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PRIME MINISTER'S PRESS CONFERENCE, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA,
TUESDAY 13TH NOVEMBER 1973

PRIME MINISTER: Well ladies and gentlemen any questions.

QUESTION: The Singapore Foreign Minister, Mr Rajaratnam said that he wants to raise with you the question of the defence of South East Asia and the Five Power Arrangement. He suggested that relations between Singapore and Australia could break down if the Five Power Arrangement collapsed. Do you see any differences of opinion with Singapore over the defence of the South East Asian region?

PRIME MINISTER: The Five Power Arrangements are supported by the Australian Government, I expect that they will continue. Any differences that there have been between Australia and Singapore were raised by Mr Lee Kuan Yew at Ottawa early in August, with one exception, they were all matters of differences of view which had arisen under the McMahon or earlier Governments. I am looking forward very much to seeing Mr Rajaratnam, I've known him for many years. I will be happy to discuss any matter he chooses to raise.

QUESTION: Unclear

PRIME MINISTER: The repatriation of students.

QUESTION: In your interest to have your concept of an Asian co-operative grouping formed, would you give way on the membership of the United States and the Soviet Union if necessary. Would you accept their admission?

PRIME MINISTER: I won't speculate on membership as extensive as that. I have never suggested it.

QUESTION: I would like to ask a question on Parliamentary Privileges, particularly in view of the fact that an increasing number of Australians will be coming before Parliamentary Committees and being subject to these archaic laws. On the 9th of December 1971 in the House of Representatives, you said: "My own Party is committed to the proposition that Procedures and Privileges of Parliament, we used the term in the plural because we think it should apply to State Parliaments as well and their committees, should be adapted to contemporary standards of efficiency and justice." Will you continue along this line?

PRIME MINISTER: I am committed to that proposition, because I think I helped to frame it when it was put in the Australian Labor Party's Platform at the Conference in mid-1971. I have already raised many of the matters in the Platform concerning Standing Orders of the Parliament in the Standing Orders Committee of the House of Representatives. I think the Speaker is trying to arrange a meeting of that committee this coming week.

QUESTION: Will you raise the Privileges matter at that meeting?

PRIME MINISTER: I am not sure that I will be raising that. Offhand, one of the matters I have asked them to consider - and I asked them to consider this some months ago - is procedure for rostering ministers in one House to answer questions without notice in the other House. As you know, this is done in the Indian Parliament, where Ministers have to be members of Parliament, and obviously it happens in many of those parliamentary systems where Ministers can't be members of Parliament but are rostered to answer questions in each House of the Parliament. That happens in the Low Countries and in France. So I raised this at a very early meeting of the Standing Orders Committee after we became the Government. I forget the other matters. That particular matter I mentioned there is specified in the Labor Party's Platform.

QUESTION: Just of this privileges matter, sir, you did describe the present privileges position as archaic in 1971, but what are you doing about not making it archaic?

PRIME MINISTER: As I have told you, I have raised one matter that I can recall, one matter which I raised at the earliest moment, a matter which is specified in the Party's Platform, specified largely on my initiative. I believe Mr Chalmers is referring to the fact that it is a breach - it is a contempt of Parliament - for a newspaper to publish a report of a parliamentary committee before it has been presented to the Parliament. This is a matter which is concerning many Members of Parliament at the moment. As the Standing Orders are at the moment, and I believe as they always have been - I think we get it from the British too - it is a contempt of Parliament for a newspaper (and in this respect the position of a journalist or an editor of a newspaper is the same as any other citizen) - it is a contempt of Parliament for the report of a parliamentary committee to be published before the Parliament itself has received the report from its committee.

QUESTION: Sir, would you agree to appear in a face-to-face debate with Mr Snedden on the prices and incomes referendum?

