PRESS STATEMENT:

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SELF-GOVERNMENT FOR NEW GUINEA

In the last days of the autumn session the Minister for Territories, Paul Hasluck, introduced a Bill in the Commonwealth Parliament which would take Australian New Guinea a very long step on the road to full self-government. It is the Australian Government's intention that Australian New Guinea should be brought to the stage in which New Guinea can be left as an independent, self-governing and economically sound State. To this end the Australian tax-payer annually provides between $20 million and $30 million with no thought of any return except the satisfaction of trying to do a good job for New Guinea.
When the history of this century comes to be written, I would not be at all surprised if it became known as the century in which equality of status was finally accorded to all people, no matter what their colour, race or religion. We sometimes forget the almost complete transformation that has taken place since the war. Colony after colony of the United Kingdom has become independent and self-governing, remaining a member of the British Commonwealth. It might give us pause to think, as a member of one of the original dominions in the Commonwealth, that 90% of the members are black. The former British Empire has been transplanted into a group of independent and self-governing dominions with a real degree of friendship and without the bitterness which has so often been associated with the emancipation of coloured people.

In general terms, Australia has not been involved in any of these processes, but despite the fact that this country has never had territorial ambitions, has never sought to expand its own rule and its own boundaries, we run the risk of being one of the last colonial powers in the world. This is because we have obligations and responsibilities in East New Guinea. It was only after the war that the Australian Government began to do anything very much to develop this territory. From the very outset that development was never undertaken with the attitude that this will be a good financial investment for Australia. Development was undertaken solely to assist the people of New Guinea and to try and bring East New Guinea to the stage at which it could be a self-governing and financially sound State.

Tremendous improvements have been made in recent years. The Australian approach to this particular problem has been different from that adopted by some European countries. For example, France educated an elite of indigenous native in each of the French-African colonies. Then, the running of these French-African States was handed over to this native elite. This was not democracy. It was not intended to be. It was more intended to hand the colonies over to a group of people who were able to administer their states effectively. It cannot be denied that France has had a remarkable degree of success with this policy and the former French-African colonies have a greater loyalty to France than have other former colonies to any other country. Nevertheless, the Australian approach has been quite different. We have taken the much more difficult step of trying to create democracy in New Guinea. When we consider that democracy as we know it is something that has developed over a course of one thousand years, we realise the size of our task. We are trying to introduce it in about 25 years in New Guinea in an area where the people have no common language, no common custom or religion and where education was unknown before Australia developed schools.

Australia began this process of trying to teach democracy at the basic local government level. New Guineans were elected to local government councils and so many people gained a knowledge of responsibility and some meaning of the word democracy. In 1960, comprehensive changes were made to the Legislative Council of New Guinea and, under the Act, elections were held early in 1961 for a Council in which the number of elected members was increased from three to twelve and in which the indigenous members were increased from a minimum of three to a minimum of eleven. Then this Council was opened in 1961, it was announced that this was just one more stage on the road to full self-government.

In this last autumn session, the Minister for Territories, Paul Hasluck, announced the further stage which is taking the territory of New Guinea a very long way indeed along the road to full self-government.
The name of the Legislative Council is going to be changed to House of Assembly. It is thought this name carries with it a greater degree of responsibility than Legislative Council which is a name that, in the minds of many people, has a close relationship to colonial regimes. The membership of this new House of Assembly is going to be increased from 37 to 64. Of this total of 54 elected members, 44 members will be elected from a common roll in single member constituencies. Ten members will be elected from a common roll in single member constituencies described as reserved electorates. Both black and white members of New Guinea will be on the common roll and it is thought that the 44 open electorates will be represented entirely by indigenous people. The ten open electorates can only be represented by non-indigenous candidates but all people, black and white, will vote for them. This, in fact, means that 10 electorates will be reserved for white people. It should be emphasised that the indigenous people of New Guinea wanted some way in which white representation in the House of Assembly could be guaranteed because of their experience which the indigenous people of New Guinea recognise they can still need. Voting for this new House of Assembly will be by secret ballot as we know it and each member will be representing about 30,000 voters.

The Administrator's Council, which carries out the job of government, as our Cabinet does in Australia, is also going to be expanded from 7 to 11 members. There will be 6 official members of this Council who will, in fact, be public servants, and 7 non-official members who must be elected by the new House of Assembly.

The procedures of the new House of Assembly have been evolved especially to give its members experience in responsibility and in executive government.

It should be emphasised that this Bill was introduced into the Australian Parliament as a result of a report made by a Select Committee of the old New Guinea Council. This Select Committee carried out an exhaustive investigation of the wishes of the people and these comprehensive changes are the result.

Last year, a United Nations Committee on Colonial Territories visited New Guinea and made a report suggesting certain changes. This report was a general one. The United Nations Committee did not ascertain the wishes of the local inhabitants to any great degree. The main purpose of the United Nations Committee is to prod colonial governments into granting self-government as soon as possible. It should be pointed out that while the Government of Australia respects the views and the wishes of this United Nations Committee, it feels that it is acting more in the interests of the people of New Guinea by bringing about reforms that have been asked for by the New Guineans themselves. This is much better than some outside authority coming along and saying - "This is what you want; this is what you require."
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