PRESS STATEMENT:

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CENSURE MOTION (Continued)

RADIO BASE AND DEFENCE

Last week I spoke about the censure motion and how a large part of this debate ranged around issues involved in the establishment of the United States Naval Communications Centre in Western Australia. I said the Opposition was on the defensive on this issue. Today I want to show why this is so.

Australian Labour Party policy in peace and war has differed greatly over matters of defence. During the last war, the Curtin Government behaved as I hope any patriotic hardworking Australian Government would under similar circumstances. It pursued the war as vigorously as it could. Control of the Australian Armed Forces was placed entirely in the hands of an American. Unified command was essential to the proper conduct of the war. This was recognised and, as a minor power, our troops had to be placed in the charge of our major ally. There is only praise for this action.

During the war, the United States built up a magnificent defensive base at Manus Island at a cost of £100M. The United States for a long time wanted a full and proper agreement with Australia on the peaceful and permanent use of this base. The then External Affairs Minister, Dr. Evatt, procrastinated so long over the negotiations that the Americans came to the conclusion that the Australian Government in peace time would never make proper arrangements for the Manus Island base. Therefore the Americans broke off negotiations and established a base on another island, Guam. As a result, Australia lost a tremendous asset - a base on Manus Island which would have been fully available to the Australian Forces and a major part of the American defensive system in this part of the world. Shades of the Manus Island policy are now evident over this Naval Communications Centre to be built at Learmonth in Western Australia.

Within the last two or three years several members of the Opposition have said in Parliament that too much money is spent on defence; one said that we would do better to devote our defence vote to building a railway across Australia or conducting some other public work. I do not want to go into names and details but the record stands plainly for anyone who wants to read it. If anyone is interested, I have the references which clearly indicate that 8 members of the Opposition have, in recent years, said they want our defence vote reduced or who have implied that it is wasted. Two of these 8 said that there should be no Naval Communications Centre in Western Australia. Indeed, last October, the Australian Labour Party Federal Executive passed a resolution which Mr. Haylen, front-bench member of the Labour Party, said clearly meant the Australian Labour Party opposed the radio base. This is also recorded in Hansard of late last year.

The Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Calwell, recognised that outright opposition to the base would place the Australian Labour Party in an intolerable electoral position and to give him credit, I do not doubt that he also recognised that it would place Australia in an intolerable position with our relations with the United States. Mr. Calwell asked that a special conference of the Australian Labour Party be held to discuss foreign policy, in particular the radio base issue. The Federal Conference of the Australian Labour Party is the supreme policy-making and governing body of the Party. It normally meets only once every two years. It has full power over the State Branches of the Party. It has the right to suspend State Executives of the Party. It has the right and the power and ability to make every Australian Labour Party member of the Federal Parliament do as it wishes. The appropriate rule of the Conference is Rule 10 and in plain terms it says that the decisions of the Conference shall be binding on all Parliamentary members of the Australian Labour Party.

The Conference is composed of six members from each State. The different States have their own rules about the election of these six delegates. It is unusual for politicians to be members of the Conference although Mr. Clyde Cameron and Mr. Barnard from South Australia & Tasmania respectively both are.
The most powerful man in the Conference is said to be Mr. Chamberlain, who is Secretary of the Party in Western Australia and Secretary of the Conference. It is interesting to note that it was Mr. Chamberlain who announced the results of the special Conference, not Mr. Calwell. Before the special Conference was held it was Mr. Chamberlain who is reported to have told Federal Labour Members of Parliament not to talk about foreign policy and defence issues, not Mr. Calwell. They were told not to talk about these issues because many different viewpoints have been expressed by different A.L.P. members.

When the Conference does not meet, the Federal Executive, which has two members from each State, is the supreme governing body. It is rare again for politicians to be on this Federal Executive and its decisions are binding on all Labour politicians. Thus, there are two outside bodies—the Conference of 36 and the Executive of 12, both of whom can tell every Labour politician from Mr. Calwell down what to do. When there has been a very strong Labour Party leader this has not always mattered. For example, for a long time there had been traditional Labour Party policy that only volunteers to the Armed Services could be sent beyond Australia. Conscripts could only serve in Australia. Mr. Curtin knew that this would make it impossible for Australia to prosecute her war effort effectively. He had an argument with the Labour Party Conference of that day about this issue. Mr. Curtin is reported to have laid his leadership on the line in the following terms—"If you don't authorise me to do what I know to be in the interests of Australia, I will resign". This is the way a strong leader should behave and any leader of any country needs to be strong. Mr. Calwell knows that the Naval Communications Centre in Western Australia is as necessary to Australia's future defence as was Mr. Curtin's decision about conscription during the war. He spoke to members of the Conference. He asked them to support the base. Fifteen of the 36 voted flat against having the base under any conditions. Seventeen of them voted against having it even with the fairly stringent conditions that the new South Wales motion had attached to it. Thus, certainly 15 and possibly 17 members of the Conference that met last month do not want to co-operate with our Ally—the United States—on this matter.

The Conference decision only supported the base by 19 votes to 17 because Mr. Duggan from Queensland refused to vote with his five other Queensland members. He supported the resolution for the base. If he had not, official Conference and A.L.P. policy would have been against the base. An 18-all decision, under Conference rules, is equivalent to a negative vote.

The margin of victory for the base therefore is very small indeed. There are reports that when the biennial Federal Conference is held at Perth in June the decision will be changed. There are some who say that Mr. Chamberlain is against the Radio Base and these people go on to say that Mr. Chamberlain always gets his way in the A.L.P. by one means or another. Certainly his own Branch delegates from the West all voted solidly against the base.

Mr. Calwell should have laid his leadership on the line on this issue as Mr. Curtin did over conscription. If he had he would have won the almost unanimous support of the Conference and of his Parliamentary colleagues. He would have deserved the admiration of the Australian people. However, he did not do this. He waited around the corridors of the Kingston Hotel until the Conference made its decision late at night. He is apparently not prepared to challenge a rule that could make an Australian Labour Prime Minister subservient to an outside unconstitutional body owing no responsibility to the Australian Parliament or people.

The present minority view of the Conference is heavily supported inside the Labour Party by Parliamentary members. It is just as heavily opposed by other members. It is easy to see that this is a deep and fundamental issue which Australians have got to learn to face and the Australian Labour Party has got to learn to face. It is tragic that the Party that has the alternative Government is so divided on an issue that affects our security so greatly. We must hope that the A.L.P. Federal Conference shortly to be held endorses the policy recently made by a much wider margin and with less stringent conditions attached. If this is done it may then be possible to heed Mr. Calwell's plea not to make defence a political issue.