

THE PRIME MINISTER'S PRESS CONFERENCE
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PRIME MINISTER: Ladies and gentlemen. I haven't got anything to volunteer to you. Is there anything you want to ask me?

QUESTION: I refer to the return of power of the Labor Government in Britain and your previously unsuccessful attempt to get support from the Heath Administration for Australia's argument with the French over nuclear testing in the Pacific. Have you had any contact with the new Foreign Secretary, Mr Callaghan, about the proposed French tests this year, if not, would you expect to get more sympathetic support from the new Administration than from the previous encumbrance at 10 Downing Street?

PRIME MINISTER: We haven't had any communications with the new British Government yet. I do think that they will be more positive on this matter than the previous administration.

QUESTION: Sunday night in your address to the nation, you were talking about the five referenda which you said would be held at the same time as the Senate election. In view of what's been happening in the Senate, does this mean that the Senate election will not be held until it is possible to hold the 5 referenda. Alternatively, will you hold the referenda after the Senate election.

PRIME MINISTER: No, the proposal all along has been to hold the referendums at the same time as the Senate election. That was stated more than 6 months ago at the Constitutional Convention in Sydney, and it has been stated on several occasions since then. My broadcast and telecast on Sunday night dealt with the four referendums for which bills have now been twice passed by the House of Representatives and once rejected by the Senate. The broadcast and telecast didn't deal with the Constitution Alteration (Inter-Change of Powers) Bill because while it has gone through the House of Representatives it hasn't yet been voted on by the Senate. If the Senate rejects that bill then that referendum couldn't be put to the people. The other referendums can all be put to the people because, even if the Senate twice rejects them, there has been the necessary double passage by the House of Representatives.

QUESTION: But if the Senate does not reject them in time for perhaps the date you were thinking of for the Senate election, would you then hold the Senate elections back?

PRIME MINISTER: It is quite clear that the Senate knows that these referendums are to be held together with the Senate election and if there was any delay in the Senate we would make it clear that that would be regarded as a failure to pass and we could then....

QUESTION: You would go to the Governor-General on this?

PRIME MINISTER: Yes, yes, as the Constitution provides. The Constitution has always made it possible for the Governor-General to put a referendum to the people if it has been twice passed by the House of Representatives and twice rejected by the Senate. The Senate can't prevent a referendum being put to the people in those circumstances.

QUESTION: You say the Constitution makes it possible for Sir Paul Hasluck to do that. How certain are you that he would take this view. Is it mandatory for him to take the view that you have suggested?

PRIME MINISTER: I am certain the Governor-General would act on the advice of his Attorney.

QUESTION: Even if the Senate approves the referendum on the exchange of powers, it's not possible now for you to have that referendum in conjunction with the Senate election before May 12, and the likelihood of the Senate having rejected a change in the Standing Orders is in fact a delay of about another month. Do you now have any hope whatsoever of putting back the Senate election until June to have that referendum with it?

PRIME MINISTER: The Senate election doesn't have to be held until the end of June because the Senators who will be elected will take office on 1 July. Ordinarily Senate elections, like House of Representatives elections, are held on Saturdays. So, accordingly, it would be possible to have the Senate election on the last Saturday in June. I'd add that I would expect - certainly hope - that the Senate would pass the Constitution Alteration (Inter-Change of Powers) Bill because this bill was approved, in principle, in fact applauded by the Premiers of N.S.W. and Victoria. Also, by the Premiers of South Australia and Western Australia and the Attorney-General who was leading the Tasmanian delegation at the Constitutional Convention last September. And while the Premier of Queensland didn't endorse the proposal he didn't reject it either. Since then the seven Parliamentary draftsmen, the Commonwealth, the six State ones and all the Attorneys-General, the Commonwealth and the six State ones, have considered and approved the text of the bill which I introduced and which the House of Representatives passed. This was promised at the Constitutional Convention six months ago, so it would be a gross breach of faith if the Opposition parties in the Senate were to delay that bill. You mention the call of the Senate. Under the Standing Orders of the Senate such a call takes place on the third reading. If, on the second reading, the Opposition Senators were to vote against the bill then, of course, there would never be any third reading, there would never be any call of the Senate, so one would know I expect the fate of that bill on the second reading.

QUESTION: What's the date of the Senate election?

PRIME MINISTER: That depends on the dates on which the Senate passes any of the five bills for referendums which are before it or the date on which it rejects any of the four which it has already rejected once. I should add that if the Senate this time passes any or all of those four which it previously rejected, then two months must elapse before those referendums which it approves are put to the people. If it rejects those - all of them the second time - then there is no minimum period before they are put to the people.

QUESTION: I was just wondering what your reaction was to the apparent reluctance by the A.C.T.U. Executive to co-operate in the introduction of some skilled car workers from the Philippines to Australia as permanent settlers, and further if you feel that this decision may have caused some misgivings in Manila about....

PRIME MINISTER: I am discussing....Mr Cameron, the Minister for Labor, Mr Grassby, the Minister for Immigration, and I are discussing this matter with the officers of the A.C.T.U. next Friday morning in Sydney.

QUESTION: Just following on that question. Do you still believe that they should be allowed to come to Australia?

PRIME MINISTER: I will make no more statements on this matter until Friday morning.

QUESTION: Do you remain committed to completely abolishing the means test on old age pensions in the life of this parliament?

PRIME MINISTER: You know what I have said in the policy speech.

QUESTION: Do you have any plans to visit the flood areas of N.S.W.?

PRIME MINISTER: I am seeing if I can arrange my program to go there.

