

- South Africa
Australia's Migration Policy
Future relationship with South Africa
Possible Royal Visit
Governor-General
P.M.'s lead in arguing South Africa's
internal affairs
Discussions with Dr. Luns - Dutch
West New Guinea

OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR AUSTRALIA IN THE UNITED KINGDOM



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PRIME MINISTER'S AUSTRALIAN PRESS CONFERENCE

On Sunday, March 19, the Prime Minister, Mr. Menzies, received the Australian Press in conference at the Savoy Hotel. A transcript of the conference follows:-

MR. MENZIES:

"I notice that there is a good deal of speculation, and perhaps something more, about the final stages of this conference, so perhaps I might as well add my own little bit to it. For some time it looked as if we could evolve a form of communique which would confirm South Africa's membership, while at the same time containing a fair summarised statement of the criticisms of South Africa's racial policy and of Dr. Verwoerd's reply. In point of fact as I have followed this - and I took a very active part in it, in drafting various things - Dr. Verwoerd was at first very reluctant to adopt the form of communique that was suggested because he felt that it was too much like a concerted judgment on South African policy, the language he thought being put in a rather too positive way. Ultimately, after considering his position, he agreed that the communique should go out in that fashion. And quite frankly, I thought at that time that the problem looked as if it were over. But when he announced, or Mr. Macmillan announced, that he was agreeable to a communique of this kind, he was promptly told by several of the Prime Ministers that it was not good enough. One or two of them indicated quite plainly that they did not accept his continued membership; that if it became necessary to move for the expulsion of South Africa they would do so. At least half the Prime Ministers there made it clear that they would pursue this matter every time there was a meeting, and between meetings, on any convenient opportunity.

"In other words, looking at the substance of the matter at least half the Prime Ministers there indicated that they did not want South Africa in. Dr. Verwoerd I thought, with very great dignity, accepted the logic of that position and indicated that he would withdraw his application. Personally I don't think he had any choice. I would have withdrawn the application had I been in his place.

"One reason I know he had in his mind, I thought did him very great credit; that was, that if he had remained and in some way or other his application for continued membership had been agreed to - I don't undertake to say how it could have been under these circumstances - but suppose in some way or other it had, then he would have remained in and would have divided his colleagues into those who would continue to want to be rid of him, and those who would continue to want to have South Africa as a member of the Commonwealth. Rather than expose the

rest of us to that risk, he decided to remove his application and avoid that possibility.

"I think, of course, that this is the most unhappy affair. I make no secret of my own view. I wanted to keep South Africa in. Last year at the Conference we all agreed that South Africa's racial policy was a matter of domestic jurisdiction. We all agreed and that was why we did not discuss it in full conference. Quite true there has been a good deal of international argument about it since, but it will be remembered that the former Prime Ministers' conference was after the incidents at Sharpeville and after there had been world-wide reaction, and we all agreed, upon that occasion, that this was a matter of domestic jurisdiction. This year Dr. Verwoerd indicated that he would waive that point because he thought that we ought to clear our minds about the question of policy. He did not abandon the proposition that it was domestic, but he said (in effect), 'Very well, I am prepared to sit in here and now and have an argument about it'. And he expressed his own case very powerfully and at considerable length. But even though there has been a great deal of international agitation this is still a matter of domestic policy in South Africa. South Africa doesn't seek to apply that policy to any other country. It is as much a matter of domestic policy for South Africa as Australia's migration policy is a domestic matter for us. And to have a member of the Commonwealth virtually excluded from the Commonwealth on a matter of domestic policy, presents in my opinion, a rather disagreeable vista of possibilities for the future. We may object very strongly to racial discrimination practiced in one country. We might equally object very strongly to the absence of any form of democracy in another; we might take exception to the absence of parliamentary machinery, or the presence of imprisonment without trial; or any of these things that lend themselves to examination if we adopt the attitude that one of our tasks is to examine each other's policies. And that is why I think this is a very unhappy development.

