

HONG KONG

PRESS CONFERENCE GIVEN BY THE PRIME MINISTER,
MR. HAROLD HOLT



3RD APRIL, 1967.

PRIME MINISTER: I think most of you are aware of the reasons - particular reasons anyhow - why I am making this journey. It will include, apart from this visit in transit to Hong Kong, the visits I have already made to Laos and to Cambodia and from there we proceed to Taiwan and South Korea.

Australia over recent years has become increasingly involved in the affairs of this region of the world in a commercial and trading sense particularly since the dramatic growth of our trade with Japan. As striking evidence of that, we have now become the second or third largest customer for the export of Japanese goods and Japan has now outstripped the United Kingdom as the largest purchaser in value of Australian exports. But it is in the military and diplomatic fields that we are also finding ourselves increasingly involved in the affairs of the region and so, since becoming Prime Minister, I have tried to develop a closer and better knowledge of the countries, the leaders and the peoples within the area and to manifest Australia's growing interest by my own presence and that of members of my official party.

Last year, I went to the centres where Australia had its own forces operating, whether in South Vietnam in direct military operations or in other places such as Malaysia, where we have people on station in the strategic reserve, or in Borneo where, at that time, they were serving in aid of Malaysian forces in coping with the Indonesian Confrontation Policy. This year I have sought to round off that series of visits by including the countries which I have not previously visited in this area, and once I have completed this tour, I think, with the exception of Mainland China, I will just about have covered the field. But there is no specific political purpose, I mean I am not here to negotiate treaties or enter into any special agreements with any of the countries concerned, as you will gather from the composition of the two countries pursuing official policies of neutrality, and South Korea which has joined with us in forming part of the friendly forces engaged in support of the South Vietnamese, and Taiwan with which Australia has had a long friendship and a growing trade connection.

So it is, as you will gather, not a simple uncomplicated pattern of visits, but the prime purpose is to get to know the countries better, make Australian policies better known to them. And there is, I think, an indirect consequence which is of considerable value to us. Thanks to the assistance we received from people like yourselves, the countries and peoples and their problems are made increasingly known to my fellow countrymen in Australia as a result of these visits.

Now, perhaps having said that I could try to cope with any questions you may have.

Q. Mr. Holt, would you say it is safe to say, that Australia is becoming now, more and more Asia conscious and possibly might even want to get into Asia in a way of speaking?

P.M. Well, we are in Asia in a very practical and realistic fashion. We are not only in Asia geographically and a certain part of South East Asia, but the illustration I have given of the growth of Asia, the involvement of military forces, the increasing participation of Australians in the various instrumentalities such as ASPAC, the Asian Development Bank, SEATO, and ANZUS treaty arrangements - these are an illustration of active Australian participation in the affairs of Asia. So it is not so much a case

of becoming involved in the work for the first time - there has been an increase in the degree of participation. This doesn't imply that we have diminished our interest in other areas of the world. Later in the year I shall be making visits to Canada for the Australian participation in Expo 67 and in the course of that will be making a visit to Washington and also to London - Washington and London still being, of course, the principal centres of diplomatic interest for my country.

Q. You put a great deal of stress on trade but a number of people in other Asian countries are somewhat disturbed by what is referred to generally as the White Australia policy - I refer to immigration.

P.M. Well in my experience, that concern is manifested more by representatives of the press than by representatives of the government concerned. I find on behalf of the governments concerned, an intelligent appreciation of Australia's attitude and the basis for its policy. I think too, there is an inadequate realisation of the liberalisation of the policy which has occurred over recent years. Just to illustrate that, there are some thirty thousand people who have come into Australia in the years since the war and would not have been eligible to enter Australia under the rules and arrangements which applied prior to that time. There are at this time some twelve thousand students from countries of Asia in Australian universities and colleges. Some six thousand Asian citizens over recent years have become fully naturalised Australian subjects. Any Asian who marries in Australia - several do - they enter Australia with full rights as residents, their children are full citizens of Australia. So there remains a degree of misconception about the policy and its operation. And the liberalised arrangements make provision also for people to be admitted who can make a contribution to Australia's growth - development - I think that when one considers the numbers involved and the manner in which citizens of Asia are currently received in Australia, it will be seen there has been a considerable liberalisation.

