

NEW PRIME MINISTER
PRESS, RADIO AND TV CONFERENCE GIVEN BY THE
LEADER OF THE LIBERAL PARTY, MR. WILLIAM McMAHON

CANBERRA

10 MARCH 1971

MR. McMAHON: There is not much I want to say to you other than that today the Party has had a vote, voting for the Prime Ministership, and they decided they wanted a new election for the Leader of the Liberal Party. The vote was taken and I have been declared the Leader of the Party and I consulted with Mr. Gorton about taking over from him. The vote was also taken for the Deputy Leadership and Mr. Gorton has been declared by me to be the Deputy Leader. I don't know the numbers of votes. I think only the scrutineers would know them, so I hope there won't be a great degree of speculation about how many votes I won by or how narrowly I squeaked into the position of the leadership of the Liberal Party.

This afternoon, I will be going out to Government House with Mr. Gorton in order to advise the Governor-General and to see what action he will take about the courses of action that are open to him. At 2.30 the House will meet and Mr. Gorton will then announce to the House the changes that have taken place in the Liberal Party and will then ask for the adjournment so that the normal Constitutional practices can be observed.

I don't want to say a great deal to you today other than this. I am a Party man. I believe in the Liberal Party and I believe the Liberal Party is the organ by which the national will and the national consciousness can be put into effect. I am a very great believer in the system of Cabinet Government, in full discussion in Cabinet with every Member having the opportunity to express his views, and only when political matters of the highest moment are involved, should the Prime Minister feel that he should intervene and ensure that the fullest discussions take place or fuller discussions take place between the Cabinet Ministers and Members of the Parliamentary Party. I want the Party itself in the Party Room to be able to play an increasingly important part in knowing what is going on in the Government, knowing the facts on which Cabinet decisions are based, knowing the reasons why we have decided to introduce new types of legislation, and I hope by this means to ensure that not only are we cohesive but when we go to the election, whenever it might happen to be - somewhere towards the end of 1972, we will have that degree of cohesion, we will have the public confidence that will make certain that we come back with a bigger majority than we have at the present moment.

That is all I want to say to you. I can assure every member of the Press, and most of you know me well by now, that whenever you feel you want to have a press conference with me, provided you give me some notice of the kind of questions and the problems that you want me to handle, believe me I will do my best to fit in with your wishes because I want the Australian public to be informed of what the Government is doing and, just as importantly, the reasons why the Government is taking the kind of action we recommend.

- Q. Mr. McMahon, do you intend to prorogue Parliament? Will Parliament be prorogued, Sir?
- A. I am not sure of the procedure, but it will meet at 2.30. The Prime Minister will announce that a new Leader of the Liberal Party has been elected, and that we are to go out for an interview with the Governor-General, and then the House will be adjourned until the ringing of the bells...
- Q. Mr. McMahon, I understand the Governor-General may not be in Canberra today. Do you know whether this is so?
- A. Well the information that is now available to me is that he is there at Government House.
- Q. After the events of today and yesterday how do you now feel about working with Mr. Gorton as Deputy?
- A. Mr. Gorton has been elected as the Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party by the Liberal Party itself. I am sure we will both work together in the interests of the Party and above all in the interests of the country.
- Q. What do you know about the future of Mr. Fraser?
- A. Don't ask me that yet because I have only been elected the Leader of the Liberal Party in the course of the last hour.
- Q. When do you expect to name your new Ministry?
- A. Probably the existing Ministry will have to be sworn in. I am not sure of this for the time being. But I will announce the Ministry - when I get a commission - I will announce the Ministry as soon as I can. But that of course will take some time and I must have the fullest discussions with Mr. Anthony, with the Country Party.
- Q. After Mr Gorton virtually voted himself out of the vote of confidence, were you surprised that he stood as Deputy Leader?
- A. No, he had the right to stand as the Deputy Leader and the Party had within its power the right to elect him if it wanted to. It elected him and that decision binds me in the same way as it binds every other Member.
- Q. (Inaudible)
- A. I have just given an answer to that question a few moments ago. I haven't yet had time to think about it.
- Q. Could you say whether you will be making a decision on the Ministry this week?
- A. I will try, but I can't be precise.