"It is quite true that every Prime Minister except the Prime Minister of South Africa was critical of all or some aspects of South Africa's policy. I don't need to go into that with any elaboration, but I have up to now acted on the principle - which I believe is sound - that I do not make public comments on the policies of another member of the Commonwealth; a very good old-fashioned rule that, and it did a lot of good when it used to be practiced. But since the thing is all out now and this has been thrashed out and most people have made statements about it, I just want to say this: My objection to the policy of apartheid is, in simple terms, that in my opinion it won't work. It is a policy of separate development. It is a policy that accepts that the white man occupies the superior position. In other words it is the same policy that existed in all colonial establishments until a few years ago. The South African Prime Minister says, and with great sincerity - he is a man of singular integrity, a most impressive man - He says: 'We are spending far more money on education and health for the Bantu population than any other African community.' That is quite right; he had figures to support it. He indicates that every step is being taken to raise the living and the educational standards of the Bantu. That is very good. Excellent. But I don't believe that when that object

has been achieved, the Bantu is going to be satisfied and adopt the second rate position in the general social structure or in the political structure of South Africa. In other words the more this policy succeeds, in a sense the more certain is it to fail in the long run. Now that's a purely practical objection. I have not, like some, moralised about this matter. That, in brief, is my view as to why their policy is wrong. Of course it has some, to me, some inexplicable detailed consequences.

"I told Dr. Verwoerd that I just did not begin to understand why he adopted the view that there should not be an exchange of diplomatic missions with other African and Asian members of the Commonwealth. I said we did that kind of thing very successfully in Canberra and nobody seemed to be very concerned about it. We ate in each other's houses and so on. But he had his own reasons and he said that it could not be done. I thought that, psychologically, this had a bad effect. You know, that seemed to be carrying it a bit too far."

QUESTION:

"How do you see the future relationship of South Africa with other Commonwealth countries?"

ANSWER:

"Well, I'm very troubled about it because a lot of people don't understand anything about the Commonwealth. They seem to think the British Commonwealth is a court of morals or law. You sit down and sit in judgment on each other. It never was so. You meet to discover what you agree about, not to discover what you disagree about. I spoke about this last year in the Smuts lecture. We are not sitting in judgment on one another. That is not the point. We can talk very intimately and frankly with each other. We learn a lot from each other. Occasionally you go away and find that your mind has been influenced more than you thought by something that was said. But there it is. Apparently, the character of our deliberations is to be changed. I think it a great pity. But in particular, this is the last time we will ever have a discussion on racial policy in the Commonwealth itself; in a meeting of Prime Ministers. South Africa is out. Somebody may want to discuss the racial policy of some other member of the Commonwealth, but so far as South Africa is concerned, we will never have a discussion of this kind again. Now the discussion is going on. The passions of other people were roused on this matter and they won't be silenced. But instead of having the discussion in a meeting of a limited number of heads of Governments, who are men of experience and restraint, this thing will now be put into the United Nations; it will be debated hotly in the General Assembly; it will be transferred in other words to areas where there will be much less restraint and much more passion, I think that is a pity - a great pity.

"There is one other point I would like to make about my approach to this refusal of membership or expulsion. You don't admit a Government to the Commonwealth, you admit a nation. The other day we didn't admit Archbishop Makarios, we admitted Cyprus; and one of the foundation members of the Commonwealth is South Africa - South Africa the nation. We did not admit only those people who had a vote, to wit the Europeans, we admitted the whole who included nine million Bantu. True, they don't have the vote. But there are one or two other Commonwealth countries in which the voters are by no means in the majority - let us put it as delicately as possible. You don't, in due course, put out the Verwoerd Government, you put out South Africa - all of its people. How do we know whether the Bantu, as they come along, are not very very hopeful of such protection as they can get by the

Commonwealth association? I don't know, but I can guess that they might be. How do we know what the attitude is of people who are for the time being in the minority among the voters - people who support the Opposition in South Africa? Governments come and go; that is a very healthy reflection. But, in effect, South Africa has gone, including all those who are 'pro' this policy and those who are against it, and those who are pro the Government, and those who are against the Government. I think that misconceives the nature of the Commonwealth; the Commonwealth as I have known it for many years at any rate."

QUESTION: "What was the answer to that argument, sir?"

ANSWER: "The answer was a lemon. That didn't cut any ice".

QUESTION: "Do you think that she's out for good now?"

ANSWER: "Well, frankly, I do. If I were being very tactful now I would say - 'Well, of course, in a year or two you will be back with us'. But the world doesn't work that way. Nor do I think that this decision is likely to have a tempering effect upon South African racial policy. It may very well stiffen their attitude. I don't know. I hope not. But it's possible."

