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THE PRIME MINISTER'S PRESS CONFERENCE

AT PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 3 APRIL, 1973

PRIME MINISTER: There are a very considerable number of decisions which the Cabinet made this morning. Most of them you can get details about from my colleagues, and I've told them that you might be asking them details. There are some however which come within my responsibility so I'll give a bit further detail about them.

We decided on two significant improvements in the conditions of service for Australian Government employees. The first deals with maternity leave and the second with furlough - long service leave. Legislation to implement these decisions will be introduced as soon as possible but the improved conditions will be effective from 1 January last. I'll be issuing press statements which will give the details. They'll go to some pages. They include however, in the case of (a) maternity leave a minimum of 12 weeks paid maternity leave and up to one week's leave with pay for employees who require it to care for the mother or children. (b) In the case of furlough an increase in the accrual rate of long service leave to half a month for each year of service after 10 years, reduction in the qualifying periods for long service leave and for payment in lieu. These decisions are consistent with my Government's policy that as the largest single employer in Australia, we have a duty to advance the cause of all employees by establishing new and improved standards of employment for our own employees. The maternity leave provisions in particular, of course, have been ILO standards since 1919.

Cabinet decided to establish a task force to apply close scrutiny to continuing policies of the previous Government so that room may be found for our own higher priority programs. The Chairman of the task force will be Dr. Coombs who will be responsible for the final report. To assist him I have sought and obtained from their respective ministers the release of the following officers from their normal departmental duties so that they can serve on the task force in a personal capacity: 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.O. Stone, Deputy Secretary, (Economic), Department of the Treasury. They will be joined on the task force by Mr P.V. McGuinness of Mr Hayden's office and Mr J.J. Spigelman of mine. Mr Walsh will be releasing to you the letter I've sent to Dr. Coombs.

We have decided to set up a National Commission on social welfare. The Chairman will be Mrs. Maree Coleman, the Deputy Chairman will be sought by advertisement. The part-time members will be Professor R.G. Brown, Professor of Social Administration at Flinders, Mrs. Sadie Canning, Matron of the Leonora Hospital, Western Australia, Mrs. Edna Chamberlain, Head of the Department of Social Work in the University of

Queensland, Professor Harris, Professor of Economics at James Cook University, Mr Tom Roper, Lecturer in Education at La Trobe University, Professor E.G. Saint, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine in the University of Queensland, the Reverend Keith Seaman, Superintendent of the Adelaide Central Methodist Mission, Mr Greg Sullivan, Q.C., of the N.S.W. Bar, and an A.C.T.U. representative who will be nominated by the President of the A.C.T.U. Mr Hayden can give you more details of the terms of reference - I have got them here actually - but I don't suppose you want me to take up time in reading them to you. Now to the other decisions.

Mr Barnard, as Minister for Defence, and I as Foreign Minister, will be referring to the Joint Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence any Foreign Affairs and Defence aspects of the Omega Navigation System. The Attorney-General will draw up a bill to repeal those sections of the Crimes Act which permit the deportation of citizens who were born overseas and the declaration of organisations by the High Court or a State Supreme Court. These sections have been in the Act I think since 1926. Mr Uren can give you the details of the inquiry into the leasehold system of land tenure. Mr Justice Else-Mitchell will preside over the inquiry and the terms are being settled in consultation with him by Mr Uren and Mr Enderby. Mr Uren will give you the details of the establishment of Australian-State Land Commissions. Dr Patterson and Mr Enderby can give you the details of a survey into a regional township in the Aligator River area. Dr Patterson can give you details of our suggestions on a Burdekin River Authority. Mr Crean can give you details of a technical bill to make defence expenditure a charge on loan funds. Mr Jones can give you details of the reappointment of the Select Committee on Road Safety which the House of Representatives established last year. Senator Wriedt can give you details of the Wool Research Grants which we've approved for next financial year. Senator Wriedt is leaving for a meeting of the International Wool Secretariat tomorrow. He can also give you details of our proposals for a national brucellosis and animal tuberculosis campaign, and Mr Morrison can give you the details of a bill to amend the Marine Science Institute Bill and details of the Ord River Research Program. Are there any questions?

Q.: May I ask you two questions please: one is on the Rhodesian Information Centre and the powers of the Government, the Foreign Affairs powers, to close that if the New South Wales Government doesn't deregister it under the Companies Act. I'm not clear about those powers, Sir, and the other question was legislation being introduced by Senator Murphy ultimately with regard to the integration of law enforcement authorities. I think some people are worried that this could put too much power of the law enforcement of an investigation and of a prosecution character into the hands of one man, and I wonder how you see this particular problem in terms of a free society?

