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PRIME MINISTER'S PRESS CONFERENCE  
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA  
TUESDAY, 18 MARCH 1975

PRIME MINISTER: Ladies and gentlemen, I understand that Mr Bjelke-Petersen the Premier of Queensland, has claimed credit for the sales of beef to Japan which I announced yesterday. I should explain that I instructed the Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Mr Renouf, to raise this matter with the Japanese Ambassador in Canberra on Saturday.

Over the last twelve months the Australian Government has mounted a major effort to have the Japanese re-open their beef market. Soon after imports were cut in February last year representations to Japanese officials and consultations with them began. A formal Aide-Memoire protesting at the action taken was lodged on 14 June after the ban was formally imposed. In July a high level delegation led by Dr Harris, then Deputy Secretary of the Department of Overseas Trade, with senior industry representatives including the Chairman of the Meat Board, visited Tokyo. Follow-up discussions with Japanese officials took place in Canberra at the time of the joint Agriculture talks in August last year with the Secretary of the Department of Overseas Trade leading for the Australian side.

The Minister for Agriculture, Senator Wriedt, pressed the matter with senior Japanese ministers during a visit to Tokyo to discuss the supply of Australian primary products to Japan, that was on the 10 of October last year. In the same month, at the special meeting convened in Washington on Australian initiative to discuss the world beef crisis and to launch its proposal for an International Meat Consultative Group (since successfully established in the GATT), the Japanese were again pressed to re-open the market, that was on the 18th of October.

The matter arose in discussions between Prime Minister Tanaka and me on 1st of November. The Japanese were yet again strongly urged to re-open the market.

As you know, the Queensland Premier has tried to indulge in his own form of resources black-mail on this issue threatening not to permit coal deposits in his State being exported to Japan. He, of course, has no power in this issue which the Australian Constitution specifically provides is within the power of the Australian Government and the Australian Parliament.

The Queensland Minister for Agriculture was in Japan recently and has been negotiating with the Japanese on some issues concerning the Queensland Government. However, the Minister, Mr Sullivan assured the Australian Embassy that he had no intention of seeking to negotiate on the beef issue.

It is nonsense for Mr Bjelke-Petersen to suggest that his black-mail rather than our serious and consistent negotiations have caused a change in the Japanese attitude on this issue. Unlike Mr Bjelke-Petersen we are interested in results rather than in grand-standing.

QUESTION: The Country Party leader, Mr Anthony today called on the Government to protest to the North Vietnamese about the death of Mr Graham Lewis. Have you done so, and do you intend to?

PRIME MINISTER: I haven't.

QUESTION: Has there been any progress or contact with the PRG on the question of setting up an Information office in Australia?

PRIME MINISTER: There was an approach through the North Vietnamese and we said that any office in Australia would be along the lines of those established in Scandinavia.

QUESTION: Since late December there has not been a single petroleum exploration well drilled on land in Australia. This level of zero being the worst for more than twenty years. How do you reconcile this with Australia's pressing future needs for oil supplies?

PRIME MINISTER: The people who have been exploring in Australia for oil, of course explore in many parts of the world. They have thought that the prospect of finding oil on land where greater in other parts of the world.

QUESTION: I understand that Mr Renouf also talked about the Nara Treaty with the Japanese Ambassador at the weekend. Could you say or could you outline the state of negotiations on that treaty and would you say that it is in jeopardy at the moment because of the stalemate?

PRIME MINISTER: The negotiations have been temporarily suspended while we wait for further clarification of the Japanese position on a technical and legal point. When we receive this clarification and if it meets our position, we expect the talks will be resumed and quickly concluded.

QUESTION: Can you tell us why you have not protested against to the Vietnam Government over the death of Mr Lewis?

PRIME MINISTER: It's not clear who destroyed the plane. I am not going to assume and I don't suppose anybody is in a position to assume that it was the North Vietnamese the Viet Cong or the South Vietnamese. There is no information on it.

QUESTION: Are inquiries being made?

PRIME MINISTER: I think inquiries are being made, yes.

QUESTION: On the Nara Treaty again could you say what exactly the hold up is, the particular clauses which are in dispute between the Australian Government and the Japanese Government?

PRIME MINISTER: No, no I won't go into details on this. It is a technical, narrow matter.

QUESTION: They don't concern Japanese ownership of minerals and resources in Australia?

PRIME MINISTER: No, that's not the precise issue.

QUESTION: Mr Stirn a French Government Minister said yesterday that if it was possible there would be further atmospheric nuclear tests in the Pacific. Would you comment on that?

PRIME MINISTER: I saw a report to that effect. I had an hour with him this afternoon he said nothing of the sort.

QUESTION: Senator Wheeldon announced that he had written to the Federal Executive of the ALP asking them to take action against Mr Bill Hartley over the PLO. Do you intend to support Senator Wheeldon in that action?

PRIME MINISTER: This is a matter which will come before the Federal Executive, so I suppose I would have to express a view in that body when I hear the facts. You wouldn't expect me to pre-judge the matter.

QUESTION: What priority do you place on re-establishing the Australian Embassy in Phnom Penh? I just wondering, not when, but in what circumstances would it be re-established?

PRIME MINISTER: When Phnom Penh is safe.

QUESTION: Regardless of what government?

PRIME MINISTER: Of course. We have made our attitude clear all along, for over two years. That we will have diplomatic relations with whatever government is installed in the capital of Cambodia. We have relations with the Lon Nol Government. Our diplomats have been withdrawn because there was no sufficient Australian interest to justify their being in jeopardy in Phnom Penh at this time. And that attitude has been adopted by most other countries which had diplomats still in Phnom Penh. We don't believe that Australian lives should be jeopardised in the circumstances there at this time.

QUESTION: Are you concerned that a possible change of Opposition leadership might open threats of an early election?