It was said not long ago in my presence, and I think it is a fact, that there is no country in the world in which a citizen of Asia or a citizen of a country in Africa would find themselves better or more comfortably treated as they would in Australia, outside of their own country. This would be their experience and this is echoed by the students and others who come to the country. We find that on their return they are the best ambassadors we can hope for in building better relations with my country.

Q. Prime Minister Holt, during your talks with Prince Sihanouk did he give you the impression that Cambodia might be willing to re-establish diplomatic relations with the U.S.?

P.M. Well, my talks with Prince Sihanouk were private and confidential talks. It is not part of my purpose to narrate publicly what passed between us. If he wishes to make any comment about the talks, that of course, is within his province to do so, but I regard the discussion as a confidential one and I wouldn't feel free to narrate.

Q. Well, did you get the impression that Cambodia might now be willing to resume contact with the U.S.?

P.M. Well, I don't think this is other than trying to present the question in a slightly different form, as you have done. Prince Sihanouk has made it publicly clear that his country pursues a policy of neutrality and non alignment. I believe he wishes to proceed on a basis of friendship and peace with other countries of the world, but I don't want to put into his mouth, words which he is quite capable of expressing himself.

Q. Acting in the interests of the United States, which you did in Cambodia, were any messages exchanged through the Australian Embassy or through yourself?

P.M. If you mean, did I purport or attempt to convey messages from any other government, the answer is a simple no, and I don't want to go any further than that in any reference to what passed between Prince Sihanouk and myself. We had a most valuable and interesting talk together running over an hour and three quarters. I am quite certain that he wouldn't have talked as freely as he did unless he felt confident in what passed between us. He expressed a basis of respect of mutual confidence and that is the basis on which I wish to treat it.

Q. Mr. Holt you can't consider giving us detailed information about your talks in Cambodia. What about the other countries you did visit, did any really significant, really important points emerge?

P.M. Well, I don't want to imply that nothing really important emerged in Cambodia. It was a most important visit, a very valuable one. I came away myself with a much clearer appreciation, I believe, of the basis of policy in Cambodia. I hadn't realised previously the intense feeling in the country for the retention of the Khmer tradition, the separate identity of Cambodia related to a historic past going back over many centuries, and it became more readily understandable to me why Cambodia had been following the particular line it has in its foreign policies over recent years.

The only other country so far that I have visited has been Laos, and there we had a special interest based on the strategic importance of the country in relation to the security of South East Asia generally. The fact that Australia has been a contributor of aid in useful directions there, has been a good basis of friendship between our two countries and I was glad to build on this by the personal contacts I made with the King and Prime Minister and other leaders of the country. The impression gained there encouraged me to say something on this aspect of propaganda, which we have to face so frequently from communist sources, that the programmes of aid and processes of aid are those producing a brand of neo-colonialism. And I attempted to deal with that directly by referring to the situation of Laos as illustrating the importance and the values of these programmes of aid. Here is a country which is able to preserve its identity, is able to improve its material circumstances, is able to make itself more secure in a military sense because friends with goodwill and of no ulterior purpose have made resources available to them, and given them support.

Here is a country which has had to face the ravages of man and the ravages of nature under conditions of great difficulty for many years. And without this kind of aid, then the oldest colonialism of all, the enslavement to the age-old enemies of mankind - of ill health, poverty, illiteracy, lack of security in one's national affairs - these things would be perpetuated. I believe, as a result of the kind of aid that countries of goodwill are giving to Laos, we will help to overcome what otherwise would be an enslavement to the past and a chaining to these backward destructive processes.

Q. Mr. Holt, - speaking of Cambodia - there was a story in the press to the effect that Prince Sihanouk had more or less admitted to you the fact that North Vietnam was flying troops and materials to South Vietnam through the country of Cambodia and that he, or his government, would make efforts to cease that. Is that so?

P.M. I can see that you won't take no for an answer, because I have already said I have no intention of publicly indicating what passed privately between us.

