

Miss Bates / File with Press Statements p.6 72/10.B

PRESS BRIEFING GIVEN BY THE PRIME MINISTER,
MR WILLIAM McMAHON TO HEADS OF BUREAUX IN
THE PARLIAMENTARY PRESS GALLERY,
CANBERRA

26 JANUARY 1972

PRIME MINISTER : Just before Christmas, David Solomon asked me if I would have a meeting of the Press Gallery to give them a briefing on those papers that had been considered by Cabinet and to which I could give a press release. And I said I would do my best to meet the wishes of the Gallery. This is the first attempt. We have sat until rather late this afternoon, so it took a pretty substantial effort to try and get these three statements out for you, but I have done it. And I arranged with David (a) that I would give you the press release -- I regret that I haven't been able to give you as much time to read through and chew over it as I would have liked; and (b) that there would be a briefing relating to these press releases, but not to be a general cross-examination relating to my tortious activities in the past -- I was going to use the word "criminal" but I bit my tongue just in time!

So I have now given them to you and I thought if you liked, the one that probably had the greatest interest for you is this one relating to war-time Government papers. The statement is there and I think you will agree that we have now adopted a practice that is much the same as the British practice - in other words, the thirty years' access rule will apply. We are making the rule apply to the War Cabinet itself, the Advisory War Council and the Production Executive as well as Cabinet documents that come within the thirty-year period. *archives access*

I mention, too, that there are some papers that we will have to look at, and I think you will find that what I have said closely follows the British practice of protecting specially sensitive papers, documents containing information supplied in confidence and documents containing information about individuals.

Now we have one problem, and that is - and I have set it out here - that for some time we didn't keep archives in the same way as other countries have done, and now that

2.

we are building up the archives themselves, we will find that we haven't got at the moment sufficient personnel to process the papers, to be able to make them available quickly. So I will take it up with the Public Service Board -- I gave instructions that the matter was to be taken up urgently with the Public Service Board to provide staff to permit it to be done. I believe round about twenty will be asked for and probably agreed. But until we get the staff recruited and trained, we will borrow them from other Departments and get temporary officers, particularly retired persons, and if necessary from the university.

The only other matter that I think I should specifically refer to is that while the War Cabinet papers, War Council and Production Executive papers have been to a large extent kept and they are indexed and I believe can be pretty quickly processed, the others will take a considerable period of time and therefore we will probably have to do it in groups. I think that sets out the matter as best I can in a short compass, but I have got the officer of the Department, Mr Keith Sinclair, who has done a lot of work on it since I first gave them the instructions to work on it, so if you want to ask any questions, I'll answer them. If I haven't got the information immediately available I'll get Peter to do it for me.

Q. I was just wondering why the selection of 1941.... will this be the change of Government - 1939-41? Why select that period, and not year by year?

PM: For what purpose?

Q. Well the first ones going to be released are 1939-41 and the others will be separately...do the 39-41 ones only deal with a Labor Government came in or...

PM: No, it was just because it was the first three years. 1939 was the year the war started and it was the first one, and 39-41 the first years as a group that we can handle as possible, and we want to get them out in groups. We feel this could be done expeditiously.

3.

Q. Whose responsibility will it be to decide the number of exceptions, what is an exceptionally sensitive paper? This is obviously a matter of opinion very often. Will there be one officer who makes that decision that a particular paper or document is a sensitive one? Will it be yourself, or will you allocate that responsibility to a Minister?

PM: All of this will now be handed over to the Department of the Environment..

Q. It will be open to Mr Howson to....

PM: No, I will lay down the rules, but I think you can take it that in the archives themselves, that is the section dealing with the archives we will appoint a fairly senior person to look at the documents to see whether or not they come within the exception provisions. And if they feel that they are in any doubt, any serious doubt about it, they can refer it through Department of Environment to myself.

