



## PRIME MINISTER

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ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY  
MATTERS IN RELATION TO ELECTORAL REDISTRIBUTION  
QUEENSLAND 1977

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The Report of the Royal Commission is being sent to all members of the Parliament today.

At the first opportunity the Report will be tabled in Parliament.

I have taken the course of releasing the Report before the Parliament meets because it is important that the public have an awareness of the facts.

Following allegations made both inside and outside the Parliament concerning the Queensland redistribution of electoral boundaries, it was determined on 18 January that the matter should be referred for investigation and report by the Law Officers, the Attorney-General, Senator Durack, and the Solicitor-General, Mr. Byers.

The Law Officers' Report was submitted in February. On 7 April further allegations were made in the Parliament. The Law Officers' Report was tabled and the new allegations were referred to the Attorney-General and the Solicitor-General.

On 23 April, the Attorney-General and the Solicitor-General further reported "Whilst it is our view that the form any investigation should assume is a matter for the Government to determine, we consider that a judicial inquiry would be preferable."

The Law Officers' recommendation was considered by Senior Ministers and as a result the Royal Commission was established on 24 April.

The terms of reference of the Royal Commission were related to the allegations that had been made concerning the Queensland redistribution and to the possible involvement of the Honourable Eric Robison.

At a later stage, allegations were made concerning statements made by Mr. Robinson on uranium mining. Consequently, Cabinet on 10 May decided that the terms of reference of the Royal Commission should be widened so that this matter also could be considered by the Royal Commission of Mr. Justice McGregor. At this time the Government indicated to the Royal Commission through the Attorney-General that they would be willing to further extend the terms of reference if necessary.

On 30 May there was a further extension of the terms of reference of the Royal Commission. The Commissioner, under his extended terms of reference, was empowered to find whether anyone had sought illegally or improperly, to influence the Commissioners. This extension was also the result of a Cabinet decision after full discussion amongst Ministers.

The Royal Commission exonerated the Hon. Eric Robinson of allegations concerning the Queensland re-distribution. His Honour said that:

"no breach of a law of the Commonwealth, or impropriety occurred in the course of the Re-distribution in 1977 of the State of Queensland into Electoral Divisions for the election of Members of the House of Representatives including the change of the name of a proposed Division from "Gold Coast" to "McPherson" by reason of

- (a) anything said or action taken by or on behalf of the Honourable Eric Robinson;
- (b) any action taken by the Distribution Commissioners or any of them as a result of anything said or action taken

- (Contd) (b) by or on behalf of the Honourable Eric Robinson; or
- (c) any communication by the Distribution Commissioners to the Honourable ERic Robinson".

On the issue of allegations about statements made by Mr Robinson on uranium, the Commissioner reported:-

"On 26 July 1977 at Bæaudesert in the State of Queensland the Honourable Eric Robinson made a statement concerning the likely decisions of the Commonwealth Government in relation to the mining of uranium in Australia to the following effect -

"The Government will be making a decision about mining and export of uranium early in the Budget session which commences in about three weeks time. If the Government is satisfied that all interests requiring protection can be protected I would expect the Government to authorise mining and export of uranium."

This was an innocuous statement to which no criticism can be attached. I have written to Mr Robinson today, asking him to resume his portfolio as Minister for Finance.

In his Report, the Royal Commissioner also considered the actions of another Minister, Senator the Right Honourable R. G. Withers in respect of the naming of the electorate of McPherson. He found that the Minister had done nothing illegal, but he did find, in the words of the Report:

"The action of Senator the Right Honourable R. G. Withers constitutes impropriety within the meaning of the Letters Patent dated 30 May 1978. Senator Withers used his position to further a political purpose by an approach (not open to members of the public) to the Distribution Commissioners...."

"Whilst Senator Withers did not seek to influence, or influence, the Commissioners in any way about how they should perform their duties of distribution of the electoral divisions in Queensland, he did seek to influence them and he did in fact influence them through an intermediary as to something which they proposed to say in their Report, that is to say, the names which they tentatively attached to two Electoral Divisions. What he did, having regard to the purpose with which he did it, in my judgement constitutes impropriety".

Senior Ministers considered carefully what should be done in the light of this finding. We had no doubt that our first and foremost responsibility was the maintenance of the high standards of propriety set and maintained by this Government.

We were of the view that Mr. Justice McGregor's Report had to be accepted and accepting it had inevitable consequences in respect of the finding of impropriety.

The community rightly demand a high standard from the Ministers of the Government. The judgements on Ministers are more exacting and sometimes more harsh than the judgements which might be passed on those outside sphere of public life. If these high standards were not upheld, the people's confidence in Government - a confidence which is fundamental to Australian democracy - would be undermined.

The Government has an obligation to uphold them even though the cost can be and is in this instance, a high one.

Senator Withers has been an energetic and able Minister and his services have been of immense value to the Government. It is with great regret that I have recommended to His Excellency, the Governor-General, that he should determine Senator Withers' appointment as Minister for Administrative Services.

Senator Carrick has been appointed Vice-President of the Executive Council and Leader of the Government in the Senate. The Attorney-General, Senator Durack, has been appointed Minister for Administrative Services, and Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate.