

BACKGROUND BRIEFING GIVEN BY THE PRIME
MINISTER, MR JOHN GORTON, FOR THE HEADS
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PRIME MINISTER : I called this because I thought it might be of interest to you, not because I have anything specific to say, but rather there might be a number of questions in your own minds that you might wish to ask at this stage. So I thought this would be an opportunity for you to come here. More particularly did I think this because I will be going to Melbourne shortly to put in my nomination for Higgins and then coming back and then on Saturday I am going down to Sydney. On Monday I have got a lunch-time talk in Sydney in connection with the New South Wales elections, and after that, as far as you are concerned, I am going into smoke for about five or six days - and as far as anybody else is concerned - I hope. Anybody up here will know where to get on to me - I mean, the Department of Defence, the Department of External Affairs - if anything comes up they will know where to get on to me. I don't want the press to get on to me. I want four or five days off after what has been rather a strenuous two and a half or three months, so I will be out of circulation and I thought, right, now is the best opportunity for you to ask any questions that might be in your minds.

Q. This break is just a bit of a rest, is it? It's not.....

PM: Yes it is a rest.

Q. You are not going to cook up something big?

PM: NO! Oh, no. There will be a certain amount of work to be done, a certain amount of thinking to be done. It really has been pretty strenuous. I had this Leader of the Senate business for a time, Harold disappearing and then the campaign, then various crises since. I just want to try to get four or five or six days before we really get stuck into it again.

Q. How many reports are you taking with you?

PM: Please.....you don't know where I'm going, but if you find out don't reveal it!

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Q. Prime Minister, will you release the correspondence to Sir Henry Bolte on the tax?

PM: Yes, I will, but so far I haven't had Sir Henry Bolte's reply to our letter to him, and I would like to get his reply and release both together.

Q. We understand you have to pay this tax?

PM: I don't know whether we have to pay this tax or not. This would be ultimately a matter for some other decision. But we are not collecting from our Commonwealth employees the tax which he has imposed on wages and salaries.

Q. As the Member for Higgins, you are subject to this tax?

PM: Oh, me personally? Yes, while this legislation is in force, it will probably cost me about \$10 a year or something like that.

Q. Do you intend to pay it?

PM: Yes, of course I do.

Q. Will ~~it~~^{there} be a compensatory deduction at the next Premiers' Conference?

PM: I think all I can tell you is this. We have expressed our opinion to Sir Henry Bolte on this general taxation that he has imposed. We, as a government, have no quarrel with a stamp tax, a turnover tax, a tax on receipts. We feel that a tax on wages and salaries, even though it would be a flat rate tax, in fact, in principle, is a tax on income, and we could not accept that as a principle. This does not necessarily mean any immediate action on our part, but it does mean that we are not going to collect it, and we regard it in principle as a tax on income and therefore a breach of the Uniform Taxation Agreement. Now, while I am waiting for a reply from the Premier of Victoria, we don't want to have any confrontation on this sort of matter, any sort of violent quarrel. There are a whole lot of things connected with it that will require discussion and ultimate resolution, but there is no violent hurry about the thing.

Q. In your early observations, do you see this as a real threat to uniform taxation? Do you see a collapse?

PM: Well, let us put it this way. I don't regard this imposition of one cent on one dollar in itself as a threat to uniform taxation. After all, the Western Australian Government has been imposing something of the kind for some time, but if the principle were accepted and ultimately to be expanded so that it became ten cents or fifty cents or something like that, then that would then reach a stage where it would be a threat to uniform taxation.

Q. You haven't proposed anything in the nature of what might be called reprisals, and are going to cut Sir Henry's ground from underneath him?

PM: No, I haven't. I have presented to Sir Henry our views on this matter. I am awaiting his and his Cabinet's reply to our views on this matter, and have been suggesting that we might all get together and have a talk about this matter before it blows up like a pyrotechnic or something.

Q. Does that mean the next Premiers' Conference?

PM: Well, it could be one before, it could be the next one. Other Premiers are interested in this too. . . .

