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ELECTORAL STATEMENT BY THE HON. MALCOLM FRASER, M.P.,

Few people would have thought that turtles could have
disturbed the Federal Parliamentary scene. Few people would
have thought that turtles could have been the centre of a
potential scandal involving some of the major figures in
government.

During the last week this has become a real possibility.

There is a turtle farm on Thursday Island. It has been
sponsored by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. A
considerable quantity of money has been involved in the
project. It is designed to help establish an industry which
Aborigines and Thursday Islanders could ultimately look after
for themselves.

There was a report in the Telegraph on 11 October
which has pointed out that the Auditor-General, Mr. Steele
Craik, has seized files dealing with the scheme, and that
Mr. Craik had acted after reports of a massive waste of
Government money on the scheme.

The next step was a move by Senator Georges, a Labor
Senator from Queensland, in the Senate, in which he sought
to defend the deposed Minister for Aboriginal Affairs,
Gordon Bryant, against Mr. Barry Dexter, Head of the Department
of Aboriginal Affairs, and Dr. Coombs, the Prime Minister's
special adviser. Senator Georges referred critically to
both of them in relation to their alleged activities against
the Minister, Mr. Bryant. Mr. Dexter had apparently earlier
accused Mr. Bryant of interfering with the turtle farm project
by delaying the reduction in the number of turtles. He
said that Mr. Bryant had commandeered a lugger being used
in the project. This in fact is what the newspaper report
allaged.
Mr. Bryant later denied that charge. The document which is alleged to have been quoted by Senator Georges went on to say: "I am reluctant however to tamper in any way with the company structure" - the quote "I", of course, is Mr. Dexter - "while it continues to be under assault and the Minister seeks to force his own nominee upon the Directors."

Shortly before that document was written the newspaper goes on to say that Mr. Bryant had appointed Senator Georges as the Chairman of the turtle farm project.

The report said that Mr. Bryant was worried that nearly $450,000 profit by the Government was not being properly spent. The report went on to say that Labor back benchers were angry because Mr. Dexter's letter, and he is Head of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, to Dr. Coombs related to evidence to be given before the House of Representatives Committee on the Environment and Conservation, and in that letter Mr. Dexter is alleged to have said to Dr. Coombs: "We should not assume that all those we will be talking to will be interested in getting at the facts. I have no doubt that at least one of them will seek nothing less than the abandonment of the turtle farm project or of putting what remains of it after re-structuring under the direct control of the Thursday Island Co-operative. We should therefore exercise discretion in what we say, in particular in relation to those aspects we may not yet have determined - our own approach such as marketing."

It was thought sufficiently serious for the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Bill Snedden, and the Prime Minister, Mr. Gough Whitlam, both to agree last Thursday night that this matter ought to be referred to the Privileges Committee. A prima facie case would appear to be evident. It will depend very much on the view of the Speaker, but the Parliament certainly has not heard the last of the turtles of Thursday Island.

During the week the Prime Minister announced some Ministerial changes. I regret the change of Gordon Bryant from Aboriginal Affairs, because he and his wife have both devoted many years of service to the Aboriginal cause and
both of them had a real feeling for the welfare of Aboriginals. I think Gordon Bryant wanted nothing more than to make a really worthwhile and lasting contribution to the well-being of the Aboriginal people, and it must have been a heavy blow to him to have that opportunity removed from him by the Ministerial changes.

But I really do believe that the most foolish of the changes made by the Prime Minister was the one concerning Dr. Cairns. Many people have strong views about Jim Cairns, especially his views on foreign policy and overseas relationships. I have spoken to many people in industry in recent weeks and months who have said that Dr. Cairns has knuckled down to his job as Minister for Overseas Trade and Secondary Industry very well and very thoroughly listening to reasoned arguments. They believe that Dr. Cairns has argued for the cause and the needs of his Departmental responsibilities well and effectively. This is something certainly to be praised. When Dr. Cairns was moved some industrial groups came out and thanked him for the work he had in fact done. Well, Dr. Cairns has been moved. The responsibility for Secondary Industry has been taken from him and Mr. Enderby, who has annoyed quite a few people in the A.C.T., will be taking over those responsibilities from him. I think the Government would have been better served if Dr. Cairns had remained in charge. Not only of Overseas Trade, but also of Secondary Industry, where he had been doing a good job indeed.

In these talks it is difficult sometimes to prevent myself from becoming too critical of the Government. In view of the last few months, I think it is not surprising that that should be so. But now I want to say something about a Government policy of which I approve, which the Liberal Party supports and which will be put into effect.

A few days ago the Federal President of the Liberal Party pointed out that the Federal Rural Committee and the Federal Manufacturing Committee of the Liberal Party had given long and careful consideration to the question of establishing the best and most equitable machinery for making recommendations
on assistance to Australian industries, both primary and secondary.

As a national Party, Mr. Southey said, we accept that we have a responsibility to evolve policies which are to be for the benefit of all Australians and the objectives of the proposed Industries Assistance Commission are consistent with that aim. For many years the Federal Rural Committee of the Liberal Party has advocated that the granting or withdrawing of assistance to primary industries should be subjected to the same expert and impartial scrutiny which the Tariff Board has applied to secondary industry, and the acceptance of a body such as the Industries Assistance Commission would have prevented the rape of the rural sector by the present Government since it came to power. For example, if such a body had been in existence the Government could not, without any investigation or report, have taken such arbitrary action as abolishing the dairy subsidy, with all that it implies for the future of the industry, of individual farmers and of rural communities.

There are many other actions that the Government has taken which ought to have been referred to such a body if it had been in existence. In addition, the public examination and report procedures of the proposed Industries Assistance Commission would greatly assist the urban and rural communities in gaining a better understanding of each other's difficulties and the growing inter-dependence of all sectors of the Australian economy would have been better understood.

However compelling the arguments may be for assistance to any industry, primary or secondary, public awareness of the issues involved make it inevitable that any assistance granted must be as a result of a full and open inquiry.

Australian rural industries, which are amongst the most efficient in the world, would at least have a public forum in which their case can be presented and argued. That was the substance of the statement put by Mr. Southey.

I believe it puts the arguments for the Industries Assistance Commission quite clearly, and I am quite certain that if such a body as this does come into existence, as I believe it ought, then we will have a situation in which
the business that so often seems to mark the arguments between the country and city interests will tend to fade away, because we will realise that there is an inter-dependence between both sectors of the Australian economy, that we are all really part of one economy.