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PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

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The Australian Archives today is releasing the records of the Royal Commission on Espionage, related Cabinet material and contemporaneous Prime Minister's Department files.

The release is the first major release under the Archives Act 1983, which this Government brought into effect.

All Australians will recognise the high value to be placed on the preservation of the nation's heritage, and acknowledge the service performed by Australian Archives in maintaining and making publicly accessible so much of our written history.

The Royal Commission on Espionage and the events that it inquired into hold a particular place in modern Australian history and continue to evoke strong feelings. I have no doubt that the release of the records will be met with keen and scholarly interest.

The timing of today's release has been determined by the need for Australian Archives to respond by 30 September to the first valid request received under the Archives Act for access to the Royal Commission records.

The Archives Act provides that a Commonwealth record is in the open access period if a period of 30 years has elapsed since the end of the year in which the record came into existence. Many of the key documents in the Royal Commission records are in this category, but the bulk of the records would not normally be released before 1 January 1985 and 1986.

Rather than release key open access documents in isolation from the ensuing Royal Commission records, the Government decided that for public interest reasons, there should be an accelerated release, as a single package, of the full Royal Commission records, and certain other supporting documentation.

The Royal Commission on Espionage was established on 3 May 1954 to inquire into and report upon the information given to the Commonwealth by Petrov (a defector from the Soviet Embassy in Australia) as to the conduct of espionage and related activities in Australia and matters related to or arising from that information. When Petrov defected he handed Australian authorities certain documents. These became known as the Moscow letters (six letters described as having been sent in 1952 from Moscow to Petrov and lettered A-F by the Royal Commission), the G-series of documents (a miscellany of documents written in Russian and numbered G1 to G18 by the Royal Commission), and two English language documents identified by the Royal Commission as documents 'H' and 'J'.

The Royal Commission, over a period of ten months from May 1954 to March 1955, sat on 126 days, examined 119 witnesses, entered over 500 exhibits and published almost 3000 pages of transcript of evidence. During that period the Commission's Secretariat created around 300 files largely concerned with administrative matters but also containing transcript of evidence taken in camera, some of which was not published by the Royal Commission.

An interim report was presented by the Royal Commission in October 1954 and a final report of the findings of the Royal Commission was published in August 1955. Both reports were tabled and debated in the Parliament. In addition, a classified annexure to the final report was presented to the Government of the day but has remained unpublished.

All this material comprises the records of the Royal Commission on Espionage which were transferred to the custody of the Prime Minister's Department at the conclusion of the Commission. They have been in the custody of the Department since then, except for the period September 1975 to May 1977 when the records were provided to the Royal Commission on Intelligence and Security.

Access to the records has been strictly controlled since 1955. On the basis of indexes accompanying them when they were transferred to the Department, of cataloguing and indexing by an archivist since 1977 and of recent evaluation of the records by Australian Archives, I am advised that a complete set is held of the individual documents that together comprise the records of the Royal Commission on Espionage.

Accelerated access is also to be given to closely related Cabinet material and contemporaneous Prime

Minister's Department files. The Government acknowledges the ready co-operation of the Leader of the Opposition in agreeing to the accelerated release of 1954, 1955, and 1956 Cabinet material.

Extensive consultation has preceded the release of these records. Wherever necessary, material has been referred to appropriate departments and agencies for consideration and advice; and all foreign governments affected by the release have been consulted.

At the end of this process, the Government has determined that only minor exemptions, on security grounds alone, should be made from the released package. Nothing that affects the integrity of the Royal Commission's records has been deleted; and nothing has been exempted from the documents handed over by Petrov.

The exemptions made - which affect neither the substance nor the continuity of the records - relate to:

- . ASIO file numbers;
- . names of ASIO officers where these names were not published by the Royal Commission on Espionage or have not subsequently become publicly known;
- . material in exhibits 300 and 301 which would allow identification of ASIO officers' names;
- . references in a few documents to a particular ASIO overseas post;
- . a few references to UK security service officers; and
- . certain technical details concerning ciphers which were provided by Petrov and entered in exhibit 510.

Considerable thought was given to whether material should be deleted from the records because its release would involve the unreasonable disclosure of information relating to personal affairs. Documents 'H' and 'J' in particular were closely studied.

Document 'H' contains pen-portraits - most of them not very flattering - of 45 journalists. The Royal Commission found that it was prepared by a then member of the Parliamentary Press Gallery, passed to a Russian, and then on to Moscow.

The Royal Commission on Espionage report describes document 'J' in the following way: "Amongst many other

matters, the document contains personality reports on a great number of persons - politicians of every colour, newspaper proprietors and journalists, business-men, etc. Many of the reports are scurrilous and grossly defamatory (some of the allegations are of a filthy nature)". Counsel assisting the Royal Commission alliteratively described the document as a "farrago of fact, falsity and filth"; and while that description may have depended on the community standards then prevailing, document 'J' nonetheless remains, in my view, a very shabby document. And document 'H' is not far behind it.

In these two documents, there are about 250 individuals mentioned. In considering whether the personal affairs exemption, allowed for in the Archives Act, should be applied, we had to ensure parity of treatment for all. In other words, if there were to be any deletions on this ground, there would have to be many and substantial deletions. But to make either substantial or total exemptions for documents which were central to the Royal Commission, and which have a corresponding historical significance, would not in my judgement have been tenable. The final decision was to release them without exemptions, with consequential release of related references elsewhere in the records. Release by Archives does not authorise publication of the records, and in respect of this material media representatives should have in mind that the ordinary laws protecting individuals continue to apply.

As I have stressed, this decision rests on the historical significance of the documents and on the difficulty of exempting only parts of them. Release is not designed to embarrass or disadvantage any individual or section of the community or political party. No precedent for future access decisions of the Australian Archives is being created, for it is probable that some of these references, if they had occurred in isolation or in less consequential documents, would indeed have been exempted.