PRESS STATEMENT

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In this last week of the session some amendments were introduced to the Defence Act and to the National Service Act.

You will remember that last Spring we introduced a National Service Bill providing for National Service. There is no need to recall that this has been made necessary because of the difficult and dangerous conditions that prevail in south-east Asia and between Indonesia and Malaysia. It will also be recalled that this was introduced only after the most vigorous efforts had been made to obtain a sufficient number of people by voluntary means.

The new National Service Bill doesn't introduce fundamental changes, but it does tidy up several procedures. Under the original National Service Act introduced last year a serviceman called-up has an obligation to serve two years full-time service in the regular army supplement, then he would have an obligation for three years in the regular army reserve. Membership of the reserve involves an annual camp but would not interrupt a normal occupation. The regular army reserve is liable to be called-up during a period of defence emergency which would be proclaimed by the Governor-General and made known to the Parliament within a minimum period of a few days after the proclamation. Under the same conditions members of the Citizen Military Forces could be called up for full-time service. This is a period short of general war, as defined in the Defence Act.

Under the legislation as it stands at the moment, if there were a period of defence emergency a serviceman whose two-year period in the regular army was running out would have to be discharged from the regular army and then served with call-up papers for full-time duty as a member of the regular army reserve. Such transfers could have a disruptive effect on the formations in which the national service-men were serving under these conditions. Therefore, the legislation now introduced makes it possible for the members to stay in the regular army supplement but not for longer than the period of total service made obligatory under the legislation last year.

There is another change in the new Bill. If there is a period of war, as defined in the Defence Act, the national service-man, as any other service-man, would have to stay in the service for the duration of hostilities.

Provision is also being made to allow a national service-man to volunteer for a period of longer than two years in the regular army if he so wishes. Then, obligation to serve in the reserve would be reduced by the term of any voluntary full-time service. The Bill also makes it possible to allow a member to remain on full-time duty to complete medical treatment which was begun before discharge. A new provision is also being introduced to allow the serviceman to complete his reserve service in the Citizen Military Forces instead of with the regular army reserve. This would be at the choice of the serviceman himself.

Under the Defence Act as it now stands people who are called-up for full-time service during a period of war are not now liable to serve outside Australia. This provision was made many years ago when strategic circumstances were quite different from those of the present time. These circumstances impose a limitation on the military effectiveness of our forces which is unacceptable in view of the sort of situation that Australia could face in wartime. It is essential that in war all services should be available for service in any position that Australia's defence
demands. The Government has concluded that the war-time restriction to Australia and its territories should be removed. It is worth pointing out perhaps that countries with whom we are associated in defence arrangements, the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand, already have a comparable obligation in a time of war. The same obligation exists in most European and Asian countries.

Thus, in a time of war all military forces will be required to serve in or beyond the territorial limits of Australia as our security may demand.

This is a significant and important change. It is one that is not only made necessary by the strategic situation in which Australia finds itself, but it has also been made necessary from a point of view of justice. I can see no justice in the provision that states that national servicemen should serve overseas and in which other servicemen called-up during a time of war should not have a similar obligation. There would be no reason in this at all.

In the last year the Government has done a great deal to increase our military preparedness. We have a greatly expanded defence program which will almost certainly involve increased taxation. We are, at the same time, involved with National Service training to obtain the necessary manpower for the army. These amendments to the National Service Act and to the Defence Act represent just one more step to make sure that if we are forced into the position Australia will be prepared and ready for any emergency that might arise.

We will all regret the necessity for having to make these changes, for having to impose these obligations upon Australians, but the first duty of the Federal Government and the first duty of each citizen is to do what he can to maintain the security and independence of Australia. I think by now we will all have become very much aware that we live in a difficult and dangerous part of the world. Our survival depends not only on our own efforts but also upon the arrangements we have with our allies like the United Kingdom and the United States. We should not forget that the dangers that are present in our part of the world, in southeast Asia would more directly affect us than they would Britain or the United States. Therefore, it is our task to make sure that we do everything we possibly can to see that our defences are adequate to meet the situations that could arise.