- Q. Mr. McMahon, the antipathy between you and Mr Gorton, I think you would agree is a public fact. Do you think that despite this antipathy you can still work together in the next 22 months to the election?
- A. Yes.
- Q. Sir, have you spoken to Mr. Anthony since the election?
- A. I have spoken to him to inform him that I have been elected the Leader of the Liberal Party and I asked him if he would make the time available to speak to me as soon as he could.
- Q. Has he indicated he will work with you, Mr. McMahon?
- A. I haven't spoken to him on that matter yet.
- Q. Could we ask a question of Mrs. McMahon? How she feels about this?
- A. NO.'
- Q. Can you tell us who the other candidates were for both positions?
- A. Mr. Snedden was a candidate for the leadership and Mr. David Fairbairn and Mr. Malcolm Fraser were also candidates for the Deputy Leadership.
- Q. (Inaudible) concerned with Mr. Fairbairn withdrawing his statement that he was no longer available to serve as Minister in a Liberal Ministry?
- A. Mr. Fairbairn is both a friend of mine and I admire him. But as yet, I have not had any discussions with him about Cabinet or Ministerial portfolios. But naturally I will have discussions with him soon.
- Q. Do you see a place for him in the Ministry?
- A. I will think of every member of the Party and one of them will be Mr. Fairbairn.
- Q. Mr. McMahon, are you likely to be Prime Minister and Treasurer?
- A. I haven't thought of that, but naturally it will be one of the problems I will be giving consideration to. I don't think it is practicable for a person to act in two portfolios for very long. Other Ministers have tried it, other Prime Ministers have tried it, and it is a pretty difficult if not impossible task.
- Q. I was thinking of Mr. Ben Chifley.

- A. That was quite right. But he was the only one in the Labor Party who had the capacity to do it.
- Q. Mr. McMahon speaking of your Ministry, have you considered the possibility of adopting the elected Ministry system?
- A. No.
- Q. Are you thinking in terms of a trip to Washington and other places very shortly?
- A. No.
- Q. What do you see as the main problems confronting the Government today?
- A. Don't ask me that at this moment. As soon as I have had time to settle into the leadership of the Liberal Party, then of course I will have another conference and you can ask me all the questions you want then. I think at the moment the real problem is how to organise the Government, the Ministerial portfolios in the Government and that I believe is the main problem that must face me for the time being.
- Q. Do you think a new Ministry should have another look at how the Government should deal with problems in the economy?
- A. Yes.
- Q. How long do you think the House will be adjourned?
- A. I can't tell you because there is a lot to do. I was quite surprised when papers were brought to me, or to myself and Mr. Gorton, to see how much has to be done, particularly as there is a new Government the whole of the Ministry has to be sworn in before it can meet the House, so I couldn't give you any real guidance other than I would like the House to meet today.
- Q. You have said you will be having a look at the economy. Are there any other recent Government decisions that you would like your Government to review?
- A. Yes, Commonwealth/State relationships.
- Q. Inaudible, concerning what sort of a line will be taken on this.

- A. I couldn't tell you because I have said that I am a Party man from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet and I will want the fullest consultation with the Ministry and with the Party before I make any decision or fill in any precise details.
- Q. Mr. McMahon, do you have in mind an early meeting with State Premiers?
- Q. April 5, will that still be on? That was arranged by Mr Gorton with the Premiers.
- A. I see no reason to change it but if I felt that it was impracticable to hold it, I would let them know immediately. But I would have no difficulty at all, no problem whatsoever in talking to them. I wouldn't doubt that in a few days I would be talking to Mr. Askin and later on to Sir Henry. But later on, I want to talk to them just as soon as I can.
- Q. Sir Henry is most anxious to talk to you.
- Q. As Deputy Leader, did Mr Gorton make any declarations of loyalty within the party to you and your potential administration?
- A. There was a universal declaration of loyalty. And in particular there were declarations of loyalty by Mr Snedden and then after the election of the Deputy Leader by Mr Gorton.
- Q. Do you anticipate any challenges to your leadership as Mr. Gorton has had. Inaudible comment about backbenchers.
- A. I hope not, but I hope that I will be able to so change the Party system to bring them well into the mechanism of government, I don't know how I will go about it, but it will be one of the major problems of Government I will face, and I hope it will bring great satisfaction to the Party.
- Q. Sir the Prime Ministership has been your goal for a long time. Did you go in there this morning thinking that you might come out as Liberal Leader? Were you surprised and how do you feel personally now that you have attained it?
- A. It is a strange thing, but everyone seems to think I am a person of tremendous ambition. I don't think I am. I'm a tremendous worker and if I'm given a job to do I work at it and if it takes me to some other goal, and if the goal is the kind that most people in the world would like - that most people in Australia would like - of course I'm glad I've got there. I think my wife would answer this question better than anyone else. But I don't feel the slightest bit excited or emotional, and you'd be as good a judge of this as she is. I have taken it in a composed way because I have been here for a long time. I've seen Prime Ministers come and go. I've seen the Ministry change. So I hope that what I will be able to do with the co-operation of my colleagues in the Country Party and my own Party - I hope we can make this a very successful Government, and I'll do as much as I can - all I can to ensure its success.