Q. It is not just a Liberal family matter.

PM: Oh, no.

Q. Have you fixed a date for the meeting of Parliament, Prime Minister?

PM: Of Parliament?

Q. Yes.

PM: This is not for attribution. For myself, I would like the Parliament to meet about the 12th March, but I would like, as a matter of courtesy, to talk to the Deputy Prime Minister and Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party which I have not yet done. I don't think we can meet before that, which gives us twelve days or so after the 26th February.

Q. Are we right in understanding that it is likely to be that date?

PM: Yes.

Q. Again, at the moment that would be my intention, but again I want, as a matter of courtesy, to confer with Mr McEwen and Mr McMahon

MR EGGLETON: So again, they could understand that without quoting you.

PM: Yes.

Q. When do you expect to get the "Voyager" report?

PM: I've got it. I got it yesterday. I got a copy. The Governor-General got a copy. I am told that it will be about a fortnight or possibly three weeks before they are printed in bulk sufficiently for distribution. When we get

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sufficient bulk printing for distribution it is then my intention to release it so that all concerned could study it before the Parliament, if there needed to be anything to be done in Parliament, rather than waiting met and tabling it, because it is a pretty bulky report. It is about that thick. If we waited until Parliament met and put it down on the table, people could, I think quite rightly, say, "We have hardly had time to study this before some debate or other comes on" so I would be intending to release it.....

Q. Will Cabinet have to examine it first?

PM: No. Why?

Q. I just wondered.

Q. Will this be part of the work you will be studying during your period in smoke?

PM: Oh, I spent a long time last night reading it.

Q. The broad findings, Sir?

PM: The broad findings.....oh.....dear.....do you want this for publication?

Q. Well even "understanding" as background, Sir.

PM: Off the record background. I really think I had better not go further than that. I haven't spoken to the Governor-General who has got his report about it, and the only other one it has come to is me. Other Members of my Government might want to have a look at it before I sort of did anything more than off-the-record background stuff. From the reading I was able to do yesterday afternoon.....

Q. May I interrupt, Sir? There is a confusion between 'off the record' and "background" I think in your mind, Sir. "Background" is something you can use without attribution. "Off the record" is something that we must not use.

MR EGGLETON: I think the PM means "off the record" in its purest sense.

PM: I think I do on this one.

Q. Can you assist us a bit more? Does it upset, say, the original finding. Something we can use for background just in a broad way.

MR EGGLETON: I think the PM has explained that he has to talk to his colleagues about this, and for them to read it in the papers....

PM: That one we leave for the moment. But off the record what it says - and I use my own words - is this. Cabban didn't tell anything that was untrue - in his own mind as being untrue - but he dramatised a helluva of a lot. He saw himself as the centre of all sorts of things that came along. He exaggerated. When you sifted his evidence out, it became quite clear that Stevens wasn't a drunkard, a chronic drunkard or subjected to alcohol or anything of that kind, and indeed, when they questioned Cabban about it, he, Cabban, agreed that there could be no allegations against Stevens' seamanship and there could be no allegations that Stevens was an alcoholic or a drunkard. But on at least two occasions in port during the 184 days' voyage, Stevens had been affected by alcohol, but he had probably been affected by alcohol because he had an ulcer, which with a small amount of alcohol was upset. The report recommended that before anybody with a record of having had an ulcer was appointed to command, they should have an extra specially severe medical check before they were appointed. I can't quite remember the terms, but it said the Naval Board obviously didn't know there was anything at all wrong with Stevens, couldn't have known a couple of the medical officers hadn't done their duty by filling in the appropriate forms when Stevens went to see them about having an ulcer. That's the guts of the report.

Q: Sir, have you made any assessment yet of the current situation in Viet Nam?

