PRESS STATEMENT:

MALCOLM FRASER:

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In my last report I described a censure motion and said how a large part of the debate ranged around issues involved in the establishment of the United States Naval Communications Centre in Western Australia. In this report I want to show why the Opposition is on the defensive on this issue.

The Australian Labour Party Policy in peace and war has differed greatly over matters of defence. During the last war the Curtin Government behaved as I hope any patriotic hard-working Australian Government would under similar circumstances. It pursued the war vigorously. Because unified command was essential the Australian Forces were largely put under the control of our most powerful Ally — the United States. Co-operation with the United States was complete — for this there is only praise.

During the war the United States built a defence base at Manus Island at a cost of £100,000,000. After the war the United States tried to obtain a proper agreement with Australia for the permanent use of this Manus Island base. The then External Affairs Minister, Dr. Evatt, procrastinated so long over the negotiations that the Americans came to the conclusion that the Australian Government in peace time would never make proper arrangements for the Manus Island base, therefore the Americans walked off the Manus Island base and established another one on their own island of Guam. As a result, Australia lost a tremendous asset. This event that took place in the late 1940's gave a jolt to American-Australian relationships. Shades of this Manus Island policy are now evident over the Naval Communications Centre to be built at Learmonth in Western Australia.

Eight members of the Opposition have, in recent years, said they want our defence vote reduced, or have implied that it is wasted. Two of these eight have said there should be no Naval Communications Centre in Western Australia. Last October the Australian Labour Party Federal Executive passed a resolution which Mr. Les Haylen, front-bench member from Sydney, said clearly meant the Australian Labour Party opposed the Radio Base. This is also recorded in Hansard of late last year.

Mr. Calwell, recognising that outright opposition to the Base would place the Australian Labour Party in an intolerable electoral position and, to give him credit, I do not doubt that he also recognised that it would place Australia in an intolerable position in our relationships with the United States, asked that a special conference of the Australian Labour Party be held to discuss foreign policy, in particular the Radio Base issue.

The Federal Conference of the Australian Labour Party is the supreme policy making and governing body of the Party. It normally meets only once every two years. It has full power over State Branches of the Party and over every Parliamentary member of the Party. Rule 10 of the Australian Labour Party Federal Conference says in plain terms that the decisions of the Conference shall be binding on all Parliamentary members of the A.L.P. The Conference is composed of six members from each State. The States have their own rules about the election of these delegates; it is unusual for politicians to be members of the Conference. Mr. Calwell is on record in Hansard as having said all members of the Australian Labour Party are bound by the platform of the Party. It is the Conference not the politicians of the Party that makes the rules and decides the Platform.

The most powerful man in the Conference is said to be Mr. Chamberlain, Secretary of the Conference and Secretary of the A.L.P. in Western Australia. It was Mr. Chamberlain who announced the results of the special conference called by Mr. Calwell. Before the special Conference
was held it was Mr. Chamberlain who is reported to have told Federal Labour members of Parliament not to talk about Foreign Policy and Defence issues. It would seem that Mr. Chamberlain was, to some extent, usurping the functions that one would think belongs to the Parliamentary Leader of the Party - Mr. Calwell.

With a strong Parliamentary Leader in the Labour Party the power of the Conference has been pushed aside. During the war Mr. Curtin had an argument with the Labour Party Conference of the day over conscription. Traditional A.L.P. policy had been that conscripts could only serve inside Australia and that only volunteers could go beyond our shores. Prime Minister Curtin knew this would make it impossible for Australia to prosecute her war effort effectively. He is reported to have laid his leadership on the line in the following terms:

"If you don't authorise me to do what I know to be in the best interests of Australia I will resign".

Mr. Curtin knew that it was necessary for Australian conscripts in the last war to serve beyond the shores of Australia. He won his point - as any strong leader should.

Mr. Calwell knows the Naval Communications Centre in Western Australia is as necessary to Australia's future defence as was Mr. Curtin's decision about conscription in the war. Mr. Calwell, however, behaved differently. He spoke to members of the Conference, he asked them to support the base. 15 of the 36 voted against having the Base under any conditions, 17 of them voted against having it even with the fairly stringent conditions the N.S.W. motion attached to it. The Conference decision only supported the Base by 19 votes to 17 because Mr. Duggan from Queensland refused to vote with his five other Queensland members. If it hadn't been for his vote Australian Labour Party policy would have been against co-operation with the United States in this matter. The margin of support for the base is therefore very small. There are reports that when the next biennial Federal Conference is held in Perth in June the decision will be changed.

Mr. Calwell should have laid his leadership on the line in this issue as Mr. Curtin did over conscription. If he had he would have won the almost unanimous support of the Conference and of his Parliamentary colleagues, he would have deserved the admiration of the Australian people. He did not do this. He waited around the corridors of the Kingston Hotel until the Conference made its decision late at night. He is apparently not prepared to challenge a rule that could make a weak Australian Labour Party Prime Minister subservient to an outside unconstitutional body owing no responsibility to the Australian Parliament or people.

It is easy to see that this is a deep and fundamental issue which Australians have got to learn to face and the Australian Labour Party must learn to face. It is tragic that the Party that is the alternate Government is so divided on an issue that affects our security so greatly. We must hope that the A.L.P. Conference shortly to be held endorses the policy recently made by a much wider margin and with less stringent conditions attached. If this is done it may be possible to heed Mr. Calwell's plea not to make defence a political issue.