QUESTION: "Dr. Verwoerd has referred to venomous attacks from the Africans, the Asians, and he also included Canada".

ANSWER: "No I won't name any names, but certainly the most extreme speeches were made at the very closing stages, at this time when I thought we were probably going to get by with a statement of the criticisms and the answers, and with continuance of membership. 'Venomous' is not my word, but there were very pungent attacks made then, as I said."

QUESTION: "Sir, on this precedent, do you fear any attacks possibly on Australia's migration policy?"

ANSWER: "Well, once the precedent is established it's obviously a possibility".

QUESTION: "Was there any hint of that?"

ANSWER: "Oh, no. From nobody. They all concentrated this time on the one thing. I made a glancing reference to it myself".

QUESTION: "What would our attitude be if....."

ANSWER: "That is like, 'If you had a brother would he like cheese'. I can't answer that one. I know what mine would be and they know what mine would be. But leave it at that. I mightn't be there".

QUESTION: "In the case of Australia, Sir, - our own future relationships with our new foreign government - I take it that the (South African) High Commission will take on another diplomatic status".

ANSWER: "Yes. We've never contemplated any of these things like boycotts or things of that kind. Somebody did suggest very powerfully that we ought to boycott South Africa, so I sent around word to find out what things we bought from South Africa. What were the main items? When I got the answer back it turned out that ninety per cent. of the people engaged in the production of those things were black people. I said I didn't think there was much sense in penalising these fellows under the guise of helping them. I don't think economic measures are going to be taken in Australia;

certainly not by us".

QUESTION:

"Is there any indication how other members of the Commonwealth might feel about the continuation of Commonwealth preferences. They apply mainly of course to Britain, we know that. They do give South Africa the same privileges in the British market as we enjoy, and New Zealand."

ANSWER:

"I would be guessing if I tried to speculate about that. No doubt there will be a lot of consequential matters that have to be looked into. I don't think most of us have had time to think about those yet".

QUESTION:

"Mr. Menzies, two or three of the Sunday papers today refer to the possibility of a visit by the Queen to Australia fairly soon. I wonder if you have any comment on that?"

ANSWER:

"When was a Sunday paper without that ~~story~~? You know my rule on this matter. I am having a discussion with the Queen about Royal visits in general; you know, trying to look ahead, but that is as far as it has gone. But any announcement of those things is to be made, as always, by the Palace, not by me. Nor do I want to infer that we are likely to have any early visit by a member of the Royal family. I have a list of requests that I brought with me that I am going to discuss with the Queen next week".

QUESTION:

"Can you give any indication, Sir, as to when the name of the new Governor-General will be announced?"

ANSWER:

"No. I wish I knew the name of the new Governor-General. Until I know that, I can't put a timetable on it".

QUESTION:

"It still hasn't been settled then?"

ANSWER:

"No".

QUESTION:

"Will you be seeing the Queen again before you leave?"

ANSWER:

"Yes".

QUESTION:

"Do you know what date?"

ANSWER:

"On Friday".

QUESTION:

"Coming back to the Conference, Mr. Menzies. There is a reference from Melbourne saying that there is a debate boiling up now on you taking the lead in arguing the constitutional objection to interference in South Africa's internal affairs; it is suggested that you may have taken on yourself a role which will be difficult to explain to our Asian neighbours. Do you foresee any difficulty in that?"

ANSWER:

"Not at all. That sounds almost like one of the Sydney papers which has a bee in its bonnet on that problem. I must say I find no difficulty whatever in explaining myself to our African and Asian neighbours in conference - none. We are on the best of terms. Anyhow, my principal duty and role is to express the mind of my own Government, not the mind of other Governments. When I am no longer able to do that, I will go out."

QUESTION:

"Mr. Menzies, can you tell us anything of your discussions with Dr. Luns of the Dutch Government on the future of Dutch New Guinea?"

ANSWER:

"No".

QUESTION:

"Will you make any comment, Sir, on the latest position of West New Guinea?"

ANSWER:

"As far as I know, the position is as it was. There has been no change. Our policy has been stated time after time. There is no change in that."

QUESTION:

"It seems to be a little hotter than it was".

ANSWER:

"Well, you know, we keep on getting stories about that. Anyhow, I have nothing to say about that. Right?"

VOICES:

"Thank you, Sir".

(Conference closed).