

QUESTIONS FROM THE HOBART PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON

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22 SEPTEMBER 1975

Bowers

Mr Fraser's been maidenishly coy about whether or not he intended to catch you with your trousers down as he so charmingly put it. Can you say with precision what you'd do if the Opposition blocks Supply in the Senate next month?

P.M.

Well, there are various options and I wouldn't at this stage specify which one I at this stage find most attractive. But all I need to say is it's been assumed that if an Upper House rejects a Budget or refuses Supply, the head of the Government - which of course has a majority in the Lower House - must then ask the Governor-General to dissolve the Lower House. There is no law which says that; there is no precedent for it happening, and because nobody ever thought it could happen, there has been no discussion about it. There is no convention about it. Now one of the things which one bears in mind is that the Senate now is considerably different from the Senate which was elected in May last year. I would recall that in May last year at the Double Dissolution which I advised the Governor-General at that time to grant because the two Houses were unworkable - there was a threat of refusal of Supply but in fact there had been no refusal of Supply; there was the situation where they could be a Double Dissolution - I advised the Governor-General to dissolve both Houses and he did. And in the election for the House of Representatives which was supposed to be elected for three years - nobody ever disputed that at the time; the then Liberal Leader never suggested that the House of Representatives being elected should not be elected for three years - at that time the candidates of my Party got a very considerable majority of votes for the House of Representatives and also of course a comfortable majority of seats in the House of Representatives and the candidates for the Senate got more votes than the candidates of all other Parties contesting the Senate, including one Party which is no longer there.

. Since then there have been two Labor vacancies and in an utterly unprecedented and, I believe, unprincipled move, the Premiers of New South Wales and now Queensland have substituted non-Labor people for the former Labor Senators. It is possible, it's easier, therefore, for an Opposition to get half the votes - which is all you need; you don't need a majority to reject these things: the Bill's not passed unless it gets a majority - so it is possible maybe in these circumstances. But of course it's really for Mr Fraser to make up his mind on this; he always says himself that he thinks it's improper to do it; but he tolerates a degree of speculation which is very unsettling for business and administration and some people think it's unsettling for the Government. Well my withers are unwrung

on this business. We've been through it before and on this matter we wouldn't be caught with our pants down or one leg in and one leg out.

QUESTION

Prime Minister, I'm sure that we're very thankful to your government for the assistance towards the restoration of the Bridge: at least our grandchildren are, anyway. I noticed that you said that you were under no obligation to do anything towards that Bridge. Would you not agree that if one of your ships has knocked the bridge down you are morally, if not legally, bound to restore the Bridge.

P.M.

Well my views on what happened about the vessel concerned are well known. But legally you would be liable for whatever you can prove against the ship. And the law in this respect is quite vague. But I would concede that the owner of the ship - and that happens to be, the Australian Government: Tasmania would be in a pretty poor position but for Australian Government ships - that it should make the contribution. But there's no legal or moral obligation for us to provide a fifth lane. There is no legal or moral obligation for us to provide another bridge, four lane, Dowsings Point. Whatever may be the legal or moral obligation there could be no doubt that the Australian Government has been generous and not just - I don't know about your grandchildren I would have thought you look admirably hale and hearty and you will see it in very few years. But the transport across the Derwent will be very much better than it has ever been before. The City of Hobart will be very much better planned and very much better equipped and serviced as a result of my government's response and its initiatives and the tumbling of the Bridge has had a golden lining and the taxpayers of all Australia, thanks to the initiative of my Government, are providing the lining.

QUESTION

You mentioned the Antarctic research base being shifted to Hobart. How soon are we likely to see it shifted to Hobart?

P.

I wouldn't lay down a timetable in these matters because neither Bridges nor scientific establishments are done in the course of any one financial year. But there is that commitment. And if you don't mind me making the political point too, it will be noticed that our opponents' Shadow Minister or spokesman for Science, objected to it leaving Melbourne. Now whatever you do - even some of the things I have said about your ports - will produce adverse comments elsewhere. Now my Government has made the decision that the Australian Antarctic activities will be centred in Hobart. We think there are very good reasons for doing it, for making that commitment. I don't know how soon they'll come about; there are of course buildings to be designed, there's also certain notice which we aren't compelled to give, but which we as a matter of fact do give to Government employees concerning their movements because they have families and of course they have to make arrangements for education and accommodation and that sort of thing. But the commitment has been made.

QUESTION

During the Bass By-election campaign you mentioned that funds were specifically being allocated for the Launceston Eastern by-pass road. There seems a certain amount of uncertainty amongst the State Labor Government whether these funds have actually been allocated or whether they will be allocated. Could you clarify this matter?

P.M.

