

REFERENDUM

Statement by the Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Holt

The Prime Minister, Mr. Holt, said today that Cabinet had further considered the course to be followed in relation to the holding of a referendum on the two proposals to amend the Constitution which were passed by both Houses of Parliament towards the end of last year.

The major purpose of the first of these proposals was to remove the requirement in the Constitution that any increase in the number of Members of the House of Representatives would automatically produce an increase in the number of Senators to the extent of half the increase in the number of Members of the House of Representatives. The second proposal was to remove the provision which prevents aboriginal natives from being counted when the population is reckoned. Before these proposals could become law, they would have to be approved by a referendum of the people. The referendum was to be held on a date to be determined by the Government not less than two months, nor more than six months, after the Bills containing the proposals were passed by both Houses of Parliament - that is, before the 2nd June, 1966.

Mr. Holt said Cabinet had decided to inform the Parliament that the Government would recommend to the Governor-in-Council that he does not issue a writ for the holding of a referendum this year in relation to either of these proposals. The decision of Cabinet will be conveyed to the Chief Electoral Officer of the Commonwealth, who in the absence of this notification, would proceed as required to the posting to some six million voters of the arguments for and against the proposals.

In explanation of the Government's decision, Mr. Holt said this.

"We have given a great deal of thought to the course to be followed in relation to these proposals. We remain strongly in support of both of them. But ours is a new Government which will, in the normal course of events, be conducting a general election later this year. We have taken office at a time when the Australian Government finds itself heavily occupied with a great many important and pressing matters arising both at home and abroad. We see ahead of us a crowded and unusually active political year. We feel that, in addition to performing an increasing volume of administrative tasks, we should, as a new

Government, make a thorough review of current policies. In the swiftly-moving world of today, some changes may well appear to us to have become desirable. We wish to be able to concentrate on all these matters without the interruption and distraction that an active referendum campaign of several weeks would create.

"We believe an intensive referendum campaign of this dimension would be necessary if the Australian public is to be made fully aware of the need for the first proposal in relation to the Parliament, and to counter uninformed opinion and misleading propaganda already evident, which have adversely affected public support for this proposal.

"There is no urgency about the proposal becoming law this year, because no action is intended arising from it in the course of the remainder of the life of this Parliament. On the other hand, we believe that the proposal will be better understood, and more widely supported, if it is presented after the general elections in the context of a programme of specified increase in the number of Members of the House of Representatives without there having to be an increase of Senators. This increase would be linked with redistribution proposals to be presented in the life of the same Parliament for the purpose of remedying the present unsatisfactory and inequitable distribution of population in existing electorates. Some metropolitan electorates, for example, currently include less than 40,000 voters: others are stretched well beyond the 100,000 mark.

"The Government, when informing the Parliament on its resumption early in March, of its intention to defer the holding of the referendum proposals, will also indicate that it intends, early in the life of the next Parliament, to introduce the necessary legislation to enable a referendum to be held on the proposal to break the nexus, and it will, at the same time, give a general indication of its intentions in relation to redistribution proposals should the referendum prove successful.

"The Government will further indicate that the proposal relating to aborigines would be presented at the same time as the "nexus" proposal. This proposal about aborigines has been supported by all political parties, and, indeed, no-one has come forward to present a "Negative" case in opposition to it. Any delay in passing the referendum in relation to the counting of aborigines will have no adverse practical result because, in fact, the Commonwealth Statistician does count the aboriginal natives in the community and makes the figure public. The provision in the

Constitution does not amount to an impediment against this counting, nor does it prevent aborigines voting. Many of them do. We believe the provision should be taken out of the Constitution because it is outmoded and misleading, and gives cause for criticism both inside and outside Australia by people unaware of the actual situation.

"Rather than incur the additional expense of holding two separate referenda to cover the proposals, the Government intends to hold them together as soon as practicable in the life of the incoming Parliament after the next election.

"Throughout its discussions, the Cabinet has been sensitive to the fact that the Parliament has supported in both Houses the referendum legislation which the Menzies Government presented to it. We believe, however, that the Parliament will recognise the reasons which have influenced us, and will approve our decision to defer the proposals for the time being. We are convinced that what we are now putting forward is not only the sensible course in current circumstances, but will strengthen, rather than weaken, the prospect of success for both proposals."

CANBERRA,
15th February, 1966.