

TELEVISION INTERVIEW GIVEN BY THE  
PRIME MINISTER, MR JOHN GORTON ON  
GTV9, MELBOURNE

Interviewer : Mr Tony Charlton

18TH FEBRUARY, 1968

MR CHARLTON : Facing your electorate for the first time as Prime Minister, how do you really feel about it?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, I hope I will win it.

Q. And you are confident that you will?

PM: I hope I will.

Q. But has the enormity of the job you sought and won really had time as yet to register with you.

PM: I think it has. Let us examine the question you asked me : Has the enormity of it had time to impress me? It did the very first moment at the time I won it. It has been impressing me since. I can answer that yes, but if you say have I sufficiently studied it to know how to overcome all the problems which make up this enormity, the answer is No. I doubt if any Prime Minister ever would reach that position.

Q. I had the feeling, of course, that you could have had no notion that one day you would become Prime Minister before the Harold Holt tragedy. Then the race was on, you were involved in it, and maybe only now you are sitting back and thinking, "Good Heavens, what have I done?"

PM: Oh, I was a volunteer.

Q. And happily so!  
Your predecessor, Sir Robert Menzies was critical of the spectacle of the power struggle that the Prime Ministership became. How do you feel about it?

PM: Well, I think that is a little bit of a conservative view. Personally, I think it was not bad that the public should have had the opportunity - and I speak now from a party point of view - that it was not bad for the public to have had the opportunity to see four people appearing before them, all of whom, I think, were good, without any personal attacks the one upon the other. From my point of view, I can see nothing that was reprehensible about that. Indeed, as I say, I think it could well have been a good thing. Of course, ever since 1949 until Sir Robert retired, he having formed the Liberal Party, he was outstanding. I really, myself, see nothing to object to in what happened.

Q. Do you see anything to object to in some of the goings-on with the opening of your Higgins by-election campaign? There were a number of arrests. Does the conduct which brought about that action register with you as being part of the game, or deep down are you really disturbed by it?

PM: Well, I have to rely on what I read in the papers this morning because I didn't see any of the actual occurrences outside the hall. Certainly there was nothing that I could see to complain of inside the hall at all. I didn't see what happened outside the hall, but I think I can answer your question perhaps this way. I think the people have inalienable rights to come to public meetings and to interject and to ask questions. I don't think they have got an inalienable right to come in force and make a constant barrage of noise so that the man on the platform can't put his message to the Australian people because that seems to me to be interfering with a proper method of running a democratic country. Similarly outside the hall, or protest meetings generally - groups of people, as I said before, must have the right to protest, but I believe their protests must not be allowed to be carried to a point where they are in fact using force against people with whom they disagree, such as trying to overturn cars, throwing paint bombs, or even lying down in the streets to prevent other citizens from using them. This is carrying the right to protest into an area of licence rather than right.

Q. And even in the knockabout world of politics, what of the taunts and barbs like "Liar" and "Murderer". Surely they would revile any decent man?

PM: Oh, I think you have got to take cognisance of the quarter from which they come, and I am not particularly worried about the quarters that have lately been calling me either liar or murderer.

Q. As far as the hubbub your "enough is enough" statement on Viet Nam has caused, do you feel on reflection that maybe this will be as prominent an indiscretion as "All the Way with LBJ"?

PM: I don't think the statement which Mr Holt made, and he made it in a context which I think has been misrepresented, was an indiscretion, although it has been so used that in the public mind it became to be an indiscretion. I don't think that what I said was an indiscretion at all. I believe, as I said last night, that we are making for our size and considering all our other requirements, a very significant contribution in Viet Nam. I believe we are proving ourselves there to be an ally in the real sense. I believe if we were to add 2,000 or 3,000 more troops should we be asked to, or 4,000 should we be asked to - and we haven't been asked to - we would make a very minor additional contribution to the military operations, but the expense of that, apart from other things, could have a very major effect on things we would like to do in Australia itself.

Q. Well, did you make that Canberra statement off the cuff, or as one would think, after considerable thought?

PM: It wasn't a statement. It was in answer to a question at a press conference. The answer provided was not provided just sort of out of the air but because I had thought about it beforehand.

Q. Nonetheless, it seemed to be modified a few days later in Sydney. Now, was this as a result of indignation on the line from America?

PM: No, we have heard nothing from America, and with great respect, I don't think the English language could be so used as to say the statement was modified. One statement was: We are not going to increase the forces that we have in Viet Nam. The other statement was: We are going to maintain the forces we have in Viet Nam for as long as is necessary to attain our objective. Now it doesn't seem to me that they are in any way contradictory or that one modifies the other.

Q. Well, Mr Prime Minister, would it be reasonable to deduce that what you said, in effect, means that being in Viet Nam is not the vital be-all and end-all thing that your predecessor believed?

PM: I think that being in Viet Nam is of immense significance to us, but I believe that we have so much to do in other areas outside Australia and inside Australia that we have to balance the overwhelming importance of being in Viet Nam with more troops against the overwhelming importance of building our country as quickly as we can in the time we have.

Q. Can I put it to you this way? Did you mean that we can't do more in Viet Nam or that we shouldn't do more?

PM: Oh, we could do more. We could do more in Viet Nam. We could perhaps fill the place that Britain is leaving in Singapore and Malaysia, but if we did, we wouldn't be able to do anything else at all.