- Q. How would you account for that story getting out then?
- P.M. I would have to be accountable for every story which appears in the press relating either to myself, my discussions or those of other people. I learned with some amusement shortly after leaving Australia that I was limping my way through my Asian tour as a result of some injuries I sustained in the water in Australia. I had a couple of abrasions but I thought I was getting along without noticeable defects in my pedestrian.
- Q. Excuse me Mr. Holt, would you be interested in the possibility of increased armed commitment in Vietnam and particularly after Air Marshal Ky's visit to your country?
- P.M. We have already indicated publicly the extent of our military participation and we have no plans to increase that at the present time.
- Q. Don't you find it rather embarrassing, Mr. Holt, that while Australia is committed in Vietnam, her racial partner Britain is not committed. Whereas Britain seeks American support in Europe. Is it not embarrassing? (The main portion of the text of this question was unintelligible due to badly spoken English).
- P.M. No, I don't find it embarrassing. Australia is an independent country capable of adopting independent attitudes in its foreign policies as of course is the United Kingdom and Canada, India and other members of the Commonwealth of Nations. Australia, in pursuit of its own interests and in support of principles which it has supported by military participation in two world wars, in Korea, in Malaysia in resisting Indonesian Confrontation, has come with other friendly forces in support of the South Koreans (Vietnamese?) in resisting what we believe to be a communist inspired aggression in that country. Our reasons, I think, have been made clear enough for the participation. The Australian electorate where this was fought - as an outstanding issue of the last election campaign - overwhelmingly endorsed the Government's policy in this direction, and the visiting Prime Minister Ky highlighted not only issues but the fact of Australian support for South Vietnam.
- Q. Yes, but it is said that Britain is interested in retaining American support in Europe so is Australia interested in retaining American presence in Asia, this is in direct result of her maintaining her military presence in Asia. Do you subscribe to this view?
- P.M. Well, I find it rather an involved question. I have tried to indicate why it is that Australia is participating. I repeat, we are quite capable of making up our own minds as to what we should do on these issues, and each country of course consults its own interests. But in Australia's case, our own interests also include our presence in what we hope would be a more peaceful and more secure world. We have not waited for these threats to come to our shore in the past, if we felt the peace of the world was threatened. We fought in two world wars, as you mentioned, many thousands of miles away from our own shores. Much of the fighting in which we have participated since has been conducted a long way from Australia.
- Q. Mr. Prime Minister, are you encouraged by the free world's military position in Vietnam?
- P.M. I think it has greatly improved, yes, even since I was in Saigon myself. At that time I came back and expressed my confidence that the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese could not win the military conflict there. Events which have occurred since then, I think, have produced a considerable improvement in the position of the South Vietnamese and those supporting them.

Q. By this do you imply Mr. Premier, that you expect a political solution or a military solution. The Viet Cong won't win militarily, that means they won't be defeated militarily.

P.M. I have always felt that for a satisfactory solution which had any prospect of enduring, there had to be a political solution. I predicted when I came back from Saigon about a year ago, that as the Viet Cong were forced either into a retreat or were defeated in the military sense, they would tend to concentrate more on guerrilla activities and put pressure perhaps on other countries outside of South Vietnam itself. And I based that judgement on what has occurred in Malaysia where, for many years, a comparatively few guerrillas were able to occupy the attention of very much larger forces at very great expense. So that to achieve a military victory or a series of victories against massed and organised military forces of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese would not produce the abiding solution unless as a result of this, or accompanying it, there were a political solution also.

Q. (Indistinct, but concerning peace talks for Vietnam)

P.M. It is true that attempts have proved abortive but that doesn't mean that the attempts should be abandoned. Australia has supported the attempts made to find a solution which would produce a just and enduring peace. In my own experience, which is not only in the external field, but as a former Minister for Labour dealing with communist led unions, I found that, although you seem to be up against a brick wall in negotiation and it becomes an impasse, once the communists themselves come to the conclusion that it is no longer profitable to pursue their tactics, you can get a quite dramatic switch - you know, without regard to consistency or logic or anything that has been said previously as to where they stood. And contemporary history is studded with instances of this kind, from the Berlin crisis onwards.

Q. (Indistinct but to the effect, : Do you expect a shift in American policy as a result of the Presidential Elections or a dramatic change in the military climate?)

P.M. I don't see that the American elections should affect the basic situation because, after all, there have been three American Presidents in succession and coming from different sides of the political spectrum in the United States who have all consistently supported American involvement in support of the South Vietnamese. I would think that any American Presidential Candidate who stood on a platform of abandoning the South Vietnamese or retreating from the conflict before a just peace had been discovered would poll very poorly in the United States.

