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THE PRIME MINISTER'S PRESS CONFERENCE

AT PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 12 DECEMBER 1972

PRIME MINISTER : Ladies and gentlemen : the first announcement I wish to make to you is concerning the Interim Australian Schools Commission about which you will remember I spoke in the government's policy speech. I will hand out the terms of reference of the Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission, the terms of the letter sent to each of the persons who have been asked to serve on the Interim Committee and the list of those persons. All I need to say before you ask any questions is that the Chairman is Professor Karmel, whose service in general administrative matters and particularly educational matters in South Australia, Papua New Guinea and the Commonwealth as a whole is well-known.

On diplomatic relations with China; there has been a further meeting between the Chinese and the Australian ambassadors in Paris, this time at the Australian Embassy early this morning Canberra time. Good progress is being made. I have also received a cordial message from Prime Minister Chou En-lai.

Our Ambassador to Indonesia has returned to Indonesia. He has been received by President Suharto. He has given the President the news about the \$2½ million gift of rice to alleviate the severe shortage in Indonesia caused by drought. There is a press statement which will be given to you on that.

At yesterday's Executive Council meeting, there were some renewals of appointments to - what were the Boards? - in the repatriation field and the valuation field - the No. 1 War Pensions Entitlement Appeal Tribunal and the Valuation Boards.

The Honorable John Ignatious Armstrong has been appointed our High Commissioner to Britain as from next Friday for a term ending at the end of 1974. You will remember he was a Senator for very many years, he was Minister for Supply, he was Chairman of the Sydney County Council, he was Lord Mayor of Sydney. I have let Mr Heath know that Mr Armstrong's appointment is to symbolise the high importance that the Australian Labor Party places on links with Britain, and my own personal desire that those links should be close ones. Well, those are the things I thought I would announce first.

FRANK CHAMBERLAIN : Prime Minister, that's ex-Senator Armstrong?

PRIME MINISTER : Yes.

TONY HILL : Can you give us the terms of the message from Chou En-lai?

PRIME MINISTER : No. I think the terms of messages will be released when, as we expect shortly will happen, relations are established, but there is no agreement to release any texts at this stage.

MATTHEWS, MELBOURNE HERALD : Have you any intention of recalling the Parliament early to give the pensioners an immediate \$1.50 rise for a Christmas bonus?

PRIME MINISTER : No. When the ministry is sworn in we will decide when the Parliament will meet. It is unlikely to be before February.

One of the early pieces of legislation will be to increase the basic pensions by \$1.50 per week. I know there has been some speculation on a Christmas bonus. In fact, no such proposal was ever made in the policy speech and during the campaign I was never asked about it, and I made no commitments on it.

KEVIN POWER, 2UE: Does your Government propose to re-negotiate the F111 agreement, Sir. That's the first question, the second one - do you propose to restore the News and Information Bureau to full departmental status or will it be incorporated in some other department such as Media or will it remain with Interior?

MR. BARNARD: The first one, Kevin, if I may answer it, on the F111 - it has not been possible for me, at this stage, to be able to examine the documents that I would want to look at in relation to the F111 purchase. What I did, of course, say during the course of the campaign was that it appeared, in view of the large amount of money that Australia has already paid out for the F111, that we will have to accept it. But it would not be possible for me, before the full ministry has been sworn in, to devote my attention to this particular question.

PRIME MINISTER: On the A.N.I.B., I have made no commitment. There is no current proposal to make the Australian News and Information Bureau a full department. The Department of which it will form a part, or the Minister to whom it will be responsible, is being considered at this time by Mr. Barnard, Senators Murphy and Willesee and me in consultation with the departmental heads in preparation for a recommendation to Caucus next week.

MEGAN STOYLES, FINANCIAL REVIEW: In view of what Mr. Crean has been saying about taxation policy, have you yet made any decision for the Treasury to publish a "comprehensive review" on taxation levels which you promised in your policy speech?

PRIME MINISTER: We have been asking Treasury about this. There have been several papers prepared for the former Government on taxation review. We are working with them on two matters. Firstly, which are the ones to which Mr. McMahon was referring in answers to questions in Parliament, and, I think, in answers to members of the press. Secondly, if these were Cabinet papers then we clearly have to check with our predecessors whether they mind them being released.

