PRESS STATEMENT:

MALCOLM FRASER:

December 7th, 1965

The following is a statement made by the Minister for Health, the Hon. R. W. Swartz, on the illegal importation of semen.

"Early in September a Mr. Gordon Burcher returned from America bringing with him a vacuum flask containing 58 ampoules of cattle semen.

On arrival at Sydney airport he declared the vacuum flask to Customs Officers but not its contents.

He took this semen to his farm at Mount Crosby, about 25 miles south west of Brisbane and over the last three weeks he has inseminated four cows with it.

On 25th November he took three ampoules to the Veterinary School at Queensland University where he asked a technician to tell him if the semen was still viable. On November 26th the Chief Quarantine Officer (Animals) at Brisbane was informed of this.

He immediately confiscated all unused ampoules and quarantined the farm. After consultation with my Department, he ordered destruction of all ruminants on Burcher's farm viz., 21 cows and 13 calves.

The semen was obtained from a Government Artificial Insemination Centre in British Columbia, Canada, which borders the United States of America. As bluetongue is widespread in the United States of America there is a possibility that the virus may have crossed into the neighbouring provinces of Canada.

Bluetongue is a serious disease of sheep which is transmitted by midges of the genus Culicoides, hence it cannot be contained by isolation of infected animals. Cattle can be inapparent carriers of the virus and it is transmitted from them to sheep and other cattle by midges.

There is no suspicion whatsoever that this semen contains foot and mouth disease virus as it is many years since foot and mouth disease has been present in North America.

I must point out that the Animal Quarantine Service is responsible for keeping bluetongue and other diseases of animals out of Australia but in the event of the entry of a disease, it is the responsibility of the State concerned to deal with it.

On Tuesday last the Director of Veterinary Hygiene of my Department convened a Consultative Committee of senior veterinary officials in Brisbane which recommended the slaughter of all ruminants within 1½ miles of Burcher's farm, the insecticide fogging of all habitats of midges in this area and sealing off of the area for ruminant animals for two months after slaughter operations have been completed. This will involve the slaughter at abattoirs of approximately 600 or more animals. Any form of compensation will be considered by the Queensland Government.

The Queensland Government and particularly the Queensland Minister for Primary Industries is to be commended on his prompt acceptance of these recommendations by the Consultative Committee and there is every reason to hope that any possible outbreak of disease will be averted.

This is a regrettable incident which demonstrates how the action of an individual can frustrate the efforts of the best quarantine precautions.

The question of any legal action against Mr. Gordon Burcher is under consideration by the Commonwealth Government."
If the Minister's statement is read carefully it will be clear that it was purely chance that led to the discovery of this illegally imported semen. The vacuum flask had been passed through Customs without its contents being inspected, and the importation was only discovered when Mr. Murcher took three ampoules to the Veterinary School at the Queensland University to find out if the semen was still viable. The technician who thought the circumstances were suspicious certainly needs congratulating.

It is important to note that Mr. Murcher returned from America early in September and it was not until November 25th that he went to the Veterinary School to have the semen tested — at least two months after the importation.

This incident demonstrates the difficulty in scrutinising people who come into this country in a manner that is both reasonable from a personal point of view and which is also adequate to meet the various quarantine precautions. I think the incident will cause our Quarantine Officers to ask themselves if what is being done at the moment is all that can and should be done.