

AUSTRALIA CLUB, LONDON

Speech by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Menzies

28TH JUNE, 1965

On the whole I think that what I ought to do is to say "thank you", to say that I concur with all the bits that didn't relate to me and to sit down, because I am here in a glittering company.

Here is Lord Baillieu, very modest about himself, one of the great Australians of my lifetime. I see sitting along here, with characteristic modesty, Alec Douglas-Home. I have no bias about him at all. All I do is to say that I have said, and I repeat, that I think he's the greatest man in the Kingdom - and, what is more, a rather tolerant man, because some of you will recall sitting at an Australia Club Dinner in another setting when he made a speech about me and I made a speech about him, and he thought fit on that occasion to make a certain amount of play about my name - remember? Some of you will. He had discovered that my proper name was "Mingies" and this, of course, is quite right.

I very well remember many years ago being at a big dinner in London, and the gentleman with the red coat, who had a fine Home Counties accent for public production, with a good Scots burr on his tongue in private, nipped across to me just before I was to speak and he said "Excuse me, Sir, but am I to announce you as Menzies or by your proper name?". Word of this must have reached Alec because on that occasion he made a little play about the name, and I recalled it with my usual courtesy, and said that after all we all have a lot to learn, and when I get back home and I am invited by the vicar to go to the concert of the year, I will expect him to say: "And now Miss Flora Smith will sing for us 'Hume Sweet Hume'". This put a very great strain on our friendship because three days later he said for me, "You know, you've made life very troublesome for me. I can't go to the House of Lords now without being confronted by 'Hume Sweet Hume'. And I claim some credit, therefore, for the fact that some time afterwards he left the House of Lords and became the Prime Minister of this country.

As for Peter Carrington, well he's in the House of Lords. He's the leader of the Opposition in the House of Lords and he's developed a line of eloquence which I didn't suspect when he was in Australia. I remember that after he became the High Commissioner, I was up at his house for dinner, and after we had absorbed some frugal provisions and pre-prandial drinks, we walked into the dining-room, and on the right as we walked in there was a portrait of the Lady Carrington with one "r" - and I said to him, with my usual blushing modesty: "How do you explain this? Is this a legitimate ancestress of yours, because you have two "r's"?" He said: "You needn't worry, the name is Smith". I don't need to tell him that he has a great and affectionate place in the Australian mind.

I'm glad that he referred to Lord Slim and Lord De L'Isle because I imagine, though I'm constantly being asked questions about it by the Press, that it's not the easiest business in the world to be a Governor-General. I've always thought it a revolting job. You have to be nice to everybody, you have to make a speech but you have to take great care that it doesn't cut across the policy of the Government, and this I think is a painful task.

I must say that Lord Slim solved this problem very easily. He made his own speeches and apologised to me afterwards. Although Lord De L'Isle, that gallant and distinguished man who has just ceased to be our Governor-General, didn't quite go so far as that, I thought he went as near as a man could possibly go, and I'm delighted that they are both here.

I think it would be a mistake if I didn't say to you that on all of these occasions I'm delighted to see Lord Bruce. I can remember him at a time when I was so nervous about even speaking to him that I found it difficult to speak at all. He's been here a long time and there are foolish people, I suppose, somewhere in Australia who still manage to think of him as rather more English than Australian. I want to take the opportunity of saying in his presence that, so far as I'm concerned, I regard him as one of the greatest Prime Ministers that my country has ever had, and when he ceased to be Prime Minister of Australia, he served Australia with vigour, with force, in this country for years and years. The name of Stanley Melbourne Bruce will never lack a place, and a high place, in the history of Australia.

Now that we have observed the old Chinese practice of meeting each other and exchanging confidence, I wonder if I might say something to you on my own account because in the last ten days I've been attending that joyous, jocund thing known as the Prime Ministers' Conference.

I can remember the time when there were a few of us, and we sat at the table and there it was, and at the end of a day or two, we finished our discussion, but this year because of the advance of independence and self-government, there were 21 of us - you are only entertaining one Prime Minister, one out of 21 - and as each Prime Minister is allowed to have three acolytes sitting with him, that's a total of 84 - and then there are other necessary people connected with the Secretariat and so on so that we sit in Marlborough House with 100 people in the room.

I don't know how you chaps feel but I find it very difficult to conduct an intimate discussion in the presence of 100 people. This problem is solved by some who give their speeches to the Press - it's a very private meeting you understand, but in some strange way a number of speeches reach the Press, sometimes before they are delivered. Therefore, some of the old intimacy has disappeared and yet it is essential that in a Prime Ministers' Conference we should endeavour to get to the point and to register with each other some views about some of the great problems of the world.

Well, on this occasion we of course had something to say about South Vietnam and I want to say something about it to you myself, because as it turned out, we had no time to discuss the merits of the South Vietnam position. We were concerned to discuss whether we ought, as a Commonwealth, to appoint a mission to go around to the contending parties and find out whether there might be some basis for a conference which might lead to peace. Now that's a modest ambition but, still, we all thought it was one worth trying to give effect to - but at no time did we discuss the merits of this matter.