JOHN LOMBARD, MELBOURNE SUN: Last July you promised rehabilitation assistance for those who suffered in the name of conscience under the National Service Act. What form will the rehabilitation assistance take - will it be financial compensation and is compensation being considered for draft resisters who went underground?

PRIME MINISTER: Nothing is being considered at the moment. I can assure you that Mr. Barnard and I have not considered this matter. You mention some statement by me. I do not remember a statement of this character. At the last Federal Conference of the Australian Labor Party in June last year, there was a resolution that this matter should be considered. I do not remember saying anything about it. We have not given consideration to it. I did not mention it in the policy speech. I was not asked about it and I made no statements about it later in the campaign. This is a matter clearly for the ministry when it is formed.

MR. BARNARD: Mr. Prime Minister, can I supplement the question by saying that once again I have not had the opportunity to fully consider this matter but I have made enquiries. I will be having discussions later this afternoon with officers of the department.

LONDON DAILY TELEGRAPH: Have you any more surprise announcements for people in Britain?

PRIME MINISTER: I wouldn't believe that any Britons taking an intelligent interest in Australian politics would have had any surprises to this stage.

BEGG, A.B.C.: Have you given any consideration, as yet, to the redistribution of boundaries?

PRIME MINISTER: No. Here obviously is a matter which will be left to the full ministry. I would expect that there will be legislation amending the Commonwealth Electoral Act as there was introduced as a Private Members Bill by Mr. Daly in the last parliament, and a distribution is due but the census upon which a distribution would be based was held 18 months ago. Western Australia should have one more seat in this Parliament if a distribution had been held. There would be a much more equal representation of the people if a distribution had been held, as it could and should have been, before this recent election.

DAVID SOLOMON, CANBERRA TIMES: Do you expect that there will be any necessity for another meeting between the Australian and the Chinese ambassadors in Paris before the matter is finalised?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes.

FRANK CHAMBERLAIN: Will you be taking any Christmas holidays?

PRIME MINISTER: I hope so.

FRANK CHAMBERLAIN: Will you use those holidays to go for a trip to the Torres Strait Islands with Mr. Bjelke-Petersen?

PRIME MINISTER: I am very much looking forward to Christmas so I can have a holiday. I noticed Mr. Bjelke-Petersen's kind offer. I had already received some offers. I will be writing to Mr. Bjelke-Petersen about the Torres Strait Islands question which was raised by the United Nations Visiting Mission to New Guinea in the middle of last year. I think I am right in saying that this matter had not been raised by the former Government with the Queensland Government. I am taking steps to raise it.

ROBERT HAUPT, FINANCIAL REVIEW: It is Dr. Cairns' publicly expressed view that a final decision has been reached as to the future shape of the Trade Department. I understand from your office that this is not so. Can you finally tell us whether a decision has been made over the future status and shape of the department? Can you tell us under what title Dr. Cairns will be sworn in when he is sworn in?

PRIME MINISTER: No decisions have been made at this stage. As I said in answer to an earlier question, these are matters being discussed by Mr. Barnard, Senators Murphy and Willesee and me in consultation with the heads of departments for a recommendation to Caucus. Caucus will make the decisions as to what departments there will be, and then after Caucus has made that decision it will be my responsibility, if I am re-elected as Leader of the Party, to allocate the portfolios.

KEVIN POWER: Will you make a recommendation to Caucus on that particular point?

PRIME MINISTER: Among others. There will be recommendations on the whole departmental structure.

BENNEL, 7 NETWORK: How long do you think it will be before the new health scheme comes into operation as proposed by the Labor Government, and what do you think should be done with the vast reserves that the health schemes have at the moment?

