

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR E.G. WHITLAM, Q.C., M.P.,  
AT THE OPENING OF THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS AND  
INQUIRY CENTRE, PITT STREET, SYDNEY, FRIDAY 26 APRIL 1974

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One of the great themes that led to the election of the Australian Labor Party in 1972 was the need for a new openness in Government. For too long before we came into office, Australian Governments had operated on the assumption that they knew best, that the people had no right to be kept fully informed of their activities. For too long Government decisions had been taken against a background of secrecy. The people weren't given the facts to enable them to judge adequately the worth or otherwise of official decisions which could have momentous, and even tragic, results for the community. No issue has symbolised this failure in the last decade more than Vietnam. The people weren't told the whole truth about this bloody and mistaken war. Yet despite the absence of Government honesty and frankness, their sons were sent to fight in that quagmire, to be wounded and some cases killed.

The failure to communicate with the people took many other forms. All too often, our predecessors suppressed documents and reports on which their actions were based, all too often they delayed the publication of these documents for into intolerable periods. Their purpose was clear: to prevent the people from having a proper chance to evaluate their performance.

My party, my Government has been determined to reverse the secret practices of the past. In my policy speech in 1972 I said: "We want the Australian people to know the facts, to know the needs, to know the choices before them. We want them always to help us as a government to make the decisions and to make the right decisions." To achieve this objective, I pledged that a key channel for communication between the Parliament and the people would be a number of expert commissions making regular reports and recommendations on new spending. I made it clear that we would promptly publish their findings, so that all interested people could know what was proposed and comment upon those proposals.

On this, as on the rest of the program which I outlined in my 1972 policy speech, the Government has sought to do what it promised. In the last 17 months, a number of special bodies have been established to examine and deal with the needs of Australia and Australians over a wide range of activities. The Schools Commission, for example, has been the agent for the transformation of education in Australia. The Hospitals and Health Services Commission has provided a framework for a new Commonwealth involvement to meet the health needs of the community. The Social Welfare Commission has begun the mammoth task of meeting and co-ordinating social services throughout the country. As these and other new bodies have reported to the Government, we have promptly tabled their findings in the Parliament. We have made it possible for the people to be fully aware of their recommendations and the reasons behind them. In the first year alone, 39 reports on inquiries instituted by the Government were presented to the Parliament, not including reports from Parliamentary Committees or reports on inquiries instituted by the previous government.

We have proved ourselves as the first Government in a generation to be frank with the people. We have been the first Government in a generation to share our decisions and the reasons for them openly with the whole community. We pledge to continue on that path, to persevere in the creation of a new tradition of openness in Government.

In the last week our opponents have suddenly discovered the words "open government". This discovery has come in the midst of their rush to produce a brace of policies so that they can pretend that they have a coherent program. Their spokesmen have promised that they would publish "wherever practicable" reports, reviews and other materials concerning Government decisions. Just what does "wherever practicable" mean? On their past performance it would mean nothing more than that they would publish such documents only when it suited their purpose, only when they would face no embarrassment, only when their decisions had been made and foisted on the community. I defy anyone to believe that such words have any more meaning, coming from the same men who suppressed one Government report for 15 years. In 1958 the Liberal-Country Party Government received the report of the Morshead Committee on the re-organisation of the Defence group of departments. A succession of Liberal-Country Party leaders refused to publish that report. It was finally tabled on the 30th May 1973 - by the Labor Minister for Defence. The parties that talk so much about the defence needs of Australia weren't prepared to share with the public vital documents on the administrative needs of this area. The parties who now expect you to believe that they want open government for 15 years cloaked that report in secrecy. They are no more credible when they talk of open government than they are when they pull out of the hat any of their other hasty and ill-considered policies.

The only Government that can be trusted when it makes such a pledge is the present one. It made that pledge 17 months ago and it has stood by it. If people want the opportunity to share knowledge and information with the National Government, they have only to give us a fair chance to continue to honour that pledge.

Open government, of course, must mean more than simply tabling documents in Parliament and then printing them. It is vital to our democracy that that be done. But we must go further than that. The present Government has recognised that there are many interested and concerned people who will still never have the chance to see and study those documents if we do not give them wider dissemination. Many people are not familiar enough with the processes of Government to know how to get a copy of a government report if it is only available in Canberra. We want to ensure that Government publications are not confined to the highly educated, the highly informed or people with established contacts with Government. If a Government publication is of interest to any person or group, then the access to that person or group to that document should not depend on education or wealth or influence.

Similarly, in areas beyond publications, we want to enable all people to know what the Government is doing, to know what services are available to them. It is no use if the Government provides a service and no-one is aware of its existence. Our predecessors' Health Insurance Subsidy Scheme for low-income earners is an excellent example of a service of which the very people whom it was supposed to help overwhelmingly remained ignorant. The subsidy was supposed to be available; only 4 in every 100 people who should have been eligible for it received any benefit from it.

That is the importance of this Government Publications and Inquiries Centre. By establishing the Centre the Government is taking the initiative to provide readily accessible means for people to know what it is doing.

The necessity of getting government to the people is not unique to Australia. Britain tackled it during the last war by establishing Citizens Advice Bureaux, Canada has for several years had a network of regional Inquiry Centres; the United States has 35 information centres operating in major cities. So last year when the Australian Government approved a proposal of the Minister for the Media (Senator Douglas McClelland) to set up Publications and Inquiry Centres in the cities and main provincial areas, it was answering a need to bridge a knowledge gap of Australians.

It should be clear that this centre fulfills two separate functions. Publications of the Australian Government are sold here at the lowest price to clear only overheads and publishing costs. The bookshops are also selling agents for the publications of other governments. The Inquiry Centre is a different matter. It provides services free. The public is invited to submit enquiries personally or by telephone about any aspect of Australian Government activity. It is not expected that final answers may be provided for all questions at the centre. Many of the simpler ones can be dealt with on the spot, but where specialised knowledge is required the inquiry officer will refer to an appropriate contact officer in the Department concerned for the answer. Should the inquiry be more complex, a Central Reference Unit which is being established in Canberra will search out the information and return it back to the Inquiry Office by telex or telephone.

The first publications and inquiry office began operating last year in Canberra. Since then Adelaide and Perth have been added. After Sydney will come Brisbane, Hobart, Melbourne and Darwin. They will be extended to the major provincial areas including Albury-Wodonga, Newcastle, Wollongong, and Townsville. Until these provincial centres are established, mobile bookshops and Inquiry Centres are being commissioned to tour rural areas. The first is ready for the road now. Some of the capital cities including Sydney and Melbourne have had Government Bookshops for up to six years. But until now they have not been street level operations designed to engender the greatest public interest. The relocated shops have immediately shown sales increases of between 150 and 250 per cent. This alone points up the need of the public for better access to Government affairs.

The inquiry function is also being widely utilised. The established centres are each already handling more than 30 inquiries daily and when fully operative the network is expected to deal with over half a million requests for information by telephone, correspondence or personal applications in a year.

This new Centre will provide the public in Sydney with a convenient point of initial contact and is real evidence of our initiatives towards open government.

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