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THE PRIME MINISTER'S PRESS CONFERENCE

AT PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 13 MARCH 1973

PRIME MINISTER: First there's an Executive Council appointment. The Executive Member of the National Pipeline Authority will be Mr James Donald. I can give you details of his career afterwards if you wish. Next we're sending our first Australian Government Trade Mission to the People's Republic of China. Dr Cairns will lead it. The business interests represented in the mission will be led by Sir Ian McLennon, the Chairman of B.H.P. The other members we can give you afterwards also. Dr Cairns will be issuing a press statement on it.

*Cairns  
Trade  
Mission*

There were a very great number of Cabinet decisions this morning. Many of them were confirming decisions made by the Economic Committee and by the Urban and Regional Development Committee. Perhaps you can get details from Dr Patterson on the legislation for weirs on the lower Dawson River and assistance for the first stage of the Ross River Dam; from Mr Johnson on the terms of the new Commonwealth/State Housing Agreement; from Senator Wriedt on the details of the fruit-growing reconstruction scheme and the rural reconstruction scheme. I can give you the general terms of the arrangements we are willing to enter into with New South Wales and Victoria about the Newcastle dockyard and the new dock in Melbourne. The Minister for Transport and the Treasurer are authorised to negotiate an agreement with the respective governments under which the Australian Government provides the finance required for the construction of the proposed new docks on the condition that the dockyards will be jointly owned and operated by the Australian Government and the New South Wales Government in one case, by the Australian Government and the Victorian Government in the other case, the Australian Government's share in assets and management being commensurate with its contribution. Mr Jones can give you more details of this. These are matters upon which Sir Robert Askin and Mr Hamer have written to me. They were also matters of course which were considered by an inter-departmental Committee under the late government - that it be left to us to make a decision and proposal. There's also a matter concerning Evans-Deakin Shipyards in Brisbane. I can give you details if you like but then Mr Jones can go into greater detail with that also if you wish. Also Mr Jones can give you the terms of the assistance we are suggesting that the Australian Government and the Tasmanian Government should join in giving to maintain a shipping service to King Island. I can give you a fair amount here but perhaps you might like to ask the Ministers concerned.

*Reimburse*

Now then, there's to be amending legislation to the Public Service Act - I suppose I'd better give you the details of that. It really means that an acting Head of a Department will have the full authority that a Head has. There has been some doubt of that up till this stage.

Mr Beasley will be bringing in legislation for the Commonwealth Teaching Service. Mr Morrison made a submission which we endorsed on decisions taken by the Australian and Papua-New Guinea Governments. Senator Murphy will be bringing in legislation to amend the Book Bounty Act; to establish the Superior Court promised ten years ago; to permit us to ratify the Convention on Psycho-tropic substances; to appoint an ombudsman; and to establish an Australian Law Reform Commission. Senator Wilieese will bring in legislation to amend the National Library Act; Mr Morrison to carry out Metric Conversion; and the last one is a proposal which we endorsed from Senator McClelland that there should be a Committee comprised of the Department of the Media, which will provide the chairman and secretarial services, the Department of Education, the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Department of the Treasury to inquire into the nature and extent of supplies and shortages of text and reference books required by primary, secondary and tertiary students and to recommend means of improving the supplies and overcoming the shortages. We have in mind that we'll seek the assistance of representatives of book publishing, printing and selling organisations including government printers and university presses. Those are the decisions we made or confirmed this morning.

Q.: Mr Whitlam, I was wondering what happened to the F111. Has that been considered. If so, what has happened to it?

PRIME MINISTER: There is a submission on that. It has not been determined by the Cabinet.

Q.: Are there any hold-ups?

PRIME MINISTER: No. But there might be a couple of score of submissions which we haven't dealt with yet. We haven't determined this matter.

Q.: Sir, at a press conference today the Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister made it clear that over-crowding would make the Australian squadrons at Butterworth unwelcome by 1976. But he said that if the airfield facilities were expanded the Australian squadrons would still be welcome. My question, which I was going to address to Mr Barnard is: Will the Australian Government help expand the airfield facilities or will the squadrons be withdrawn in 1976?

PRIME MINISTER: This is too far ahead to determine at this stage. By 1976 the Mirages will be pretty well obsolescent.

Q.: In view of Malaysia's decision to withdraw from ASPAC I was wondering if Australia will follow the same line?

