The Bill recognises the historic and archeological importance of the 500 and more located and identified shipwrecks off the coast of Australia. It establishes a firm procedure whereby the Government assumes control of wreck sites, wrecks and articles removed from them. It lays down that any person finding a wreck shall notify the Minister. It applies to historic shipwrecks and relics in Australian waters or waters above the continental shelf of Australia and to relics removed from these waters. Under the Navigation Act the Commonwealth is entitled to all unclaimed wreck found in Australia. This takes effect where there has been no claim for one year.

The Minister is authorised to declare by notice published in the Gazette that the remains of a ship are a historic shipwreck. He may also declare that articles from wrecks are of historic significance.

Powers given to the Minister so that he may exercise control effectively include:

(a) Demand information about wrecks and relics.

(b) Issue directions as to the disposal and custody of historic articles.

(c) Issue permits, subject to conditions as appropriate, for exploration or recovery of shipwrecks or relics.

(d) Declare protected zones surrounding a wreck site, limited to 100 hectares.

(e) Appoint inspectors with wide powers of investigation, search, seizure, arrest, etc.

(f) Maintain a Register of Historic Shipwrecks.

(g) Pay compensation when property is acquired from a person.

A reward may be paid for the discovery of a historic shipwreck.

The Bill makes special provision concerning Dutch shipwrecks to conform with an agreement with the Netherlands signed on 6 November 1972 recognizing that country’s continuing interest for historical and cultural purposes, and the apportionment of relics found where appropriate and practicable.

In order to give the Government effective control a number of offences are created and defined with maximum penalties. These include:

(a) Failing to give information about a historic article when required to do so. – Penalty $1000
(b) Failing to obey instructions about an article after being given notice to do so. Penalty $2000 or 2 years imprisonment or both.

(c) Damaging, interfering with, destroying or removal of a historic shipwreck or relic from Australian waters. – Penalty $5000 or 5 years imprisonment or both.

(d) Contravening a condition in a permit. – $2000 fine or 2 years or both.

(e) Making false or misleading statements to the Minister. – $1000 fine.

(f) Contravening regulations prohibiting entry into a protected zone with equipment or tools for salvage or recovery operations. – $1000 fine.

Arrangements may be made with a State for the purpose of the protection, recovery, preservation and exhibition of historic shipwrecks and relics.

Defence, Science and Technology.

25 October, 1976