
SPEECH

BY

Rt. Hon. SIR ROBERT MENZIES,
K.T., C.H., Q.C., M.P.,

ON

ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE.
MINISTERIAL STATEMENT.

[From the "Parliamentary Debates," 24th October, 1963.]

Sir ROBERT MENZIES (Kooyong—Prime Minister).—by leave—Mr. Speaker, on 22nd May of this year, I made a comprehensive announcement about a review of Australian defence, of the defence programme and of defence expenditure. I remind the House that that was a time before any announcement had been made about an election and before panic had broken out on the benches opposite. The decisions that I then announced involved an average increase in the defence vote, over a period of five years, of the order of £41,000,000 a year. At the same time, though I stated the nature of the extended Mirage fighter procurement, which will give our fighter forces unsurpassed strength, I pointed out that neither the programme nor the figures included any re-equipment of the strike-reconnaissance force. I quote what I went on to say, because I think it is important that this be kept in mind. I remind the House that it was said on 22nd May. I went on to say—

This is an important matter. The Canberra is by no means obsolete . . .

I wonder whether I may interrupt myself at that point, Sir, to say that to-day I have

10857/63.

observed that the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Calwell), who goes into print on these matters so hastily, has had his views published in a not-always-reliable newspaper. I want to quote from this report, but I do not vouch for the accuracy of it. Oh dear, no! I quote it for what it is worth, for it records the Leader of the Opposition as having said—

One thing is certain. The Government could not have gone into the election campaign without having at least some plausible story to show that it was at least—

Perhaps "last" was meant—

trying to replace the Canberra which has been obsolescent since 1949.

I am always willing to concede the chances of error in that journal.

Mr. L. R. Johnson.—What journal is it?

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—The Sydney "Daily Mirror".

Mr. L. R. Johnson.—The "Daily Mirror"?

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—Yes—your official organ. I am always prepared to concede the possibility and, indeed, the

probability, of error in that journal. I take leave to point out to the House that, so far from the Canberra being obsolescent in 1949, not until early in 1951 was I invited to go to an aerodrome in England to name this new aircraft "Canberra" and to see it taken up by the test pilot on a demonstration flight. Therefore, long before it was born, it appears to have been obsolescent. This introduces a new problem into obstetrics. With that human aside, I go on to quote what I said in May—

This is an important matter. The Canberra is by no means obsolete; it is still being used by overseas air forces, including those of Nato. But we are giving close consideration to the future as we must. There are, of course, great financial problems, but there are vital questions as to the availability of suitable types to meet our requirements. Having regard to our special geographic circumstances, we must consider range, the capacity to perform both reconnaissance and attack and the ability to use existing runways and services. An on-the-spot evaluation by a team of qualified experts is necessary, as it was in the selection of the Mirage. Such a team will be sent overseas at an early date, under the Chief of the Air Staff to investigate and report. Then, of course, the Government will consider the matter further in the light of the report.

We sent the evaluation team overseas and in due course received its report. It was clear that, subject to problems of the time-table and of payment and of interim provision to supplement if necessary the Canberra force, the evaluation team regarded what was then called the TFX in the United States as the most modern and complete answer to our requirements.

I then decided to ask the Minister for Defence (Mr. Townley) to undertake the very onerous task of going to the United States to examine these problems more closely on a government level. He had, of course, one further objective. He was not to discuss aircraft in isolation from strategic needs and priorities, but he was to have close political consultation with the United States Administration on those very matters. It is very easy, if I may say so to the Leader of the Opposition, to say, "We will procure a Canberra replacement", as if all we had to do was to go, so to speak, to the shop and buy it over the counter.

Honorable members will realize that this is not the position to-day. Both of the two most recently designed reconnaissance bombers, the TSR-2 in England and the TFX in the United States, are still in the develop-

mental stage. It will of necessity be some time before they become available. The cost of such modern instruments of war is, of course, enormous, although the cost tends to come down if very large orders are placed.

The Minister for Defence has the great advantage of being on very close and friendly terms with the American defence administration. My colleagues and I felt that he would have a reasonable prospect of fruitful discussion. I am happy to tell the House that his mission has been most remarkably successful; so successful that I have found it necessary to advise the United Kingdom Government that we propose to go ahead with the arrangement he has negotiated.

