



PRIME MINISTER, MR. J. McEWEN, MEETS WITH PRESS

MR. McEWEN:

I wanted to see you yesterday, but pressure of events overtook me, so I'm seeing you now.

First, I want now publicly to express through your media my deep regret at the loss of Mr. Holt and to say that I am sure this is a regret felt by every single Australian citizen and obviously deeply felt in much wider circles overseas.

Mr. Holt, as you all knew, was a typical Australian. I think any one of us would be happy to be so described. He was at home with his fellows here in Australia and undoubtedly he was an equal with his contemporaries when he was overseas. He was a good man. He was a brave man. And he was a devoted man to his country. We have suffered a great loss.

We extend our deep sympathy to Mrs. Holt and to the family. I have, of course, communicated this to Mrs. Holt.

In thinking of her I want, in her deep distress, to see that she is relieved as much as may be done of the practical problems that inevitably surround the wife of a great and distinguished man. I have told Mrs. Holt that I have directed, in view of the enormous correspondence in which she will be involved, that secretarial assistance will be made available to her; that, at least in existing circumstances, I want her to retain the use of a government car and driver; and I have told her that she should contemplate moving from the Lodge only at her own convenience.

For myself, gentlemen, I achieve this high office with no sense whatever of personal gratification. It's only in rare circumstances that a man could become Prime Minister and not be warmed and elated by the fact, but I am neither warmed nor elated by the circumstances that have unexpectedly precipitated me into this position.

As I have already made it perfectly clear, it is my intention to hold the office only until the major party in the Coalition, the Liberal Party, shall have chosen for itself a new leader, and I will put myself at his disposal, and at the disposal of the Governor-General. I have already advised His Excellency of my attitude in this regard and advised senior members of the Liberal Party. I've told the Governor-General it's my intention to step aside as soon as the Liberal Party has elected its leader.

For the record, I want it to be quite clearly understood that I have not been commissioned by His Excellency subject to an undertaking. His Excellency has commissioned me and I have, out of a sense of the correctness of things and my own sense of responsibility, advised him, as I have now advised you, of my intention.

I have advised His Excellency to swear in all the present Ministers in their present portfolios. I myself was re-sworn as Minister for Trade and Industry yesterday, as well as Prime Minister.

Could I divert for just a couple of seconds to say **there** has been some comment on the fact that no Liberal Ministers were present yesterday. I'm afraid this is entirely my responsibility. It had not been contemplated that any Ministers would be present at all and I just suddenly decided I would wish my Country Party colleagues, particularly my young men of whom I am so proud, to be present. I checked with the Governor-General that this would be acceptable and invited them to come along, and frankly confess I didn't give a thought to my Liberal colleagues nor to my friend, Ceb Barnes, who was in the building and I didn't know. I just divert to say there's no ground for any speculation of anything in this.

It is my intention in this position to adhere strictly to the policies of the Holt Government. There will be no new policy departures.

On Friday the Memorial Service is arranged in Melbourne. Melbourne is itself an appropriate centre, Mr. Holt's own city. Of course we contemplated Canberra, but there is no Anglican Church in Canberra with sufficient accommodation to hold the number of people who undoubtedly will wish to attend the Service.

A number of very high-level personages will come to Australia from overseas for this occasion. Prince Charles will come. He will represent his mother, the Queen. He is the Heir to the Throne. This is a very great gesture. Mr. Harold Wilson, the Prime Minister of Britain, with sufficient worries of his own, will come, and Mr. Edward Heath, the Leader of the Opposition in Britain, will come. They will fly direct from London to Melbourne. It's my understanding they will arrive in Melbourne on Friday morning. We understand that their visit can only be a very short one, but I am moved - I'm sure we are all moved - that the Queen has so feelingly and so generously signified her own feelings by sending her son and Heir to the Throne to represent her. It symbolises in a most moving way the attachment of Australia to the Crown - the Queen of Australia.