PRIME MINISTER: There are two big items of the health scheme. One is the question of insurance; how long it takes to implement the Government's program on this matter will depend on the co-operation of the medical profession. There is, in addition, a very large part of the Government's health program relating to hospitals, the modernisation and regionalisation of hospitals through Commonwealth grants to the States on the basis of recommendations of a Hospitals Commission. I would hope that that Hospitals Commission would be in operation before the end of 1973. There are other features in the Government's health program such as dental health for school children which can scarcely get under way in the life of this Parliament because one just has to train more dental therapists or nurses than Australia has the hope of getting in less than three years. You asked me about the reserves of the hospital and medical benefits funds. I think these reserves amount to somewhere about \$140 million. This is a sum which obviously would be appropriate to provide hospital and nursing home facilities in those parts of Australia where they are very badly needed.

I would hope that arrangements can be made for these sums which have been collected by contributors over the last twenty years to be spend for such proper public health purposes as hospitals and nursing homes. It will require, naturally, negotiations with the bodies concerned because they are generally incorporated under State laws and the registration by the Commonwealth which has enabled them to flourish and multiply exceedingly didn't provide for the dissolution of these bodies.

HAWKINS, BRISBANE TELEGRAPH: Is there a possibility, as you have seen Mr. Tonkin and Mr. Dunstan in the last few days, of asking Mr. Bjelke-Petersen to come to Canberra before Christmas to talk to you about this problem rather than you arranging a trip up there?

PRIME MINISTER: Mr. Dunstan and Mr. Tonkin asked to see me. If Mr. Bjelke-Petersen asks to see me I am very happy to see him - on this or any other matter.

BAILEY, ADELAIDE ADVERTISER: Has a date been discussed for a Premiers Conference?

PRIME MINISTER: No. This is clearly a matter which will have to be decided by the full ministry. There have been suggestions that, as usual, there will be a Premiers Conference in February, but this is not a matter upon which Mr. Barnard and I would make arrangements alone.

D'ARCY, A.B.C.: In view of the speculation, could you state at this stage whether Dr. Stephen FitzGerald is to be Australia's first ambassador to China, and secondly, have you had any official communique about Francis James?

PRIME MINISTER: My answer on an ambassador to China must be the same as it was a week ago. It is just not possible or proper for any country to announce who its representative will be in another country until that other country has been informed and has approved. This must be the case still more, of course, with a country with which we don't yet have full diplomatic relations, with which, at this stage, we are only having discussions. So, I must reiterate that it would be quite improper to confirm or deny any speculation on who might be our first ambassador to China. In view of the very many references which are being made to this question, perhaps I should say that many of you have seen Dr. FitzGerald in China when you accompanied me and Dr. Patterson and Mr. Burns and Mr. Young there. I think most of you are here. There is Mr. Barnes, Mr. Oakes, Mr. Walsh, Mr. Stubbs, Mr. Randall, Mr. Barnett and Mr. Koch. Nearly all of you are in this room. You went to China with us. You saw Dr. FitzGerald in those isolated circumstances and you would have noticed his dexterity, his diligence, his decorum. Perhaps I might add this - Dr. FitzGerald has turned down the opportunity of taking a prestigious professorial post, a foundation professor, at Griffith University so that he might be eligible for appointments by the Commonwealth Government. The Commonwealth Government regards it as appropriate that there should be academics or business people serving the nation in various positions of advice or representation for periods of 2 or 3 years and we would regard it as appropriate that public servants, for instance, should be seconded to academic and commercial positions for similar periods. I don't believe that the constant speculation about Dr. FitzGerald is fair to him. He can't say anything on this matter and, I reiterate, I can't either.

D'ARCY, A.B.C.: Prime Minister, Francis James, Sir?

PRIME MINISTER: I am sorry. I have sent no message about Mr. Francis James since taking office.

D'ARCY, A.B.C.: Have you heard anything of him, Sir?

PRIME MINISTER: I have heard nothing about him since taking office.

LAURIE OAKES, MELB. SUN: Will you send a message, Sir?

PRIME MINISTER: When full relations are established then the Australian Government will be in the normal, proper position to safeguard the interests of its citizens in China, including Francis James.

WARREN DUNCAN, A.B.C.: Prime Minister, there has been yet another prediction today as to what the level of unemployment will be in the coming year. How do you see employment over the next 12 months in Australia? Secondly, when will the monthly figures be released, and in view of Mr. Cameron's comments about these figures, are you going to check to make sure they are accurate?

