

NEW ZEALAND TOUR 1967

PRESS CONFERENCE GIVEN BY THE PRIME MINISTER,
MR. HAROLD HOLT AT FAIRBAIRN AIRPORT, CANBERRA
ON HIS RETURN FROM NEW ZEALAND

8TH FEBRUARY, 1967

MR. HOLT : Well, I am very glad to be back home, and the first thing I want to say is how saddened I have been to learn of this tragic business in Tasmania. When I got the news this morning, I sent a message off immediately to Mr. Reece and then tried to contact him by telephone, but he was, I gather, on the mainland at the time, and I talked to Mr. Fagan. I told him that in my message to Mr. Reece I had asked if there was anything more that the Commonwealth Government could be doing to be of help, and when I spoke to him on the 'phone I suggested if there was anything he could think of, to contact my colleague, the Deputy Prime Minister. I gather Mr. McEwen himself had been active in the matter and that Mr. Howson had been appointed as a Liaison Minister from the Commonwealth Government. I asked Mr. Fagan whether our own Service people had been able to help in any way and he said they had been extremely helpful on the day of the fire, and at that stage, he felt it was under control. As to the rest of the detail, I have only been able to pick up a little bit along the way. I told Mr. Fagan to contact me if he could around about seven tonight. I expected to be in then. He may have tried to do so. If not, I will be trying to get in touch with him from the Lodge.

Q. Will you go down yourself and have a look at it - do you think you will get an opportunity?

PM: Well, I am willing enough. It is a question of whether I could serve any valuable purpose by doing so. There are busy days ahead here, but of course if it was of any usefulness and help, I would be glad to do so.

Q. Have you any comment on the result of the Labor leadership contest ?

PM: Well, I heard the news on the plane of Mr. Whitlam's election. I sent him a message telling him I had just learnt of his election, offered my congratulations and expressed the hope that he would have a long tenure of that office, as Leader of the Opposition. The election of Mr. Barnard revealed, I think, how deep and strong the divisions remained inside the Labor Party. There have been changes of personalities, but the problems which confronted the Labor Party before the election remain with the sole exception that there has been a change of personalities. As for myself and my Government, we shall continue to strive to command the public support which currently holds us there.

Q. I didn't understand what you meant about the divisions.... That was the vote between Barnard and Cairns you are referring to?

PM: I am not wishing to discount Mr. Barnard's abilities, but I think most observers, most objective observers, would have considered that there were several Members of the Labor Party who on Parliamentary form would have had a claim on the vote rather more strongly than Mr. Barnard, but it is not for me.....

Q. Are you aware of the fact that Senator Willesee has been replaced in the Senate?

PM: No, I was not aware of that.

Interjection: By Senator Murphy.

PM: Yes, well, again I think that confirms the point I was trying to make that this after Senator Willesee had been so shortly in office that he should be rejected again reveals, I think, the divisions which exist, and the currents which are swirling around the personalities. However, we have our problems; they have theirs. We shall do our best to remain a Government and no doubt they will do their best to displace us.

Q. Could we ask you something, Sir, about your New Zealand trip. From what has come back, you have been most reluctant to discuss economic issues. You made a big point of the fact that you were not over there specifically for that and that Mr. McEwen was going over afterwards. I was just wondering whether you could tell us whether there were any specific points of difficulty raised with you from official sources because there were a number of private criticisms of the operation of the trade agreement.

PM: Well there weren't all that many private criticisms. There was the criticism expressed by Mr. Stock, the Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce. On the other hand, I was given the most cordial welcome and reception by the Chamber of Commerce at Christchurch which was attended by representatives of the Chambers of Commerce of all other parts of the South Island. It was one of the agreeable surprises of the tour. I had been asked to meet the Christchurch Chamber of Commerce. I went along expecting to find twenty or thirty people of industry and commerce around the table and having a discussion with them. Instead of that, it was a very crowded and quite convivial gathering of estimable people from all over the South Island. They told me in the 179 years which we had celebrated just a few days before, I was the first Prime Minister to have ever visited the South Island. There were these comments of Mr. Stock as well as one or two editorials in the Press which came to my notice. I think some of my critics here in Australia would have been rather surprised to learn that in New Zealand some people think we are so smart that we in some way are able to score advantages over the New Zealanders. The point of substance, of course, is our hope that this agreement will work to the mutual advantage of both countries. Australia has much to gain from a developing, prospering, strengthening New Zealand, as indeed they have from a strengthening, prospering Australia, and I said there that this agreement which, after all, is only about twelve months' old, could hardly have been said to have given full expression to its elements in so short a space of time, and particularly following a year in which Australia had been contending with the effects of very serious drought in two of our principal States that if this agreement in the longer haul was not working out to the satisfaction of one side or the other, then I was sure that the parties to it would approach it in a constructive and helpful spirit. I am sure that is the spirit my colleague will carry with him to New Zealand when he goes there. I may say that in talking to members of the Government, I didn't find this same degree of concern expressed. The question of forest products is an important one with them, and I shall be mentioning that to Mr. McEwen, although I didn't discuss it in any detail with the Government there. The Deputy Prime Minister did tell me that the aspect which they regarded as of topical importance was this question of forest products. Altogether I may say, that the Prime Minister of New Zealand and myself

