

PRESS CONFERENCE GIVEN BY THE PRIME MINISTER,  
THE RT. HON. R.G. MENZIES, IN CANBERRA, CN  
23RD MAY, 1962 AT 4 P.M.

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PRIME MINISTER: There are one or two matters, perhaps, that I should mention to you to get them out of the way. During my absence, of course, Mr. McEwen will be acting Prime Minister, Mr. Bury will be acting for Mr. Downer. Mr. Freeth will be acting for the Attorney-General during his absence and Mr. McEwen will act as Minister for External Affairs, assisted, of course, as at present by Senator Gorton. The Minister for Defence will be absent for a short period - something like a week - in June and when he is away Senator Paltridge will act for him.

Sir Garfield Barwick, I think, will be in a position later today to make a statement about Thailand and the provision of an Australian force, but I will leave that to him. He is working on that.

We have also had under consideration the matter of a visit by the King and Queen of Thailand to Australia. The Governor-General, on behalf of the Government, extended an invitation and that has been accepted, in principle, as we may say. The details of the programme are being worked out and the exact dates are being worked out because I am anxious that they should not conflict with the absence from Australia in September of senior people in the Government. It is expected that they will make the visit to Australia, and, it is also thought, to each of the States, but that will be announced as soon as the details have been cleared with them.

I do not know that there is anything particularly new to be said about my journey, but I will, perhaps, summarise a few points and if you have some question that you want to raise then you can ask me.

In the first place I think it is proper to say that speculation which I have read in some English papers about Mr. Macmillan being embarrassed by my visit could hardly be more wrong. Mr. Macmillan and I conduct correspondence with each other and, as far as you can on paper, discuss some of the Commonwealth problems. He has, for some time, been very keen on my making a special visit at about this time so that we can discuss these things more fully and informally in a personal way. Any idea that he is to be embarrassed can be dismissed.

Now Mr. McEwen's visit, I thought, was immensely valuable. We do not yet know, of course, what results will follow because the problems are extremely difficult ones. But I do know this, and I have said it before, that I do not know of any man in politics in Australia who has quite the same grasp of the details of our export commodity problems. He has had a great deal to do with them. He has been able to speak overseas with great authority and nothing that I say will be designed to subtract in any way from what he has been putting. My task is to supplement it, and perhaps direct my own attention to some more general problems that will have to be determined.

I think it is useful to remember the history of this Common Market matter. When it was originally established by the treaty of Rome, Great Britain chose to remain out. Later on, only in the last two years, discussions arose as to whether Great Britain might decide to apply to go in but, until comparatively recently, this was always on the footing that agricultural products, if I may use that comprehensively, were not to be in, which meant that a great deal of our exports would, of course, remain untouched.

Later on it became quite clear that they could not hope to go into the Common Market unless agricultural products were in, having regard to the importance of agricultural policy in the six European States. There by the time Mr. Sandys visited us it became clear that there would need to be a great deal of work done on the side of agricultural products if our interests were to be reasonably provided for. Then later on, as you know, the British Government decided to apply to go in; that was the next thing, we being told that the principle of consultation would be observed. When I was in England last year I secured the adoption of the proposition that you could not work out principles very usefully until you had had a good close look at the commodities affected and that there ought to be consultations.

Now on that matter the Australian Government took the view that we ought to engage, constructively, in detailed talks on the commodities concerned. When I say "constructively" I mean that instead of simply saying "Look we have a certain position and we will not discuss anything else but its maintenance", we would be quite willing to explore these matters to see whether good results, satisfactory results, might be achieved by some alternative method - alternative to those now existing. This was a thoroughly constructive way of going about things and as you know we have had for months some very top line officials engaging in talks, not only in London on the official level, but also in the continental countries affected, all that culminating in Dr. Westerman's elaborate statement in relation to commodities quite recently at Brussels.

Now at this stage it seemed to me to be very desirable that Mr. McEwen should go overseas. It is quite true that a great deal of the discussion had been occurring on the official level - two British Ministers led by their chief negotiator, Mr. Heath, were in consultation on ministerial level in Europe - and I felt, and Mr. McEwen felt, that this was a good time for him to go in order to emphasise, in relation to a series of commodities, what our interests were, what the dangers were that we can, what the value to us was of certain preferences, particularly those affecting particular interests in Australia and so on. So he went and as I have said he saw them. He had ample time with them. He put the case with the usual vigour, force, and point.

