

ACCESS TO WAR-TIME GOVERNMENT PAPERS

Statement by the Prime Minister, Mr. William McMahon, CH, MP

The Prime Minister said that, as he had undertaken on 6 January, the Government had now given further consideration to the policy of access to government documents for the war-time period.

The Government has decided that the 30-year access rule should in future apply to Cabinet papers, as it has since December 1970 to the generality of departmental documents.

In addition, the Government has decided that, because of the special interest in them, the remainder of the war Cabinet papers (covering the years 1942 to 1945) should also be released for public examination.

The war Cabinet papers include papers from the War Cabinet itself, from the Advisory War Council, from the full Cabinet and from the Production Executive.

Before the papers can be made available, it will be necessary to examine them in order to withhold those which, in accordance with normal archival practice and policy, should not be released.

The categories of papers which will not be released will be those falling within the following groups -

- (i) exceptionally sensitive papers, the disclosure of which would be contrary to the public interest, whether on security or other grounds (including the need to safeguard the revenue);
- (ii) documents containing information supplied in confidence, the disclosure of which would or

might constitute a breach of good faith; and
(iii) documents containing information about individuals,
the disclosure of which would cause distress or
embarrassment to living persons or their immediate
descendants.

Access to the Cabinet papers, when released,
will be arranged, as with other archival documents, through the
Commonwealth Archives Office.

When the documents are released, they will be
accompanied by an index to assist searchers to identify the
documents they wish to see. Because the main interest has been
in the war years, the first releases will be of the years 1939
to 1941 in one group. As quickly as possible, papers for the
remainder of the war years will then be released in further groups,
and a similar process will then be followed for such papers as
are available for the pre-war years, commencing in 1919.

The Prime Minister said that it will take some
time to prepare these papers for release. He expected that it
will be possible to make available the first group of those not
in the restricted categories (covering the years 1939 to 1941)
by about the middle of the year. Further groups of war-time papers,
and later of pre-war papers, will become available as they are
processed.

In addition, the Prime Minister said that the
Government had considered the departmental papers for the years
1942 to 1945 which are at present closed except for the preparation
of important works of scholarship. He said the Government
considered that these papers also should become available at the
same time as the Cabinet papers. Because of the vast number

of papers involved, there will be a time lag in satisfying requests for documents.

However, the Government has asked that steps should be taken to reduce the time required to meet requests.

It has authorised whatever increase in establishment of the Archives Office is necessary to achieve this and has asked that the matter be taken up urgently with the Public Service Board. It has also agreed, as an immediate step, that the Archives Office may use officers on loan from other Departments, or seek to employ suitable temporary officers, such as those recently retired.

The Prime Minister said he believed this step by the Government to make available Cabinet and other papers covering the war years, and later the pre-war Cabinet papers, would be welcomed by the public and in particular by those involved in work of scholarship and research.

26 January, 1972