

THE PRIME MINISTER'S PRESS CONFERENCE

PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 22 MAY 1973

PRIME MINISTER: Gentlemen: When nearly six months ago I promised to have a press conference every Tuesday that I was in Canberra, I had hoped that I would be able to have them alternating between Tuesday morning and Tuesday afternoon so that the afternoon papers and the morning papers could share the benefits. As you know, it has proved impossible to have any in the morning because there has been no break between the Cabinet meetings on Tuesday morning and then Question Time and the necessary procedural matters in the House. However, last week and, of course, this week and next week there will be Cabinet meetings on Monday. I had hoped that we would be able to get through the Cabinet meeting yesterday in time to have the Press Conference on Monday afternoon. We weren't able to do so, so then I thought we would have this one this morning after Question Time. We can't have a Question Time until the Speaker lands, so I hope it hasn't inconvenienced you - we can have it now. Now I have got no information to give you because the decisions of the Cabinet were released to you yesterday. You know my principle - I don't release these until after Question Time, and if people don't have the gumption to ask questions at Question Time about Cabinet decisions then you are the first recipients of them. But they have been given to you.

Q. Could I ask you whether your Government approached the States to try and settle areas of difference on the Off-Shore Resources legislation. If not, why not, and what have you to say about the South Australian Premier, Mr. Don Dunstan's comments on Sunday night that the new Federal Labor Government should have held such talks with the States?

PRIME MINISTER: Any such talks would have been futile. Mr. Gorton found that. We decided to go ahead. The States are completely intransigent on this subject, and in my policy speech - well, I will go back further. The Labor Party declared its attitude towards this legislation at its last Federal Conference at Launceston in June 1971. I mentioned that we were going to enact the legislation if the people returned us. I said that in my Policy Speech in November. The Governor-General's speech opening this Parliament undertook that his Government would introduce the legislation. He used the same words as he used in opening the previous Parliament in February 1970. In the meantime, the Cabinet had made the decision. I think it was in January - it was one of the very early decisions that we made.

PRIME MINISTER CONT... The decision was communicated to all the Premiers. Without conferring with the Australian Government, one of the State Government's did in fact seek to approach the British Government about this - I think in February. But in all events gentlemen, the Labor Party's attitude on this has been known ever since the legislation was first introduced over three years ago by a Minister representing Mr. McMahon who was then the Foreign Minister. It remained on the Notice Paper for the whole of the rest of the last Parliament. Throughout the three years of the last Parliament the Labor Party supported the legislation. Everybody has known and expected that we would enact it, and this is our intention. Any consultations with the States on this subject would have been as futile now as it proved in 1970, 1971 and 1972. The whole reason for it is this: That Australia is believed to have valuable resources under the Territorial Sea and in it, on and under the Continental Shelf. We don't want to have the situation which has applied to our on-shore resources, particularly Mr. Court - as he then was - and Mr. Bjelke-Petersen enabled overseas interests to get access to Australian on-shore resources under terms which were to the disadvantage to our country. We don't want the same situation to arise if 7 Governments in Australia exercise or purport to exercise jurisdiction over our off-shore resources. There ought to be one national Government dealing with this. We shouldn't allow a Federal system to distract us from that issue and to dissipate our resources once again. You don't want this sort of break of gauge position arising in respect to those resources where this country is fortunate, particularly minerals and fuels.

Q. On the Victorian State elections, Mr. Whitlam. There was an apparent drop of about 6 per cent in support for the Labor Party since the Federal election. Were you concerned about this, and do you attribute it to a lack of confidence in either the State Labor Party or the Federal Labor Party?

PRIME MINISTER: No I don't attribute it to either. Of course I was disappointed in the Victorian result. We got only a marginally improved percentage of the vote over the last State elections, but I will certainly give, and we should all give credit to Mr. Hamer for having the good sense to pick the eyes out of Labor policy. He is a very different man to Sir Henry Bolte. He sees a good idea, he identifies it and he adopts it. In fact, on the relevant issues - as everybody was saying before the election - there was very little difference between Mr. Hamer and Mr. Holding and for that matter, myself.

Q. I refer to reports in this morning's press about the cost of Commonwealth cars for ministerial staffs and staffs of Opposition leaders, and I ask you whether you are concerned about this misuse of Commonwealth cars, has Cabinet discussed the matter, and are any new controls on the use of these cars by the staffs of ministers and Opposition leaders being considered?