PM: No because it is such a fluid situation. It is changing so rapidly. I have been speaking to the Minister for the Army this morning. / You make an assessment of something which is in such a state of fluidity, it is doubtful whether it is worth a very great deal. There has been some suggestion that our own troops have been moved into a northern area of combat. Well this is not so. Our contribution was to the Third Corps area, and I can show you a map of what the Third Corps area is, if you are interested in seeing it. Now, this is the area in which our troops have always been intended to operate, although when we have only had two battalions there instead of the three, we now have, the operation through other parts of that area have been very inhibited. Well we have got three battalions now and one of them is operating. I think it is about thirty miles away from the main base, that's all. It is not sort of way up on....

Q. Still in the area?

PM: Yes, still in that area. We have had some casualties in the last couple of days but the next of kin have not yet been properly informed. We have had casualties heavier than we have in the past been having.

Q. Is this off the record, Sir?

PM: No, you can say this. We'll have the whole of the relatives of everybody up there upset if we use the casualties one. I think we must keep that off the record.

Q. Can we understand that, without attribution?

PM: No, I think we had better leave that off the record. But they are not operating more than thirty miles away, this battalion we have been speaking of. Again off the record, we have had six or seven killed in the last couple of days. But everybody with any relatives up there will be so upset in thinking it's theirs that we have got to let them be notified first.

Q. Can you tell us, Sir, what progress has been made in surveying the general future of defence in South-East Asia.

PM: Malaysia/Singapore? Only, as you already know, Paul Hasluck is leaving, he is going to talk to Harry Lee, he is going to talk to the Tunku, to see what their views on this are. It's an exploratory ~~mission~~ ^{mission} more than anything else, to see what they see for the future, what they have in mind as to anything that might come out of a Five-Power pact meeting. And then he will be talking to New Zealand, and he will, I am delighted to say, be speaking to the Indonesian Government as well during the course of this visit. It is essential that anything we do - if we do anything in the future - is seen not as directed against any country in that area.

Q. Will ~~you~~ he be seeking to set a date or fix a time when a meeting might be held?

PM: No, he won't. We will be leaving that to other people. But what he will be seeking to do is to find out. he's going to Harry Lee, he's going to the Tunku and saying "You have been talking about Five-Power Pacts, you have been talking about what might happen when the British pull out, what do you have in mind, what do you see, what sort of contributions do you imagine could come from other places

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for what purpose? If there are some Australian troops in a base which had been previously occupied both by British and Australian troops and logistic supply has been provided to that base, what do you see for the future of the logistic supply? Do you expect to take it over yourselves, Singapore/Malaysia? Do you expect us to take it over? If so, why? Just what, in detail, you see as the future in this area".

Q. Coming back to Viet Nam. In view of these latest developments, is there any suggestion that Australia will increase its commitment?

PM: Australia won't increase its commitment.

Q. Have we been asked to?

PM: No.

Q. Is that a permanent statement, Sir? Or the position as it

PM: As far as I am concerned it is.

Q. What about the visit to South-East Asia.

PM: With the best of intentions, and really wanting to do it, I can't it coming up before the end of April or May. If we meet on the 12th, if we meet having prorogued and having the Speech from the Throne, it looks to me as if the session would go on well into May, anyway. I suppose it might be possible ^{because would be} ~~if there is~~ a fair break over Easter to port off and have a quick run-round. I would prefer, if possible, to wait until the first Session is out of the way, and you can go at more leisure and spend more time and talk to more people without so much pressure.

Q. Any countries in mind? Any particular countries?

PM: Oh, clearly, the places I would want to go to would be Indonesia, Singapore, Malaya, Thailand, South Viet Nam, Japan, and if there were time. . . . now, I had better not say that in that way. the United States.

Q. Are you including a trip to New Zealand, Sir?

PM: I would hope it might well be fitted in. As you probably know, I think the first Prime Minister that I spoke to from any Commonwealth country, after I was appointed to this position, was the Prime Minister of New Zealand, and he extended an immediate invitation to go there as soon as it was possibly convenient for me to do so.

Q. Have you had formal invitations from ^{these} ~~any~~ other places?

PM: Not as far as I know. Not formal. They have all sort of said you know their Ambassadors and people. . . . have all sort of said "For heaven's sake come and see us". NO, I DON'T THINK I HAVE TRIED TO VISIT

PM (Contd.)

invitations as yet. I would have thought - you can correct me, you people who know more about this than I do - that the normal way this was done was to have the External Affairs Department to say to their External Affairs Departments: "Our Prime Minister is interested in going around " and get a reaction from them .

