PRESS STATEMENT: April 12th, 1959

EXPORT OF BIRDS

Some time ago, at the request of people who are particularly interested in the subject, a few of us approached the Minister for Customs to ask him to prohibit the export of birds from Australia.

The present position in relation to this trade is thoroughly unsatisfactory. About 100,000 birds are trapped a year and at least 75% of these, on the most conservative estimates, die before they are sold. This very high mortality is not necessarily the most important factor concerning this unwanted trade. If the position remains as it is, it is inevitable that some Australian species of birds will become extinct; indeed the Paradise parrot and the Princess Alexandra parrot may have already done so.

There is, furthermore, great danger to some variety of finches. At first sight, this may appear to be impossible because these birds are found in great numbers in the remoter parts of Australia. However, if the habits of finches are examined, it will be found that they can only keep their natural predators at bay when they are living together in large mobs. If inroads are made into these mobs for any particular reason the remainder die out very quickly. Furthermore, since waterholes in the drier parts of Australia are very far apart it is not difficult to trap all the birds congregating in the one waterhole.

The Passenger pigeon, a bird of the United States was one whose habits were very similar to those of the Australian finches. It was possibly the most numerous bird in the world. Trading made inroads into its numbers and the rest began to die out and the bird became extinct in 1914. The same thing could happen to Australian finches.

The export of birds is a trade with which Australia could well do without – the dollars returned to this country are not worth the permanent loss of certain species of birds.
The trade is carried out mostly by large scale professional trappers.

The present Commonwealth arrangements with the States is completely inadequate for the protection of any birds in the Commonwealth because it is only necessary for one State to permit the export of a certain bird and then that bird can be trapped from any part of Australia and exported from that one State. Indeed, this is what happens and this is why restrictions imposed by one State or by the Northern Territory Administration can be and are made completely ineffective.

The position in the Territory is that permission is given to trap or export birds for botanical or zoological purposes only. This should be the position throughout the whole of Australia.

I understand that the Commonwealth has the power to prohibit this trade, but in the past has been reluctant to use it.

I can understand how this position has arisen. The States have the authority to look after their native fauna and flora, but this is a question which cuts right across State boundaries and is one in which the Commonwealth must interest itself. It is not sufficient to say that this should be left to the appropriate State Minister, the Minister in Charge of Protection of Fauna and Flora in South Australia for instance has no knowledge of problems in Victoria. To try and leave this matter to State Ministers implies in fact that a State Minister in South Australia will be making regulations that will vitally affect Victoria. This is a hopeless way of doing things, and furthermore it is no excuse to say that it is necessary to permit this trade to prevent certain kinds of birds becoming pests. If it is wished to reduce the numbers of certain birds in certain areas there are easier and much more economical ways of doing it.
There was considerable support from many Members from all States to have this unfortunate trade banned. I feel that everyone who has some regard for native Australian wild life should agree.