Q. Sir, would you elaborate a bit more on this officerI am a bit concerned about who will decide whether they are contrary to the public interest or security. Will this be an officer that you are going to appoint or will it be an officer that you have already in mind?

PM: Well I have got one in mind, yes, but I have not yet decided whether I will get a panel of names and then ask one of the people in the panel whether he will take over the responsibility. It will be a very senior person.

Q. It will be one person?

PM: I am not sure of that either, but it looks as though it will be one person.

Q. will it be a public servant or....

PM: An ex-public servant, I think. A public servant, or ex-public servant.

4.

Q. Will he make any recommendation to you or Cabinet?

PM: No, he will get his charter, he will get his terms of reference, but in cases where he feels doubt, he can refer it to me though the Department of the Environment.

Q.: Prime Minister, interest in these documents was sparked by the release of particular documents by the British Cabinet relating to the exchange between Prime Minister Curtin and Prime Minister Churchill over the re-posting of the Australian Forces. Haven't you felt that it might be fairer to get those documents brought out first rather than some time in the future, as they won't be covered by the first release?

PM: I don't know whether it will be fairer or not because I haven't read the papers and I don't know what is in them. I know they are a massive lot of documents and if I start picking and choosing, I think you will find we will get into a mess. But nonetheless, if a person comes along and has a special requirement, it could then be referred to me and I will then make a decision whether it should be looked at specially. I think this is the way I wanted to look at it when the paper was being prepared. Could I just say this to you, I want to assure you that there is a mass of documents. How many feet of paper there, Peter?

MR BAILEY : One hundred feet of War Cabinet papers, solid papers. And that doesn't mean files, it means individual papers. One hundred feet tall if you like, yes.

Q. And then volume, what is the volume?

PM: That is the volume, one hundred feet tall.

MR BAILEY : That is foolscap. And similarly with the Cabinet papers. There is something like another twenty feet -- not as much.

Q. Has the Leader of the Opposition been consulted, or will his consent be required for any of the documents concerning the time the Labor Government was in power? .../5

5.

PM: Well, he has already sent a message that he would be willing to do this. Of course he will be informed of this decision, and in sensitive cases relating to the Labor Government, of course he will be consulted.

Q. You mentioned that this will happen as soon as possible, Prime Minister. Is it possible to put a more definite..?

PM: No, I can't.

Q. Could you say weeks or months?

PM: No, I can't do that. Unless, Peter, you can give some guidance on it. All I wanted to do was to get the decisions out because this is what I can do as a Prime Minister. As to the details of the administration, I have got to leave it to the Department of the Environment, but they know they have got to act quickly.

Q. Prime Minister, Sir John McEwin, when he was in the Cabinet when the Cabinet previously discussed the release of Departmental papers, I understand made a specific proviso on documents relating to the Country Party...

PM: Not so far as I am aware. Certainly it isn't in the records.

Q. There is nothing of that nature that would preclude any individual^{or} particular Party..

PM: No.

Q. When they do become available, what form can we as journalists...will we be able to^{go} in and pore over them as ...

PM: Well they are to be made available generally. We thought primarily it would be for the purpose of scholars, but certainly the newspapers will have access to them.

MR BAILEY : There will be a difference, Prime Minister, between the Cabinet papers which will be put in order before they are released, as it were, so there will be pretty quick access to those. The vast number of documents that the Archives Office has from all Departments occupy acres and acres of space, so they can't do that as quickly, but they will be trying to. So this is why the Government has said they want the extra staff to get those papers in more order from the middle of the year. They won't be for immediate access. It's not possible for them.

PM: Look, I can simplify this by saying that the Department of the Environment know how urgent it is and so do my own people in the Cabinet Secretariat, and they will be doing all they can to make them available as soon as they can.

Q. In future now that the thirty-year access rule will apply to Cabinet papers, will they be made available each year on the 1st of January or will there be a batch made available every couple of years?