Before going on to state the substance of the arrangement that my colleague has made in Washington, I would like to say that I have observed some inspired statements in one or two newspapers to the effect that our discussions in the United States were either accelerated or affected by some statement made in this House by the Leader of the Opposition. I did not have the good fortune to hear it. The answer to this is that we had our first full and promising report from the Minister for Defence before the Leader of the Opposition spoke at all. Having received it and studied it, we were attracted by it, but we sent one or two inquiries to him so that he might clear up a few outstanding points. This he has done, with the result that I will in a few moments announce it to the House.

The whole business of re-equipping the Air Force is extremely complex. It cannot be solved by a few rhetorical phrases. It has in the present case required most exhaustive technical investigations by our highest technical advisers and this rather remarkable negotiation which has been conducted by the Minister himself in the United States.

In the result, the defence programme I announced, which represented a large increase, will be very substantially added to. But the arrangements made by my colleague will unquestionably result in a very substantial saving to Australia, as against the original estimates of TFX costs as formulated when the evaluation mission made its inquiries. To this must be added

the other practical defence advantages which will appear.

I will now state in agreed language the nature of the arrangements that have been made. In pursuance of the Government's policy of improving Australia's defence preparations, the Minister for Defence has been in Washington discussing with Mr. McNamara, the United States Secretary of Defence, the re-equipment of Australia's bomber squadrons, together with other defence matters of mutual interest. As a result of these negotiations, the following most favorable arrangements have been made with the United States: The Government of Australia has agreed to purchase from the United States two squadrons of F-111A aircraft, which used to be called the TFX. By special arrangements with the United States of America, the aircraft will be available to Australia at the same time as deliveries are made to the United States armed forces, which will be from 1967 onwards. I emphasize that date because of rumours that made it a couple of years later. Financial arrangements are entirely satisfactory to Australia.

In a most favorable package deal, if I may use that phrase, the United States has agreed to supply the aircraft on the basis of a purchase price that includes one year's initial spare parts including engines, ground handling equipment, training aids, and the initial and operational training of crews, which would be carried out in the United States.

A further important and valuable consideration is that the United States has agreed to integration of the Royal Australian Air Force and the United States armed forces logistic pattern so that Australia will be able to draw future requirements of spare parts and equipment from American stocks and therefore secure the advantage of much lower prices than would be the case if Australia itself had to procure independently the full range of stores.

The financial arrangements for the purchase of the F-111A aircraft enables Australia to spread its payments to suit its own budgetary requirements over a period of years. As Australia will commence progress payments immediately, a special and important part of the deal is that Australia's payments will attract interest from the

United States until such time as payments are in fact made to the United States contractors for the aircraft. The F-111A aircraft will now be available to Australia at least two years earlier than had previously been thought possible. At the same time, in case the years between now and 1967 were to see a deterioration in the international situation, the Government has been concerned that Australia should have, if necessary, some additional long range strike and reconnaissance capacity in the R.A.A.F. over the intervening years.

Arrangements have now been made to ensure that there will be suitable strike reconnaissance aircraft available to the R.A.A.F. until the F-111A comes into operational service. Agreement has been reached with the United States that up to two squadrons of B47E aircraft will be made available to Australia with no leasing charge to the Australian Government. Australian personnel will be trained by the United States Air Force on the basis of reimbursement for actual costs, and ground handling equipment and logistic support provided at satisfactory prices.

Performance details of the F-111A are classified—that is, they are not available for general consumption—but it can be said that it is a two-man bomber which can fly at two and a half times the speed of sound and well above supersonic speed at sea level. It can take off and land from short and, if necessary, rough airfields. It can fly to any place on earth within 24 hours.

The F-111A programme embarked upon by the United States is the largest programme, both in numbers and in cost, of any aircraft since World War II. It is, in other words, the last word. Twenty-two prototype and development aircraft are scheduled for delivery to the United States in 1965 and we are told that we will secure our first deliveries in 1967.

The B47E is now used in the Strategic Air Command of the United States and will be in squadron service, particularly in this part of the world, for some years. It has proved a most versatile and effective aircraft in operational service to date. Its full operational capability is still partly classified—that is to say, partly not for general publication—but it has a sub-sonic speed of

over 600 miles an hour and a ceiling of over 40,000 feet. It is also particularly effective at low level. This is important. It is a six-engine aircraft with a range of over 3,000 miles and a capacity to carry over 20,000 lb. of conventional bombs. It is equipped for air-to-air refuelling.

Putting all controversy on one side, I am sure that all honorable members will agree

not only that my colleague's mission reflects credit on himself but also that its success is an indication of the genuine goodwill which the United States has towards our country and of the high opinion which the United States Government has of the capacity of the Australian armed forces and of the reliability and importance of Australia as a nation and law in this area of the world.