

QUEENSLAND BROADCAST NO. 10

THE ENVIRONMENT

25 MAY 1975

---

ON FRIDAY I ANNOUNCED A MOST IMPORTANT DECISION BY THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT FOR THE PROTECTION OF THE GREAT BARRIER REEF. THE GOVERNMENT HAD BEFORE IT THE REPORT OF ROYAL COMMISSIONS WHICH WERE APPOINTED, YOU'LL REMEMBER, IN 1970 TO CONSIDER THE PROBLEM OF OIL DRILLING ON THE REEF. THAT REPORT MADE IT CLEAR THAT WE ARE STILL VERY MUCH IN THE DARK - SCIENTIFICALLY SPEAKING - ABOUT THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF OIL ON THE REEF AND ITS ORGANISMS. I DON'T WANT TO OVERSIMPLIFY WHAT ARE REALLY COMPLEX MATTERS, BUT IT'S FAIR TO SAY THAT THERE IS STILL ROOM FOR DOUBT ABOUT THE DEGREE OF RISK WHICH OIL DRILLING WOULD POSE. TWO OF THE THREE ROYAL COMMISSIONERS FELT THAT WITH CERTAIN SAFEGUARDS AND PRECAUTIONS, DRILLING COULD BE SAFELY PERMITTED IN CERTAIN AREAS AROUND THE REEF. THE CHAIRMAN OF THE INQUIRY, MR JUSTICE WALLACE, FELT THAT THIS WOULD BE TOO GREAT A RISK TO TAKE. HIS OPINION WAS THAT NO DRILLING AT ALL SHOULD BE ALLOWED NEAR THE REEF UNTIL WE DISCOVER MORE ABOUT ITS LONG-TERM SCIENTIFIC EFFECTS. THE GOVERNMENT CONSIDERED ALL THESE VIEWS. WE DECIDED ON FRIDAY THAT WITH A NATURAL ASSET AS PRICELESS AS THE REEF, WE WOULD NOT BE JUSTIFIED IN TAKING ANY CHANCES. WE ACCEPTED THE MORE STRINGENT VIEW OF THE COMMISSION'S CHAIRMAN. WE HAVE THEREFORE DECIDED THAT THERE SHOULD BE NO DRILLING IN THE AREA OF THE REEF UNTIL MORE SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE IS AVAILABLE.

FOR US, THE PRESERVATION OF THE REEF IS PARAMOUNT.  
I HAVE ALREADY WRITTEN TO MR BJELKE-PETERSEN EXPLAINING  
OUR DECISION,

IT WAS CERTAINLY TIME FOR SUCH DECISIVE  
ACTION. I DON'T NEED TO REMIND YOU OF THE LONG HISTORY  
OF WRANGLING BY OTHER GOVERNMENTS WHICH LED UP TO OUR  
DECISION. IT STARTED FIVE YEARS AGO, WHEN MR GORTON  
WAS PRIME MINISTER. HE TOO WAS CONCERNED ABOUT OIL  
DRILLING ON THE REEF - DRILLING PERMITTED AND  
ENCOURAGED BY THE QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT. IT WAS MR  
GORTON'S AGITATION - AND I GIVE HIM CREDIT FOR IT -  
WHICH LED TO THE APPOINTMENT OF THE ROYAL COMMISSIONS  
BY THE QUEENSLAND AND AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENTS. BUT MR  
GORTON WASN'T JUST CONCERNED ABOUT THE REEF. HE TOOK THE  
WIDER VIEW - SUPPORTED BY MY PARTY - THAT ALL OFF-SHORE  
AREAS, THE WHOLE CONTINENTAL SHELF AROUND AUSTRALIA, WAS  
THE PROPER RESPONSIBILITY OF THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT,  
NOT THE STATES.

THE REASONS FOR THIS ARE SIMPLE ENOUGH: THE OFF-SHORE AREAS LIE OUTSIDE OUR LAND BORDERS; THEIR DEFINITION INVOLVES QUESTIONS OF FOREIGN RELATIONS; AND MOST OFF-SHORE ACTIVITIES, SUCH AS MINING AND MINERAL EXPLORATION, AFFECT NOT ONLY THE ENVIRONMENT BUT OUR TRADE AS A NATION. SO THE GORTON GOVERNMENT IN APRIL 1970 BROUGHT IN LEGISLATION TO BRING THESE AREAS UNDER THE CONTROL OF THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT. WELL, THERE WAS A GREAT HOWL FROM THE MINING INTERESTS AND STATE-RIGHTERS, AND MR GORTON'S SENSIBLE MEASURE WAS PUT IN COLD STORAGE. THE LIBERALS IN CANBERRA WENT TO WATER. WHEN WE CAME IN WE REINTRODUCED THE LEGISLATION; THE QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT PROMPTLY CHALLENGED IT IN THE HIGH COURT. WE ARE STILL WAITING FOR THE COURT'S JUDGMENT. THAT'S FAIR ENOUGH; BUT MR BJELKE-PETERSEN HAS BEEN USING HIS COURT CHALLENGE TO TRY AND HOLD UP ANOTHER POSITIVE MEASURE TO PROTECT THE BARRIER REEF. WE WON'T GO ALONG WITH THOSE TACTICS.

