the Cabinet, I must say it took very little persuading. But since we are starting to look to a bicentenary year in 1988, there should be a bicentennial program for the War Memorial itself. The \$11 million modernisation and renovation program will enable a number of things to be done which have been on the books, which have been planned for some time. It will be exciting to see more of those things coming to completion as 1988 approaches. It is going to come around very, very quickly indeed, it is only five or so years away.

There are many things needed in the War Memorial, not only space for aircraft and other exhibitions or special exhibitions; it is designed to cater for about 300,000 people a year and last year one million people visited that memorial. The Governors and managers of the Memorial are taking upon themselves wider responsibilities. I think there is a feeling that there is less of some important elements of Australian history taught in Australian schools now than there might have been. The War Memorial especially in relation to young Australians, is quite actively making sure that visitors to the Memorial learn a little more of Australian history than they might otherwise have done.

I don't think there is any need for me to talk of the commitment of the Government to veterans. Sir William has done that for me I think. There are always gaps. It is not possible to do everything that the RSL asks in any one year because if we did I know you would still think of other things in the next year and the year after, so we have to leave something for future years. The relationship and the discussions that take place between governments and senior ministers and the League are of great value. I welcome very much having the National President and his Executive to a lunch at The Lodge on one occasion and I hope that that can be repeated in future years because it enables a discussion to take place in a totally informal atmosphere and an exchange of view which I for one, found very useful.

I think you know that the Government is very much committed to expanding and improving the defence forces of Australia. We live in an unstable world and we live in a world in which the day's imperial powers continue to spread their influence. We don't need reminding too much of Soviet aggressions, what has happened in Eastern Europe, in Hungary and Czechoslovakia in earlier years, but more recently in Afghanistan, the suppression of Poland, the \$3 or \$4 million a day that is being spent by the Soviet Union in reinforcing the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea, what they are seeking to do in many parts of Africa and the Middle East and in Central America. It is in a sense an unpredictable world and the Government values very greatly the United States' determination to rebuild the United States defence forces to a position at least of equality and I would hope in a number of areas to one of superiority over the Soviet Union because I believe very, very strongly indeed that the only guarantor of peace and of a secure world is a strong and firmly led United States.

The greatest danger to peace is to fall in the errors of earlier times when the western democracies became weak and unable to do things that they ought to. It does not take much reminding to know that the last World War could have been so easily stopped in 1935 or 1936 if only the French or the British or for that matter the United States which was then very isolationist in its outlook, had done some of the simple things that they needed to have done. The overwhelming preponderance of military power then lay with the French and with the British, but it was the lack of political will, a lack of resolve, a lack of understanding which led to the deterioration of events and the horrors of the World War.

We have been reminded in quite recent times that if foreign policy goes wrong a war can result very quickly, it can be very difficult and very expensive. Foreign policy advice in the United Kingdom in relation to the Falklands was in error. It was thought that the Argentinians would not use force, but they did and the Australian Government gave all the support it could to Mrs Thatcher and her Government in the prosecution of that conflict, the recapturing of the Falklands. I would like to take this opportunity

to praise the courage and the determination, the fortitude of the British Prime Minister and the skill and the capacity of British servicemen in what they had to do in a pretty difficult environment, 8,000 miles from home. It was an enormously successful venture. We were privileged to have only a few days ago a special briefing by a British team who were here and there was only one thing that I would like to say about that particular briefing the extent to which they went out of their way to emphasise the dominant role the British Prime Minister took, the conduct of the United Kingdom affairs at that time, through the war cabinet and reporting to Cabinet. It is an enormous tribute to Mr Thatcher and one which I am sure not only we, but all British people appreciate very, very greatly.

What happened in the Falklands demonstrates that dangers can come out of a pretty clear sky unpredictable, unknown, unexpected and without advice. That means that those nations that are determined to do what they can to defend themselves, determined to co-operate with their allies, need to be vigilant and to make sure that their defences are in good order.

Last year our defence expenditure was up about 20% on the year before. This year it is up very nearly 12% that is about 3% of gross domestic product, not as much maybe as the RSL would like, but still up considerably as a proportion of national product in earlier times. We are in effect in the middle of a \$6 billion re-equipment program. It is a very expensive program indeed and as much of the purchases as can be, will be directed towards Australian industry and the new Department of Defence Support is designed to act as quite a vigorous advocate in a sense for Australian industry to get them interested in fulfilling defence contracts and to make sure that the contracts that could go their way, don't flow overseas.

