

FOR PRESS :

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE RT. HON.
SIR ROBERT MENZIES

The Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, said today that his Government regarded the defence issue as one of the most important in the current election campaign.

The Government's defence planning, based on the advice of the senior officers of the three defence services, envisaged the highest possible degree of mobility for the forces. With this in view, the Royal Australian Air Force was now equipped with the Hercules, the finest transport aircraft in service anywhere in the world, which was capable of shifting well-equipped army units to any threatened area within a few hours.

Mobility of forces, the Prime Minister said, answered Australia's special problems of area and distance far better than the sort of static defence, with small units scattered all over the continent, which was the essence of Mr. Calwell's thinking.

The Government was also providing the RAAF with the Mirage fighter and the TFX bomber - each the best of its kind in the world and each capable of reaching any part of Australia in a few hours.

Guided missile destroyers which would come into service before very long and a submarine force would help to make the Royal Australian Navy the most modern and effective for its size in the world.

Sir Robert Menzies said that in an attempt to "buy" votes in the New South Wales electorate of Cowper, which Labour unexpectedly won in 1961, Mr. Calwell had last week promised to station a battle group in the town of Grafton. Perhaps it was the same battle group he had already promised to Western Australia. In any case, it was the sort of irresponsible promise which, carried to its logical conclusion, would result in the ineffectual dispersal of our forces all around Australia, particularly in doubtful electorates, and an inability to concentrate our strength where it might be most needed. The splitting of our forces into small widely separated groups destroyed completely the concept of concentrated training and quick movement on which the whole of the planning of our military experts depended.

Mobility, on the other hand, would allow us to bring to bear in the minimum of time considerable concentrated power at a point of attack. It also would allow us to move our forces to points outside Australia. It seemed to be the Labour Party's view that any war should preferably be fought on Australian soil. This was not the present Government's idea.

The Labour Party's anxiety for power had led it into making many promises which, in defence matters especially, ran counter to expert advice. It was strange, for example, to read Mr. Calwell's proposal to build a naval base in Western Australia in the same speech in which he declared his intention to "re-negotiate" the agreement with the United States for a naval communications station at North West Cape.

Re-negotiation on Mr. Calwell's terms could well lead to United States withdrawal from the area, just as Dr. Evatt's "re-negotiation" over Manus Island after the last war had led to United States abandonment of plans to establish a base there which could have made a tremendous difference to Australia's security. Withdrawal of the United States from the North West Cape could administer to Australian defence plans an irreparable setback.

The present Government's friendly co-operation with our United States ally in the North West Cape agreement was the best assurance of the defence of the western and north-western areas of Australia. The Government would stand firm on its agreement because it meant so much to our future security.

PERTH,

17th November, 1963.