PRIME MINISTER: This matter was raised with me at the National Press Club Luncheon, which I attended at the invitation of many of you, last Thursday. The suggestion was that in the week before 8 December referendums on prices and incomes, the National Press Club should have a luncheon to discuss those issues, as it always does on the eve of a House of Representatives elections and I think, the Senate elections. The proposition was that instead of the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition appearing separately at luncheons before the club, as happens on the eve of elections for the House of Representatives or the Senate, they might appear together. I said I would be happy to do so. I made the suggestion that whoever gave an opening speech - whatever order that was - there should be a summing up in the reverse order. Presumably, the order would be Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition, then questions from all of you, then Leader of the Opposition and Prime Minister summing up.

QUESTION: Since the National Press Club has become something of a shambles because of seven million outsiders attending it, would you be prepared to do the same thing in a television studio instead?

PRIME MINISTER: Let me see what happens with the National Press Club invitation. I think I can say it was an invitation - it was certainly a suggestion to which I responded positively. In other words I suppose, to put it in ordinary English, to which I said yes.

QUESTION: My question is in relation to the referendum. In an address to the Australian Electrical Manufacturers Association in Canberra on September 17, you said that if the referendum on prices was carried, the first move would be against land prices, and you continued that by Christmas legislation would be passed to stabilise land prices. Could I ask you, sir, that in view of the time it takes for writs to be returned, is this going to be possible and, if not, do you think the House will be able to get up on December 6 which was proposed earlier on?

PRIME MINISTER: You have a good point there. I did say that. Subsequently, I realised that there would have to be time for the return of the writs or any challenges - I don't think challenges are likely - but we have to await the return of the writs before the Parliament can pass bills under the new constitutional power conferred at the referendum. You asked me also when the Parliament would be getting up. I doubt if the Parliament will be getting up on 6 December. I can't be certain when the Senate will get up, but I doubt whether the House of Representatives will get up on the 6 of December.

QUESTION: Will it still be possible to get it through before Christmas?

PRIME MINISTER: The return of the writs takes longer than Christmas.

QUESTION: It is not generally known, but I hope you won't mind it being made known, that you are a fairly learned bloke in matters of theology, with as good a knowledge of doctrine and Church history as any man I know who is in holy orders. Can you tell us whether in this post- or sub-Christian country in which we now live - but above all in this post-conciliar period when people have arrived at the idea of God which I think you arrived at many many years ago, where we are getting to the essence of what Christian belief is - would you agree that in China there is, in fact, a spirit of applied Christianity which is obvious throughout all Chinese life - economic, social, political - and the kind that we in this decadent, bourgeois, western democratic state ---

PRIME MINISTER: You can call me bourgeois but you are not going to call me decadent.

QUESTION: The point I would like you to say something about, although I realise there are more interesting political matters

than this, is whether you would agree that there is an extraordinary parallel between Chairman Mao's dictum "We must be modest and prudent, avoid arrogance and rashness and serve the people" ---

PRIME MINISTER: I follow that myself.

QUESTION: Well, not yourself actually, but another - the Lord Christ, who said 2,000 years ago, "He who shall be chiefest among you shall be the servant of all". Would you care to give us your thoughts on this parallel - if, in fact, there is one - between Chairman Mao's somewhat lengthy thing and Jesus Christ's somewhat pithier ---

PRIME MINISTER: I don't know that I would respond to questions on this subject to anybody other than yourself. It is about 40 years since we last spoke in Canberra. I want to make it plain that I don't hold myself out as an expositor of Christian doctrine or ethics. I find them interesting and I wouldn't be altogether unacquainted with them, but I do not assume the role of explaining or propounding them. Also, you will realise there are risks in making any comparisons between communism and Christianity - between Mao and our Lord. Nevertheless, I would think it clear, as many of you have now had the opportunity of observing for yourselves in China, that there is a degree of dignity accorded to individuals whatever their calling, whatever their age, which we do not find in countries which have been, and still claim to be, Christian. There is a respect for one's fellow man and woman to be seen in China which, I believe, is admirable.

QUESTION: Last week in Parliament you said that you expected that ministers would answer in the spirit of the answers which you had given to questions. Since then - in the last week - ten ministers failed to give an answer on interdepartmental committees in the same spirit that you did. Will you make sure they do give an answer?