PRIME MINISTER: We won't withdraw from ASPAC at this stage. We are considering our membership of ASPAC because, clearly, the usefulness of ASPAC is very limited indeed while Taiwan remains a member because three of the members of ASPAC - Japan, New Zealand

and Australia have now recognised the People's Republic of China and not Taiwan. There is a Standing Committee of ASPAC meeting in Bangkok at the moment. We are not attending it. We would not be attending a ministerial meeting if one eventuates.

I should have read to you incidentally another decision which will interest you. I hadn't written a name against it so that's how I overlooked it. Export incentives: We will extend the present legislation for one year.

Q.: Mr Whitlam, if I can ask my weekly question on the American bases. Could you tell us how you can reconcile the Australian Government's attitude as announced by you and Mr Barnard on continuing the presence of the bases and the secrecy of the bases firstly with Labor policy on ANZUS which suggests that the ANZUS Treaty should be made into a slightly less militaristic thing than it has been in the past, and secondly, now that the Australian Government has ratified the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, can you explain how we can continue either as part-owners or as not owners at all to have the North West Cape Base - which as everyone knows is concerned with polaris submarines - on our soil?

PRIME MINISTER: The future management or joint management of the North West Cape Station will be discussed by Mr Barnard as he told you. If this is inconsistent with the Treaty to which we are party, then that would have to be considered also - that aspect.

Q.: Prime Minister, supplementary to that question, at your Caucus Meeting last week we believe a substantial number, or the majority of those present actually voted in favour of a motion which would have allowed discussion of a proposal that Cabinet should reconsider Mr Barnard's statement. That was defeated because of a technicality. However, does the vote influence you to take the matter back to Cabinet for reconsideration?

PRIME MINISTER: I'm led to believe that this matter arose too. I was out of the Caucus when it happened. I was out discussing the reply to what was to be a no-confidence motion in the Government or Mr Barnard on this subject. At any rate there has been nothing on the Cabinet Agenda about this.

Q.: You are not interested to take it back to Cabinet as a result of the vote which you and I both understand occurred in the Party meeting?

PRIME MINISTER: I think there are more pressing matters for the Cabinet to consider at this stage as you'll see.

Q.: Sir, after your meetings with Tun Dr. Ismail and President Soeharto how do you feel the Australian proposals for a new Asia-Pacific grouping are going - how are they being received now in your view at this stage?

PRIME MINISTER: I found Tun Ismail was interested as, of course, President Soeharto was in contemplating wider arrangements for regular discussion among all the nations of this region. I must say that when I answer questions like this, I'm not to be taken to endorse terms such as "grouping" which I think is the first time I've heard this one used. Also I know four-letter words are popular. People use the term "pact". Now nobody has suggested grouping; nobody has suggested pacts. What has been suggested - and it's been suggested by the ASEAN nations at their meeting four weeks ago in Kuala Lumpur - and it will be further discussed at their next meeting next month - the prospect of having some wider forum for discussions. The particular relevance to Australia is that there is only one arrangement to which we are a party which would seem to have continuing validity like - that's ANZUS - I don't really think one could say it was a militaristic; - it was the least militaristic of all the arrangements we've had. It wasn't made the basis for Vietnam or any other objectionable courses overseas. Similarly, Indonesia and Malaysia value an association with the other three members of ASEAN which also has continuing validity. The other arrangements to which Australia is a party - SEATO, ASPAC, which we've discussed earlier, and the five-power arrangements are all anachronistic or objectionable in part or transitory. Now in these circumstances it's mere wisdom to contemplate contemporary arrangements which will have some future.

Q.: Prime Minister, can you elaborate on the statement you made in Parliament this afternoon that there were reasons why Australia could not consider an approach to the International Court on Chinese nuclear testing?

PRIME MINISTER: Because the winds from the Chinese nuclear testing don't come within thousands of miles of Australia. The winds from the French ones do. The basis of our claim is that the French are committing a nuisance in our environment and we are hoping that the International Court of Justice will take steps to restrain that nuisance; to enjoin the French from committing it - the same way as can happen between neighbours within the jurisdiction of any of our domestic courts.

Q.: That environment applies only to Australia..?

PRIME MINISTER: No, no. It applies to all the countries of the same latitudes.

Q.: Doesn't the same argument apply to China, that other countries are being affected by fallout?