PRIME MINISTER: There has been no Cabinet discussion on this, and I haven't seen the report on which the story is based. I was naturally very interested in the report. I notice that it was said that Mr. Lynch's staff has spent some thousands of dollars on taxi orders. Yes, well I have been unable to verify it...I don't know what the strength of this report is. I haven't seen it. I mean I've seen no report upon which this story could be based.

Q. In view of the shortages of labour apparent in the BHP and GMH factories, are you considering any reassessment of the migrant intake, particularly unskilled migrants?

PRIME MINISTER: This is a matter where really I think it would be more helpful if you were to discuss the matter with Mr. Grassby or Mr. Cameron. There has been difficulty in recruiting unskilled labour for some of these remote or unattractive jobs, and both ministers have made comments on this. I believe there are discussions taking place on it. I have not been involved in them and the Cabinet hasn't discussed them.

Q. I was told this morning that Cabinet decided to support the Senate Inquiry into the Croation issue. Does this recognise the right of the Opposition to determine business of the Senate?

PRIME MINISTER: This is a matter which will come before the Caucus tomorrow. It is not a matter which Cabinet decides by itself, the Caucus decides whether it will participate in Parliamentary committees which are proposed by any or several of the Opposition parties, so that is something which I would expect to be determined at Caucus tomorrow.

Q. Yesterday the retiring President of the Arbitration Commission was asked about the penal sanctions, and he said that they didn't really matter either one way or another and that it was a matter of political ideology and not of reality. In the context of the Victorian election results, would you be prepared to hold a double dissolution on the issue of the penal clauses being rejected by the Senate, and would you be prepared to have the election campaign fought on that issue?

PRIME MINISTER: The crucial part of the Conciliation and Arbitration Bill which has been passed by the House of Representatives and is now awaiting the Senate doesn't turn on the penal clauses. There have been penal clauses for many years now, I think since 1951, and in recent years throughout the history of the McMahon Government, and I think throughout the greater part of the history of the Gorton Government, they were never used, so they generate a very great deal of heat and they have very little effect. What Sir Richard Kirby said was, I think, as in most things he says, good sense. But the crucial thing, the central thing which the Conciliation and Arbitration Bill aims to do is to remove the barriers - the union amalgamation which were introduced in the Lynch law of last year and in fact to facilitate union amalgamations. One of the very great impediments to economic advance and industrial relations in Australia is the fact that we have over 300 unions. If we only had 30 unions we would be a much more orderly and prosperous community.

PRIME MINISTER CONT... Inevitably jurisdictional disputes, demarcation disputes arise when there are so many unions, and European countries in particular, marvel at the archaism, the anarchy, of the dispersion of our industrial organisations. Now I believe that is something recognised by people in the employers side and everybody interested in industrial relations, that we would be very much better off if we had 30 unions in Australia instead of 300. I think there are only about 14 unions in Australia which have more than 50,000 members. That's/~~far~~ too attenuated form of industrial organisation. There are, I think, a hundred or a couple of hundred unions which have less than 1,000 members. I don't know the exact figures but if you are interested I can get them for you, of course. Now that is an absurd position. Now you mention the position about a double dissolution. Everybody should know, and I do believe that you gentlemen of the press should play your part in letting people know if they don't know already, that the circumstances for a double dissolution arise when the Senate has twice rejected a bill from the House of Representatives or twice made a unreasonable delay in dealing with a Bill from the House of Representatives, or has twice unacceptedly amended a Bill from the House of Representatives. Each of those actions - the rejection, the delay, the amendment having a clear three months interval. No what's happened at this stage is that the Senate has rejected one Bill, the Electoral Bill, and that will be introduced as early as possible, probably the first day again in the Budget session. Now is those circumstances, if it is rejected again, there would be the circumstances for a double dissolution. If a double dissolution takes place it will obviously be in the context that there has to be an election before the end of June next year for half the Senate anyhow. Now let there be a bit of rationality about this. The circumstances haven't yet arisen, they may not, but they can't arise for a few months yet.

Q. In your foreign affairs role. Have you sought any support from other countries for the Australian case to the ICJ through diplomatic channels, and specifically, will you be seeking the support of the Danes when you see the Danish Foreign Minister, I think on Wednesday?

PRIME MINISTER: We have already, of course, sought the participation and achieved the participation in the proceedings by New Zealand and by Fiji. You will recall that I discussed this matter with Mr. Kirk in Wellington last January and our respective Attorneys General, Dr. Finley and Senator Murphy have discussed it a few times in between and I've been on the telephone to Mr. Kirk a few times and I also discussed it with him in APIA at the meeting of the South Pacific Forum. I also discussed the matter with Ratu Mara, the Prime Minister of Fiji when he was in Sydney about three months ago, and also in APIA and there ~~have~~ been telegraphic communications with the Fijians. So, in fact, the application is three-fold: Australia, New Zealand and Fiji. When I see the Danish Foreign Minister this week I expect to raise it. As you will remember, I did raise it with Mr. Trudeau in Vancouver on Holy Thursday, with the Foreign Secretary of Britain on the Tuesday after Easter, and with Mr. Colombo in Rome on the Thursday in Easter week and with the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Mauritius over that following weekend.