PRIME MINISTER: They have not failed to answer questions in the spirit in which I have answered questions. I will take you back to the position which applied before the elections. Preceding Australian Governments, in answer to questions about what they were doing on certain subjects, would answer: "We have established an interdepartmental committee". After Mr McMahon became Prime Minister, no answers were ever given to questions about what departments were represented on those committees, when the committees were appointed, when they had reported or when they were expected to report. What the Labor Party in Opposition and, not least, I myself constantly complained about was that the Government was hiding behind interdepartmental committees. It was using them as an alibi for failing to act or deferring action. I have made it plain and all my ministers have also made it plain and there has been a complete set of questions put to all of them - we have all made it plain that if any question is asked about the membership or the timetable or the charter of an interdepartmental committee it will be answered.

QUESTION: Would you accept that it is difficult to ask a question about any specific interdepartmental committee if your ministers will not enable you to know the names of any committees that exist?

PRIME MINISTER: No. We have frequently announced the matters that are being considered by interdepartmental committees. I take you back to the earliest conferences that I held with you, when I referred to the appointment of interdepartmental committees to consider revaluation assistance. You asked me what departments were on them; I told you.

QUESTION: Before any mining licences are granted for uranium mining in the Northern Territory, will local Aboriginal groups be asked whether or not they want such mining and, secondly, if they do want such mining will that mining be on their terms and conditions in regard to Aboriginal equality and Aboriginal financial return from that mining?

PRIME MINISTER: This matter is still being considered.

QUESTION: The Queensland Premier has blamed Canberra, or your Government, for its attitude towards foreign investment rates for the failure of a foreign group of companies to go ahead with an aluminium smelter at Weipa. Do you accept that criticism?

PRIME MINISTER: We don't propose to down-value the Australian dollar in order to accommodate the foreign companies interested in a smelter at Weipa.

QUESTION: Following on from the interdepartmental committees, I understood from what you said in the House that you would instruct your ministers not to give the answer which they have all given so far on interdepartmental committees - that you would instruct your ministers to tell the Leader of the Opposition, if he asked, which interdepartmental committees each specific minister, or each specific minister's department, was represented on. Do I understand from this answer that this is no longer the case?

PRIME MINISTER: You are not correctly quoting what I said about my ministers. My ministers have said precisely what I said; they have quoted what I said. I believe I said it on 20 September. I have repeated the gist of it now to Mr Farmer: namely, that any questions about particular interdepartmental committees, their composition, their charter, their timetable, will be answered; and my ministers have done that in respect of any that have been named. They will do it in respect of any that are named.

QUESTION: But with respect, you yourself gave an answer to Mr Snedden which described which interdepartmental committees the Prime Minister's Department was represented on. Your other ministers have not.

PRIME MINISTER: No, let's be precise. I went further than the undertaking I gave on 20 September by giving, in answer to a further question Mr Snedden asked about which interdepartmental committees had been established since we took office on which we were represented, by giving him that information. He then asked some further questions about the membership of those committees and I answered that. But I gave no undertaking that my ministers, or I myself, in general, would answer such questions. The original undertaking I gave on 20 September has been followed by my ministers. It will continue to be followed by my ministers. They have quoted it; they follow it.

QUESTION: What progress has been made in renegotiating the agreement on the U.S. communications base at North-West Cape? Can you say when Mr Barnard will be visiting Washington for talks on joint control of the base, and could you say whether members of Parliament have asked to see the bases in accordance with the terms laid down by Mr Barnard earlier this year?

PRIME MINISTER: Mr Barnard will be going to the United States in the recess.

QUESTION: If my memory serves me right, you told Mr Anthony that decisions relating to tariffs would be announced in the Parliament before they were announced to the Caucus.

PRIME MINISTER: No, on a matter of substance. I told Mr Chipp that.

QUESTION: But that was the gist of what you were saying?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes, of course, in general.

QUESTION: It was my understanding from a Caucus briefing that Caucus could ask to consider these matters before they went to the Parliament. And my understanding is that you have before you the colour television report of the Tariff Board and the IDC. Could you tell me what procedures will be followed at this stage? Will the Cabinet make the decision, then tell the Parliament, or will it go to Caucus first?

