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EMBARGO: 7.00 p.m.

PRIME MINISTER

FOR PRESS

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ELECTORATE TALK

One of my Government's first promises when we were elected just over two years ago was to restore the integrity and honesty of Government.

Without integrity - without the appearance and reality of integrity - no government can hope to have the confidence of the people, or the trust of the people.

We were determined to restore Australians faith in their national government - and in the process of government. From the beginning, the government desired to reestablish the absolute propriety and unquestioned integrity that were a hallmark of the Menzies years in Australia.

Because a number of areas needed review we acted quickly firmly and fairly. First, we took action in relation to the pecuniary interests of Ministers of the Crown. Within days of taking office, I wrote to every Minister asking for a full personal statement of their pecuniary interests. I was acting on the basic principle that Ministers - in a position of privilege - must at all times avoid any conflict between public duty and private interest. Ministers staff were also required to meet this principle. Since that time, the Government has decided that additional steps had to be taken to completely meet the objective. A few weeks ago, I announced that Sir Nigel Bowen had agreed to chair a wide ranging judicial inquiry into matters relating to the question of public duty and private interest.

A matter of public concern and comment - the question of gifts to Ministers - was also reviewed. Now, Ministers who receive gifts on overseas visit must declare them to me as Prime Minister on their return. If gifts are more than token in nature, they are valued and Ministers are then given an opportunity to purchase.

The question of the selection and appointment of senior public servants has also been reviewed by my Government. We were determined to maintain one of the most important foundations of the Parliamentary system of Government - the political neutrality of the public service.

My Government strongly believed one of the best safeguards of the long-term political neutrality of the public service was a system of appointment that prevents any person appointed for partisan reasons retaining permanent terms of office. We now have that system. Any Departmental head who is appointed without the recommendation of a special top level committee can be removed from office by an incoming government.

Further, in amending the Act of Parliament to bring this about, we were also very conscious of the need to give special weight to the integrity of the Australian public service and in particular to the well-established principle of appointment on merit.

The Government has also asked the Public Service Board to examine and report on a code of ethics for public servants and Commonwealth employees. The Government also has under review the practice of retired parliamentarians, public servants and others once on the Commonwealth payroll continuing to receive superannuation and similar benefits if they take up further Commonwealth appointments.

The question of propriety and the integrity of public administration in Australia has been canvassed in the Parliament this week in relation to a computer contract. The key and central question that my Government concerned itself with was whether in the awarding of this contract that justice was not only done, but was seen to be done. That had to be the issue.

The Government in this case, was not convinced that justice had been done. We were sure that justice had not seen to be done. Accordingly, we took the only proper course - the course we would take again in the same circumstance - we recalled tenders. At the same time, we referred this whole question of Government employees working in the tendering process to Sir Nigel Bowen's inquiry into public duty and private interest.

My Government has demonstrated again and again our fundamental commitment to restoring integrity to public administration in Australia. Our record in this regard is without parallel in our history. As long as I lead the Government, there is no way known that anything less than the highest code and practice of public administration will be tolerated.