QUESTION: We understand there is an Interim Report from the Henderson Inquiry into Poverty received by the Government. I wonder when that report will be released?

PRIME MINISTER: We haven't discussed it in Cabinet yet. It hasn't been circulated in a submission to Cabinet yet. I would expect that it would be released this session.

QUESTION: There has been discussion over recent days by Mr Crean the Treasurer, on the question of restructuring the tax scale. He said today he would do it. Do you believe this should be done in this year's Budget.

PRIME MINISTER: We haven't discussed this. There has been no submission to Cabinet on this matter.

QUESTION: To take you back to David Solomon's question. Were you saying that the only influence on you on what date you decide to have the Senate election was whether or not you could hold the referenda on the same day?

PRIME MINISTER: We shall hold the referendums on the same day, and I can't say what that day is yet because the Senate still has the bills for the referendums before it.

QUESTION: Would you give favourable consideration to any suggestion that the federal Government should enter the life and general insurance field?

PRIME MINISTER: I think there are much greater arguments for the federal Government entering the general insurance field than for it entering the life assurance field. Life assurance is generally mutual and there is a fair amount of competition on the terms that are available. I do believe it is important that the Australian Government should enter into the general insurance field - most of the State Governments have already entered it. It is a field which is dominated still by foreign companies.

QUESTION: The West Australian and the federal Government co-operated on feasibility studies of the West Australian leg of the national pipe grid. This report has been presented and has been available for some time but hasn't been released. When do you expect that this report will be made public?

PRIME MINISTER: I didn't think it was available yet.

QUESTION: Well it has been widely leaked in West Australia and it has been presented to the Government.

PRIME MINISTER: I didn't know it had.

QUESTION: Abolition of the means test, Prime Minister. Would you countenance any slowing down in the abolition of the means test beyond the lifetime of this Parliament.

PRIME MINISTER: As you know, before the last elections both the Liberal Party and the Labor Party committed themselves to the abolition of the means test in the lifetime of this Parliament.

QUESTION: Mr Gorton indicated in 1970 that the Commonwealth would pay all legal costs if the States took the Seabed issue to the High Court. Is this your intention also?

PRIME MINISTER: I haven't considered that. We have given no undertakings on that. The States, you will remember, acted without consulting the Australian Government on some matters in this field when they petitioned the Queen to refer certain matters to the British Privy Council. And, as the Queen stated in her speech opening the Parliament, both the British and her Australian ministers advised her not to do so.

QUESTION: I am wondering how you reconcile the referendum proposal to make all electorates equal in numbers of people with your past adherence to the principle of "one vote one value". If you still adhere to "one vote one value", will you be extending the franchise if the referendum is passed?

PRIME MINISTER: The referendum bills, you remember, guarantees that everybody who is 18 or more shall have a vote for every House of Parliament in Australia - not only the two federal Houses of Parliament but all the State Houses of Parliament including, of course the Legislative Council of N.S.W., which isn't elected directly by the people at all. So, there will be no extension of the franchise. The Bill itself guarantees the franchise to people who are 18 or above except where there are laws restricting the franchise in the case of people of unsound mind or serving prison terms. Any such restrictions, like any other applications of that Constitutional proposal, are left to the High Court to determine. Anybody who has a vote or believes he should have a vote will be able to approach the High Court under this referendum proposal, so there will be no extension of the franchise involved in the referendum proposals.

QUESTION: But what about the question of "one vote one value"?

PRIME MINISTER: My view on this has been expressed for 10 years in the Parliament - 10 years and 1 month. Ever since the Warren Court, the Supreme Court of the United States, laid down that principle. The Australian Constitution borrowed from the United States Constitution the provision that in determining the number of members in the House of Representatives from the various States one should take into account the respective population of those States. Now, the U.S. Supreme Court, for ten years now, has said that one also equates the population of districts, as they call them, within each State, and that is what we are doing in this referendum proposal. We say that the population is what is considered in determining how many members there will be in the House of Representatives from each State. And we therefore say that in consistency there ought also to be regard paid to the population in determining the respective size of the electorates inside each State. I have said this for over 10 years now.

QUESTION: Has it been established, and are you satisfied that there was no cover-up of the Perkins Affair by your staff?

PRIME MINISTER: Certainly I am satisfied. I am surprised that you are making that insinuation. People made it in the Opposition parties in the House of Representatives to their discredit and in breach of the customs and courtesies of the House, mentioned the name of one of my advisers - a contemptible action. Now, I hope you are not suggesting that any of them have done it but, in case you are, or in case any of the viewers have such a suspicion, then it is their duty as well as their option to give any evidence for that suspicion to the Crown Solicitor or to the A.C.T. Commissioner of Police. As you know, there have been persons arrested arising from the incident of Thursday week and also there have been some summonses issued but I am not sure whether they have all been served or if all the persons concerned have been arrested. But once it was known that there might have been facts not disclosed in the undefended proceedings before the Canberra courts then the Attorney-General, immediately, through the Secretary of his Department had the Crown Solicitor for the A.C.T. and the Police Commissioner for the A.C.T. look into this matter. As a result there have been summonses issued and some at least of them have been served and the persons concerned arrested.

QUESTION: I was just wondering whether you would make a categorical declaration now that you will adhere to the schedule that you proposed to abolish the means test in the lifetime of this Parliament?

PRIME MINISTER: I have answered enough questions on this already. I won't make any further statement on it. I believe what I have said is quite clear, but what I have said I am not going to repeat.

QUESTION: You have saved me the trouble of asking a question, Prime Minister.

PRIME MINISTER: That doesn't deter many of you because my observation of these conferences is that you all want to get your own personal reply to the same question.