(Mr. Holt Contd.)

both felt we had derived great value from the visit and our two Governments and two countries. He has exchanged with me, even on the aircraft, the most cordial of messages. We were able to spend a lot of time together covering a wide range of subject matters in a most direct and intimate fashion. I did give to the press representatives who were accompanying me an indication of several of the subject matters we discussed. It wasn't by any means an exhaustive list, but it ranged over a wide area both of domestic matters and of international matters of mutual interest. The overwhelming impression I bring back from New Zealand is the friendliness, warmth and goodwill towards Australia and towards, if I may say so, its Prime Minister. It struck all of us that there were quite spontaneous expressions of this wherever we went and I didn't see a sour face or hear a sour voice in the whole of my journeyings. On the contrary, people went out of their way to come and see us in what is not a demonstrative country, a little less demonstrative even than this undemonstrative country of Australia.

Q. Did you arrange any further mutual visits while you were there?

PM: I made it clear and public that there was an open invitation to Mr. Holyoake to come here with Mrs. Holyoake whenever he would find it convenient to do so and I have suggested to him that such is the relationship between our two countries we should encourage more frequent visits by Ministers on matters of mutual interest or even of particular concern to one country or the other and that we should not regard these as the kind of formal visit which occurs from other countries to Australia. In point of fact, it is no further - indeed it is a good deal shorter from Canberra to Wellington or Christchurch than it is from Canberra to Perth, and there is every good reason why Ministers from his Government should fly in and do a few days of business here and fly out again, and the same with my Ministers if that can be of advantage to us. I mentioned at the Parliamentary Luncheon given to me or rather the Government Luncheon given to me in the Parliament Buildings that we had already provided opportunities for our own Members of Parliament to visit New Zealand as one of the perquisites of office. Whether there will be reciprocity on that score remains to be seen, but I may say Mr. Holyoake and his Cabinet greeted very warmly my proposal about Anzac scholarships and immediately indicated that they wished to have a reciprocal arrangement going, and we will see how this works out. If it is as useful as I would expect it to be and successful as I would hope it to be, then we can enlarge on that if we both think that is desirable as time goes on.

Q. Do you see any possibility of a move to help New Zealand in its balance of payments difficulties?

PM: Well, no requests were put to me. We did give some assistance, as you may remember, not so long ago, but I gather that the Prime Minister and his colleagues are looking at these matters now in their Cabinet discussions.

Q. Sir, have you had a preliminary report, or a final report yet, on this incident in Viet Nam in which the Australians were killed. . . . ?

PM: No, I did receive an expression of sympathy and regret from Mr. Holyoake as soon as he knew of the matter. It wasn't easy to get details at first, and I contacted Australia, of course, as soon as I had some word of the incident and was later supplied with the text of the two statements made by the respective Ministers for Defence in each country and I made a short comment myself while in New Zealand, which was appreciated by

(Mr. Holt contd.)

them. I spoke on the 'phone again to Mr. Holyoake this morning and the first thing he said to me was another expression of his profound regret at what had occurred. He referred to the skill and efficiency for which the New Zealand artillery are noted. But both Ministers - the Minister for Defence in New Zealand and ours have indicated that a full investigation is going forward into the incident and I don't think I can help you any further on it at this point.

Q. Sir, is there likely to be a common approach between Australia and New Zealand to the possible entry of Britain into the Common Market?

PM: Well, I don't think we have yet reached the stage where we know precisely what sort of timing or conditions would apply to a British entry. Both Australia and New Zealand have made it clear in the past that their industries could be affected - New Zealand's, perhaps, more seriously than our own - by British entry. The United Kingdom Government has maintained at all times that it would have regard to Commonwealth interests in any such approach, and there have been assurances given from various quarters that the special position of New Zealand would be safeguarded. Whether this would extend beyond a transitional phase has yet to be seen. We didn't go into that matter in any detail or, indeed, discuss it more than superficially, because our two experts on this are Mr. McEwen and Mr. Marshall. They will be meeting again very shortly.

Q. Could you just elaborate on that balance of payments question, Mr. Holt. You said there was no request for assistance at this stage but the Prime Minister and his colleagues were looking into the problem now. This doesn't rule out the possibility of an approach from New Zealand at this stage?

PM: Well, I am not in a position to anticipate what action the New Zealand Government may take. There are various ways in which a country seeks to redress a balance of payments problem, and no doubt these are being examined by them at the present time.

Thank you.
