PRESS STATEMENT:

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PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

The first week of the autumn session did not produce many sparks. Question time on Tuesday was very quiet. I had expected many questions on the banning of the Bidault interview; on the U.S. Naval Communications Centre in Australia and, possibly, on the method of deciding and enforcing Labour Party policy. While there was a question from Eddie Ward on the Naval Station in Western Australia and one also from Mr. Whitlam, many of the questions were on the run of the mill electoral matters which concern members' individual electorates. There were questions on eggs; on the training of skilled tradesmen; on taxation; on the Sydney Post Office clock. Incidentally, the person who asked this question has, I think, asked about thirty other questions all on the same subject.

The Post Office clock was in a tower that was demolished at the beginning of the war because the foundations were not secure and it was felt that if there were any bombs or shelling of Sydney the clock and the tower would fall with it. It is now believed that 500,000 people may be in the vicinity, in the last year that moves have been successfully made to have the Post Office clock and tower re-erected almost twenty years after the end of the war. The main reason for not putting the tower back is the usual one of expense.

There were questions on decimal currency; on roads and on Malaya. There was no sign of any concerted attack on Ministers on any of the controversial matters that have arisen since Parliament lifted before Christmas. However, on Thursday, the Opposition did move an urgency motion on the banning of the Bidault interview.

THE B.B.C. BIDault INTERVIEW

Quite frankly, every aspect of this affair was most unfortunate. None of it should ever have occurred. The Prime Minister strongly attacked the stupidity of the British Broadcasting Corporation for allowing the interview to be made in the first place. The Prime Minister pointed out that Georges Bidault is wanted by the French Government for treason. He is being pursued around the world. He is wanted as head of an organization which has already made unsuccessful but violent attempts to murder the President of France. The organization that he claims to lead — the O.A.S. — has been responsible for many acts of terrorism against other people in France. It was an Extremist organization formed, in the first place, to fight President de Gaulle's intention to give Algeria its freedom.

Speaking of the B.B.C. interview, the Prime Minister said: "As an unfriendly act towards a friendly power, I can scarcely think of anything more stupid and more offensive."

We have only got to look at it in this way. If somebody in Australia had disagreed with the policies of the elected Government of the people and, as a result, had formed a Terrorist organization specializing in political assassination, and if that organization had attempted to assassinate our Prime Minister or the Leader of the Opposition, and if then the Leader of the Organization had fled to a neighbouring friendly country and if that friendly country had interviewed this particular person on television and played the interview over the national Government-sponsored network we, in Australia, would certainly regard it in a pretty severe manner. This interview was all the more stupid because after General de Gaulle's rebuff to England over the Common Market, Princess Margaret's visit to Paris had been banned on political grounds by the British Government. It does not do to take offence in the field of international politics in this fashion. Britain, as a great nation, should be beyond showing ill-temper in this manner and certainly should be beyond trying to avenge her feelings against the President of France with the sort of television interview that the B.B.C. had with a person wanted for high treason against the President and Government of France.
Mr. Allan Fraser, in leading the attack for the Opposition, was in some difficulty because, at the beginning of his speech, he said: "I make it plain from my point of view that the issue is certainly not whether the Bideau interview should have been televised. I would think that the very strongest argument could be made that this man, who is the head of an illegal organization aiming at the assassination of the French President and the overthrow of the French Government, should not have been given publicity and that such action is offensive to a friendly nation". As far as this, therefore, the Government and the Opposition were on the same ground. They both agreed that the interview should never have been made. There is no doubt that the French Government had the most serious objections to the showing of the film by the B.B.C. The question is whether a second showing by the A.B.C. would have any additional detrimental effect on relations with France. It was not a question of whether the Australian people should or should not be allowed to see such a film. Quite clearly, nobody doubts the good sense of the average Australian in judging these matters and there was never any question of whether or not Australians, as individuals, should see the film. This was never the basis of the objection.

It is probably possible to argue both ways in this matter and we will never know finally which is the correct one. However, there is no doubt that the Government has learnt a lesson, in this particular matter. There is no censorship of the press in Australia in peacetime and there never will be. The only limitations placed upon the press is the danger of possible legal action if they say something that is libellous or slanderous against a person or a group. Since there was nothing to stop the press printing the interview in full, and as the "Sun" did, taking some pictures from the interview and putting them on the picture page with captions underneath, it seems there was little point in trying to keep the interview off television and this, indeed, was recognised by the Government.

The irony of this situation is that while some attack was made on the Government in this country for trying to stop the interview, the British Government was most bitterly and strongly attacked in the House of Commons for having allowed the interview to have been made and for having allowed the interview to have been put over the B.B.C. It is also ironical that it was the British Conservative Government that was attacked for doing what our Government was attacked for trying to prevent. Labour Opposition in Britain attacked the Government for allowing the interview to be made and screened and the Labour Opposition in Australia tried to attack the Government for trying to stop the interview. There does not seem to be any consistency in this whole affair which I personally believe should never have arisen. If the interview had been shown in Australia without any attempted bar I don't believe it would have caused a flicker of controversy across Australia.