PRIME MINISTER: First of all, the Rhodesian Information Service. There are proceedings pending in the Supreme Court of New South Wales to strip that shop of its title. If it turns out that the New South Wales law is not adequate to deal with the situation then we would introduce in the Parliament a bill to implement the United Nations Security Council resolutions. We would under

Foreign Affairs power have the jurisdiction to pass such a bill. At present we are supporting the application to take the title away in the Supreme Court of New South Wales. The other legislation about, say, a Federal Bureau of Investigation or a bill to unite or co-ordinate the Commonwealth Police forces - the Commonwealth Police Force, the Australian Capital Territory Police Force, the Northern Territory Police Force and various law enforcement agencies in different Federal departments - that bill has not been discussed by the Cabinet at all. There can be no question, however, of any powers given to any agency exceeding those to which we are accustomed and to which in particular the Australian Labor Party gives weight. There can be no question of there not being a due process of law in all these matters. Not only would we not wish to diminish in any ways these civil liberties, but the Constitution probably wouldn't let us.

Q.: Can I follow this up with one more question: it's a question of using these powers at a particular political time in the country. Now yesterday the homes of a number of Croats were in fact entered by police forces with warrants legally, but these acts did happen at a time when the Attorney-General was under criticism for not producing enough evidence in the Parliament of Croat terrorist activities. The Government has been in power for something like four months and it could be asked why these visits didn't take place say, two months ago...

PRIME MINISTER: ... or four years, or two years ago. These questions can be well asked.

Q.: I am particularly implying to this Government. Why...

PRIME MINISTER: It would be fair to ask why weren't these actions taken four years or two years ago. I don't propose to answer questions on that subject because there are Court proceedings pending.

Q.: Prime Minister, could I ask you about your statement in the House concerning a conspiracy by some public servants. You indicated that some action was pending and about to be taken. Would you say what action?

PRIME MINISTER: No.

Q.: Could you say how many people were involved?

PRIME MINISTER: No. I didn't raise the word 'conspiracy' Mr Snedden used that word. On the face of the document as I said, and I quoted it, there would appear to be conspiracy between representatives of two Departments at this meeting on 2 March. As I said in the House, I will not say who the persons were who attended that meeting, and as I said also in the House, I'm not going to cast dispersions on people who, it might turn out, don't deserve to have dispersions cast on them.

Q.: Sir, will you be making an ultimate report to Parliament on this, the subject having been raised in the fashion it has been?

PRIME MINISTER: I'll see what happens.

Q.: Would you explain why you believe it's a conspiracy, Mr Whitlam?

PRIME MINISTER: This is being televised and the people who see it mightn't have had the advantage of listening to Question Time so I'll read the passage from the report which I read at Question Time. You'll remember that this was a passage from a report made on 5 March by the ASIO representative at a meeting of representatives of several departments which was held in Canberra on 2 March apropos of a statement which the Attorney-General made on 1 March to the effect that he'd be making a statement on Croatian terrorism, and this is the extract which I read at Question Time:

"The Department of Foreign Affairs made two points on the proposed statement, that is the statement which the Attorney-General, Senator Murphy, said that he would be making in the Senate. The first was that the statement should not be at variance with the interim reply given to Yugoslavia in response for the aide memoire presented to Australia following the Bosnian Incident in 1972. The Bosnian Incident you will remember was that in which nine former residents of Australia (six naturalised Australians) had been picked up in an incursion into Yugoslavia. The second was that unless there were reasons to the contrary, they prefer the statement to be deferred until after the visit to Australia of the Prime Minister of Yugoslavia from 20-22 March 1973. The Attorney-General's Department accepted the first point, but argued on the second point that the Attorney-General might find it necessary to table the statement at an earlier date."

Q.: Sir, on such Inter-departmental Committees does the representative of the various departments have responsibility to report to the Head of the Department or the Minister in each case. In other words, would the Foreign Affairs representative there have a responsibility to report to the Head of the Department or to report to you as Foreign Affairs Minister?

PRIME MINISTER: I don't know what his responsibilities are to the Department. There are of course a very great number of Inter-departmental Committees having meetings all the time and I would imagine there is only a small number of those meetings which are ever brought to the attention of the ministers concerned. On this occasion, it is somewhat surprising that none of the ministers concerned were told about the meeting.

Q.: Prime Minister, Senator Murphy has told the Senate that you in fact are conducting the investigation into this subject. Can you tell us what procedures have been adopted. Are you questioning people personally? Have you delegated someone to do it?

PRIME MINISTER: The latter.

Q.: Can you tell us who?

