

FOR PRESS :



PM. No. 7/1968

TALKS WITH MR THOMSON ON BRITISH
WITHDRAWAL

Statement by the Prime Minister, Senator John Gorton

The Right Honourable George Thomson, British Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, today told the Australian Government of British proposals for speeding up the withdrawal of British forces from Singapore and Malaysia.

The precise proposals will not be disclosed partly because the British Cabinet has not yet, as we are told, made final decisions, and partly because we hope that these proposals may be modified in the light of the views expressed by Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore.

However, it can be said that the proposals amount to drastic alterations of previously understood arrangements as to the continuing availability of British forces in the region .

Australian Ministers expressed their keen concern at the proposals and made it clear without in any way becoming involved in rancour or recrimination that they were not resigned to the proposals and could not accept them without protest.

They stressed that questions of security are global questions and that it was vital not to damage the security system of the South-East Asian region. They expressed the view that a continued presence of British forces in Malaysia and Singapore could provide a greater contribution to peace and security than the deployment of those forces in the European region, and that if economic considerations led the British Government to their present proposals, it might be preferable to make savings in some other area than that of Malaysia and Singapore. They also stressed that Australia and New Zealand did not have the capacity to take over the role which British forces had been playing in that area.

Mr Thomson will bring Australia's views before the British Cabinet before a final decision is made.

CANBERRA,
12 January, 1968