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PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

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LAUNCHING OF F/A-18 AIRCRAFT

This is an important occasion for our nation because the purchase of 75 F/A-18 Hornets is the largest peacetime defence project in Australia's history.

It is a project which will involve close co-operation among several partners, and I welcome not only the representatives of the U.S. Government, the McDonnell Douglas Aircraft Corporation and General Electric, but also the representatives of a number of Australian firms and trade unions because Australian industry will be vitally involved with the whole project. The Hornets will constitute Australia's new tactical fighter force, and their purchase comes at a time when all of us are concerned about trends in world events, and about how to respond to them.

The U.S. occupies the critical position in this process, and in this context I welcome the opportunity to say something about Australia's relationship with the United States. Australia and the United States have long been involved in co-operation across a wide range of common concerns. We are similar kinds of society, so it is not surprising that we often find ourselves on the same side, making similar judgements and reaching similar conclusions. In the field of defence in particular we have many concerns in common, and there are many strands within our relationship.

Let me say at the outset that Australia is pleased indeed that President Reagan has embarked on the process of rebuilding U.S. defences because a strong United States is vital to the security of the free world. We must never let this fact be obscured because it can be obscured by people who too easily allow the enemies of democracy to masquerade as its defenders.

I must say that I take no pleasure or comfort from the criticisms which are sometimes levelled at United States policy in this area, for peace can best be pursued from a position of strength, indeed it can sometimes only be pursued from a position of strength. Any failure to recognise this fact can have the most dangerous consequences. Alternative paths which have been followed towards the achievement of peace have not worked.

The Soviet Union exploited detente and the S.A.L.T. process on which it was based - to increase both the numbers and capabilities of its own military forces both nuclear and conventional. The growth of Soviet military power over recent years gives cause for great concern, and cannot but reflect longer term intentions. The Soviets have taken advantage of western restraint and have developed a capability of projecting their military power not only in Europe but in other regions as well.

Against the background of these moves by the Soviet Union, the pursuit of peace and stability required a fresh approach and the policies developed by the Reagan administration leave no room for doubt, either that there is a fresh approach, or about the aims of that approach.

Two weeks ago President Reagan made a major statement in which he issued an invitation to all nations to join in the quest for peace, security and freedom. This statement is a clear and unequivocal response to the growing instability and insecurity which has marked the early years of this decade. President Reagan's programme is as bold as it is comprehensive because he has not started from any misconception about the relative strengths of the East and the West. This new programme is high statesmanship, and Australia welcomes it, but the international environment certainly gives no basis for complacency. There is a wide range of contingencies in which Australia could find itself in the years ahead and because of this, we need a defence policy and a defence capability which is both comprehensive and effective.

One implication of this is that Australia's defence policy must be one of self-reliance. For a country with a small population, a large land mass, an even larger territorial sea, extended lines of international communication and a developed industrial base - self-reliance means a defence capability based on high technology rather than simple numbers. The implications of this are far reaching, especially in the context of our capabilities in the air.

In making the decision about the tactical fighter force, the Government had to consider which aircraft would best meet our strategic requirements with maximum flexibility, adaptability and availability. At the same time, the Government had to consider which aircraft could carry the RAAF through to the next century, while having at the same time the capacity to be adapted to technological change.

There is no doubt that the Hornet is an outstanding aircraft, it combines a multi-role performance with formidable capabilities. It is a reliable and safe aircraft, we can expect it to have a long life, and it has been designed from the outset for ease of maintenance. It is well suited to our operating, deployment and maintenance requirements, and it also has the flexibility to accept improved weapons in future years.

The Hornet uses technology and manufacturing processes new to Australia and the project will be introducing some of these processes into Australian industry. This Government has a longstanding policy that Australian industry should have the capacity to provide support for our defence force. This is obviously part of self reliance. We have therefore developed an industry programme in connection with the Hornet project, which will involve introducing new skills in many areas, and which will give Australia capacities which will be crucial to the continuing support of the aircraft.

The success of this programme will make considerable demands on Australian industry, on both management and the workforce. I am confident, however, as others are, that the required levels and standards of production will be achieved, because this project means a great deal to the future of Australia.

There is no doubt that in developing the Hornet, McDonnell Douglas and General Electric have produced an aeroplane which will provide a boost to Australia's defence capability in general and a powerful addition to the RAAF, and we look ahead to the delivery of the Hornets to the RAAF through the 1980s.

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