PRIME MINISTER: No.

Q.: What's the aim of the investigation? Is it just to confirm that that report is accurate and what action is open to the

Government if you find that it is accurate?

PRIME MINISTER: Most of these men would be public servants and, if this were true, and I'm making no assumptions, I would assume there has been a breach of duty by one or more public servants.

Q.: What will be the penalty if there is a breach?

PRIME MINISTER: Whatever the Public Service Act requires.

Q.: If any action is taken against any public servants would you make that action public?

PRIME MINISTER: I don't know what the procedure is. In some cases, action against public servants has to be gazetted. I wouldn't be conducting the investigation or, if it is appropriate, imposing any penalties. It's not for me to do.

Q.: Sir, is it a member of your staff who is conducting the investigations?

PRIME MINISTER: I won't answer any more on this.

Q.: Sir, one more question. When do you hope to have the findings of this investigation?

PRIME MINISTER: I don't know.

Q.: Sir, you referred in Question Time to the previous Government having lied to the Yugoslav Government?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes.

Q.: Are you convinced that such a strong statement is justified and might this not just have been normal diplomacy to try and avoid trouble between the Governments?

PRIME MINISTER: No. I think what I said was accurate, it was strong, and deservedly strong. For many years the Yugoslav Government has been protesting to Australia - bringing it to the notice of the Australian Government - organised activity against Yugoslav missions and representatives. The previous Government always said that there was no evidence on which to prosecute individuals. It always avoided the question that there was organised activity. Nobody reading or listening to the ministerial statements last Tuesday would doubt that there was organised activity. The former Governments of Australia did not accurately put the position to the Yugoslav Government.

Q.: Prime Minister, could you have known publicly about some of these organisations like J.I.O. and ASIO and D.S.C. Could I ask you about the Australian Secret Intelligence Service which comes under your ministerial control - if you could tell us who heads that operation, where it has its headquarters and what its operation is?

PRIME MINISTER: I will answer no questions on security matters. Nobody in my position has and I won't and I'm certain you know that.

Q.: Sir, on the March 2 meeting, did ASIO have any responsibility to report either to yourself as the Head of the Government or to the Attorney-General as the Administrator?

PRIME MINISTER: I've already said I don't know what the duties are in this case. I would have thought that a meeting which, among other things, discussed a pending statement by a minister would have been brought to the notice of the ministers who had departmental officers at that meeting. I don't know what the duty of the ASIO representative was. All I should perhaps add at this stage is that from now on meetings of this character will have agreed minutes.

Q.: When did the investigation which you refer to begin?

PRIME MINISTER: Immediately after Senator Murphy discovered the document from which I have quoted this extract. I heard of this on the 16th, yes.

Q.: Prime Minister, Senator Murphy rests his case on visiting the ASIO headquarters in Melbourne on the basis of the discovery of this document at the ASIO offices in Canberra. We still don't know why he made a midnight visit to the ASIO offices in Canberra. Can you tell us why?

PRIME MINISTER: I don't know why, but you will see the result of it and I think you'd be very interested that this information about this meeting and such a report of it as I've quoted were discovered as a result of Senator Murphy's visit to the ASIO quarters in Canberra.

Q.: Sir, Senator Murphy has said that this document which he discovered at ASIO headquarters in Canberra - the original of it was in the ASIO headquarters in Melbourne - should have been brought to his knowledge, but was not brought to his knowledge. Is that not prima facie evidence that the Head of ASIO has not carried out his responsibilities to his Minister?

PRIME MINISTER: I don't know what the duty is - this is the third time I've said it. I do believe that ministers should have been told of the meeting discussing this matter. I think Senator Murphy should have been told, but whether it was ASIO's job to tell him I do not know.

Q.: They had the record. They were the ones who kept the record of it.

PRIME MINISTER: Yes.

Q.: He said it should have been brought to his knowledge and was not.

PRIME MINISTER: I'm not saying whether ASIO should have brought it to his knowledge. I don't know if it was their job to do it. But I do think it should have been brought to his knowledge, yes.

Q.: Mr Whitlam, you said that we would be interested in the information that was found but why weren't we told about it. We, meaning the public, when Senator Murphy spoke to the Senate

or prior to that the fortnight before, and had it not come out the way it did, did you ever intend to release this information which you released today?

PRIME MINISTER: No, I wouldn't have released it.

Q.: What is the objection of the Government to releasing the information contained in the document other than the security aspects of it?

PRIME MINISTER: That is the reason, and it's a sufficient one, but Senator Murphy said that in the Senate last week and he said that it was on the advice of the Director-General of ASIO. Having read the document I can well believe that he would have given that advice and I would believe it sound.