PM: Oh, I think you will have to leave that. I haven't considered it. I don't regard it as relevant. The main thing is to get these War Cabinet papers out and the Advisory War Council. I think this is what the public wants and I think this is what the media and the scholars want.

Q. One point has been made in the past and that is the man in charge of the Archives is a middle level Third Division officer, and a Class 8. And it has been put to me that nothing very much will happen until that position is made into a Second Division position.

PM: Well he is an Assistant Secretary level, but what you are asking me now is something relevant to the principles involved here, not the techniques. We will be expanding the Department as I said. The fellow who is head of it now is at First Assistant Secretary level.

Q. Prime Minister, could I ask you why it has taken so long for us to make this decision to release the documents?

PM: I thought it was done fairly quickly.

Q. Well there has been considerable pressure, as you have no doubt been aware, from various sources that these things should be released...

PM: This is the first Cabinet that we have had in the New Year and it was decided during the two days that the Cabinet met.

Q. Could it not have been decided by you?

PM: It could have been, yes, I prepared the paper for it and put it up to Cabinet and it was accepted, but it was one that needed to go to Cabinet, and in any event, the delay is not that great. It would have at the most have been a week.

Q. Can I switch on to the President Nixon announcement? What consultations have you had with the President on the announcement he made?

LISA
Peace
Proposals
Vietnam

PM: I am not prepared to answer that sort of a question as to whether I have been informed or whether I have been consulted because if it so happens that the President would be willing to give advance information to myself, and I make it public, then it could cause great inconvenience to him and in time I would be very certain I wouldn't be getting information. I mention that as a philosophical matter rather than mention specific details. Perhaps I can say this to you that since Dr Kissinger's visit to Peking, I believe that I could not under any circumstances feel that there was a ground on which the Australian Government could complain because of our treatment by the American Administration. But I will not in future, if I am asked a question "Were you consulted", I will not unless there are special circumstances, give an answer because I don't want to dry up our sources of information.

Q. As our own forces are involved, I would think the public would assume we would be consulted if our own forces are going to be kept in Vietnam or.....

PM: Well, I think you can see here that I have actually put in this statement that our own forces would be withdrawn..... if the agreement is made, then it would cover our forces too.

Q. That is why I assumed the Australian Government would tell the President of the United States it agrees with that, that is why I was getting at consultations....

PM: Well I will go this far. I will assure you that our forces will be withdrawn. And that is our decision. We don't depend on the United States or anyone else to tell us what we should or should not do. We make the decisions ourselves.

Q. One base point about President Nixon's speech today was that Dr Kissinger originally provided this eight-point plan way back in October 1969. I think the interest that Alan was asking on, and certainly what I am interested in is whether we were aware of the negotiating terms over that considerable period or whether we have just learnt the negotiating terms just now.

PM: I have told you I will go no further than I have gone.

Q. I am not asking about consultations. I am just asking about level of knowledge, if I can put it that way, Sir.

PM: And if I say that to you, then it becomes perfectly obvious that I might have been one of the few who knew. And I can assure you if I were to give any further information it could cause problems. And I think you know President Nixon has great problems associated with the problem of secrecy, and I am sure of this that he trusts the Australian Government implicitly.=

Q. Sir, how would the decision that we have made that our troops would be withdrawn affect our decision to train the Cambodians and Vietnamese in this country?

PM: It wouldn't affect them.

9.

Q. That would still go on?

PM: It would only add....all it would affect is any decision that might be made about the training of South Vietnamese in South Vietnam.

Q. It wouldn't affect the decision that we have made to train Cambodians here in Australia?

PM: No, it would not. It is not within contemplation. That is something to be thought of later.

Q. But that will continue?

PM: I won't say it will continue. It is something that has to be considered at a later date.

Q. Is it likely to be continued?

PM: It might or might not.