Mr. Wilson and Mr. Heath also pay us and Mr. Holt a very great tribute by their journey and their personal representation. As I said, they leave Britain at a time of very great personal demands on them, and the journey is the longest of all of those who are coming; and I want to acknowledge their gesture now deeply and gratefully, and say that we will all look forward to meeting them.

It is a tremendous and unprecedented gesture, I think, that the President of the United States should himself have decided instantly that he would come and show his respect for Mr. Holt and for Australia by coming personally. And this we attach tremendous importance to.

Mr. Holyoake, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, is coming. There are other Heads of States and high dignitaries whose names I will not attempt to enumerate now but which will be available.

I just observe, gentlemen, that this unprecedented journeying from all around the world to Australia is the ultimate tribute to Mr. Holt to the esteem in which he was held, and we will all recognise this.

I believe myself that, with the presence in Canberra or in Melbourne of the President of the United States, and Mr. Wilson, and other people, we will no doubt - I will myself - have some conversations with these. I have asked my Cabinet colleagues to be available in case it should be desired that there should be a wider level of conferring. There is no thought in my mind, and I am sure no thought in the minds of any others, of what might be thought of as a conference between various people. I would expect that those who want to talk, as I myself will want to talk, with the dignitaries who will come here will have their conversations, but in no sense formal conferences.

I believe that Mr. Holt himself would in circumstances of a similar nature, had he been involved, would himself have taken advantage of the opportunity.

When I spoke yesterday on the television to the nation, I spoke of various policy circumstances in which we are involved. The most serious and pressing, of course, is our situation in Vietnam. And I say we will stand steadfast with our allies. We will share their efforts and share their agony in this situation. Having said that, I now make it clear that we want peace, we will work for peace, but not for the peace of surrender to the aggressors of a small, brave, free people. We will continue Mr. Holt's work of coming to understand the problems of all our Asian neighbours; and not less we will work to endeavour to have them understand us, to understand our willingness to work and to help where possible, and to establish in the minds of our Asian friends and neighbours an understanding of the integrity of our own attitudes of the Australian nation.

I make it clear that in defence, our postures are entirely related to us working with like-minded people for a more stable world where all can live in peace and security and with a greater equality of living conditions.

The Government will continue to work in the field of international trade to get better and fairer trade opportunities, not only for ourselves but for others.

And we will continue to devote ourselves to the policies in which Mr. Holt and myself were involved in the decisions of the last Cabinet meeting, his last Cabinet meeting, to study the present serious problems of rural industries and proceed to devise policies for their betterment.

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There must be no interruption in the Australian national growth, and I will continue in whatever office I find myself to endeavour to make my contribution to the best of my ability to the securing of strong and stable government for Australia.

And I conclude my statement, gentlemen, by saying I am confident in the strength of the Coalition.

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QUESTION:

Mr. McEwen, are you prepared to say publicly, as you have apparently said privately, that you will not accept Mr. McMahon as a Prime Minister, as Leader of the Liberal Party?

MR. McEWEN:

Yes, I say to you that I have told Mr. McMahon that neither I nor my Country Party colleagues would be prepared to serve under him as Prime Minister. Mr. McMahon knows the reason. My senior Liberal Party colleagues not only know the reasons, but knew the reasons before Mr. Holt's death.

QUESTION:

Do you disclose the reasons?

MR. McEWEN:

No. No, I will not. I had a tormenting problem for myself, knowing that this was the attitude of myself and my Country Party colleagues, in deciding whether I should disclose before the Liberal Party's election, at the cost of being accused of seeking to influence it, or, alternatively, not disclose my attitude and, it being what it is, if Mr. McMahon were elected Leader of the Liberal Party, then undoubtedly produce a very serious national crisis by only at that time indicating that we could not work under his Prime Ministership. And I decided firmly in my mind that what I have done is the correct course: that is, not to allow the Liberals to go to an election ignorant of the attitude of myself and my Country Party colleagues.

I've said this gentlemen. We're two days from a Memorial Service. We have the impending visit tomorrow of the President of the United States. And I will not myself contribute any further to generating any atmosphere of controversy. I hope that you would all feel that it would be intolerable that in this atmosphere of mourning, in the atmosphere of the journey to this country of these great

personages, that they should find us quarrelling domestically. I will answer no further questions on that subject.