Now, on my way here, I came through the United States of America where the merits about South Vietnam are hotly contested.

I come from my own country where the merits are hotly contested. I come here where, I have no doubt, though I wouldn't be dogmatic, the merits are hotly contested. But you are not to suppose that the Prime Ministers' Conference sat in judgment on these matters or formed an opinion on the merits, but as I happen to have strong opinions on the merits, I wonder if you would allow me to give some expression to them here.

Now start with Australia. I don't think logically that's the right order but tonight let's start with Australia. We have the strongest views on this matter. We are committed in our public views and we are committed by a thousand fighting men and a number of Air Force people in South Vietnam. Now why are we committed? The answer is one that deserves a little thought.

Unless you are completely theoretical, unless you become bemused by academic considerations, you must understand that in the long run the future of freedom depends on defending freedom where it's attacked. And in South-East Asia we have this position. We had all the troubles about Vietnam, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, we had a borderline drawn, we had a demilitarised zone a little on each side of it, we had undertakings that nobody would cross that frontier in order to attack on the other side, and before we were very much older, the Government of North Vietnam which, if I may say so, I think is not unrelated to the Government of Peking, found it desirable to incite in South Vietnam the activities of what we call the Viet Cong - rebels armed from the north, not armed by themselves because they have no resources from which to arm themselves, but armed from the north, supplied from the north. And they began to conduct, with all the advantages of a guerrilla outfit, to attack South Vietnam and the government of South Vietnam, and, of course, at this time with the monsoons blowing from north-east and from the north-west, they are able to pursue their attacks under cover of the cloud and the rain and with all the elements of surprise.

Now it's perfectly clear to me, and I hope it is to you, that if this were allowed to go on uninterrupted, the effect would be that South Vietnam would become a communist country just as North Vietnam is, and if it did, then what would become of Thailand? What would happen in Laos? What would happen on the flanks of Malaysia to which not only Australia is committed by her arms but Great Britain in a very large measure? What would become of these countries? These are practical considerations. And because we realise that the abandonment of South Vietnam in that sense, and because the Americans realise that the abandonment of South Vietnam in that sense would mean that the communist tide would sweep right down to the Timor Sea, we thought we were not without interest in it.

It's not funny to have a country, a great country as Peter Carrington has described it, a country with great energy and great achievement and great hope and a great sense of independent freedom - it's not funny to have it exposed over a few miles of water to a victorious, onward movement of the communists. These are the simple facts, and the Americans looked at it in the same way. So, you know, I get a little worried about the misunderstandings that exist between this country and the United States of America.

There are misunderstandings. There's a bit of a disposition here to criticise the United States of America. There always has been in smaller countries a disposition to criticise great countries. Let me remind you as I have reminded the

Congress of the United States and the present President's allies in the White House that in the nineteenth century which we look back upon, apart from one or two incidents, as a century of industrial progress and peace and happiness, Great Britain was the great power of the world. How many friends did she have? How deeply was she loved on the continent of Europe? You've only to put your mind back to realise that great power which involves great responsibility has never in our lifetime or our recorded history involved great popularity.

There's so much nonsense talked about popularity. In the long run people don't vote for popularity, they vote for quality and strength and purpose, and in the whole of the nineteenth century, Great Britain was in that position, and the remarkable thing in this century is that after the first fifteen or sixteen years of it, the United States has found itself the greatest physical power in the world, and I am happy to say, has shown a great willingness to accept the responsibilities of that power.

Let nobody speak cheaply about them. Everybody here knows my view - I am as British as a man could be. Nothing that I say detracts one whit from my feeling about this country and its people and its history and its destiny. But don't let us overlook the fact that in this century the United States, having come to immense power, having enormous resources, might have been tempted to say, "Very well, we can live in our own country. We are strong, we have our resources. Why should we worry about other people?"

And the glorious truth has been that they have not taken that view. The glorious truth is that, just as Great Britain did in the nineteenth century, so in this century they have accepted the responsibilities of power, and we do ourselves no good if we fail to realise that profound truth, indeed that most encouraging truth, most encouraging for all of us.

Now in South Vietnam anyone could say in a cynical way, "Of course Australia would want to take a hand in South Vietnam because South Vietnam is on the outer perimeter of Australian defence." I accept that comment. But why are the Americans there? Now this is a question that all these university lecturers ought to ask themselves. Why are the Americans there?

I put this question in rather a rhetorical fashion at a meeting in the Sydney Town Hall. You know what we politicians are like, we like to put out a rhetorical question, saying to ourselves, "I hope no-one answers that". I said, "Why are the Americans there?" and there was, as usual, a character up in the gallery who said, "For profit" and I had to point out that it was a strange and new definition of profit to be in a country that cost you millions and from which you got nothing. I couldn't allow it to be resolved on a commercial basis.