Q.: But, Sir, surely there's no...

PRIME MINISTER: I think there's another gentlemen down there..

Q.: Prime Minister, can I ask you has the Government considered the continued appointment of Mr Barber as Director-General of ASIO?

PRIME MINISTER: No.

Q.: Has it considered varying the terms and conditions of his appointment?

PRIME MINISTER: No.

Q.: Will it do either of these things?

PRIME MINISTER: I don't know.

Q.: You say you don't know. Would a decision on that rest on the subject of your inquiry that you are carrying out now?

PRIME MINISTER: I wouldn't think that the inquiry which is being conducted into the accuracy or not of the report of this meeting would concern Mr Barber. Mr Barber was not there.

Q.: Prime Minister, why couldn't Senator Murphy have rung Mr Barber in Melbourne and requested him to provide this information? What is the reason for that?

PRIME MINISTER: You ask him.

Q.: Prime Minister, as it was the ASIO representative who wrote the report in attendance at the meeting on March 2 as an official representative of ASIO and if so to whom does he report?

PRIME MINISTER: I don't know.

Q.: Did he take part in a discussion?

PRIME MINISTER: I don't know.

Q.: Prime Minister, on a different topic, you mention the

task force examining the previous Government's expenditures: is there any suggestion that this task force could also examine your policy expenditures. Is there any suggestion that some of those might be curbed in appreciation of this?

PRIME MINISTER: No.

Q.: This whole idea of a task force - you said Eric's going to release a letter on it - can you give us an idea of the structure. A task force's an institution we haven't heard of before. Is it going to call for public evidence or is it going to have access to departments?

PRIME MINISTER: It will have access to departments.

Q.: Full time? I mean the personnel you've got there are pretty high-powered...?

PRIME MINISTER: Aren't they? It won't be taking public evidence, and I doubt whether they can do it full-time. I expect them to give a lot of time to it.

Q.: Have you set a time on when they report?

PRIME MINISTER: No.

Q.: When do you expect a report?

PRIME MINISTER: It would obviously be before we were discussing the budget.

Q.: Sir, it seems clear that one of the reasons for the task force is concern about inflation. Can you give us an idea of the extent to which the Government is concerned about the problem - how serious it is at the moment?

PRIME MINISTER: I don't think I'll go into that here. Of course we're concerned about it. This is one aspect of it.

Q.: Prime Minister, in view of the decision in the United States and also in New Zealand to introduce price control on the sale of red meat, would you consider taking similar action here in Australia?

PRIME MINISTER: I wish we could, but the Federal people can't do it. As Mr Crean pointed out, the States have power in this respect. Two-thirds of the Australian people live in New South Wales and Victoria. There is nothing to limit those Parliaments bringing in price control on red meat as has happened in the United States and New Zealand. Nothing to prevent them. We would obviously applaud them doing it, but we can't do it federally.

Q.: Will you ask them to do it?

PRIME MINISTER: No. But they really should be able to take some initiative themselves in these matters.



Q.: There's fairly regular correspondence between yourself and the Premiers..

PRIME MINISTER: Correspondence between the Premiers and me relates to things that we do jointly. There is nothing that we can do with regard to price control on such commodities.

Q.: Prime Minister, there seem to be now only two States which the previous Government kept at a distance for ideological reasons - Albania and Cuba. Are relations with these two States being considered? Has there been an approach from Cuba? Are our considerations of this being swayed by - in deference to the United States?

PRIME MINISTER: We recognise both Albania and Cuba. We always have. We don't have diplomatic representatives in or from Albania or Cuba. We're not discussing having diplomatic representatives in or from either of them. There is a suggestion that there should be a Cuban Consulate in Australia. There is in fact quite a considerable trade between Cuba and Australia.

Q.: Prime Minister, the task force will be reconsidering former Government decisions in a number of areas, but what state is your review of the former Government's apparent decisions. I understand you called for all-out standing reports from the Board. Are you going to consider such decisions as the decision to protect the Chain Factory at Benalla?

PRIME MINISTER: This is just what I'm not going to do - go into ad hoc imposition or demolition of tariffs. This is the matter that Sir John Crawford's looking into.

Q.: Sir, on this inquiry, will Dr. Coombs, as the man who's responsible for it, be mainly full-time on it?

PRIME MINISTER: No, he can't be full-time on this because he is doing a lot of other things too as you know.

Q.: Prime Minister, in announcing the Cabinet decisions, you said that yourself and Mr Barnard had agreed to refer to the Joint Committee on Defence and Foreign Affairs any aspects of Omega which have defence significance. Does this mean that Cabinet has decided that Omega does have some defence significance?