PRIME MINISTER: I don't know what the attitude of any of the suggested contenders is on this matter. I find it difficult to keep track of the attitude that Mr Snedden has expressed from time to time on it. Indeed from week to week or day to day. I got the very distinct message, three or four weeks ago, that he was challenging me, he was going to put me to the jump on this question of having a refusal of Supply and an election. As I understand he's changed his mind and guaranteed that there will not be a refusal of Supply in the middle of this year. I don't know what his guarantees are worth in this respect. I don't remember any of the other contenders, any of the people who go to these social gatherings on Sunday night, have said about this matter. But of course the whole question is that it is the Country Party which, in season and out of season, has said that there should be a refusal of Supply. It first said that - you might remember - in September 1973. And then six or seven months later Mr Snedden agreed. Despite the fact that we won the election and the coalition lost the election last May, there have again been these threats. They were being bandied abroad in October last year, they were being bandied about in February

and March this year. Perhaps its well to recall that at the election - during the campaign last May - neither side said that if it failed to get a majority in the House of Representatives it would use an evenly divided Senate to refuse Supply to the side which got a majority in the House of Representatives. I never said that if we only broke even in the Senate but didn't have a majority still in the House of Representatives that we would be using the evenly divided Senate to reject money bills. Nor in fact did Mr Snedden. Nor in fact did Mr Anthony at that time. But we all know what Mr Anthony's game is. He's bullying Mr Snedden, who has shown on many occasions - in Government and in Opposition - that he will bow to Country Party pressure. I'm told that Mr Fraser would do it more discreetly. He would make the arrangement with Mr Anthony in advance, that is they would confer on a joint attitude, the Country Party attitude would prevail but it would be done more decently, between gentlemen rather than delivering an ultimatum publicly to Mr Snedden who then after some hesitation would fall into line.

QUESTION: If there was a change in Opposition leadership who would you see as a greater threat to you in the Parliament?

PRIME MINISTER: I'm not going to come in on that. I'm quite satisfied with the present leadership of the Opposition. I think I express the view of my party in that respect.

QUESTION: How do you react Sir to statements by Mr Nixon of the Country Party, that you are shielding Professor Downing of the ABC, for what he calls "inadequacies" and from his statement that there are too many "pinkies" and even out and out socialists in key positions in the ABC?

PRIME MINISTER: You come from one branch of the ABC? I don't won't to do anything to jeopardise your position. What has Mr Nixon made another statement on this? Well quite frankly I've got bigger fish to fry or to toast at this moment than Mr Nixon. I gather that Mr Nixon's original complaint was that some ABC newscasts had referred to forces opposing the government in South Vietnam or Cambodia. And Mr Nixon said that the ABC should have said they were communists. I would have thought that even Mr Nixon would know that its not only communists who are up in arms against the government in Saigon and in Phnom Penh. These simplifications do nobody any good at all. We suffered from that sort of simplification too long. Sure its a better headline, single word always is and particularly if it can be abbreviated. But there are very many elements including communists who are opposed to the present regimes in Phnom Penh and in Saigon. I saw nothing inaccurate in what the ABC said, nothing objectionable and in most countries nowadays this wouldn't have been regarded as inaccurate or objectionable.

QUESTION: Mr Whitlam, Alan Thornhill, Sydney Morning Herald, Mr Bjelke-Petersen suggests that you have his phone tapped, whether jokingly or not, do you?

PRIME MINISTER: No, I can give you an unqualified assurance. I've never heard of the suggestion before.

Incidentally, I've just been passed a note. Our Embassy in Tokyo has been in contact with the Japanese

department concerned, which cannot recall a telephone call from Queensland on beef.

Perhaps I might mention, for the benefit of the record. It would be well known to all you Ladies and Gentlemen, what is the main spring of the Country Party's stirring on this question of an election. For entirely selfish and internal reasons one can expect that the Opposition, whoever the leader of it may be, would continue to agitate for an early election. We were elected for three years, they sought to be election for three years, we succeeded, they failed. Now, there can be no question that the public expects us to get on with the job, unimpeded, uninterrupted, for that three years. But the Country Party is constantly agitating on this question, and bullying Mr Snedden and any other Liberal leaders or aspirants who will yield to their bullying because they want another election on the present boundaries.

Particularly, in the three largest States the boundaries are quite unacceptable. In New South Wales, in Victoria, in Queensland, in each case there are some electorates which now have more than 80,000 people on the roles, and there are others which have fewer than 50,000 people on the roles. In New South Wales, Mitchell has an enrolment, at the end of last December of 82,700, Robertson of 81,000; on the other hand, Hume has an enrolment of 49,800, and Darling an enrolment of 46,600. In Victoria, Diamond Valley at the end of December, had an enrolment of 86,000, Bourke 83,200; on the other hand Malley had an enrolment of 49,600, Wimmera of 49,100. In Queensland, Macpherson had an enrolment of 93,100, another seat Maranoa had fewer than half that number, 46,300. There was another seat in Queensland with an enrolment of 80,400, Bowman, and other one with an enrolment of 51,000, Kennedy.

Now I don't think that Australian democracy should have to suffer such great disparity of numbers. The Country Party believe that those numbers suit them; but I don't believe that the Labor Party, or any self-respecting Liberals should accept such a distortion of the democratic process in Australia. The new distributions which have been put to the Parliament provide that instead of there being a disparity of over 30,000 or even 40,000 between electorates in the three largest States, in no case will there be a disparity of more than 5 or 6,000. The electorates which are under the quota, are the growing ones; the ones that are over the quota on the new distribution proposals are the ones which are static in population. That's the whole objective of the Country Party, the present system suits them, but it doesn't suit the other parties in the Parliament, nor of course, should it suit electors in general.

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