PRESS STATEMENT:

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October 17th, 1965

PARLIAMENTARY PRACTICE

In this last week the Parliament began the detailed examination of the Estimates. In these discussions the financial provisions for each Government Department are taken one by one and are open to full discussion.

The first matter to come under review was the estimates for Parliament itself and this year there was a more than usually interesting debate. Several members have been devoting their attention to the ways in which Parliament itself can be made a more effective instrument. In the years since the war the power and the influence of the Government has greatly expanded simply because a modern State requires a Government to do many more things than was the case some years ago. Thus, the Government services have expanded and the technical and expert advice available to Governments have, as one might expect, kept pace with this development.

If the private member of Parliament is to be able to criticise and to advise and to scrutinise as effectively as possible, he needs additional facilities so that he can keep pace with the increasing demands of Parliamentary work. This is important because our system is largely one of checks and balances. In many cases members of Parliament are watch dogs over the Executive. Parliamentary control is exercised by influence rather than direct power, by advice rather than command, by sensible criticism rather than destruction, by scrutiny as opposed to initiation and by publicity compared to secrecy. If a private member is to carry out these functions in a proper manner he needs to have a wide knowledge and a good understanding of what Governments are doing and what they are trying to do in many particular fields.

In the United Kingdom the House of Commons has come up against this problem in a much more severe fashion than we have because in Britain the House of Commons is responsible not only for all those things which are managed by our Federal Parliament but also for all those matters which are now the responsibility of our States. Thus the pressure on the time of the House of Commons has been enormous. The House of Commons has, therefore, developed a system of Committees which enable the House to get through a great deal more work. Bills are sent to certain committees for the committee stage and there are special committees whose task is to scrutinise and examine various aspects of administration. The House of Commons has always turned its back firmly against committees which might have a responsibility to one particular department and have, instead, supported the establishment of committees that have wide responsibilities which cover certain aspects of the work of several departments. They have also turned their back against committees that could criticise or discuss Government policy but have supported committees which would examine and scrutinise the implementation of established policy.

When you examine the nature of our Government and our Parliamentary system these rules and procedures appear to be sound. Over the last winter recess I made a detailed examination of British and of Australian practice and I believe that there is an area in which we could borrow from British experience.
Both Parliaments already have certain committees in common. In the financial field we have a Public Accounts Committee whose purpose is to see that monies have been spent as Parliament ordered. Both Parliaments have committees to see that delegated legislation does not impinge upon the rights of individuals. In the House of Commons you will also find a Committee on the Estimates whose purpose is to see that an established policy is being carried out as efficiently as possible, whose purpose is to see that the taxpayer is getting proper value for each pound spent. The Estimates Committee provides a valuable adjunct to the work performed by the Public Accounts Committee in the United Kingdom.

Thus, the United Kingdom has one committee whose job it is to see that money has been spent as Parliament ordered and another whose purpose is to see that Governments' policies are being wisely and economically implemented.

I believe that Australia, with great advantage, could borrow on United Kingdom experience and establish an Estimates Committee.
A COMMITTEE ON TARIFFS

There is another field suggested purely from our own experience in which we could extend the work of Parliamentary committees. At the moment Tariff Board Reports come into our Parliament, a few interested members discuss them, and that is the end of the matter. These Reports and the Government's action as a result of them are of immense importance to the economy. They affect the fortunes and livelihoods of industries and individuals. These Reports could be referred to a Joint Committee of the Parliament to make a detailed examination of them and then this Report would come to the full Parliament.

The purpose of the Parliamentary Committee would not be to perform the Tariff Board's work over again but to do two things; firstly to see that the Tariff Board adopted standard principles and practices in each case that came before it. If there were deviations from the standards the Board should be persuaded to make its reasons plainly known and the Parliament would be able to discuss them. Secondly, the Committee would be able to examine Government action as a result of the reports to see that there was consistency in Government decisions in relation to Tariff Board Reports. If there was no consistency in these matters there may well be good reasons for it but it is right and proper that Parliament should be informed of it.

And so, I believe, we should establish a Parliamentary Committee on the tariffs to perform these tasks.

Through the course of time the numbers of our Parliament will grow and their duties will multiply, thus it will become more important to devise ways and means by which our members can be better armed to fill their own duties as private members of Parliament. The two Committees I have suggested and about which I spoke on the Estimates of the Parliament would help in this direction.