

Review of Previous Government's Programmes

The Prime Minister (the Hon. E.G. Whitlam, Q.C., M.P.) announced today that the Government was establishing a high level "task force" under the leadership of Dr. H.C. Coombs to undertake a close scrutiny of the continuing policies of the previous Government. The decision to undertake this scrutiny resulted from recent discussion by Cabinet of the broad question of expenditure priorities and the review would relate to the spending programmes (including "disguised expenditure" through the taxation system) which were in being when the Government took office.

The Prime Minister said that, quiet apart from any other consideration, thorough-going review of the policies of the previous Government in these regards was highly desirable in its own right. Over and above that, the Government had undertaken to introduce a wide range of policies and programmes involving substantial expenditures of its own and, in doing so, it would be important that it should have the widest possible options available to it. Otherwise, there was a clear risk that the introduction of its own programmes could be impeded or even frustrated by the continuing demands on resources represented by the programmes of its predecessors. The Government was determined to avoid any such outcome.

... The terms of reference given to Dr. Coombs, and the membership of the task force he is to lead, are set out in the attached copy of the Prime Minister's letter of 28 March to Dr. Coombs.

28 March 1972

Dear Dr. Coombs,

The purpose of this letter is to confirm to you the outcome of our recent discussions, arising out of Cabinet's Decision that -

"Action be set in train to apply a close scrutiny to continuing policies of the previous Government so that room may be found for our own higher priority programmes."

As you know, I regard the importance of such action as self-evident. Quite apart from any other consideration, a thorough-going review of the policies of our predecessors seems to me highly desirable in its own right. Over and above that, we have a lot to do ourselves and it will be important that we should have the widest possible options available to us in instituting our own programmes.

In the light of our discussions, I have concluded that the only effective way in which the close scrutiny of the previous Government's continuing policies can be carried out is through the setting up of a high level "task force" for that purpose. You have agreed to serve as the leader of that task force.

It is essential, I think, to keep the task force small and I am proposing the appointment of six people of appropriate standing and capacity to assist you, namely -

Mr. M.A. Besley, First Assistant Secretary,
Department of External Territories.

Dr. S.F. Harris, Deputy Secretary,
Department of Overseas Trade.

Mr. R.D. Phillips, Deputy Director-General,
Department of Civil Aviation.

Mr. J.J. Spigelman, Senior Adviser to the
Prime Minister.

Mr. J.O. Stone, Deputy Secretary (Economic),
Department of the Treasury.

Mr. P.P. McGuinness, Senior Adviser to the
Minister for Social Security.

I am requesting that these officers should serve in their personal as distinct from departmental or other capacities.

As leader of the task force, you will have the right to call on departments for such information, and for the preparation of such papers, as you deem relevant to your enquiries.

So far as purely administrative aspects are concerned, you have authority to make such arrangements as you deem appropriate in the circumstances. No doubt those appointed to assist you would in any case be able to draw on their own departments for "back-up" in the pursuit of your enquiries.

In order to avoid any problems that might arise in preparing a report from the task force as a whole, I am placing responsibility for its report upon you personally. That is, I envisage that the task force as a whole would discuss what should go into your report; but you, as leader, will decide.

I should be grateful if you would arrange for your report to be available to me well before the Budget. I would then propose to bring it forward for consideration by Ministers in the Budget context.

Yours sincerely,

E.G. WHITLAM

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