

FOR PRESS

P. M. No 8/1970

DRILLING ON THE BARRIER REEF

This evening the Prime Minister, Mr John Gorton, sent the following reply to a telegram received from Ampol Exploration Ltd :-

"THANK YOU FOR YOUR TELEGRAM OF 13 JANUARY RE DRILLING FOR OIL ON BARRIER REEF. I HOPE YOU WILL BE ABLE TO PERSUADE JAPEX TO AGREE WITH YOUR DECISION AND CONGRATULATE YOU ON YOUR INITIATIVE. IT IS MY HOPE THAT OTHER COMPANIES WHICH HOLD PROSPECTING LEASES WILL FOLLOW YOUR LEAD PENDING A COMPLETE INVESTIGATION AND REPORT. IN MY VIEW THE SLIGHTEST DANGER IS TOO MUCH DANGER.

AS YOU KNOW THE COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT WAS BOUND TO CONFIRM THE OIL LEASES ISSUED BY THE STATE ON AND NEAR THE REEF AND IS VIRTUALLY UNABLE TO PREVENT DRILLING ON THESE LEASES IF THE STATE AGREES TO DRILLING. HOWEVER I AM PREPARED TO ASK C. S. I. R. O. TO CHOOSE EXPERTS EITHER FROM WITHIN THAT ORGANISATION, OR OUTSIDE IT, EITHER FROM AUSTRALIA OR FROM OVERSEAS, TO INVESTIGATE AND REPORT PUBLICLY ON THE MATTER. SUCH EXPERTS WOULD BE THE COMMONWEALTH REPRESENTATIVES ON A JOINT COMMONWEALTH/ STATE INVESTIGATION SHOULD THE STATE GOVERNMENT AGREE TO SUCH A JOINT BODY. I HAVE SO INFORMED THE QUEENSLAND PREMIER.

YOUR OFFER OF \$ 5,000 IS APPRECIATED BUT I BELIEVE YOU WOULD AGREE THAT IT MIGHT BE BETTER IF AN INVESTIGATION WAS IN NO WAY FINANCED BY AN ORGANISATION CONNECTED WITH OIL. I DO NOT BELIEVE AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE POSSIBLE DANGERS OF DRILLING ON THE BARRIER REEF SHOULD BE MIXED UP WITH AN INVESTIGATION OF THE CROWN OF THORNS STARFISH. THIS PROBLEM HAS BEEN INVESTIGATED BY SCIENTISTS FROM THE QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY AND THE QUEENSLAND DEPARTMENT OF PRIMARY INDUSTRIES WHO INVESTIGATED THE PROBLEM AT GUAM IN CONJUNCTION WITH SCIENTISTS FROM USA. A FURTHER MEETING WAS HELD IN BRISBANE IN AUGUST LAST BETWEEN OFFICERS OF C. S. I. R. O. AND THE COMMONWEALTH DEPARTMENT OF PRIMARY INDUSTRY AND QUEENSLAND REPRESENTATIVES.

THE ACADEMY OF SCIENCE HAS ALSO FORMED A COMMITTEE TO REPORT TO ITS COUNCIL ON THE PROBLEM. SO INVESTIGATION OF THIS PROBLEM IN THE HOPE OF DISCOVERING EFFECTIVE CONTROL MEASURES IS PROCEEDING."

CANBERRA
15 January 1970