PRESS STATEMENT

by Mr Malcolm Fraser, Minister for Education and Science and Member for Wannon

MALAYSIA—SINGAPORE: THE GOVERNMENT'S DEFENCE PLANS

The Government, believing that Australia is irrevocably bound to South-East Asia, has announced its plans to cope with the new era dawning in the region.

The historic role of Britain as a firm military presence in the area is coming to an end. It will be finished by the end of 1971.

The basic purpose behind the decision to retain our forces there after 1971 is this - the preservation of security so that economic conditions can be advanced and living standards lifted.

Our decision means that Australia will continue co-operating with Malaysia/Singapore and New Zealand to seek to achieve these objectives.

Australian forces have in the past played a vigorous role in supporting military measures to protect the security of Malaysia–Singapore.

Because of our position, we cannot remain aloof from the problems besetting this region. If there is instability, if there is poverty, disillusion and despair, we will be directly affected.

In Parliament, the Prime Minister announced details of our attitude: we will maintain land, air and sea forces in Malaysia/Singapore after the British leave.

The Prime Minister, as does every member of the Government, rejects utterly the 'Fortress Australia' concept - withdrawal to our own shores.

Withdrawal, we believe, would pose greater risks than maintaining forces in the region at a period when we are not directly backed by a great power.
The countries of the region who have come to look to us for help would be sadly disillusioned.

In the words of the Prime Minister withdrawal by Australia would be 'contrary to our historic actions and future interests'.

We could hardly expect smaller countries there to have much faith in the things for which we stand or larger countries outside the region to despatch assistance should the need arise.

The Prime Minister has said that if threats arise outside of the capacity of the countries involved after 1971, then we would look to the support of allies outside the region.

We continue to place a high value on economic aid through the Colombo Plan, involving considerable aid to Asian students in Australia.

We continue to direct efforts towards helping Malaysia/Singapore to improve their living standards and improve their industrial bases.

But we recognise this process takes time.

As the Prime Minister said, 'Just as ultimate stability depends on progress and rising standards of living, so does the possibility of progress depend on maintaining immediate stability. And provision for defence is necessary to help provide that immediate stability.'