Q. Sir, you omitted Nationalist China from the list of countries you would like to visit. Was that accidental?

PM: It was neither deliberate or accidental. But they don't seem to me to be (interjection; Important?) - I didn't say that! They don't seem to me to be ones that are involved in this particular visit.

Q. South Korea is involved in the Viet Nam dispute. . . . (China?)

PM: Yes, I know it is, but surely neither South Korea nor Viet Nam, important as they may be, are so immediately - we are not surely so immediately involved with problems there as we are with Singapore or Malaysia or Indonesia or Viet Nam or Thailand or the United States.

Q. Sir, does this mean that if the fighting blew up in Korea, there would be no question of sending an Australian troop commitment there? With what we have got in Viet Nam and in Malaysia?

PM: This is what President Roosevelt used to call a terribly "iffy" question. We've got an ANZUS pact with the United States which says that if the forces of either country are attacked in specified areas, then the other country will act in accordance with its constitutional processes or words to that effect. ~~I think that~~ If you want a personal opinion, I believe that with what we are doing in Viet Nam, if we retain our present level of forces in Singapore and the Malaysia area, that is about all a country of our size could reasonably be expected to do. But this is all an answer to a terribly "iffy" question; ~~none of which~~ the things haven't come up yet. Fighting hasn't broken out. We haven't been asked. No-one has approached us. . . .

Q. We are usually available to go into a United Nations force, aren't we?

PM: Yes, we usually are, but how much we could divert to a United Nations force now. . . . we've got an awful lot doing right here.

MR EGGLETON: That last one. Was that for attribution?

Q. Which one?

MR EGGLETON: The last one on the use of forces. ~~for~~ The "iffy" question and

attributed.

PM: Well, I don't mind that "iffy" question one being used. Well, look, use it, but use it "not for attribution".

MR EGGLETON: If I might say PM, if we want to get to Melbourne, I think perhaps just one more question. . . .

PM: Oh, we'll get there in time.

Q. Have you given any more thought to your new Ministry?

PM: Oh, forget that one.

Q. Are you at all apprehensive about what is going on with the APWU as a result of their wage claim being knocked back by the Public Service Board. Have you given any thought to taking the Postal Unions out of the Public Service proper?

PM: Well, the second part of your question has nothing really to do with the immediate problem because they are in now. They've made an approach to the Public Service Board and they have had a reply, and as you will have noticed, I have asked the Public Service Board to take all the steps it can. It is not completely in control because the Public Service Arbitrator is a quasi-judicial chap who makes his own mind up. But I have asked them to try and see as best they can that there is no delay in the hearing of an appeal from the Public Service Board, and I would hope that these processes of arbitration which, if I understand it correctly, could if the Arbitration Court itself agreed, finish up in the Arbitration Court, would not be delayed, so that the steps are open all the way through. Therefore I hope that these steps would be taken. Now you have gone on from that to ask a real policy question. All I will say in reply to that policy question, to use the words that you used to me - has any thought been given to it? Some thought has been given to it, but that is not to be construed into any suggestion that something will be done or might be done or is likely to be done. It is just that the matter hasn't escaped attention.

Q. Mr Prime Minister, are you about to have talks with people like the Commonwealth Police and Attorney-General's Department about this vexed question of personal security for yourself?

PM: I have been told I ought to have talks with somebody in the Prime Minister's Department on it. I don't mind a reasonable amount of personal security but I don't want guys following me around all the time.

Q. You have been seen to have been giving them a bit of a run around this last week or so.

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PM: Is that right? They have lost me a couple of times?

Q. Sir, there has been talk of growing Australian interest in the Indian Ocean. Could we expect defence talks to take place with India, South Africa and other countries interested in this area?

Q. I have heard no suggestion of that from the Defence Department nor have I thought about it myself.

Thank you.
