

QUESTION

... ban on Jews entering Damascus?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, it is very good news of course, because we can't really condone a situation in which there is discrimination against any section of the Australian people. Through the ages there has been, from time to time, with differing severity, discrimination against the Jewish people. Many Jews came to Australia a long while ago, because this is a land, I believe, that is quite free of discrimination, and to have the circumstances in which there is an attempt to discriminate against people, Australians, because of their religion, is, of course, quite unacceptable. Diplomatic representations were made, inquiries were made, about the alleged travel restriction concerning Qantas flights through Damascus and we were told that the regulation wasn't in fact operative. When it ceased to be operative I don't know - it was in the IATA Handbook - it has been applied, as I understand, much more rigidly by a number of other airlines who all understood it to be operative. But we were told that it wasn't operative - put like that, as if it could have come off at some time in the past. If that was so, we hadn't been told about it - but the fact that it doesn't exist, that it has been removed, whether it has only just been removed, or whether it was further in the past is something that is very, very welcome indeed.

QUESTION: Has the Federal Government just heard about the restrictions?

PRIME MINISTER: One of the strange things about this is that only looking back through the Handbooks, apparently the restriction has been there - at least since 1969, and perhaps much earlier. I think one of the strange things about this is that it hasn't surfaced in the public domain before now, because the Handbooks are circulated to all travel agencies, and I would have thought at some stage, over the years, there would have been somebody who would have been resentful of the restrictions, - that might say something for the way Qantas and other airlines were administering it - the fact that it hasn't surfaced - because as I understand, passengers haven't been refused tickets, but they were told of the matter, and it was then for their decision. It is surprising that it hadn't surfaced. I am not aware that any Transport Minister, in any Government, had been advised of it in the past and was aware of it.

QUESTION: How did the Federal Government first hear ... (inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER: I first heard of it when I read the Age newspaper one morning - and within about five minutes I was speaking to Peter Nixon, and he said, I have already read it, and I have already launched inquiries.

QUESTION: What sort of inquiries were these?

PRIME MINISTER: Those inquiries were: what are the facts, what were the facts? When you see a newspaper story which concerns you the first thing to do is to establish the precise facts about it.

QUESTION: What is going to happen now as far as the Federal Government is concerned?

PRIME MINISTER: I don't think there is any need for anything to happen now, because the restriction is not operative - it has been lifted. That means there is no discrimination against any Australian citizens.

QUESTION: Was it ever operative, do you know?

PRIME MINISTER: It was in the Handbook, and the airlines thought it was operative, so far as the Syrian Government is concerned. As I say, on the advice available to us, some other airlines have applied a bit more - not necessarily on the route to Australia - but in other areas, have applied the restriction more rigidly than Australia had.

QUESTION: In the case that the restriction wasn't lifted, would we have gone so far as to a) protest, or b) ask Qantas to fly through Damascus?

PRIME MINISTER: Let's not bother about a question that is entirely hypothetical. The circumstance didn't arise - the good sense has prevailed, and therefore, not let's postulate hypothetical circumstances which could be, quite obviously difficult.

QUESTION: There was no situation reached of formal Government to Government contact with the Syrians?

PRIME MINISTER: Our diplomatic people made inquiries at a political level, and were told that it wasn't operative. That was obviously a very satisfactory answer from our point of view. It is a satisfactory answer, let's not hypothecate what might have happened in more difficult circumstances, because they didn't arise.

QUESTION: So it is as a result of those diplomatic approaches ...?

PRIME MINISTER: The word to us was the regulation wasn't operative, implying that it hasn't been operative for some time. All the airlines thought that it was operative - not just Qantas, other airlines, because checks have been made. There is a degree of - an element of uncertainty in relation to that. I think what is past is past, and the important thing is that the restriction is not operative - it's off - and there is not discrimination against any group of Australians, which is the important thing from our point of view.

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