PRIME MINISTER: No. Not Australia. Australia is not discernably affected by nuclear tests by China. It is, we believe, discernably affected by nuclear tests by France. It is a sheer climatic matter that the winds encircle the world at particular latitudes. They don't go from one hemisphere to another.

Q.: Sir, are you accepting that with the return of the Pompadou Government then that the only way this matter can be settled to your satisfaction is going to the Court - that you think the Pompadou Government will go on with the tests irrespective of any meeting you have in Paris?

PRIME MINISTER: We won't assume that; that the Pompadou Government will persist with the tests. We will have the ministerial discussions which have already been the subject of discussions between France and Australia. The French suggested there should be discussions before an approach was made to the World Court. We accepted the suggestion and suggested that they should be ministerial discussions. The French accepted that suggestion.

Q.: Will you go to Paris and London?

PRIME MINISTER: I think it's unlikely that I'll go. I think it is likely that one of my senior colleagues will go, probably in Holy Week. Whether it's Maundy Thursday or Ash Wednesday - you're getting a bit out of my ecclesiastical depth here. The Australian Parliament will not be sitting in the week in which Good Friday falls. That would seem to be a convenient week for Australian and French ministers to discuss this matter in Paris.

Q.: Has any preliminary approach been made to the Court about the proceedings?

PRIME MINISTER: No, no application has been made to the Court.

Q.: Mr Whitlam, until 101 days ago when Labor was in opposition, Labor members spoke frequently about the defence significance of Omega. I remember Mr Barnard giving a learned exposition on how it could be used by nuclear submarines. Now when we contact Mr Barnard's office we are told it is purely a matter for Mr Jones.

PRIME MINISTER: That's right.

Q.: When we talk to Mr Jones, we are told he doesn't want to talk about it. Will you tell us what your Government's attitude is to Omega - what's going to happen about it, and do you expect any problems within the Party over this?

PRIME MINISTER: It is a matter for Mr Jones and his Department. There are no submissions from him on the subject.

Q.: Is it of defence significance, Sir?

PRIME MINISTER: I would believe it would have some defence significance. But I frankly don't know enough about it. I'm leaving it to him to brief me. But, as rational men, you will know that there are very few navigational aids which don't have some defence significance.

Q.: Mr Barnard in the past has been quite outspoken about it. You don't feel that if perhaps, as the expert in what's now the Cabinet, he should be consulted on this?

PRIME MINISTER: He has responsibilities in defence matters. This is primarily, as far as I concern myself with it, a navigational matter.

Q.: You agree with the previous government?

PRIME MINISTER: As far as I know, this is primarily a navigational matter. It will be taken up by Mr Jones if it is taken up at all.

Q.: Prime Minister, could I ask you a question. As Member for Werriwa, how will you vote on the Bill of which notice was given last week to allow abortion on demand?

PRIME MINISTER: In favour.

Q.: Prime Minister, in view of the statements by two Ministers in favour of limiting Australia's population growth, can you state a general Government policy on this, or has the Government a completely open mind pending the Borrie Report?

PRIME MINISTER: It's not of immediate concern to me I must confess. It's not a matter the Government has discussed. Everybody else is discussing it. One would expect therefore that Ministers would be among those who discussed it. I don't know how long Professor Borrie is going to take over his report. I think it's a couple of years on the original timetable.

Q.: On the F111 again, you mentioned that no determination had been made by Cabinet. Is this because of the lack of time or ...?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes.

Q.: No other reason?

PRIME MINISTER: No.

Q. There were no queries about some aspects of ...?

PRIME MINISTER: We didn't have time to determine this matter.

Q.: Sir, will the R.A.A.F. still take delivery of the first aircraft on Thursday as planned?

PRIME MINISTER: I don't know.

Q.: A couple of weeks ago Mr Hartley said that the Defence Department was being run by Americans. Your comment?

PRIME MINISTER: I believe it is being run by Australians. I'm in a better position to know.

Q.: Do you think the Americans have any control within the Department?

PRIME MINISTER: None whatever. Australians control the Australian Department of Defence.

Q.: Prime Minister, in Tasmania last week a member of your Cabinet, Senator Wriedt, was reported as saying that there was no room in the Labor Party for the Socialist Left. Was this statement made with your knowledge and your consent?

PRIME MINISTER: I don't know. It wasn't made in my presence. I will not comment on reports of what people have said unless I've seen a text.

Q.: You didn't see a text at this stage?

PRIME MINISTER: No.

Q.: Sir, do you believe there is room in the Labor Party for the Socialist Left?

PRIME MINISTER: I'm not going to promote speculation on this issue.

Q.: Prime Minister, in the Parliament (last Thursday I think) the Treasurer, Mr Crean, said that the Government would be making quite substantial changes in the Australian taxation structure for the next budget. Can you assure the public that this will not involve greater taxation on some members of the Australian public?

PRIME MINISTER: There is no submission before Cabinet on this matter.

Q.: Have you any plans, Sir, for an overseas visit which would include Great Britain and the United States this year?

PRIME MINISTER: There are no definite plans that I've made to visit either Britain or the United States this year. It's quite possible I shall. It might help you to know that I have made definite plans to attend the South Pacific Forum in Apia in Holy Week; to visit Japan to attend the ministerial conference - the annual one between Japan and Australia in Tokyo at the end of October; to visit the People's Republic of China on the way back; to visit Ottawa for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference in August.

Q.: Will you go to Washington during that trip, Sir?

PRIME MINISTER: I think it is very likely, but no arrangements have been made. There are a very great number of invitations I've received - Ambassadors and High Commissioners are bringing me personal letters from their Heads of Government or Heads of State in great numbers. I told them that it will be pretty well

impossible for me to accept these invitations this year. I would hope to accept them next year or the year after. There is one particular one which I must try to accept this year - India, - to which no Australian Prime Minister has made a visit since 1959.

Q.: Mr Whitlam, have you received a report from the Foreign Affairs Department yet on the arguments for and against the Treaty of Friendship and Commerce with Japan and can you say what your attitude would be on the merits of Australia signing such a Treaty?

PRIME MINISTER: I saw the paper on this a couple of months ago. I've not made up my mind on the subject, I've not discussed it with my colleagues. America, Britain, Canada have such treaties. That weighs with me clearly.

Q.: Prime Minister, would you say what you would hope Dr Cairns mission to China would achieve?

PRIME MINISTER: Increased trade.

Q.: Anything else?

PRIME MINISTER: Well that will be good.

Q.: I'm trying to clear up something Sir. Will the Cabinet's failure to have time to deal with the F111 today delay the R.A.A.F. physically accepting the first ones later this week on Thursday?

PRIME MINISTER: No. We're having a Cabinet meeting tomorrow to deal with this and some other unfinished business.

Q.: One other thing, Sir. When's Holy Week? Before Easter or the week after?

PRIME MINISTER: You were better instructed than I was in these matters. You learnt them at school I had to learn them in the Air Force. Under James I, whom I follow, Holy Week is in the week in which Good Friday falls. Easter Week is the following week.

Q.: You and Evelyn Waugh, Sir, are the only people I know who use the term.

PRIME MINISTER: Well, on my staff they refer to it as Passover.

Q.: Sir, your Government is in favour of trade union amalgamation. Have you any views on the amalgamation of your political opponents?

PRIME MINISTER: This is not a Dorothy Dix one ... As a matter of general principle I am convinced that the two-party system is what makes the British Parliamentary system work. I believe that it has



been the experience in Britain, New Zealand, the United States, Canada, Australia. I believe that our Parliamentary system would work very much better if there were two parties contesting each election - Federal and State - each House, Federal and State. I believe that the multiplicity of parties debauches the system.

Q.: Can I ask one final supplementary to that ... A public opinion poll published today says that 55 per cent of Australians are now in favour of 'first-past-the-post'. Is this likely to influence your decision announced to a meeting that you won't introduce it at the next elections but possibly the one after?

PRIME MINISTER: I don't believe that we should change the system. I undertook this before the elections. We should not change the system on which the next House of Representatives elections will be contested. I favour 'first-past-the-post' voting myself but that doesn't mean that I feel that we should change the system without having a mandate from the people. I therefore believe that the next House of Representatives elections would be contested on the present preferential system or at least on the optional preferential system. *Voting*

Gentlemen, I won't be able to give a Press conference next week. I will be in Canberra for the very special reason that the Yugoslav Prime Minister is visiting here in the course of his tour through the whole of this region and that is the day when there is going to be a Government House luncheon, and it is the only time when I can have talks with him. We are therefore also taking the opportunity of having Cabinet meetings morning and afternoon, and that Night I have a long-standing dinner engagement in Sydney with the High Court.

Q.: Will you be having a private briefing with newspaper heads?

PRIME MINISTER: Not unless you insist.