PRESS STATEMENT:

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ARTHUR CALWELL AND NEW GUINEA

Last week, the Prime Minister welcomed Mr. Arthur Calwell, the Leader of the Opposition, back to his Parliamentary duties. As we all know, Mr. Calwell had some time in hospital and had undergone an operation. However, the Leader of the Opposition is back on the front bench looking well.

Unfortunately, Arthur Calwell's return to Parliament has not been an entirely happy one because, in his first week, he was forced to rise immediately after another front bench member of the Opposition, Clyde Cameron from South Australia, and publicly rebuke him for what he had said about New Guinea. This took a great deal of courage because Mr. Cameron is clearly an influential Left Winger in the Labour Party, a very able speaker, and one with quite a few friends in the Labour Caucus.

The argument between Mr. Cameron and Mr. Calwell arose over New Guinea. Mr. Cameron had been speaking on the Estimates for the Department of External Affairs. The tenor of Mr. Cameron's speech was that Australia had done a lousy job in New Guinea and that we had not taken care of the indigenous population.

Mr. Cameron said that people were taken from the backblocks of New Guinea, such as from the Sepik River, and sold to plantation owners for £20 a head.

Mr. Cameron continued that such people were then examined and if they were found to be suitable for employment they were taken 200, 300 or 400 miles away from their own villages so that there was no possibility of them being independent of their employers.

Mr. Cameron went on to say how racial discrimination thrives in New Guinea. He said that the European traders were charging natives more for goods than they charged the Europeans.

Mr. Cameron said, and I quote his exact words: "We have to admit that the position is due entirely to our own lack of interest in the future of these people."

The danger of this sort of position is, of course, that the Russian representatives in the United Nations and in the forums of the world will quote Mr. Cameron as a leading member of the Australian Labour Party describing and criticising the actions of his own people. This does a tremendous amount of damage. It gives the Communist powers a weapon with which they can beat Australia about the head, and in these days of anti-colonialism the newly independent powers are only too ready to believe charges such as these no matter how little truth there is attached to them. This kind of speech does Australia very real damage.

There used to be a convention in the Australian Parliament as there still is in the United States Congress or in the House of Commons that you can put the boots in as hard as you like so far as the Government is concerned, so far as Ministers are concerned and, in return, the Government can hit the Opposition as hard as it can. But, when it comes to matters that involve Australia's prestige in the world and our relations with other nations, there is a borderline which most of us won't cross. Most politicians will take a political trick when they can but they will not attack without foundation of fact in a way that can do nothing but damage to Australia. This is what Clyde Cameron did.
Arthur Calwell recognised this. He realised the damage that Mr. Cameron's speech had done and, therefore, having come into the Chamber he rose immediately following. One would normally have expected a Government member to follow Mr. Cameron but Mr. Calwell felt so strongly about the matter that he took the call. He said: "The honorable member for Hindmarsh (that is Mr. Cameron) is entitled to express his own views and tonight he has expressed his own views and not necessarily those of the Labour Party. Every member has the right to his own opinions, but I don't hold with many of the views that have been expressed by the honorable member for Hindmarsh."

When you have in mind the fact that Mr. Calwell is Leader of the A.L.P. in the Parliament and Mr. Cameron a leading front bench member, this is a pretty solid rebuke. Normally, if a member says something that is out of line with Government policy or if a member says something that is out of line with Opposition policy it goes almost unnoticed and Party Leaders certainly do not come into the Parliament to dissociate their Parties publicly from the views expressed by an individual member, but because of the importance of the position, because of the fact that the speech could affect Australia's overseas relations, Mr. Calwell felt that he had to do this to dissociate the Labour Party. Mr. Calwell said: "The honorable member for Hindmarsh has been rather extravagant in his criticisms. I do not agree that nothing has been done in the Territory in the last 60 years. I was a member of the Government which at least started to effect some improvements there in the postwar years and that work has been added to since then."

Mr. Calwell showed a great deal of courage in acting in the way he did because as I said, Mr. Cameron is a persuasive and influential member of the Labour Party. Australia should thank the Leader of the Opposition for putting the record straight over this matter in a much more effective manner than any Government member or Minister could have done. For example, if the Minister for Territories had said what Mr. Calwell had said, impartial critics may have believed that the Minister was just protecting his own position, a thing that he would have to do as Minister, but when the Leader of Mr. Cameron's own Party comes and says the kind of things that were said we should be thankful because no one could say Mr. Calwell did not mean every word.

Australian policy in Australian New Guinea is bi-partisan. We are spending about £20M. a year in the area to develop it, to give the people and the natives some education and to try and build up the resources of the area in the hope that the pressures of world politics will give us time to stay in New Guinea long enough to leave the country in a proper state so that it can sensibly carry on its own affairs. Australia as a whole can take pride in what has been done. This does not mean that we should not do more but the United Nations Committees that have visited the Territory from time to time, while clearly being critical in certain respects, have, on the whole, praised the Australian Administration and the enthusiasm and dedication of the Administration's officers. We spend £20M. a year in New Guinea for no financial return and with no expectation of any return. This alone should answer Mr. Cameron's claim that Australians don't care about the New Guinea people.