Q. Does that also apply to our supply of equipment to Cambodia? Would that continue, too?

PM: I haven't given the question of supply of equipment consideration, and to the best of my knowledge, it hasn't received consideration. What has received consideration is what I have got in the document and that is the total withdrawal of forces.

Q. Are you optimistic about any agreement from the other side?

PM: If past experience is any criterion, and because I have been pretty well informed from diplomatic sources including my own Department, of initiatives that have been taken, and because I also participated in this other conference on Cambodia, I feel that the only statement that I could make is that if the North Vietnamese live up to their past practices and then the prospects are not what I would regard as very glowing. I hope they will. I sincerely.. /10

hope they will, and on the conditions laid down by President Nixon, because I think we all want to see an end to these difficulties up there and we would like the South Vietnamese to have the opportunity to determine....to have a vote to determine the kind of Government they want and to determine their own future, and that is why I specifically referred in this document to something that has been ^{the}very substance of the Australian Government's attitude to participation in Vietnam, when I referred in the fifth paragraph to various points in the Nixon statement, that coincides exactly with our own views.

Q. On the Army statement, Prime Minister, just one thing. You mention here "military district headquarters in each State". Does this mean that in places outside Sydney and Melbourne, for instance, Adelaide and Perth....

*Army
Reorganisation*

PM. ///...in Sydney and Melbourne, too, there will be a District Headquarters in each State.

Q. How does this affect the overall organisation in terms of real estate and existing organisation there... in terms of property they hold....

PM: It won't affect them to any great extent other than in Canberra and Melbourne. In Canberra, there will be a substantial reduction in the demands for real estate. In Melbourne there will be an increase in the demand for real estate.

Q. Have you got any details as to what extent...?

PM: No, but in Melbourne it will....in Melbourne and Canberra it will be quite substantial the demand. But I want to emphasise to you that so far as units are considered - training or operational units are concerned - ^{they won't be shifted} this is an organisational matter dealing with the higher Command. And if I can now remind you, when I was Minister for Air a few years ago, I carried out a similar kind of change in the Air Force and changed it from a lines of communication geographical system to a functional system, and as one who has had some

some experience, too, in the war years of what we had to do to move away from a geographical system to a functional command and all the difficulties that persisted throughout the war, I am sure this is right.

Q. Will the breakdown be such that one area becomes a training area, or one area a logistic area, or will the State Commands combine all of these things?

PM: The command only will be in the State and the disposition of the units themselves will not be changed.

PM: Now, I have been trying to get one or two other documents ready for you, but if I am not here tomorrow - and I hope I won't be - but at least I will get an officer....I will have to get you, Peter, if you don't mind and you, Keith, if you are here, I will get you to come down and give a briefing to let you know about it.

Q. Documents on what, Sir?

PM: I didn't say! Look, I hope this is what you want. At least it is the way I cleared it with David Solomon. I think I will be able to say this to you in future that I will be trying to get....when a paper comes into Cabinet...I will be trying to get some sort of press release for you when it comes in and it can be suitably changed to meet the amendments that are made in Cabinet discussions, and recorded in the final decision. But at least this is a start. The second thing I want to do, and again this is because David Solomon came down on behalf of the Gallery, is to see if we can, immediately after meetings of the Party, if I can give you half an hour's briefing on what happened there, certainly on those subjects that are not too sensitive and I don't think there are any. But I will take it up with the Party at its next meeting.

Q. That would be most useful. Mr Whitlam, as you appreciate, does this, but not in things that are going into the Parliament in the future. I would hope it wouldn't preclude press conferences on general topics.

PM: No, but I don't want to mix the two up. . . .
The last two days we have made handled 15 or 18 decisions
and you wouldn't be able to handle a press conference on
the whole lot of them, but in any event, I will do what
I can.

Q. When do you think it will be likely we could have
a full-scale press conference; I am thinking particularly
of economic matters and other things that are of interest
at this time...

PM: Well, I will give that some thought and I will
let the Secretary of the Press Gallery know.

THANKS.