- Q. Mr. McMahon do you have in mind calling this the First McMahon Ministry or the First McMahon-Anthony Ministry?
- A. I hadn't thought of it. I don't believe in giving titles anyhow.
- Q. Well it has to be one or the other.
- A. Oh, I don't know. For a long time we called it the Liberal-Country Party Government. And that title suits me for the moment.
- Q. Sir, did you think back in 1969 that you'd had your last chance at this job?
- A. I didn't bother to think about it. I knew that events change so quickly - and as events change opportunities change with them, so I didn't bother about the past. I always look forward to the future. And now I can only express my joy that I'm where I am.
- Q. Mr. McMahon have you sent a telegram to Sir John McEwen?
- A. I will.
- Q. (Inaudible)
- A. I haven't thought out the contents yet.
- Q. How do you regard Mr. Whitlam as an opponent to fight an election against?
- A. I don't want to get heavily into politics at the moment, but you have heard me express my views in the past, and I see no reason after yesterday to think I should change my mind.
- Q. Sir would your Government be a more conservative one than Mr. Gorton's?
- A. I don't know what that means... what "conservative" means. I will try with my Party and with my Ministry to make those changes that we think are desirable. I don't think "conservative" is a good word to use. We are a practical people, anxious I believe, demonstrably anxious, to do our best in the interests of the country. And whether that means being conservative, or being radical or being liberal, I don't know. We'll do our best. It doesn't matter - what title people want to give us. All I can say to you is that I'll be very anti-communist, and I'll be very anti-socialist.
- Q. Mr. McMahon will Sir Cyrus Lennox still remain as Prime Minister's Department Head during your reign?

- A. I haven't given a great deal of thought to that, but I will announce that in due time... or I might not even announce it, it might just happen.
- Q. Prime Minister, will you consider an early increase for pensioners?
- A. Look, I am not there yet. I haven't yet discussed it with Cabinet. I want to ensure that Cabinet is fully consulted on everything before decisions are made. I personally will not make any statement about this until I have discussed it with the relevant Minister.
- Q. Mr. McMahon how do you feel about being the first Prime Minister from New South Wales for 22 years?
- A. I thought of Billy Hughes immediately, but I can't tell you what my thoughts amounted to.
- Q. Do you feel yourself bound by the decisions of Mr. Gorton's Government in respect of tariffs, and trade practices and other economic measures he has taken in the name of the Cabinet?
- A. I am not going to discuss any policy decisions at the moment but everything is open to review - tariff policies, economic policies.
- (To Max Walsh) I am sorry your guess this morning wasn't too good!
- Q. Mr McMahon you have made a point that you would be anti-communist. Now there are a lot of families around Australia at the moment watching you on television and wondering just what you are going to do about Vietnam.
- A. The policy on Vietnam, the Government policy, has been more strongly pressed by me than by any other person there. Those policies will continue. But as I said, all policies are open to review. I stated when I was Foreign Minister there wasn't any single area of foreign policy activity where we weren't looking at our policies, our policy objectives and trying to find out whether changes should be made. Exactly the same will apply in the case of Vietnam as applies to the other policies. I cannot give you any decisions because I have not discussed the problem with my Cabinet colleagues.
- Q. There has been speculation that if you won today you would consider an early election to go to the people before the alleged honeymoon is over. Is there any truth in that?
- A. I think it is about 100-1 odds or even worse.
- Q. Do you feel any gratitude to Mr. Fraser whose resignation seems to have sparked all this off?

"Gratitude" is a word that is not frequently used in political language. I respect Mr. Fraser. I think he is an able, perhaps a very able man. I make no other comment about Mr. Fraser other than that, and I like him.

Q. Inaudible (about the role of the mass media)

A. I think the greatest problem any government faces is one of communication, and consequently the more intimate association you can have with the mass media the better it will be for the Government, the better it will be for Australia. The real problem is how do you do it. How do you explain your policies? How do you explain your policy objectives? I do hope I will be able to win the support of the mass media, particularly as I will be communicating with them to let them know what we will be doing and why we are doing it.

Q. Sir, will it be possible to arrange a regular press conference, say once a week?

A. I don't know about once a week, but, regularly - yes.

Mr. Barnes : Thank you very much on behalf of the Gallery Members. Thank you for your assurance that in our future relations we will be having frequent contact.