QUESTION:

Mr. McEwen, do you expect in the immediate few weeks ahead to be making a decision on Sir Henry Bolte's tax proposals?

MR. McEWEN:

Oh, well, this is a matter that will come up for Cabinet consideration. I can make no comment on that at this stage.

QUESTION:

Sir, the President will be in Canberra tomorrow, you say. Have you any thought of a general discussion with Cabinet with him on this thing, on the major issues that ...?

MR. McEWEN:

I will, of course, meet the President on his arrival and I will consult him on his wishes. I've already said I have asked my Cabinet colleagues to hold themselves available if the President does wish that there should be discussions on that level.

QUESTION:

Are there any significant discussions, Sir, to which you will be inviting potential leaders of the Liberal Party to participate in them so that they'll be kept informed?

MR. McEWEN:

Oh, of course, of course. We have a standard of two levels of discussion of this nature. There is the level of the Cabinet itself and the Defence and Foreign Affairs Committee of the Cabinet, which I think is a committee of about seven Ministers as far as I remember - in fact, Mr. Holt's appointed committee, and that would be my appointed committee.

QUESTION:

Because of the importance of the problems existing between Australia and Britain, will you seek discussions with Mr. Wilson while he's here?

MR. McEWEN:

Again, I will, of course, be meeting Mr. Wilson on his arrival, and I would not force a discussion on Mr. Wilson, but

consult with him whether he himself would feel it would be fruitful for us to have discussions. I would be willing to do so.

QUESTION: (Mr. Harold Cox)

When do you go to Melbourne, Sir? Tomorrow or on Friday morning?

MR. McEWEN:

I have not quite decided that, Harold. I expect Prince Charles, Mr. Wilson and Mr. Heath to arrive in Melbourne on Friday. I'll either go down Thursday night or early Friday morning.

QUESTION:

Sir, would you expect to take any decisions during your period on this rural industry consideration that began with the last Cabinet?

MR. McEWEN:

Well, some decisions were taken at the last Cabinet and I, of course, don't know with what urgency other matters will arise. There will be no change of policy attitude and, if, against the policy attitude already decided under Mr. Holt's Prime Ministership, some matter comes up for decision, no doubt we'll face it.

QUESTION:

Sir, have you decided yet when you'll call your first regular meeting of the Cabinet?

MR. McEWEN:

No, I haven't.

QUESTION:

Where will you spend Christmas, Sir - in Melbourne or Stanhope?

MR. McEWEN:

I don't know. I think probably Canberra.

QUESTION:

Sir, I don't want to press you on this in view of what you've said already, but would the Country Party take any objection to any other Liberal Leader, Sir?

MR. McEWEN:

No. No.

QUESTION:

Mr. McEwen, there has been a suggestion from, among others, Senator Turnbull, that the Liberal Party should ask you to continue in office. Would you be agreeable to doing so?

MR. McEWEN:

I'm afraid I'm not responsible for Senator Turnbull.

QUESTION:

You wouldn't be agreeable even if asked to, Sir?

MR. McEWEN:

I don't answer hypothetical questions.

QUESTION:

Before your commission, Sir, it seemed that the position on shipping freights had reached a rather critical stage. Now we seem to put the Government in suspense for three weeks. Is this going to affect what you hoped to achieve on shipping freights?

MR. McEWEN:

Now don't be under any apprehension that the Government is in suspense for three weeks. The Government is as existent today as ever a Government has been. If any matter of urgency and importance arises we'll face it and deal with it.

QUESTION:

Is this sufficiently urgent to be dealt with in the immediate future?

MR. McEWEN:

I think that the present issue on shipping freights can be handled probably at my own Departmental level.

QUESTION:

Will you give a normal New Year message, do you think?

MR. McEWEN:

I've had too many other thoughts on my mind. Yes, I'll give consideration to that.

Thank you, gentlemen.

Canberra,  
20th December, 1967.