PRIME MINISTER: I will ask the Minister for Labour and National Service to answer this question.

MR. BARNARD: I have asked for information concerning the latest unemployment figures and I have no knowledge of them myself at this time but I expect to have some information on them tomorrow. They would normally be available for publication, that is if one follows the procedure of the previous administration, they would be available for publication on Monday next. Whether I at this stage ought to make any comment, that is after I have received the information, or wait for the new Minister for Labour and National Service to make the comment is a matter that I will determine with the Prime Minister. Matters concerning the levels of unemployment and what we intend to do about unemployment, of course, I think ought to be more properly answered by the Prime Minister at this stage.

BOB BAUDINO, NEWS LIMITED: Mr. Barnard, if I might, in his capacity as Minister for Defence - Massive savings have been made by the abolition of national service, and now of the withdrawal of our forces from Vietnam. Could you tell me if those savings will be diverted elsewhere or do they remain in the defence vote?

MR. BARNARD: I have not discussed this aspect with the Prime Minister. It is not one of the matters that we thought desirable or necessary to consider immediately. Naturally I will have to determine what will be done, but my, off-the-cuff decision at this stage would be that whatever saving is made in this respect would be expended by the defence forces.

DAVID BARNETT, A.A.P.: .....

PRIME MINISTER: An old China hand.

DAVID BARNETT: A question to Mr. Barnard. Have you begun to consider yet the future of the D.D.L. program announced by the last administration? Have you begun to think yet about what sort of tank the Army should have, and have you begun to consider also the level of 40,000 men set by the former Defence Minister as desirable for the Army?

MR. BARNARD: You have asked three questions. First of all, concerning the D.D.L. program - as you know, action was initiated by the previous administration, that is, for a design study to be authorised. I have made no alteration to that program. It is still proceeding although this does not, and I want to emphasise this, it does not necessarily mean that the present government or the new government, the next Whitlam ministry, when it is sworn in, would continue with the program without looking very closely at it. Now naturally I have not had the opportunity to fully consider it. The second question, I think, that you asked was in relation to the tanks. The tanks that we have in Australia today, the Centurion tanks, are 22 years old. Half of them, I understand, have been used in Vietnam. Naturally there would be a need to look very closely and quickly at this question. Yes, I have

discussed it but no firm decision has been made at this stage. The final one was on.....

DAVID BARNETT: The level of troops, is 40,000 a desirable number for the Army?

MR. BARNARD: I have, as you know, following the announcement which I made last week to discontinue the call-up and the discharge of national servicemen, and perhaps I can answer your question by pointing out that what I said at the time apparently appears to have been borne out by the facts that I have available to me at this time that about at least 40 per cent of the national servicemen have elected to remain and continue their service. The precise figures or the details will not be available to me until the middle of next week. It could be even higher. Indeed, the report I think I read in the Melbourne "Age" this morning may be rather closer to the actual figure, that is about 60 per cent. So far as the level of the Army is concerned, once the decision had been made in relation to national service, the future level of the Army itself is a matter that I have set down for discussion with the people concerned from the Army Department early next week.

PRIME MINISTER: Gentlemen, you are asking quite a number of questions about defence. Mr. Barnard and I spent this morning at the passing out parade and graduation ceremony at Duntroon. You might be interested in the remark that was made there, that it is the first time that the whole Commonwealth Ministry has attended such a ceremony and it is the first ministry which is entirely composed of returned servicemen.

TED BARKER, "WEST AUSTRALIAN": Prime Minister, could you tell us what plans you have for the territorial sea legislation? Do you intend to press ahead with it?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes.

BARKER: Anything else?

PRIME MINISTER: No. The Labor Party's policy is, as you know, to assert the national government's jurisdiction over the territorial sea beyond low water mark and I expect that, in opening this Parliament, the Governor-General will use the same words as he used in opening the last Parliament.

MUNGO McCALLUM: Sir, do you think you can get that through in time for the Law of the Sea Conference?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes.

