

PRIME MINISTER INTERVIEWED BY JIM BONNER ON ABC'S "AM"

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Steve Cosser

In Federal Parliament yesterday, the Leader of the Opposition called on the Prime Minister to review the classification of secret documents in light of Monday's ruling in the High Court against the Federal Government's injunction which sought to prevent the publication of the book "Documents on Australian Defence and Foreign Policy, 1968-75". The Prime Minister was urged to prevent current guidelines being used as a device to stop discussion and criticism of Government policy. However, in this exclusive interview with Jim Bonner, Mr. Fraser defended the Government's action.

Prime Minister

We weren't trying to protect any secrets that might have been made, or any arrangements that have been developed over the last five years, because they were mostly documents of the Labor years. And so we were acting out of a basis of principle. Quite obviously any Government needs to be examining what it is doing, needs to be making sure that various security classifications are used with discretion. I would hope that that is a continuing process. But there is a great deal of material - advice on sensitive matters from Departments to Ministers, especially of Foreign Affairs and Defence, or the Prime Minister - which must be handled with discretion; involving security material, conduct of relationships between different countries. It is just not good enough to think that these things can be published without doing harm to relations between countries.

Bonner

But some of those documents in that particular book go back to 1968 when there would have been a Liberal/National Country Party Government in power.

Prime Minister

A few of them do. They were not documents of this particular Government. The main documents, the ones that had most interest, would have been the more recent ones which were prepared and developed in the 1972 to 1975 years. There is almost a view that some people seem to have that there is not only a right but almost a moral obligation to publish everything that people can lay their hands on about the activities and about the affairs of Government. I will be amongst the first to concede that full public disclosure of what Governments are doing, to the maximum extent, is a good thing. But when you come into this area of foreign affairs and defence, where relationships between other people as individuals, as Ministers, as Heads of Government - where just the relationship between countries is involved - you cannot have the sort of communication you need if you are going to do it through the front pages of the newspapers.

Bonner

But it does seem that apart from the instances that you have given that the bureacracy, the public service, is holding information that doesn't come into those categories. It has been classified 'secret' unnecessarily. Do you agree with that?

Prime Minister

You have got to look at the circumstances at the time when the documents were devised. I do not particularly want to criticise the classifications that were put on the documents in those Labor years. The classifications were there. They were dealing with sensitive matters involving relationships between Governments. I was a little bit concerned to hear on "AM" a suggestion that certain things would not be published - and this came from a former senior public servant - he indicated that the previous Government had made a decision that certain things would not be published merely because they would be some advantage to the then Opposition. Well, that is not a principle that I have ever stated. That is not the basis on which matters ought to be published or ought not to be published.