PRESS STATEMENT:

MALCOLM FRASER:

March 8th, 1964

In the first week of the Federal Parliament there is a fair amount of shaking down that is necessary before Parliament can get down to the hard work that undoubtedly lies ahead of the session. It will be a long session, not only because there is new policy to implement as a result of the election but also because there are agreements with the States which expire at the end of this year and which will have to be renewed.

COMMONWEALTH AID ROADS:

One of these agreements involves Commonwealth Aid to Roads, which has totalled £250M over the last five years and which the Prime Minister promised would total at least £350M over the next five. This will involve a good deal of dispute and much hard bargaining. Several different interests are at work. Each State is concerned to develop a formula that will give a larger share of funds to his own State, but in addition to this the Lord Mayors of the capital cities have all been particularly active in trying to get special funds for their capital city development. Furthermore, rural interests are most concerned to maintain their share of the total grants that they have had over recent years.

These different pressures will work themselves out by approaches to members of Parliament and to Ministers and, finally, in a Premiers' Conference that is to be held shortly.

It is most important when the final decisions are known that we should judge them not purely in the light of our own particular need and belief, but in the light of what we think is best for Australia as a whole. If the Lord Mayors don't get all the money they would like I hope and believe they would recognize that rural roads need the continued development that they have had over past years. There have certainly been tremendous strides made in country areas. When I first began electioneering in 1953 I would very often be travelling on gravel roads and now these are rare and I find myself grumbling to some extent if I have to get off the bitumen.
COMMONWEALTH RE-DISTRIBUTION:

A spark flew when the member from Bradfield, speaking on the Address-in-Reply, called the redistribution proposals included in the Governor-General's speech a gerrymander. This received quite wide publicity. While I have a great respect for the member for Bradfield, Mr. Turner, I don't agree with him on this particular matter.

Mr. Turner comes from one of those metropolitan seats in Sydney which is, in fact, and from an electoral point of view, easy to service. Incidentally it is one of the best seats in Australia. At the last election his majority was 30,000.

A country growing as rapidly as Australia obviously needs redistribution every so often. This is to keep pace with the growth and shift in population. While the average number of people in seats in Australia may be about 45,000 some seats have dropped to less than 30,000, while there are two that are pushing the 100,000 mark. This is quite inequitable and something has to be done about it.

The redistribution that was introduced after the last census was defeated because two political parties in the Commonwealth Parliament indicated they were going to oppose it and the redistribution was dropped. One of the reasons the redistribution did not receive support was that under the formulae that are used at present, even though a State may increase its population if another State increases its population at a greater rate then the first State may lose a seat. This was going to happen to Western Australia and I think also Queensland. Under the proposal introduced in the last Parliament there were a great number of people who could not understand why a State that had increased its population should lose a seat. The Governor-General's speech announced that the Representation Act would be amended so that no State can lose a seat under the kind of circumstances that I have been talking about.

The Government has also recognised that there is an inequitable division within different States at the present time. From one redistribution to the next we find that some seats have more than doubled in size while others have shrunk to under 30,000. This is largely because of slum clearance in capital cities and because many people in the inner city area have moved to outer suburbs. Because of this and because of the difficulties of representing large areas the Electoral Act will also be amended so that the Distribution Commissioners shall take into account community and regional interests, difficulties of communication, the trend of population changes and the relative areas of proposed divisions. This provision is in the present act to a certain extent, but it has never been used by the Distribution Commissioners to any marked extent and, as I understand the proposal, the amendment will emphasise and make it obligatory for these matters to be taken into account.

One of the important points here is to bear in mind the difficulty of proper representation. It is a relatively easy job for a metropolitan member to represent an area that might take him ten minutes to cross. It is a much more difficult job to give proper representation to an area that may extend for one hundred or hundreds of miles. This, of course, depends to some extent on the roads and transport facilities and distribution of population within the area, but there is no doubt that the country member has been under an enormous disadvantage when compared with the city member in his efforts to serve his area faithfully and actively. The amount of travelling and the time lost in travelling alone is sufficient to emphasise this difference.
I think it was unfortunate and inaccurate for the member for Bradfield to call these proposals a gerrymander. They were mentioned in the Prime Minister's policy speech in practically the same terms as they are included in the Governor-General's speech. No such charges were made then by any one person in Australia, or if so I didn't hear of them. Since an election was in progress one would have expected the Opposition to attack us on these matters perhaps even if they thought there was little justification for the attack but, as I recall, no attack was made.

In the Commonwealth Parliament redistribution has always been free from gerrymander and under the present Government, Australia may be sure that it will remain so.