Q. Sir, when you say you raised it with them, did you seek their diplomatic support in perhaps their moving against France as well?

PRIME MINISTER: None of the States - even in the Common Market - support France. They all think France ought to sign the partial test ban treaty which was accepted by the United States, Soviet Union and Britain ten years ago. Perhaps I should add this here, that there is a very great deal of confusion and deliberate obfuscation about the attitude of the Australian Government to Chinese nuclear tests in the atmosphere. I made it plain to Mr. Chi Peng-fei in July 1971, and Dr. Cairns has done so to Mr. Chou En-lai last week, that we believe that these tests are objectionable whoever carries them out, but we are taking proceedings in the International Court of Justice. We are doing so on the advice of some of the leading practitioners before the Court, and leading academic men in the field of international law. We are doing so because there is a 1928 Agreement to which both France and Australia are parties and New Zealand also, which permits use by each of the parties to have their disputes settled by the World Court. China is not a party to that 1928 Agreement. Again, we are parties to the Statute of the International Court of Justice, so is New Zealand, so is France, so is Fiji. China is not. So the things that we are doing about the French nuclear tests are not available against any Chinese nuclear tests in the atmosphere.

Q. Sir, I realise the demand for funds from various sources is a matter that has not probably been sorted out by the Cabinet or the Government in its entirety, but the go-ahead for the re-development of Brisbane airport appears to have been delayed or deferred by the Cabinet. You may have even heard of some of this concern during your visit to Eagle Farm race course last Saturday. If there has been a delay or deferral, when do you expect Cabinet to deal with this long-standing matter and can you give any assurance that this long delay - delayed for many years by the previous Government - for the re-development of the Brisbane airport to bring it to full international standard will not be affected by any decision to have a second airport for Sydney?

PRIME MINISTER: The Cabinet has completed its deliberations on this matter. There will be no further ones for some months. At any rate, the decision, I think, was announced after the meeting at which we considered it. That would have been three or four months ago, I think. Now I don't want to be more precise on this because I'm not sure if I haven't been in correspondence with Mr. Bjelke-Petersen about this and after the conference is over I will see if there is any more I can tell you about this including the question of correspondence. You will realise that I don't want to say anything on this subject which would produce any inflation of land prices in any relevant area. In answer to a previous question, I was referring to this 1928 treaty, to which Australia, New Zealand, France are parties. The precise title is the 1928 General Act for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes.

Q. Have you received any indication yet whether President Nixon will invite you to the White House when you are on your way to Ottawa in August. How do you see the present state of Australian-American relations?

PRIME MINISTER: There has been no communication either way on this subject. I will be in North America between the engagements I have accepted in Mexico and those, of course, which I have undertaken as a Commonwealth Head of Government in Ottawa.

Q. Does your answer to the double dissolution question mean that you won't now go ahead with your threat to recall Parliament during the winter recess, to consider any Bills that may have been thrown out by the Senate between now and the end of the sitting?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, let me clarify that one. If the Senate rejects a Bill from the House of Representatives, the Representatives knows that fact, it is informed of that fact, no action is required by the House of Representatives. It can, after a lapse of three months, following the rejection, introduce the Bill again. That is what we will be doing in respect of the Electoral Bill which the Senate rejected last week. The only circumstances in which the House of Representatives will be recalled before the Budget Sittings are if the Senate makes amendments to any Bill from the House of Representatives and then the Cabinet believes that those amendments are unacceptable in those circumstances to save time we could recall the Caucus and then we could recall the House of Representatives and we would reject the amendment which the Senate had made. In those circumstances we could - three months later - introduce the Bill in its original form or with any amendments which commended themselves to us. But you don't recall - you don't have to recall - it would be completely superfluous, irrelevant to recall the House of Representatives if a Bill from the House of Representatives was rejected outright by the Senate. The three months dates in the case of rejection from the date of the rejection. The three months date in the case of an unacceptable amendment from the date when the House of Representatives refuses to accept the Amendment.

Q. You told last week's Caucus you would recall, now you say "could". Which is it?

PRIME MINISTER: That will depend on the actions, the nature of the amendment.