LAURIE OAKES, "MELBOURNE SUN": Prime Minister, you told us a week ago that the interim two-man government was set up to deal with urgent matters. I am wondering, since we already had an acting High Commissioner in London, what was urgent about appointing a permanent High Commissioner? Secondly, while I am aware of Dr. FitzGerald's qualifications for a diplomatic post, I am not aware of Mr. Armstrong's qualifications. Could you explain that to me, what experience he has had? And, thirdly, do you anticipate any criticism based on allegations of jobs for the boys and if it should occur, how would you answer it?

PRIME MINISTER: I have been urged by the Foreign Affairs Department to make this appointment promptly because there has already been an embarrassing hiatus in the post. You will remember that the former High Commissioner, Sir Alexander Downer, had had his term of office extended several times and finally he would not accept another extension, and the whole staffing of the office, such as the appointment of a Deputy High Commissioner and so on, awaits the filling of the main post. The post has always been one of what is called a political nature, and this has the advantage, it has been said over the years, that the person holding the post has the ear of the government of Australia. There are some matters, as you know, where the new government of Australia has found that it had to vote in a different way to Britain in the United Nations. There are a number of issues which have arisen in Britain concerning the position of Australian citizens visiting, settling or working in Britain. Clearly it is an embarrassment to have this post, the first diplomatic post that Australia ever set up, vacant any longer. As I said earlier, Mr. Armstrong is a public figure of long service and great distinction in several fields and his appointment will be understood by the British Government as one showing that the Australian Labor Party regards the post as important and that I regard the post as important.

BROWN, COURIER MAIL: Sir, could you clear up the Torres Strait issue, please? Do you plan to confer with Mr. Bjelke-Petersen either here or in Brisbane in the near future, and do you plan to take up his invitation to go to the Torres Strait Islands? Could I ask a second question on a slightly different subject? Why is the Schools Commission interim at this stage? Interim is until when?

PRIME MINISTER: The Torres Strait Islands first - I only know of Mr. Bjelke-Petersen's invitation from reading the newspapers. I don't think I have received a letter from him conveying such an invitation. I am writing a letter to him. I would not think that a meeting between us is necessary at this stage to discuss the question. The discussions which may take place will be made easier if there are appropriate arrangements between officials in advance. But I would rather wait till I have written the letter to Mr. Bjelke-Petersen before saying anything more on this matter. I did say something last week about it. I am not sure that I mentioned last week, as I did today, that the United Nations Visiting Mission to New Guinea had raised this matter at least 18 months ago. Furthermore, there has been the successful conclusion of an agreement between Australia and Indonesia concerning the sea boundary between them. One would expect that similar negotiations would now take place with Portugal as regards Timor and then also there are to be negotiations which will concern Papua New Guinea herself concerning the land and sea border with Indonesia. In these circumstances it is desirable to have a consistent border, a contemporary border between Papua, which is still an Australian colony but which will soon be part of an independent nation, and Australia. This is much more amicably settled while the Australian government has jurisdiction on each side of Torres Strait than it will be if we wait until Papua New Guinea gets independence and the matter has to be determined, say, by the International Court of Justice.



BROWN: The plan on that is for officials to discuss it first?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, as I say, I want to write a letter before I say any more about this. You also asked about the Schools Commission. The reason for having an interim committee is, as I said in the policy speech and as I had said I think in Parliament but certainly I had said at public meetings well before the election campaign opened, we wanted to follow the procedure that Sir Robert Menzies had followed in regard to the Commonwealth's peace-time commitment for universities. Just as Sir Keith Murray and some other prominent educationists were asked to make a report on universities and that report was adopted in the next Commonwealth Budget and was then followed by legislation establishing the Australian Universities Commission, so, as I said in the policy speech and in these earlier public meetings, we would write to educationists in this field to make a report in good time for our next Budget and then we would set up a standing commission by statute. I did say I would write before Christmas, and I might also add that Mr. Beazley has spent a great deal of time with the people concerned and the Department of Education and Science and some of the A.U.C. in the terms of reference and the personnel. We discussed these first last Wednesday or Thursday.

DAVID SOLOMON: Have they all accepted?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes.