Why are they there? Do you know that this is one of the wonderful things about our time that this country, whose friendship with Great Britain, whose friendship with the rest of us is vital to the future of the world, this country is in South Vietnam not because South Vietnam as South Vietnam means much to it, but because it believes, as I believe, that freedom, liberty, call it what you like, is neither divisible nor expendable, but wherever it's attacked there is the frontier, and you either defend it on that frontier or you engage in the worst kind of appeasement. Appeasement from weakness was understandable,

appeasement from strength is unpardonable.

It's not so many years ago that the best kind of American opinion was: Never put troops onto the Asian mainland. Strategically it's wrong. Tactically it would be disastrous. But they put them there and they're putting more there, and then having put their troops in and we having agreed that we would put troops of ours in, somebody pops up at the Prime Ministers' Conference and says: "I appeal to the Prime Minister of Australia to withdraw his battalions". In other words, "I invite him to perform the most shameful act in Australian history." And, "I think we all ought to invite the United States not to bomb north of the border."

Not to bomb? To concede to the enemy all the rights of uninhibited supply down the route which keeps putting in material, trained men, and all the time to think: "You stop doing that and you Australians walk out on them" and this will be a contribution to peace.

Look, gentlemen, we're at war. Don't let's make any mistake about it. We've got into the habit now of using that strange vocabulary - you're not at war until something else has happened - but there's a war going on in South Vietnam. Night after night under cover of the clouds and the rain, the Viet Cong are coming in blasting villages and cutting the throats of innocent citizens, and the forces opposed to them are counter-attacking them. If this isn't war what is it?

But if it is a war, then who are we to say to the United States, the most formidable factor in the defence of South Vietnam, who are we to say to them: "You are not to attack the enemy's lines of communication, you are to allow him to have it all for free, and you must remain on a rather doubtful, difficult defensive".

Gentlemen, these problems which, as I say, we didn't discuss on their merits in the Prime Ministers' Conference, are the greatest problems you and I have had to think about, whether we've thought about them or not in the last four or five years. This is a tremendous issue.

If the United States of America paid attention to the theoretical people and said; "Yes, you've persuaded us. We'll leave," and if we said: "All right, we'll leave too" and we leave South Vietnam to its own resources, what do you suppose will happen?

I had a correspondence in Australia with some extraordinarily learned gentlemen who were bishops and they wrote letters to me about this matter and I wrote a couple back, and they didn't seem to me to understand the truth of the issue at all. You can't solve this by sitting back and saying: "We all hope for peace," because that's what the communists are always saying. There hasn't been a peace rally in my own country for years that has not been organised by the communists, and when they establish a set of cut-throats in groups running into many thousands in South Vietnam and they are called the Viet Cong by us, it turns out that by the communists they are known as the National Liberation Front. But this is the technique.

If we succumb to that and keep out and if we all keep out, including the United States, South Vietnam will be in the hands of North Vietnam before we are very much older. And if

it is, then what the bishops were saying to me about free elections will prove to be the sorry nonsense that it was. You can't have a free election in North Vietnam. It's a communist state. Any of you ever hear of a free election in a communist state? Of course not. How can you have a free election when you're being bemused and battered all the time by guerrillas, by rioters, by people who come in under cover of the rain and the cloud and murder your citizens. I've been through a few noisy election campaigns in Australia, but never through one conducted on that principle.

We must get out of this habit of thinking that because you, and therefore we, are on one side of the Atlantic and the Americans are on the other, that there is some difference. Fundamentally there can't be any difference. Fundamentally, the future of the world for the next ten years will depend on how far we understand them and they understand us, how far we are on the same lines of communication, how far we share their information, how far we share their plans and their objectives, because unless we do, then we'll reach a state of affairs in which too many people here in Great Britain will think it is not their business - the Americans are in that - and some people in Australia, not too many while I'm alive, will be saying that we should leave it to the Americans.

You can't leave the peace of the world to the greatest power in the world unless you are prepared to abandon your own share of responsibility. We're all in this together. It is just because to me, venerable as I am, but still in a sense, as you might say, a modern Prime Minister, it's just because to me the greatest events in the last twenty years in world history have been the events associated with the outlook of the United States of America, with the willingness of their people to come in and do what they can, with the willingness of their Presidents one after the other to come in and give leadership and accept responsibility. This is a tremendous event in modern history. All I can say is that I hope, without becoming blind people, without abandoning our rights to criticise, our rights to suggest, that we will always do that. I do hope that we won't fall into the fatal error of thinking that all this tremendous emergence of American responsibility is merely some form of imperialism. I hope you will always remember that this has nothing to do with imperialism. This is counter-imperialism. I'm sick and tired of hearing these words about imperialism and neo-colonialism. They rattle round the room at any conference we have.

The fact is that the new imperialism will be resisted and defeated and kept only if all of us on both sides of the Atlantic, and on my side of the Pacific realise that, in the words of William Pitt spoken a century and a half earlier about different circumstances: "We are one people", and it's because we are one people that what has been going on in South Vietnam on the merits has had support not only of the United States but of my own fair country.

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