

VISIT TO US, CANADA & UK



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THE PRIME MINISTER, MR. HAROLD HOLT ON HIS RETURN

22nd JUNE, 1967

PRIME MINISTER: I don't propose to make a lengthy comment this morning because there will be opportunities in the next few days to deal with particular matters and for the same reason, I don't propose to discuss domestic issues which have developed while I have been away. Again, I shall, no doubt, comment on some of these as we go along. But I would like to give a general comment about what has been a most concentrated journey overseas. I don't think any Australian Prime Minister could have been treated with more regard, more concern given to his views and I have had the most remarkable reception, wherever I have gone, from each Head of Government I have spoken to. I think it is a mark of Australia's growing international stature and the place we occupy in this area of the world - a significant place - that we should have so much consideration given to our views as was shown to me by the Heads of all the Governments I visited on this occasion.

It is not easy for me at this point of time to give you a great deal of detail about the results of the journey. I have no doubt myself that it has been a very valuable and fruitful journey, but some of the most important matters I had to discuss are still the subject of consideration by the Governments concerned. In respect of British dispositions East of Suez, for example, as you will know, there are to be talks with Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman and we can't expect any definite United Kingdom statement until those have been completed and Cabinet has been able to consider in the United Kingdom all the views which have been put to us by representatives of the Commonwealth countries concerned, and indeed by the United States which has a very lively interest in this matter also. But it is my anticipation that they will be indicating their general attitude on these matters before the end of next month.

I do feel, however, that the views we were able to put which I left behind in rather more precise form by way of a letter to Prime Minister Wilson have been received with every consideration and I am confident myself - although only a later formal decision will confirm this - that the United Kingdom will maintain a continuing role in that area of the world. Just what form this will take remains to be determined by them, but I feel confident that they do not intend to turn their backs on an area of the world, which to us - and I believe in the long term to them - will have such great significance.

In my talks in the United States with the President on a number of trade and financial matters, we made, I believe, very good progress, although here again the outcome has yet to be resolved in final terms. I am bringing some proposals back to the Cabinet for consideration, and there will be consideration given by various Departments of the United States to the views we have put on a number of matters. This can be stated quite emphatically: That in the President himself Australia has a staunch friend who brings a sympathetic outlook to the problems that we place before

him. I am sure that it would be his wish that the Administration does what it can within its political and administrative limits to assist Australia in the problems we have raised with him.

Some of the results of a journey such as this will later be expressed in tangible form. Perhaps some of the no less important consequences are of an intangible kind and I refer in particular to the very warm and friendly discussions I had in Canada with Prime Minister Lester Pearson. I believe we laid together, both privately and in our public statements, a foundation there for a growing Australian/Canadian co-operation in relation to international questions generally and in particular to the growing interest I think we will be finding in Canada in what occurs around the Pacific basin. That country has, for most of its history, been oriented to the North Atlantic or to North America, but British Columbia, for example, is very conscious of the opportunities which are developing across the Pacific and I feel confident that, increasingly, the Canadian Government as a whole and the Canadian people will find a growing interest and display an increasing activity in this area of the world.

There were, of course, a multitude of other discussions, and the programme was, I repeat, a very concentrated one. In the countries visited, I made, as you may recall, a number of speeches which I think could be classed as significant speeches, in United States, making Australia's views known; the World Affairs Council in Los Angeles, the Foreign Affairs Council, the Far East America Council, the American/Australian Association, the Pilgrims Society, "Meet the Press"... This is a very widely-viewed programme in the United States and produced a very good reaction from all the accounts which reached me. So in these ways, Australia's views were placed before a wide audience throughout the United States.

In the United Kingdom, we had talks with Senior Cabinet Ministers concerned with our problems, and again in America, not only were the trade matters under discussion but Viet Nam, the crisis in the Middle East, the British troop dispositions East of Suez and a variety of other matters occupied our attention. Even the concluding function of yesterday, in Honolulu - the formation there of an American/Australian Association - was not without some value for us. It has been launched by the leading figures in the life of Hawaii, which plays a useful role as a geographical bridge between Australia and the mainland of the United States, of which country it now forms, of course, a part. And when I learned that some 300,000 Americans visit Hawaii each year from the mainland, and we only get something like 20,000 of them down here, there is clearly scope for co-operation in matters such as tourism and other matters which are of mutual interest to us in our affairs in the Pacific region.

On both visits there, I had valuable talks there with Admiral Sharp, the Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Command, and after a very good briefing on my way through, he was able to refresh me on developments in military activities as I came through this time.

I am very glad to be back home, even to experience a little cool weather again after a spate of summer days wherever we have gone, and I come back confident of Australia's place in the world, and a growing prosperity which I think is assured from the great interest shown towards us in so many quarters through which I passed on my way. And it is good to be back again in the country which still seems to me to be the best country one can find on earth.

MR. EGGLETON : Will you take a few questions please Prime Minister?

PM : Yes.

Q. Mr. Holt, was there any request by President Johnson for Australia to increase its commitment in Vietnam?

PM: Well, if I answer that question by "no comment", you read something into it. If I say there wasn't, you read into that that he was indifferent as to whether we have more people there or not. I will say explicitly this matter was not raised with me, but I am not implying from that an indifference as to whether there should be an increase in Australian forces. But the President is well aware that we review our situation from time to time. Usually we study the Defence Vote at Budget time. The changing position in relation to Singapore and Malaysia is, of course, a new element in our calculations. But I don't want to give any impression that we are under pressure on this matter or that others are indifferent as to what we do about it.