ALAN RAMSEY, "THE AUSTRALIAN": Prime Minister, it appears you are going to have another national strike on your hands. The tanker drivers are going out. Can you tell me whether you have had discussions with Mr. Cameron about this?

PRIME MINISTER: No.

RAMSEY: Any suggestion that the government might intervene in this strike, and what is your comment on suggestions that industrial activity has been delayed, in support of pay claims, has been delayed until after the elections so it would not hurt your party's prospects at the elections?

PRIME MINISTER: I have no comment to make on the last. I have not been in touch with Mr. Cameron on this. I have no doubt that he has the matter well in hand.

STEWART HARRIS, "LONDON TIMES": Sir, I know you don't normally give away what goes on in negotiations, but I think perhaps a lot of people would like to know whether the matter of Francis James was raised with the Chinese in Paris by Mr. Renouf.

PRIME MINISTER: No.

PETER BARRON, "SYDNEY SUN": Mr. Whitlam, on the question of the health funds' reserves, Mr. Hayden was quoted in the press this morning as saying these reserves could be used to provide free health insurance for contributors to the funds or perhaps to pay the benefits to the contributors. Can we take it from your answer earlier this afternoon that you have dismissed that idea? Do you believe, as Mr. Hayden is quoted as saying this morning, that those reserves belong to the contributors?

PRIME MINISTER: Of course they do.

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BARRON: And is it correct that if the funds decide not to co-operate, the Commonwealth can do very little about the reserves that they have built up?

PRIME MINISTER: Of course these funds belong to the contributors in every moral sense. A great number of these funds have lasted for a long time. They are benevolent associations, co-ops, in the very best sense. These are the closed funds and I have no doubt that those bodies will do the right thing by their members. As you know, however, the funds which have grown most rapidly in the last 20 years since the Commonwealth decided to register the funds and to make them the vehicle for any help in paying doctors' and hospital bills, these funds are run by very small bodies. The most notorious of them is run by a council composed of doctors and laymen nominated by those doctors, and the annual meeting is never notified and the contributors have no right to attend it. And there are other similar democratic examples. I think it is right, but Mr. Hayden really is much more au fait with these than I have been in the last Parliament, that the reserves have been run down a bit in the case of the medical funds, I think it was, as a result of the Nimmo Committee's recommendations. It was said that reserves should not be held for more than about three months. I think the reserves were larger a year ago than they are now. It would be possible to run down the reserves in that way. If it were found that these autocracies running the large open funds were not to devote these reserves to proper public purposes such as I have suggested, then the government would rely on the co-operation of the States to see that the contributors' funds were properly safeguarded and properly directed.

Ladies and gentlemen, perhaps there are a couple of things I might have mentioned. We expect quite quickly to ratify the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and the Treaty on the Prohibition of the Emplacement of Nuclear Weapons and other Weapons of Mass Destruction on the Seabed and the Ocean Floor and in the Subsoil Thereof. Those two nuclear treaties have been signed by Australia. We will be ratifying them quite soon. At yesterday's Executive Council meeting we took the proper procedures to enable us to sign, as Britain and New Zealand signed, I think four years ago, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These have been outstanding for a long time. There will also be steps to ratify fairly soon, before Parliament meets we hope, three I.L.O. conventions - No. 87 - Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise; No. 98 - Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining; No. 100 - Equal Pay; and No. 111 - the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination in Employment. We are taking legislative means to enable us to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination. It would be our hope to ratify all these human rights conventions by the 25th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which falls on 10 December next year, and upon which I made a statement two days ago. Might I conclude by mentioning that at the press conference I had on Sunday week I referred to the fact that it was not only the anniversary of Eureka but the first Sunday in Advent. I have been helped by the officer of the Prime Minister's Department who covers

the question of honours and decorations and also by a letter from the priest who performed the marriage ceremony for my son that on the first Sunday in Advent the epistle of the day, and you might be interested in the reference, Epistle to the Romans, Chapter 13, verses 11 and follow, (This is the Jerusalem Bible, translation) read:

"The time has come. Our salvation is near. Besides you know the time has come. You must wake up now. Our salvation is even nearer than it was when we were converted. The night is almost over. It will be daylight soon."

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