



Amstrong 5/2/75

PRIME MINISTER

PRESS STATEMENT NO. 461

7 MARCH 1975

JOINT STATEMENT BY PRIME MINISTER AND TASMANIAN PREMIER

(Following their meeting in Canberra on Thursday night
6 March 1975)

The following joint statement was made by the Australian Prime Minister, the Hon. E.G. Whitlam, Q.C., M.P., and the Premier of Tasmania, the Hon. E.E. Reece, M.H.A., following a meeting in Parliament House last night to discuss matters arising out of the collapse of the Tasman Bridge in Hobart.

"The immediate problem arising from the collapse of the Tasman Bridge is to restore as quickly as possible means of communication between the Eastern Shore and the main part of the city on the west of the Derwent River, leaving questions of liability and financial responsibility to be sorted out later.

This problem can be seen in two parts.

The first is to make temporary and shorter-term arrangements to keep passenger and vehicular traffic flowing between the two parts of the city. This task has been tackled energetically by the State and Australian Government agencies concerned. Further efforts in this direction are receiving top priority and are being intensified.

The second and necessarily longer-term part of the problem is to restore the original Bridge to a satisfactory trafficable condition. This is a very big task from an engineering point of view. It is, nevertheless, the best way of restoring the position in the medium term. The building of a second bridge of a permanent type at another location will, in due course, make its contribution to the increase of traffic between the two sides of the Derwent. It must be appreciated, however, that the design and building of a second crossing will inevitably take longer than will the repair of the existing Bridge.

We have, therefore, concentrated our immediate attention at this meeting on how to organise the clearing of the river-bed in the near vicinity of the Bridge, with the object of enabling the engineers to decide finally how best to repair the existing structure and support the new spans to bridge the present gap - and then to get the reconstruction job going.

To overcome the problems of divided control and divided responsibility we have agreed to support the establishment of a Special Joint Commission to superintend and direct the combined salvage and rebuilding operation. This will be done through an inter-governmental Agreement, the main points of which we have already accepted, and this Agreement will, in due course, be submitted to the Australian and State Parliaments for their approval.

In the meantime we will proceed at once with the nomination of the Commissioners, and will ask them to act as an Interim Commission pending the creation of the substantive body. They will commence their work immediately upon appointment and will be given wide powers of decision.

The Chief Commissioner will be jointly appointed by and be responsible to the Prime Minister and Premier. One Associate Commissioner will be appointed by the Australian Prime Minister and another by the Premier of Tasmania. Each of the Commissioners will be highly qualified in engineering and experienced in large-scale construction projects. The Commission will have as its Chief Executive Officer the Tasmanian Director of Public Works and the Commission will be able to borrow or recruit appropriate skilled staff as required.

We are happy to be able to announce that Sir Allan Walton Knight, C.M.G., the Present Chairman of the Tasmanian Hydro-Electric Commission, has accepted our invitation to act as Chief Commissioner. Sir Allan is widely known throughout Tasmania, and indeed in engineering circles throughout the world, as a great engineer and administrator. The names of the two Assistant Commissioners will shortly be announced, as will the details of the proposed Agreement between the Australian and Tasmanian Governments

We express our great admiration for the work already done in trying to cope with this very difficult situation by the numerous Commonwealth and State departments and agencies concerned. Naturally a lot of this work is not fully seen nor readily appreciated by those adversely affected by the accident. Nevertheless, the efforts made have been quite outstanding. Great credit is due to all who have helped in the initial reaction to the disaster.

We emphasise that the salvage and engineering problems involved in restoring the Bridge are most severe. The sunken ship lies in very deep water, and the river-bed is overlain by a thick layer of mud which no diver can penetrate. Visibility is extremely limited and strong currents make the work difficult and hazardous. Much of the visible debris and parts of the ship have to be removed, and the area probed to locate any invisible obstructions to new supporting structures, before the final reconstruction plan can be determined and new supports built. In the meantime, and with all possible speed, preparatory work will go on while the underwater site is being cleared."

The Prime Minister and the Premier expressed their appreciation of the efforts of Sir Roland Wilson, K.B.E., who had assessed the situation on behalf of the Prime Minister, conceived the notion of a Bridge Commission and prepared the comprehensive agreement which was signed today. Sir Roland, they said, would continue to act as special adviser to the Prime Minister in respect of the Tasman Bridge and would consider and advise on all of the consequences of the bridge disaster.