Q. Indifference on whose part, Sir, yours or President Johnson's?

PM: Well, we are not indifferent, of course, to what we do in relation to Vietnam, but what is recognised is Australia is now providing close to 5 per cent. of its gross national product for the Defence Vote, that we have commitments and obligations in various other areas and the proportion of our people who are there in a fighting capacity (because we don't have the same logistics component) is higher than the mere figures would suggest.

Q. Mr. Prime Minister, you showed an acute awareness of the crisis for the world of the Middle East trouble by suggesting that Australia would take some of the Arab refugees. I would like you to amplify your statements regarding this and also to tell us of your concern.

Q. Well a great deal of emphasis appeared to be given out here to this particular aspect, but of course Australia's interest in peace in the Middle East goes far beyond that particular point. One element in the Middle East problem is the number of refugees - Arab refugees - which have not been satisfactorily dealt with for a considerable time, and I am afraid they become the pawn of Middle East politics. Clearly there has to be a solution of this problem and what I was indicating was an Australian willingness to play a part in company with other members of the United Nations if there would be value in their settlement around the world, or where they did choose to settle, in some financial assistance to enable them to settle in the place of their choice. I have been interested to note that in the "Financial Times" which I read only last night on the plane, Mr. Pearson in Canada has made almost precisely the same suggestion, talking about Canada taking its share of those who might wish to settle there, or else providing some financial assistance to contribute towards a solution of the problem.

Q. When do you expect to hear from President Johnson on the wool tariff? We have only got until June 30th. ....

PM: Well, there have been some proposals on this which I have to take to my own Cabinet first. Whether or not these will prove acceptable to us remains to be seen, but we are conscious that there is a time factor.

PM (Contd)

I think it is not necessarily bound to that date. This is the impression we gained in our discussion with them. The matter was capable of being dealt with separately but it would be, I think, to everyone's advantage if we could get some decision on the matter quite speedily.

Q. Do you expect to get anything before June 30th?

PM: Well, I can't be precise because I don't know now just how long it will take our own people to weigh the counter-proposal which is being put to us. It relates to tobacco and this may take a little study before we can get a firm reply to them on this particular matter.

Q: Sir, can you give us any details of Britain's defence plans East of Suez?

PM: No, I have made it quite clear that final decisions will not be taken on these matters, certainly until there have been talks with the other two Prime Ministers, Mr Lee is in London at this moment. I understand that Tunku Abdul Rahman will be there next month. But in the House of Commons, if my recollection is correct, Mr. Crossman, replying to a question, said they expected to give an answer before the end of July.

Q. Just going back to the Middle East crisis, Sir, your statement that the Middle East affair was at one stage "huffing and puffing" came in for some criticism. Were you quoted out of context or could this now be construed as an error of judgment?

PM: Well, where did I make the statement? This is the question I think is fair to ask.

Q. In the United States a few days before.....

PM: Where, though, will you tell me?

Q. I am afraid you are testing my memory.....

PM: You are testing my statement. In point of fact no such statement was ever made by me publicly and certainly not made in context, but Tony Eggleton in good faith, with his usual capable care of what is said at these background briefings, referring to the situation between the two major powers who clearly did not want to come to a clash themselves on this matter, and having heard me comment along those lines at an earlier point of time, did use this phrase in his press briefing. Now, I am not critical of Tony for that, but we do rely on the good sense of the pressmen who are getting the press briefing not to try to make in shorthand terms an over-complicated situation out of what I think was clearly known to be the intention of the statement. Once you have the tinder-like situation which had developed as between the Arabs and the Israelis, then no-one could predict with certainty what would come out as between those two. But we were confident in our own minds that neither the United States nor the Russians wanted this to develop into a Big Power conflict.

Q. Getting back to the troops in Vietnam, Sir. Reading between the lines, I suspect you think there might be a need for us to send more troops to Malaya and Singapore?

PM: Well, we are not making decisions on this matter at this point of time. The Minister for Defence is still overseas. We have our Budget provision for Defence yet to be considered. Australia does what it can within its capacity from time to time, and I don't want to be pressed on it.

Q. Mr. Prime Minister, the world spotlight is of course on New York at the moment. You have just come from the United States and we know you share the concern of President Johnson and also Mr. Wilson. We notice today that the British Government has suggested that Israel should withdraw from Jordanian territory. How do you feel about this and what do you think the prospects are of a lasting settlement?

PM: Yes, well, I don't propose to make any off-the-cuff statement on this. My own colleague will have been kept more closely in touch with the developments and views of other Governments. I will be talking this over with him, no doubt, quite early when I get to Canberra, but I am not making a detailed statement on Middle East policy at this point of time.

MR. EGGLETON: Sir, you have an aircraft waiting to take you to Canberra. Perhaps just one more question if there is anyone with a pressing one you want to raise.....

Q. In a lighter vein, Mr. Prime Minister, did you actually lose your pants while swimming? (Laughter)

PM: Well, you know, the last time I came back, one of the cartoonists had a statement about the President and myself having a frank exchange of poems. I suppose this time it could be said we had a frank exchange of films. We didn't have an exchange of pants, but my luggage not having arrived, and the day being very hot and lunch about to be served around the pool, I mentioned a little wistfully how much I would like a swim. The President very kindly made these trunks available. I am not implying that he is a stouter man than I am - he's a very much taller man, and what would sit quite gracefully on his figure was a little ample for mine. Having dived off the board it is a fact they couldn't stand the impact as well as they might have. I don't think any harm was done as I was managing to keep underwater at the time and I was able to restore the situation without too much embarrassment! In Honolulu at the dinner after the wind-up of the American/Australian Association function, they presented me with a pair about this big (indicating tiny size). I am hoping they will fit the grandson. They said if I could ever get into them I would never fall out of them. (Laughter)

MR. EGGLETON: Thank you, gentlemen.

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