Q. Mr. Holt, do you think we might bring Hanoi closer to the conference table a little quicker if the air war against North Vietnam was escalated.

P.M. I am not offering a military judgement on these matters. We have supported the tactics pursued by those who are more expert in the military field and I don't want to offer a technical comment on a technical point of aspect.

Q. Your External Affairs Minister made the point here last week that the bombing of North Vietnam was a question of military necessity. Do you imply now that military pressure would mean a military solution (rest of question indistinct).

P.M. I think a military solution is much more likely to lead to a political solution than the absence of military pressure. This could drag on indefinitely unless the other side were to come to the conclusion that the game wasn't worth the candle.

- Q. Thailand announced recently that they were going to take a more active part in the war. To what degree has this move been prompted or even pressed by the allies.
- P.M. Again, the Thai people are quite capable of making up their own minds as to the course they should follow. I've had some interesting discussions myself in Thailand and at the Manila Conference and in Australia, where we had a visit from the Prime Minister of Thailand, his Foreign Minister and one or two of his other colleagues last year, and Pote Sarasin, and I am well aware from these discussions that Thailand is very conscious of the threat of communist expansion it has to cope with itself, with communist guerrilla activity within its own borders, and it believes the policies being followed by those supporting South Vietnam are policies more likely to produce peace and stability, economic development in South East Asia, than surrender to the pressure of the communists.
- Q. How do you expect SEATO to function when it has fallen flat on its nose thanks to its (word indistinct) How do you account for this?
- P.M. I find there is still considerable value in SEATO and discussions together with those who participate in SEATO have produced valuable exchanges of views and can lead to co-operative action in various directions. I don't think that it should be assumed there is no continuing virtue in SEATO. That is certainly not the view of my Government nor would it be the view of either the American or British Governments.
- Q. When do you expect the next escalation in the Vietnam War will be?
- P.M. I wouldn't like to offer an opinion on this. These are matters largely of military judgement. We respect the judgement of our military advisers. Theirs is the responsibility of securing the necessary degree of military victory to produce the result.
- Q. Do you think it could be the bombing of power plants in (word indistinct - Haiphong?).
- P.M. No, I don't propose to speculate on that. These are matters, of course, which are discussed between governments and I have no desire to conjecture publicly.
- Q. There have been repeated calls that the bombing should be stopped and even this would be a stimulant to peace. Do I take it Sir, the bombing would produce this stimulant?
- P.M. We have had no encouragement from past experience when there has been a cessation in the bombing. The other side have employed these respite to build up their own supplies, accelerate the movement of troops and President Johnson has made it abundantly clear that the bombing would be stopped if there was a sign of genuine willingness on the part of the other side to abandon their aggression, to cease infiltration, to cease the movement of supplies. But so far there has been no encouraging signs that this would occur.
- Q. How about your trip to Taiwan? Is this the first time you have been there?
- P.M. The only other visit to Taiwan was purely incidental, almost repeated on this occasion by bad weather. I was en route to Tokyo and scheduled to land here in Hong Kong but bad weather caused us to be diverted and I didn't leave the airport, so I can hardly say it was a visit to Taiwan. For all substantial purposes this will be my first visit to Taiwan.

Q. What will be your talks with Government officials?
Will they be more on trade or more political?

P.M. The principal purpose from my point of view, as I said, earlier, is to inform my own mind, to get to know the leaders of these countries that I am visiting personally, to concentrate a certain degree of attention by my own countrymen on these countries and their problems. This is a consequence of the visits, but there is no special purpose, no concealed purpose as far as I am concerned.

Q. What are your views on U Thant's proposal on unilateral cease fire in Vietnam?

P.M. I thought I had already indicated that we found no encouragement from our past experience to adopt such a course, in the absence of an expressed willingness on the part of the other side to reciprocate.

Q. Is Australia "All the way with L.B.J."?

P.M. I would just like to comment on that, because it suited my political opponents to give a twist to that statement which of course was never intended. We have been consistently with America in relation to South Vietnam. On other matters Australia has its own independent mind, and follows its own mind.
