

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

SPEECH

BY

The Rt Hon. J. G. GORTON, M.P.

ON

F111 AIRCRAFT

Ministerial Statement

[From the 'Parliamentary Debates', 26 September 1968]

Mr GORTON (Higgins—Prime Minister)—Mr Speaker, I lay on the table certain documents pertaining to the purchase of F111 aircraft and ask leave of the House to make a statement concerning the same.

Mr SPEAKER—There being no objection, leave is granted.

Mr GORTON—Mr Speaker, I have told the House that the Government wishes to provide Parliament with as much information as possible concerning the arrangements made for the purchase of F111 aircraft. I have made it clear that we will not disclose any document or part of any document which has a security content, and I have stated that we will not disclose any document which, being confidential between the Government of Australia and the Government of the United States of America, cannot be disclosed without agreement between us; at least, cannot be disclosed without agreement between us without adversely affecting the relations between our two governments.

These limitations stand, and will stand. We have had an examination made of the documents and we have had consultations with representatives of the United States Government who have come from the United States to discuss with us the disclosure of the documents relating to the whole of this transaction. As a result, as I have said, I lay on the table certain documents which I believe satisfy the proper requirements of a House of Parliament to

be informed as to the spending of public money. These documents include a Memorandum of Understanding dated 19th October 1963 and signed by the then United States Secretary of Defence and the then Australian Minister for Defence. These documents are laid here except that Annex 1 has been excluded from the documents on security grounds. On examination of the documents it will be clear which Annex has been excluded on these grounds.

The second document is a letter of 23rd October 1963 from the then Minister for Defence to the then United States Secretary of Defence accepting the proposal contained in the Memorandum of Understanding.

The third document is a letter of 2nd November 1963 from the then United States Secretary of Defence to the then Minister for Defence of Australia confirming these arrangements.

The fourth document is a letter from the then Minister for Defence of Australia to the then United States Secretary of Defence giving reasons for deciding not to pursue the proposal to use B47 aircraft as interim aircraft.

The fifth document is the agreed technical arrangements between the United States and Australia for the purchase of the aircraft concerned.

These technical arrangements provide: (a) for fabrication of our aircraft and equipment to the same documentation and quality standards as those required for the United

States aircraft; (b) for the established United States Department of Defence contracting procedures to be used in relation to the purchase of our own aircraft; (c) for production or work on our aircraft to be incorporated in or placed on the same terms as contracts let for the United States Government; (d) for inspection of all supplies for our aircraft to be done to the same extent and in the same manner as is inspection of supplies for United States aircraft; and (e) for an Australian Project Manager to be appointed with direct responsibility in conjunction with the United States Project Manager for initiating and monitoring all implementation of actions under the arrangements.

The remaining documents laid upon the table are minutes of meetings, from which some extractions have been made, and paragraph 4 of the last document reaffirms—and I draw the House's attention to this—the ceiling price of \$5.95m on the basic F111 configuration which has already been announced, subject only to the conditions already announced in this House as to various ways in which escalation may occur.

As to the subject of these documents, the aircraft itself, I will at this stage say only two things. If it is agreed that Australia needs a long range strike bomber—and I had gathered it was generally agreed that we did—then the F111 fulfils the requirements of the Australian Air Force staff for such a bomber in all respects.

Mr Beaton—Does it now?

Mr GORTON—Yes, it does now. It fulfils the requirements of the staff of the Australian Air Force who are the military advisers and who should know what is required in all respects now just as much as they did then. I know of no other available bomber that does fulfil the requirements of the Australian Air Force staff. If it is agreed—and I would hope it were agreed, but if it is not, then let us hear it later—that Australia needs a bomber which will fulfil these requirements of the Australian Air Force staff far into the future, instead of a bomber that only partly fulfils our requirements, and that for a limited time only, then this aircraft meets that need better than any other available aircraft that I know.

Mr Connor—God help us.

Mr Curtin—Do you think they will last long enough?

Mr GORTON—I am not expressing my own opinion. I am expressing the opinion of the Air Force of Australia who advise the Government and of whom I would have thought the Opposition would take some notice. Let me repeat: If it is agreed—and perhaps it is not, and if it is not then let those honourable members opposite who are interjecting say so—that Australia needs a bomber which will fulfil the requirements of the Royal Australian Air Force staff far into the future instead of a bomber that only partly fulfils those requirements, such as those that the Leader of the Opposition (Mr Whitlam) has mentioned in this place, and that for a limited time only, then this F111 meets that need better than any other aircraft which has been mentioned in this House at any stage of this debate.

Mr Speaker, I believe that the present difficulties into which this aircraft has run, which are no greater than the difficulties of any other aircraft at this stage of its development, will be overcome.

Mr Bryant—You have been saying that for 10 years.

Mr SPEAKER—Order! The House will come to order. Interjections are coming from both sides of the House. I again remind honourable members that all interjections are out of order. The honourable member for Wills will restrain himself or I will deal with him.

Mr GORTON—Thank you, Mr Speaker. I dare say that the honourable member for Wills might be restrained by the expert opinion of the Royal Australian Air Force, although I suppose this would be a matter that would be subject to debate. I would not be the least surprised if the honourable member for Wills thought he was more militarily competent than the Government's RAAF advisers, but I would be surprised if many people would agree with him. I believe that the difficulties which this aircraft has encountered, which are no greater at this stage than any other aircraft has encountered, will be overcome. If that is so, Australia will have what I admit is a highly expensive aircraft but an aircraft which will rank among the most effective of any aircraft in any air force in the world. On any criterion the second best is not good enough for any defence requirement that we have, and it is not too expensive for a nation which needs the best in the world. I present the following papers:

F111 Aircraft—Documents relating to purchase.