But we have now reached another stage, a further stage. This is a continuing process because during June and July I feel quite certain that minds both in London and on the Continent will begin to crystallise. I do not mean that the whole picture will merge necessarily. It could not at once. But in relation to this commodity, or that, there will tend to be a crystallisation of ideas. Once ideas begin to crystallise in that fashion, certain broad principles begin to emerge as a result. We may find it more difficult later on to exercise the influence which is most powerful when minds are not yet made up. We have always made a great point of that. Let us be consulted before minds are made up. That is why I am going because I think this is a good time. July, of course, is not at all practical from my point of view because we will be working on the budget. June is the optimum period. Therefore as a matter of timing this seems to be highly appropriate.

Most of my talks, of course, I will have in London with Mr. Macmillan and with those who are principally concerned, like Mr. Heath and Mr. Butler, Minister for Agriculture. But I won't be proposing to take a series of commodities and go through them as if I were giving an imitation of Mr. McEwen. I hope I will know all about them, but that won't be my business. My prime business will be to discuss the broad principles - and there are many broad principles - that will have to be talked out.

There has been a good deal of argument going on about preferential trade - preferential trade which operates both ways - in the British Commonwealth. There will, I think, have to be a good deal of talk about one aspect of the matter that has not yet, perhaps, been adequately considered and that is the political consequence of Britain entering into the Common Market. What will be the political effect in Europe? What will be the new relationship between Great Britain and the European countries? Will this mean that Great Britain will thereafter be a constituent state in Europe? Will it be a European Federation? Will it be a Confederation? Will it, in effect, mean that instead of the historic balance of power policy, with Great Britain standing outside Europe and exercising her balancing influence, it will be a new state of affairs in which Great Britain is a European power more or less integrated into a new European structure? These are tremendously important matters for us. They are tremendously important for Great Britain, of course, and for Europe and probably for the whole western world.

Then in addition to that, of course, there is the consequential problem as to the effect of this on Great Britain's relation to the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth has now become so widespread, so varied in its anatomy, that I think, from the point of view of the Prime Minister of this country I will be primarily concerned about what will be the effect upon the political relations between Great Britain and Australia: how far the present Commonwealth relationship that we enjoy will be affected one way or the other. As you know some senior British Ministers consider that Great Britain's entry into the European Community will strengthen the Commonwealth and they hold that view very strongly. My own view has always been that it will tend to weaken the Commonwealth. But there is not much point in discussing that at long range. That is why I want to sit down with them on these matters in London. I do not know yet whether I will have occasion to go, for example, to Paris or to Bonn. A great deal will depend upon the nature of the talks I will have in London. It doesn't take long to get to these places anyhow. I will come back via the United States of America. There is nothing to be gained by calling in at Canada because the Canadians are having an election. But of course arrangements have been made for me to see President Kennedy and Mr. Rusk and other senior members of the Administration in Washington on the way back.

I will be taking Mr. Bunting with me, the head of my own Department. The Trade Department has a suitable senior officer in London to be able to help in my briefing when I am there. Dr. Westerman is going to Washington to conduct certain discussions and will arrive in London a few days before I leave London in order to put me in the picture and help to equip me for my discussions in Washington on my way home. There is a senior External Affairs officer in London so we do not need to take somebody there. But a Treasury officer is going. He won't actually be going with me, but he will meet me in London.

I might as well confess to you that I am going to give myself a week-end with my daughter and her family in Geneva - to freshen my mind and recoup my spirit.

QUESTION: Sir, do you hope, in your talks with President Kennedy to soften the American attitude towards trade preferences?

PRIME MINISTER: Well one is always hopeful. You know on this matter of preferences: this is almost an article of faith in the United States; this is a doctrine. No preferences. And although the United States promoted the Havana Charter and subsequently GATT the best that could be got at that time was that there would be no new preferences, but that existing ones would be preserved. They always have been very opposed to this. We, on the contrary, have always said, as we are well entitled to, that if you have a community of 180 million people embraced in a series of economic activities in states, and they enjoy complete internal free trade, they can hardly say that there is something essentially evil in another group of communities who happen to be the British Commonwealth, giving preferences one to another, or, as I think it says in Holy Writ, "in brotherly love preferring one another". Same thing.

However, I have had talks about this thing before today, of course, with my American friends and we both remain quite intransigent on the matter. But I don't want to get bogged down on words, because you can occasionally find yourself at complete arms' length because there is a phrase, there is an expression used. We talk about preferences, very properly. This is part of the pattern of our economic life. Perhaps I might say "Let us forget about the words and discuss in substance what kind of benefits Commonwealth countries, in particular Australia, enjoy and what they give, and how the United States might be able to soften the impact of change. If you have some alternative which you do not call preferences but which give us some compensating advantage then let us have it."

