

MR. NIXON INTERVIEWED: MINISTERIAL TRAVEL

FROM ABC'S "NATIONWIDE" (23/2/79)

There was a short debate in the Parliament tonight on, as it was put, the extravagant costs of Ministerial travel. A lot of mud was thrown by the Opposition, but the Government could hardly complain -- they were equally eager to employ the same tactics when they had the opportunity.

Shadow Transport Minister, Mr. Peter Morris, the man who threw the mud today, is in Canberra with Richard Carlton, together with the man who was his target, Mr. Peter Nixon.

Richard Carlton:

Before continuing with this story, can I re-confirm the news flash that James Dibble brought to you in the news bulletin a moment ago that the 12th ranking Minister in the Fraser Ministry, the Minister for Finance, the Member for MacPherson, the Gold Coast seat in Queensland, Mr. Eric Robinson has resigned from the Ministry. As I understand, Mr. Robinson submitted a three-page letter to Mr. Fraser this evening at 8:00 o'clock. What was in the letter, what the issue is, I have no idea. The Prime Minister's Office is refusing to make any comment whatsoever. Mr. Robinson, it may be known to some, was a very colleague of Mr. Fraser's, he possible still is but he was associated with the 1974 attempt by Mr. Fraser to wrest the leadership of the Liberal Party from Mr. Snedden and he was associated also with the very successful 1975 attempt by Mr. Fraser to wrest the leadership from Mr. Snedden on that occasion. I have no more information on that story. I can confirm the accuracy of it though, and if I may, Mr. Nixon, I did not ask you here on the pretext obviously, of asking you about Mr. Robinson's resignation, but can you add anything to what I said.

Mr. Nixon:

No I can't. It comes as a complete surprise to me. Mr. Robinson has been a very valued colleague both to myself and Mr. Fraser, of course, and I think only time will tell whether it's some personal reason or whatever that has caused him to resign. He has taken me by surprise.

Richard Carlton:

Mr. Morris,

this is not related, I suggest to the pretext on which I invited you into the studio this evening either, but do you know anything about Mr. Robinson's resignation?

Mr. Morris:

No, it's come as a total surprise to me also.

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Richard Carlton:

May we now revert to the pre-plan: VIP aircraft. Your speech in the Parliament today, as Clyde, suggested, throwing a little mud, sir, is there anything about the Government's use of VIP privileges -- anything, any improper use of those privileges that the Whitlam Government was not also guilty of in its term in office.

Mr. Morris:

Let's put the matter in context. It was Mr. Fraser who said in 1975 there would be no more international safaris. We didn't want a tourist for a Prime Minister. What I was pointing this afternoon, in spite of that statement, we've got a tourist for a Prime Minister, whether we like it or not, and a tourist that we can't afford. The thing that the Whitlam Government didn't do was it didn't embark on any \$40 million programme that we are to re-equip the VIP flight. That's the essential difference and that was the point of this afternoon's debate. The Government's decision, in the initial stages, has been \$14 1/2 billion in the purchase of two Boeing 707's. It is a direct contradiction and rejection of what Mr. Fraser said in 1975.

Mr. Nixon:

As a simple answer to this of course, circumstances since 1975 have changed markedly. We've had a report from Sir Robert Mark, who is the Head of Scotland Yard -- and that's one of the reports on security and the need for Prime Ministers when travelling to travel in VIP planes to separate him from the travelling public. For two reasons: there is a tremendous trust involved in providing security when a Prime Minister or Head of State of any country, in a host country, travels with the normal travelling public in commercial planes.

Richard Carlton:

Doesn't that same thing apply to Mr. Whitlam though, in his days as Prime Minister.

Mr. Nixon:

Well the security question certainly was not raised and I don't think even Mr. Whitlam pretended that his use of a Boeing 707, which he ripped off Qantas over a busy Christmas period, was on the basis of security....No I never suggested that, but the reason for the purchase of the 707s is certainly VIP use. But equally importantly, and perhaps more importantly, they are the last two planes that Qantas own - the 707s aircraft - the RAAF have been using those to charter their people and their traffic up to Butterworth. They will no longer be available after they are sold. They now have them in their fleet and they will be used importantly by the RAAF in the majority of hours used and importantly by the Prime Minister in the minority of hours used as VIP fleet.

Mr. Morris:

Mr. Nixon has a faulty memory. Mr. Whitlam, in response to Mr. Nixon's own questions on the chartering of the 707 made that essential point -- that security was involved, but the point

Mr. Morris: (continued)

I want to stress is that the Government has no recommendation from it, from any responsible quarter that it should purchase Boeing 707s and a veritable flying hotel. There is no recommendation at all for Governments that they should buy 707s. That's the essential point of the discussion.

Richard Carlton:

Do you think that the dispute here would really disappear if the Opposition was given equal access to the planes?

Mr. Morris:

Not at all.

Richard Carlton:

It is a matter of principle?

Mr. Morris:

It is a matter of priority. We see that we have a time now of record unemployment. We are in a period of enforced economic adversity. Yesterday, last evening in particular, we saw the Government reject a proposal to restore six-monthly cost of living adjustment to pensioners. We've seen a cut in defence service allocation - only today the Prime Minister told the Parliament of the increasing crisis to the north. What has been the Government's response?

Mr. Nixon:

Are you saying that Mr. Hayden won't use the VIPs?

Mr. Morris:

I can't speak for Mr. Hayden.

Mr. Nixon:

Well, what are you saying. Are you saying that..

Mr. Morris:

I'm not saying that we wouldn't purchase Boeing 707s...

Mr. Nixon:

You know you will have access to them, don't you? But irrespective of that, the fact is that there was a report by Sir Robert Mark, who is a former Head of Scotland Yard. There is a report by an IDC. There are requests by Heads of -- by other Governments -- that when the Prime Minister of Australia travels in their country that he doesn't it in VIP aircraft for security purposes. I think the reality is we are living in changed circumstances and we shouldn't ignore it. When you combine that factor with the use that the RAAF can make of these planes, it is just quite wrong to make the bald statement that he'd done this, and that he's not prepared to do something for pensioners. The fact it was taking the total decision, it was taking the total needs

Mr. Nixon: (continued)

of RAAF requirements and they will get more use out of the plane than the VIP fleet will.

Mr. Morris :

Isn't it rather incongruous that the day the Prime Minister announces to the Parliament the danger to the north, 20 of our new tanks are in moth-balls, 20 percent of the army's armoured vehicles withdrawn from service. The Navy steaming time is cut, ammunition issues have been cut, yet we can squander, and that's the only word to describe it, we can squander, \$14 1/2 million to buy two VIPs -- two Boeing flying hotels. Now that's \$14 1/2 million. If that was used for defence purposes, would produce a ten percent increase ... (inaudible)

Mr. Nixon:

They will be used for (inaudible) purposes quite heavily. And as time unfolds and as the planes are put into use, we will be able to see the hours they are used by the RAAF. It is one of their priorities to have them.

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