I've been asked this in Parliament quite recently, too, and I said then, as I said during the by-election campaign, that during the next triennium for which the funds are being discussed by the Australian and all the State transport Ministers this was announced, you know, that there would be these triennial arrangements made when the legislation was introduced in about September last year, I think. In those discussions the arrangements will be made. As I said before, the Australian Government, the Australian Parliament has always had the responsibility - before my Government had ever exercised it - to make roads to promote trade and commerce with other countries and among the States and in pursuance to that arrangement we have decided to finance the road, the national highway, between Hobart to the outskirts of Launceston over the Burnie and similarly from the outskirts of Launceston up to Bell Bay. And the by-pass you mentioned is to connect the national road and the export roads concerned and that will be discussed - I think it has already been discussed - in the context of the next triennium, that is, the next program of allocations which the Australian Government will finance directly itself and by grants to the States.

QUESTION

One very general question on the Harradine affair, if I could.

P.M.

No you can't.

QUESTION

I'm just wondering if you will answer the question, do you think the A.L.P. has overreacted, was a bit oversensitive to Mr Harradine's comments in the past?

P.M.

No. I'm not answering the question.

QUESTION

You mentioned a little while ago that you expected some criticism in other places for some of the things you've said today, particularly your reference to the ports. Reading the speech it appears that we have arrived at a situation where by the take-over of the railways in Tasmania you set Tasmania's port system's future quite considerably in advance of the report of the Nimmo Commission which you expect to get. In fact has Mr Nimmo now been wasting his time because it looks as if you have decided in advance that there will be one major port and in fact you have lined it up with the railways?

P.M. Well, of course, Mr Nimmo is not wasting his time. Mr Nimmo is securing information and seeking information which has never been collected or sought before. The Australian Government and the Tasmanian Government will be very much better informed as a result of Mr Nimmo's report than they could otherwise have been. If we'd had the Interstate Commission over all these years that information would have been available to people. As it is the Tasmanian Government, I think it was the previous one, the Bingham one, got the report from the Pak Poy people and of course, we have had to get the information from the ANL. And the advice that both have given is that there needs to be some port which can take a bulk ship, and there isn't in Tasmania at the moment. There are probably more ports per head of population in Tasmania than in any other State but I hope I don't give any impression that I am preempting Mr Nimmo's report; I don't know what he will advise in this respect and if, of course, he advised something else I would probably heed what he said rather than what I've ventured to say at the moment. But there is a suitably sited port at Bell Bay, there is industry at Bell Bay and there has been by agreement with Tasmanian Governments - successive governments and it couldn't have been done without their consent - there has been a largely Australian Government-financed railway up to Bell Bay. That's been completed, it's the best track in the State. Some people say it's the only really good track in the State. Now in those circumstances it does seem reasonable to bring together the road, the rail - the export road I was describing - the new rail and bulk port facilities at Bell Bay. But the port facilities are not primarily a federal responsibility. It may be that an Australian Government could build a port or wharves, because obviously a port one way or another relates to trade and commerce with other countries and among the States. But there has been no arrangement to this stage about that port. But we're obviously committed to the road, we have been overwhelmingly committed to the railway and we do need a new ship for the wheat trade for Tasmania. So we ought, in the next few months be able to make some plans for that purpose, but I want to discount immediately the suggestion that comes from the Mercury - that chap looked more like Jupiter than Mercury - that Mr Nimmo is wasting his time. He's doing a job that ought to have been done years ago.

OAKES

Prime Minister, a question on the controversial and crucial issue of metric pronunciation. I noticed in your speech you referred again to kilometres.

P.M.

Of course.

OAKES

Can I ask you are you not inclined to accept the advice of your Minister for Science that the word should be pronounced kilometres, and in view of this serious disagreement, do you think a Cabinet and Caucus decision is required?

P.M.

Well, as a matter of fact, I was drafting a response to him this morning during some of the lulls. I've always said myself kilometre or centimetre or millimetre or those sort of things and I don't want to pre-empt the letter which I'm sending to the Minister for Science whose qualifications of course were of my ordaining: I gave him his scientific qualifications. But since this is, of course, a very serious enquiry, I would point out that all scientific terms are accented in that way. You have thermometers and barometers and altimeters and spectrophotometers and for those people that can go the distance required, speedometers or for earth-bound people you have pedometers and the versifiers among you have always used pentameters and tetrameters. And you've got a pretty fair diameter and perimeter yourself.

I believe that Mr Cameron has been influenced by his departmental advisers and they thought they were being very gallic. Ever since these urban guerillas in Paris 190 years ago brought in the metric system, they thought it would sound nicer if you said kilometre or kilometre. But the migrants who come to Australia usually put it back where we would ordinarily put it, that is the Italians all say kilometre; the Spaniards, the people from Timor, all say kilometre. It's easier to say kilometre. I mean the technical ones among you, the people from the Mercury would know - ABC too possibly, the older ones - that you only put the accent on the second last syllable if it's a long syllable and the words ending in metre all come from a Greek word where there's a short 'e': it's epsilon not eta; it's metron not metron. ABC please follow.

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