THIS WEEK, IN THE FEDERAL PARLIAMENT, WE INTRODUCED A BILL TO CREATE A GREAT BARRIER REEF MARINE PARK. IT'S A MAGNIFICENT SCHEME; IT WILL ENSURE THAT THIS SUPERB AREA, THIS UNIQUE PART OF AUSTRALIA'S NATURAL HERITAGE, WILL BE SAFEGUARDED FOR ALL TIME. WE TOLD THE QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT THAT WE WOULDN'T ALLOW THEIR COURT CHALLENGE TO DELAY THE BILL, WE SAID WE WOULD PREFER TO COOPERATE IN A JOINT AUTHORITY TO ADMINISTER THE MARINE PARK WITH QUEENSLAND, BUT IF THE QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT WOULDN'T COOPERATE WE WOULD GO AHEAD ON OUR OWN. ONCE AGAIN, THE FUTURE OF THE REEF WAS PARAMOUNT TO US.

THOSE ARE JUST TWO OF THE INITIATIVES WE HAVE TAKEN TO SAFEGUARD THE ENVIRONMENT. THEY ARE AREAS IN WHICH WE HAVE CLEAR CONSTITUTIONAL POWERS, OR ARE CONVINCED OF OUR POWERS. WHERE WE HAVE THE POWER WE HAVE ACTED PROMPTLY. WE HAVE POWER IN THE TERRITORIES - AND IT'S IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY THAT MOST OF OUR URANIUM IS MINED. HERE WE HAVE IMPOSED STRICT ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROLS ON URANIUM MINING BEFORE IT STARTS, AND HAVE APPROVED FULL LAND RIGHTS FOR THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE. WE ALSO HAVE POWER OVER THE EXPORT OF MINERALS, WHEREVER THEY ARE MINED. THE PREVIOUS GOVERNMENT REALLY ONLY CONCERNED ITSELF WITH THE EXPORT OF URANIUM AND IRON ORE. ONE OF OUR FIRST ACTS AS A GOVERNMENT WAS TO ASSUME FULL CONTROL OVER THE EXPORT OF ALL MINERALS. WE DID THIS FOR A NUMBER OF REASONS - NOT JUST ENVIRONMENTAL ONES - AND ONE RESULT, THANKS LARGELY TO THE WORK OF REX CONNOR AND HIS DEPARTMENT, HAS BEEN TO QUADRUPLE THE EARNINGS FROM THE EXPORT OF QUEENSLAND COAL.

WHEN IT COMES TO ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION WITHIN THE STATES, WE HAVE SOUGHT RESULTS BY AGREEMENT WITH THE STATES OR BY BRINGING IN LEGISLATION WHICH THE STATES AGREE TO SUPPORT. THAT'S NO EASY TASK. AWAY BACK IN APRIL 1973 - MORE THAN TWO YEARS AGO - I FIRST WROTE TO THE PREMIERS SEEKING THEIR COOPERATION IN PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT WHENEVER THEY REQUESTED FEDERAL FUNDS FOR STATE GOVERNMENT PROJECTS. IN JANUARY LAST YEAR - 16 MONTHS AGO - I WROTE AGAIN TO THE PREMIERS. I SUGGESTED A PREMIERS' CONFERENCE. WE WANTED SOME PROCEDURE FOR JOINT ENVIRONMENTAL INQUIRIES BY THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT AND THE STATES. IT'S SURELY ABSURD TO HAVE TWO INQUIRIES INTO THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF A PROJECT WHEN ONE WILL DO. THE RESPONSE FROM THE STATES WAS FRANKLY DISAPPOINTING, BUT THAT DIDN'T STOP ME FROM ACTING ON AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT PROJECTS WHICH FALL WITHIN OUR OWN RESPONSIBILITY. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT INQUIRIES HAVE BEEN STANDARD PRACTICE FOR THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT SINCE THE BEGINNING OF LAST YEAR. LEGISLATION TO MAKE THESE PROCEDURES COMPULSORY WAS PASSED IN DECEMBER. FROM NOW ON, EVERY PROJECT AFFECTING THE ENVIRONMENT - WHETHER MINING, BUILDING, OR DEVELOPMENT - WILL BE SUBJECT TO THE MOST SEARCHING SCRUTINY.

IT'S ONLY WHEN WE GET THESE MATTERS INTO PROPER PERSPECTIVE THAT WE CAN UNDERSTAND WHAT HAPPENED WITH FRASER ISLAND. LET ME BE QUITE CLEAR ABOUT THIS: NOTHING WE DO CAN STOP THE MINING ON FRASER ISLAND. THE MOST WE CAN HOPE TO DO IS PREVENT THE EXPORT OF MINERALS THAT ARE ALREADY MINED. THE QUESTION WAS WHETHER WE COULD DO THAT LEGALLY - OR HONOURABLY. DON'T IMAGINE THAT THIS PROBLEM SUDDENLY TOOK THE GOVERNMENT BY SURPRISE A COUPLE OF WEEKS AGO. ALMOST A YEAR AGO, MY MINISTERS, MR CONNOR AND DR CASS AGREED - AND I ACCEPTED THEIR ADVICE - THAT WHEREVER POSSIBLE THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD USE ITS POWERS OVER MINERAL EXPORTS TO DISCOURAGE MINING OPERATIONS WHICH COULD DAMAGE THE ENVIRONMENT. ONCE AGAIN - IT WAS ON 9 JULY LAST YEAR - I WROTE TO THE PREMIERS POINTING OUT OUR CONCERN, AND STRESSING THAT ENVIRONMENTAL SAFEGUARDS WOULD BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT WHEN FUTURE APPLICATIONS FOR MINERAL EXPORTS WERE CONSIDERED BY THE GOVERNMENT. MR BJELKE-PETERSEN TOOK SIX MONTHS TO REPLY, AND THERE IS STILL NO AGREED PROCEDURE ON THE NECESSARY ENVIRONMENTAL INQUIRIES.

I ASK YOU TO REMEMBER THAT MINING HAS BEEN GOING ON ON FRASER ISLAND FOR YEARS. THE PRESENT MINING LEASES WEREN'T APPROVED BY US - THEY WERE APPROVED YEARS AGO BY MR BJELKE-PETERSEN HIMSELF. THAT'S ONE REASON WHY THERE HASN'T BEEN A WORD OF CRITICISM BY THE LIBERALS OR THE COUNTRY PARTY OF THE MINING ON FRASER ISLAND. WHEN WE CAME TO OFFICE THE MINING COMPANIES ALREADY HAD THEIR LEASES; THEY HAD ENTERED INTO FIRM CONTRACTS, AND THEY HAD THE RESULTS OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL INQUIRY BY THE QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT WHICH GAVE ITS BLESSING TO THE SCHEME, SUBJECT TO PRETTY STRINGENT SAFEGUARDS. THE WHOLE OPERATION WAS PERFECTLY LEGAL. SOME SAY WE COULD STOP THE EXPORT OF MINERALS NOW BY MAKING OUR LEGISLATION RETROSPECTIVE, BY SAYING : "THIS RULE WON'T JUST APPLY IN FUTURE, WE'RE GOING TO APPLY IT TO PAST CASES AS WELL. WE'RE GOING TO KNOCK OUT MILLIONS OF DOLLARS WORTH OF MINERAL CONTRACTS ALREADY MADE IN GOOD FAITH." WE WEREN'T PREPARED TO DO IT. WHAT WE ARE DOING IS MAKING SURE THAT FROM NOW ON, ALL FUTURE MINING OPERATIONS WILL BE CAREFULLY STUDIED FOR THEIR EFFECT ON THE ENVIRONMENT. DR CASS HAS ANNOUNCED A FULL ENVIRONMENTAL INQUIRY INTO THE WHOLE FUTURE OF FRASER ISLAND - TO HOLD THE LINE AGAINST ANY FUTURE DAMAGE.

WE HAVE ACHIEVED GREAT THINGS ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND YOU CAN BE SURE WE WILL PRESS ON WITH OUR PROGRAM AS VIGOROUSLY AS EVER. THAT PROGRAM WILL MOVE AHEAD MORE QUICKLY WITH A LITTLE LESS HYPOCRISY FROM THOSE WHO DID NOTHING, DURING 23 YEARS IN GOVERNMENT, TO PROTECT OUR NATURAL HERITAGE.

\*\*\*\*\*