I was delighted to see that the retiring chief of Defence Force Staff who is here on his retirement, said that we now have the best equipped and the best trained force that we have ever had in peace time. That is a tribute not only to his activities to his officers, the chiefs of staff and to the services, but I hope in some way a compliment to the Government that has assisted in providing the funds that have made that possible. The introduction of the F-18s, the purchase of new Orions, new patrol boats being built in Cairns and new modern missile systems, the fitting of Harpoon, equipment for the army, all of these things are going forward in a pretty steady way.

We thought we were buying Invincible and I believed it would have been an enormous addition, and a very valuable addition to Australian defence forces, but having regard to the role Invincible had played in the Falklands, I also thought that there was only one thing to do at the time and write a certain letter to Mrs Thatcher which I did. I was not surprised that the United Kingdom had decided they wished to keep Invincible, but there is not the slightest doubt that that decision has posed very significant problems for our own defence planners for the maintenance of a balanced force.

Defence are now bringing together all the options open to us which I hope will be before the Government in a few weeks time so that we can determine what is best to do. Obviously cost is one of the things that we have to have in mind. I think some of the things that might have been said about having a carrier, or a single carrier, have not really been accurate in the past. If it is a question of peace time, possession of Invincible obviously gives Australia a capacity which is not matched by other countries in our own region and I am not too sure that that it is not a good thing. I would like to say to that Australia has, as indeed is the case, the best the most modern equipment, more effective forces, technologically for advanced than any others in our own part of the world. Invincible would certainly have been very much part of that. But if we were ever unfortunate enough to be involved in a significant or major conflict, then quite plainly we would not be operating alone, it would not be just one carrier operating alone, it would be a net addition to allied forces of enormous and significant tactical and strategic importance. How we come out of this current examination I cannot predict at the moment because I know there are a number of options that are being looked at very, very closely indeed. There is a question of cost and the balance of forces in other matters.

A good deal is being done to modernise communications at North West Cape, for establishing a new patrol base in Darwin, which will be opened by Her Majesty very shortly. Cockburn Sound has been developed as a very effective naval base, it is being used extensively by United States ships as well as by our own and the RAAF base at Darwin or possibly Tindal is obviously going to be very extensively extended and improved to take the new F-18s when they come on stream.

We believe the close co-operation with allies is very essential and arrangements with the United States are very real. It is a full blooded relationship, but it is a relationship in a political sense between equals, not between a middle ranking power such as Australia and a much larger one as the United States is. President Reagan very recently said the partnership is more than military, it has political and economic dimensions that have become deeply enmeshed in the fabric of the United States' national policy. I very much share that view. The relationship is vital to Australia. There have been arguments about the nature of the alliance and about ship visits which I am not going to revive at this point, but there needs to be no equivocation at all so far as Australia's interest is concerned. A full-blooded relationship with the United States is of vast and great importance and that includes the visits of ships to our ports whether they are carrying nuclear arms or whether they are nuclear powered or whatever.

The United States has made it very plain that if ship visits of that kind cannot take place, if friendly country after friendly country started to say "We don't want you ships because

they might have a nuclear weapon in the hold", then the United States would not be able to carry out its obligations to countries such as Australia with whom they are in partnership, they would not be able to carry out their global responsibilities in defence of the free world. There is one other thing that President Reagan said when Ambassador Cotton, Senator Cotton as he was, presented his credentials as Ambassador to the United States. I think you might be interested in the sentence. He said, "You state that Australia is a middle power, but it is clear that Australia plays an immensely greater role in world affairs than that modest appellation would suggest." I think that is a reasonable compliment on the part of the United States President.

Co-operation with allies much closer to home is also very important. When I was Defence Minister I negotiated with Singapore, Malaysia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom - the Five Power Defence arrangement. That was not all that active for some time. Our battalion was withdrawn and I think that that was one of the great mistakes in Australian defence decisions. The British had their own problems and problems with anything east of Suez and there was some changed political perceptions for a while. But as a result of discussions I had with the previous Malaysian Prime Minister, and the Singapore Prime Minister, a number of decisions have been made and I am very glad to say that not only my good friend Harry Lee, but the present Prime Minister of Malaysia Dr Mahathir support these arrangements very strongly indeed. There are exercises between the three countries most concerned, Malaysia, Singapore and Australia. It is our hope they might expand to involve other countries, they would not necessarily be under the five power arrangement, but it is our hope that they will expand.

