



PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

THURSDAY, MAY 1, 1980

GREAT BARRIER REEF

The Prime Minister answered a question on the Great Barrier Reef in Parliament today, as follows:

Mr Moore:

I ask whether the Prime Minister's attention has been drawn to claims that the seas and submerged lands package undermines the Commonwealth Government's capacity to protect the Great Barrier Reef. Are these claims correct?.

Prime Minister:

The claims that have been made in that regard are totally wrong. In clear and unequivocal statements, both inside and outside the House, the Commonwealth Government has made it plain that we will not permit exploration for petroleum in the Great Barrier Reef region. We will not permit the renewal of petroleum exploration in the region until the results of both short and longer term research into the reef's ecosystem are known. This follows our decision in the report of the Royal Commission into petroleum drilling in the area of the Great Barrier Reef itself.

Those decisions were very clearly announced in this House on 4 June of last year. On 14 June the Premier of Queensland and I confirmed that it is the policy of both of our governments to prohibit any drilling on the reef or any drilling or mining which could in any way damage the reef. Those policy decisions are binding on both the Commonwealth Government and the Queensland government.

The rights and title to be vested in the State of Queensland as a result of our initiatives in the Seas and Submerged Lands Act exercise are very clearly subject to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act.

The powers of the Commonwealth under that Act remain supreme. They are untouched by the package which has been introduced. I think that is the main point to emphasise in this matter because there has been a suggestion that the legislation which has been introduced touches upon, and diminishes, our capacity to protect the reef through the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act, and it does not do that.

Our responsibilities and powers in respect to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act are in no way diminished as a result of the Seas and Submerged Lands Act exercise. The policy of the Commonwealth is very clear. We are progressively declaring sections of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, and by the end of this year I would expect that about one quarter of the length of the reef of 2,000 kilometres will be marine park.

We are taking advice from the Marine Park Authority. It is a Commonwealth/State body but the powers are virtually the Commonwealth's under Commonwealth legislation. As recommendations are received from that body we are acting to have marine parks declared. That will be the continuing policy of the Government.

We have given greater support to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. Last year it started off with a staff of 18. That was increased, at the request of the Authority to 29. The staff is to be increased to 44. I think there is a limit, in a new body of this kind, to the rate at which it can assimilate staff and usefully direct them to their proper functions and responsibilities. But the growth of the staff of the Authority shows very clearly the importance and priority which this Commonwealth Government places on these particular matters.

In no formal way has the statement that was issued by the Premier of Queensland and me on 14 June ever been formally brought to the notice of this House, and in a moment I would like to seek authority to have the statement incorporated in Hansard so that the record on the matter can be complete.

Again I would like to emphasise that that statement indicated that what we are doing will be the same for Queensland as for the other States, but with full regard to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act and to the Prime Minister's Parliamentary statement of 4 June on Petroleum Exploration on the Great Barrier Reef. The statement pointed out that both the Premier and the Prime Minister confirmed that it was the policy of their respective governments to prohibit any drilling on the reef or any drilling or mining which could damage the reef.

The relevant part of that statement reads:

Both the Premier and the Prime Minister confirmed that it was the policies of their respective governments to prohibit any drilling on the Reef or any drilling or mining which could damage the Reef.

A moment ago there was an interjection which indicated that the joint statement from the Premier and me does not have the force of law. But what does have the force of law is the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act and the Authority established under that Act which will be totally unimpaired as a result of the package of measures which is now before the House. The measures that are now before the House pay due regard to the Act and to that Authority and make it perfectly plain that that Act and that Authority will stand supreme in relation to the protection of the reef.

The Australian Labor Party is being purely mischievous in seeking to suggest otherwise. So that the record may be complete, and so that I will not need to read the statement of 14 June to the House in full, I ask that it be incorporated in Hansard.