PRIME MINISTER: The former.

QUESTION: Could you say why the Cabinet has not yet considered the question of four weeks' annual leave for employees other than Commonwealth employees in the Australian Capital Territory, particularly in view of the decision of the Queensland Industrial Commission that workers in that State should have four weeks' leave?

PRIME MINISTER: The Cabinet has considered this matter and it believes, as appears from the Australian Labor Party platform, that this matter should be determined by arbitration, and, as you point out, it has since been determined by arbitration in Queensland.

QUESTION: Have you had time to confer with Senator Willesee on the offer by 33 South Australian medical students to go to Ethiopia?

PRIME MINISTER: No.

QUESTION: Do you know when you will be able to confer with him?

PRIME MINISTER: I said I would have the matter looked into. I didn't undertake to confer with Senator Willesee directly. This was a question asked by Mr Hurford, the M.P. for Adelaide, yesterday afternoon. I'm certain it is being acted on already. I am certain that the department is investigating the matter already. I hadn't heard about it before Mr Hurford asked his question without notice.

QUESTION: Figures released in a Question on Notice answered by Mr Grassby today indicate that of 26,013 migrants who came to Australia on assisted passages for the first six months of this year, only 80 were from Asia. Given Mr Grassby's answer on no applications for migration from Japan, but in the context of the fact that there is great interest to migrate to Australia from Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines, do you agree with allegations that Australia's immigration policy still has a bias in favour of whites?

PRIME MINISTER: There is no official bias on racial grounds at all. There is an inevitably greater number of Caucasians coming to Australia than people of other racial origins because the basis of the immigration program has been switched from official recruiting to family reunion.

QUESTION: Do you give the Labor Party any chance of winning the New South Wales State elections and, if so, by how many seats?

PRIME MINISTER: I'm not going to comment on that.

QUESTION: I'm confused and a little bit disturbed by your answers on IDCs, and I would like to ask a very brief and blunt question. Why shouldn't your ministers tell Mr Snedden which interdepartmental committees their officers are members of. What is the difficulty? Is there such a vast number that it would take the Public Service months to work it out?

PRIME MINISTER: It is just the degree of time taken up, money spent in compiling answers to questions when there may, in fact, be no particular point that Mr Snedden wishes to establish. If he wants to name any committee he will be told what departments are on it and what its terms of reference are and what date it did report or is expected to report.

QUESTION: Can't you agree with the point made by Mr Spigelman of your office that it is impossible to ask questions about committees when you don't know whether the committees exist or not? And it is surely reasonable in the interests of open government that people who are outside the Government should be entitled to know what interdepartmental committees exist?

PRIME MINISTER: No; primarily, we are concerned in what decisions Governments make and how they reach those decisions. If there is any departmental committee which the Government sets up, and somebody wants to know about that particular committee, he will be told. But it has never been suggested, and I don't propose to initiate, publishing all the interdepartmental committees which the Government may establish. I have pointed out in answers to questions by Mr Snedden that there are some matters of international or commercial relevance where it would be quite wrong to identify the existence of a committee or its membership. There have never been so many reports to Parliament by bodies advising the Government - never.

QUESTION: I understood that in the early weeks of your Government you did have inquiries made for a consolidated list of the interdepartmental committees. Have you ever been given that consolidated list?

PRIME MINISTER: I forget.

QUESTION: What are we going on about? I mean there are all sorts - I don't understand, you see, all this curiosity about interdepartmental committees. Ever since we were boys here in Canberra there have been committees, interdepartmental, formal and informal, and all the rest of it. Surely what matters is what comes out in the end. What is the reason for being so testy about it - I don't think it matters two hoots.

PRIME MINISTER: The important thing is that people ought to know what the Government decides and why it has decided it and that has been done to a degree that has never been done by any Australian Government before.

QUESTION: When you were in Opposition did you find it frustrating that you were unable to get the information that you are now denying to Mr Snedden?

PRIME MINISTER: No. I would have been very pleased indeed to get all the information that I now give.