My experience has been that if you agree, after a while, to put all those things on one side and sit down round the table and say "What about this", "What about that", you occasionally can get somewhere, each side preserving his principles, in theory, but modifying them a little in practice. That, after all, is one of the great things about round table conferences, particularly between friends. When I say that, don't be under any misapprehension: Mr. McEwen has spoken up manfully on this question of preferences and I do not modify a word he has said. But he know, and I know, that we must now get to the next phase of seeing what practical results we can get.

QUESTION: Could you tell us, Sir, to what extent you intend to have consultations on West New Guinea and South East Asia and that kind of thing?

PRIME MINISTER: Well I have no set plan in my mind, of course, but you may take it for granted that when I am there I will be having discussions about the position in South East Asia. In point of fact the first week-end I am in London I am going to spend with the Foreign Secretary himself at his home, because there are quite difficult questions there on which views do not always coincide. I would like to see whether I couldn't establish the greatest possible common basis on New Guinea, Thailand, and Viet Nam.

QUESTION: Will these discussions go into Britain's rumoured departure from South East Asia. It has been rumoured that Britain is pulling out of South-east Asia.

PRIME MINISTER: I have not heard them, nor do I think there is any substance in them. But if there is I will find out and let you know.

QUESTION: Do you regard the Indonesian attacks on Dutch New Guinea as a breach of the assurances given by Dr. Soekarno and Dr. Subandrio?

PRIME MINISTER: I think so. If they do not represent the use of force I do not know what else they do. It is a most unhappy business.

QUESTION: In the light of this breach of faith how do you feel about their assurance that they will not lay claim to Eastern New Guinea?

PRIME MINISTER: I think that that is a question I might leave on one side. I will treat it as a hypothetical one.

QUESTION: After Mr. McEwen returned from his Common Market talks he said he was neither optimistic or pessimistic.

PRIME MINISTER: I think that is a pretty fair statement. The difficulties of this thing are enormous. It took them a few years to thrash out the Treaty of Rome. They have made a few protocols and no doubt they will make some more. I am not pessimistic. I have no reason to think that we cannot get somewhere on this matter, but whether we will get as far as we want is a question on the knees of the Gods, or, if not on the knees of the Gods, on the knees of people other than ourselves when it comes to the point. Our job is to treat this year as a year in which there has been every effort. We cannot look back at the end of this year, we cannot finish this year, without being able to say we have not done all we could. We must keep up the pressure of our case until all stages of this business are concluded.

QUESTION: Is the general impression in favour of Britain persisting in her application to join the Common Market?

PRIME MINISTER: I do not know. I will know more when I have been there. That is a matter on which you do not want to have someone else's opinion. I know these people and will get a pretty fair idea.

QUESTION: Will the British monarchy come into the Common Market talks?

PRIME MINISTER: That had not occurred to me. I am a dyed in the wool monarchist.

QUESTION: Will you raise the question of a royal tour of Australia?

PRIME MINISTER: You never know. If I answer "Yes" it will become so. If I answer "No" it will not. You had better leave that one.

QUESTION: There have been reports that the Government will consider establishment of a body such as the Federal Communications Commission in the United States to handle allocation of frequencies for radio and television?

PRIME MINISTER: I do not know because I do not know anything about this. I thought it was a rumour upon a rumour. Nothing was ever said by me, or to me, about it.

QUESTION: Are there likely to be any discussions on trade with Communist China?

PRIME MINISTER: I do not know. You follow it as it goes. If they want to raise some point on that no doubt they will and I will be very willing to discuss that.

QUESTION: There has been a report that the United States wishes to establish tracking stations at Manus and Baka Islands. Are you able to say anything about this?

PRIME MINISTER: I have not heard about it. I have heard suggestions on this but do not ask me because I am not the authority on it. This might be well off as far as I know. If it was that kind of thing no doubt Mr. Fairhall will say something about it.

QUESTION: Have you received a letter from Mr. Rylah complaining about the terms of reference for the Post Office Inquiry in Victoria?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes, I have received a letter. I have passed it on to the Attorney-General and the Postmaster-General to have a look at it. I do not think they were very formidable alternatives.

QUESTION: Does this mean there will be alterations?

PRIME MINISTER: I do not know. This is for the Attorney-General. Do not ask me.

QUESTION: Will Mr. Holt be attending the Commonwealth Finance Ministers' Conference?

PRIME MINISTER: Do not ask me about September. That is an awfully long way off. All I know is that perhaps the House will be up or has that not been announced?

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With the compliments of  
Press Secretary to Prime Minister.

CANBERRA,  
23rd May, 1962.