PRIME MINISTER: No, it hasn't discussed it - whether there are Defence or Foreign Affairs aspects of Omega. There are many people who assert it has. They'll have the opportunity to ventilate their views and to have those views examined or exposed in public before the Committee.

Q.: And will this delay any decision on the future of our Government until that Committee has reported?

PRIME MINISTER: I don't think we would be making a decision until the Committee has reported but how quickly the Committee reports is up to the Committee. All these Parliamentary Committees, listeners and viewers may not realise are composed of representatives from all the political parties in the Parliament.

Q.: Have you or the Government considered the abolition of the D Notice system?

PRIME MINISTER: This has never been considered. You must be from the Nation Review. They're the only D Notices whose existence I would ever acknowledge.

Q.: May we take that seriously, Prime Minister?

PRIME MINISTER: You'll take it as it was meant, I'm sure.

Q.: Prime Minister, in the Cabinet decision or endorsement to refer the Omega question or defence aspects of it to the Joint Parliamentary Committee, was there any wider discussion by Cabinet on the question of defence facilities in this country?

PRIME MINISTER: No, not at all.

Q.: Prime Minister, did you discuss Senator Murphy's proposed divorce legislation today?

PRIME MINISTER: No.

Q.: Prime Minister, the Treasury would normally be the Department that would exercise continuing scrutiny over past government commitments wouldn't it?

PRIME MINISTER: It would be one of the Departments, and a very senior member of that Department is on the task force - Mr Stone.

Q.: I was going to ask you do you think that the job it was doing in this respect was deficient so that you had to set up this Committee - two personal staff representatives from the Government on it. Unusual, the point I'm trying to make...

PRIME MINISTER: You're referring to Mr McGuinnes from Mr Hayden's staff and Mr Spigelman from mine?

Q.: Yes, it's unusual to have a mixed committee like that.

PRIME MINISTER: The fact that it's unusual doesn't make it improper or undesirable. Mr McGuinnes is not disqualified from the fact that he used to write perceptively for the Financial Review, and Mr Spigelman is a well-known author.

Q.: Speaking of which, Sir, what is the Government going to do about the question of open government? What's happening to all of the reports that were reviewed by Mr Spigelman and by other Ministers?

PRIME MINISTER: We're waiting for some of them to come in from the Department.

Q.: I take it from your answer to Mr Lombard previously that you don't intend to discuss security matters.

PRIME MINISTER: No that's right.

Q.: That you include Secret Intelligence Service within this on the basis that it would appear to impinge upon the security of other countries. What harm could be done to the national interest by entering in general questions such as are you satisfied with the operation of the Australian Secret Intelligence Service? Are you satisfied that it fits in with our foreign policy and does no harm to it?

PRIME MINISTER: I'll repeat I'll not answer questions in Parliament or here or anywhere on security matters. That is a procedure which is followed - has been followed - by all my predecessors. It is a procedure which I shall follow too. Some of you have mentioned some organisations by name. I will not confirm or deny or correct any such names. The reason is obvious. By asking sufficient number of questions and then getting denials or confirmations or corrections people can find out about the security procedures of this country. I will not answer questions on these matters.

Q.: Prime Minister, may we ask a question on the role of Australia on South-East Asia?

PRIME MINISTER: Could you limit the question?

Q.: What new possible role can Australia obtain in South-East Asia after Labor took over?

PRIME MINISTER: It's a very wide subject. I've written a lot of articles on this. You don't want me to to expatiate on this. The general historical context is that we want peace to be established in this area. We do not want arrangements such as were made after the end of the Korean War or at Geneva in 1954 to miscarry a second time. We are therefore in active consultation diplomatically with all the countries of that area in the hope that the latest agreements (ceasefire agreements) in Vietnam and Laos will succeed and that such agreements can be made in the Khmer Republic. Secondly in the overall economic or social context we want to see that the great disparity between relatively developed countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Japan and all the countries in between is reduced. And there again internationally, diplomatically, we are doing what we can to see that developed countries help to raise the standards in developing countries. Even Japan can't do it single-handed. We can make some impact, but a marginal one. Obviously the countries of Europe - east and west - and of North America must also contribute to that end. And a concluding thing I could point out is that we are the only country which has never been ruled by another people, except Thailand. Every other country within thousands of miles has within the last generation been ruled by other countries. We ourselves have ruled some other countries, conspicuously Papua New Guinea. So therefore our policies are designed quite deliberately to rid Australia of any colonial or colour policies. I think that was German T.V. wasn't it?

I thought you were going to ask me about the Mercedes.