There was an earlier decision that we would withdraw from Butterworth by 1984-85. One of the first decisions of my Government was to extend the period our fighter squadrons would stay there. One squadron is coming back to be transferred to F-18s, but we are now having an examination to look at the economics of either keeping the Mirage there or putting a detachment of F-18s in Butterworth. There is not the slightest doubt that they are welcome. I believe they are wanted, but one has to know the national characteristics of the language that is being used when these matters are discussed. They are certainly very, very welcome indeed and I believe in terms of regional co-operation, the decision to keep the presence in Butterworth beyond 1985, is very much in Australia's interests and very much in the interests of the whole region.

It is not so widely known that we have been flying Orions out of Butterworth for a very considerable time now. This was part of our response to Afghanistan when we took over a significant part of the patrolling obligations that had formerly been undertaken by the United States. It is also a training operation with Malaysia because their people are on the aircraft on all flights. The knowledge gained is shared totally with them, but they are flying both to the east and to the west conducting very valuable surveillance operations and making a commitment to free world defence of a very constructive kind.

I think it is also worth drawing attention to the fact that training facilities have been made available to Singapore which we all know, has some shortage in geography and space, in Australia. That is accepted by our other regional partners as a totally reasonable thing to do and again it deepens our defence relationship with our close neighbours. It is not only in relation to the United States as a major power that the relationship is closer, more effective, more substantial than I think it has been for a very long while, it is also in relation to our regional partners and friends that the relationship has been strengthened in very substantial ways over recent times.

I think you also know that Australia has accepted some wide responsibilities, the Sinai Multinational Force. For some time I thought it might be difficult for Australia to be involved in that because you need a certain degree of political support for things that are done, but we did believe that it was very important to build upon the one example of co-operation in the Middle East, the one example of Arab and Jews sitting down to talk and coming to an agreement. I believe that it was our indication, our willingness to participate, that in a sense acted as a catalyst and encouraged others also to join that force.

There is one thing I would like to say, and where I think the RSL maybe has a role that could be fulfilled to a greater extent, but not only the RSL, also governments, because perhaps you and I sometimes take too many things for granted. Let me explain it in this way. Through the last year there have been massive peace marches throughout Europe objecting to the deployment of modern weapons which are necessary for the effective defence of western Europe. The opposition to those weapons has been based very significantly on the fact they are nuclear weapons of one kind or another. You and I perhaps take so much of what we need to do for granted. We know the reasons for NATO, we know the reasons for the ANZUS Treaty then we ask ourselves what weapons systems, what tactics do we need to give adequate effect to those sorts of treaty. It is so easy to forget that not just one generation, maybe two generations have grown up since that World War ended. So many people who were born since the NATO arrangement was founded. So many people born in Australia, since the ANZUS Treaty was signed - do they really understand the reasons for it? Have they been told the reasons for it, or have we taken all that for granted? What we do need to understand is that if we believe these things are important for Australian security, or for western world democratic security, each generation in its own time has a right to the explanation. They have a right to ask questions. I have got no doubt that a part and maybe a significant part of those peace marches in Europe had been promoted by the Soviet Union or the friends or the agents of the Soviet Union, but I also have not the slightest doubt, and I hope this won't be misreported as it was last time I made this comment, because they only reported a part of it, I also have not the slightest doubt that a very large number of the people who are marching, only wanted peace and maybe they are people who have not had the explanations as to why NATO is necessary.

For Australia we need to explain why ANZUS is necessary, why military expenditure is necessary, why it is important not to make the sorts of the mistakes that some of our fathers made before us. We who so often take the need for adequate defence and defence arrangements for granted, I think sometimes fall down in our obligation to explain to young Australians who only want peace and cannot understand the need for war preparations, the reasons for it all and why it is so necessary to preserve peace.

I think Sir William this is something in which the RSL can certainly play a role, something in which governments need to play a role. I think it may be something that all of us who believe in strong and effective defence could work a little harder at than we have in the past. I would like to thank you very much indeed for what the RSL is doing throughout Australia. It is an organisation of great and significant value. Obviously you don't always agree with the Government or governments and we cannot always agree with every element of your policies. My good friend Bruce Ruxton and I sometimes have mild discussions on how to get to a common objective and we don't always agree on the way to that objective, but we do agree about the objective, there is no doubt about that. When there are disagreements it is about means not about ends. That is healthy and I would like to thank you all for the role that you played and the service that you continue to do for Australia.

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