Q. The point about this line of questioning is: If the cause is justified, why then stop at a commitment of 8,000 men or, as you say, a few hundred more?

PM: Because - last October I think it was, only a few months ago - we examined the military requirements in Viet Nam from the point of view of our troops, and considerably increased the forces that were there. Now it was worked out that to add another battalion to the two that were there was not merely increasing its efficiency by one-third. It was increasing it by a factor much more than that because instead of having one battalion out and one battalion resting and in reserve, you could have two battalions out and this could do far more than could be done previously - more than twice as much. This was the military advice as to what we could do and this is what we did. Now, it would, of course, be arguable that, all right, Viet Nam is so important let's send another three battalions up there, but I am saying that I think the other things we have to do, bearing in mind the significant task we are fulfilling in Viet Nam, would make a judgment on my part that we are doing all that can reasonably be expected from a country of our size.

Q. When you underlined your Viet Nam attitude the other night in the Higgins by-election campaign opening, were you aware then that America would throw a further 10,000 troops into the Viet Nam conflict?

PM: No, I wasn't. No.

Q. Isn't it extraordinary that the Australian Prime Minister wouldn't be advised in advance of such a step by our ally?

PM: Why? I don't think so. I can't imagine that the United States would need to inform a Prime Minister of another country that it was increasing forces that were already there. It may well be that on military <sup>level</sup> discussions this was made known but I can't see any necessity for it to have been made known.

PM: Overall, do you see Viet Nam as being something of a finger in the dyke in view of the festering problems in Cambodia, Laos and Northern Thailand?

PM: I have always felt that if Viet Nam were to be overrun by the North - let me put it that way - that it would be likely that what people call the domino theory would come into practice instead of being theory and we would see the same sort of thing going on in Laos; (indeed we've seen it in provinces of Thailand) and perhaps in Cambodia. I think the people in that area of the world also have that feeling, though some of our opponents in Australia regard it as nonsense.

Q. Is there right for thinking - harking back to that Viet Nam statement which, as I say, has caused so much comment that there is a revision of our Asian policy in your mind?

PM: Because we are not increasing the number of troops?

Q. No. Just generally speaking. The Asian situation - you are wanting to impress on Australia a revised Asian outlook?

PM: I don't think so. In what way... Could you explain that a little bit more?

Q. I feel there was a parallel in your comment on Viet Nam with a comment you made during your dealings with Lee Kuan Yew - yes, we should be involved in Malaysia but not too involved. Yes, we should maintain our involvement in Viet Nam but not become over-involved.

PM: Ah, well I don't think there is any revision of our policy to Asia. Asia is an awfully big world, isn't it? We are really talking, both of us in our minds, of the countries of Asia nearest to us - Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia and the Philippines, that area of Asia. I don't think there is any revision there at all. We are, as I said last night, not only in but of Asia, and we do need to give such assistance as we can and as we have been giving, and I think it is the sort of assistance that ought to be so designed by imparting skills or technological capacity or capital or factories which will not just be consumed as it is given but build up the country to which it is given. This is the part that we have been playing and must continue to play. In relation to the military involvement in Malaysia and Singapore which was what we were talking about, I think, in my comments on Lee Kuan Yew,

PM (Contd.) they have both asked and wish for us to keep some military presence there. It is a matter still under discussion as to what role that presence would be, whether it would be expected to be bigger than at present; what the countries themselves could do. But they do express this wish, and as I said again last night, this wish must weigh quite heavily with us. I think the late Harold Holt paid particular attention to Asia, made us known in Asia better than we have been known before. I think this was one great achievement of his, particularly the personal contacts he made to do it. This is something I would hope to build on rather than revise.

Q. As he was keen, so are you keen to develop our relationship with Indonesia?

PM: Yes.

Q. Now on this point, the F111 was ordered at the time when the situation with Indonesia was anything but happy. Since then, of course, Britain has cancelled its order. Do you feel it would be prudent for us now to cancel ours with that as a background?

PM: I think it would be too late for us to cancel the order, leaving aside the question of whether one should or whether one shouldn't. I think it would be too late. I speak subject to correction, but I believe the first of these aircraft is due to be delivered in July or very soon and that they are to follow along later. I would think that apart from anything else cancellation at that late stage, cancellation charges involved, would all - leaving aside the question of whether one should or shouldn't - add up to the suggestion that it is too late anyway.

Q. Personally, do you feel we should?

PM: Personally do I feel we should. . . . well, clearly we shouldn't because it is far too late.

Q. Mr Prime Minister, a further note I had here concerning the home front is: If there is poverty in Australia as indicated in your speech the other night, is the Government going to investigate it? Will there be an enquiry?

PM: I was speaking the other night on particular matters, particularly related to our health scheme.

Q. The health scheme and the need you hinted there for an overhaul on the problem of the pensioners and the aged. . . .

PM. Yes. I was trying to compartmentalise it a little, talking on the health scheme. It is true, I think, that some of the charges for insurance are getting a bit dear and people aren't therefore covering themselves with insurance as much as they should. And, of course, there is this thing which has always disturbed me and still disturbs me that long chronic illnesses aren't covered, and that can cause immense hardship and economic distress. Now, you asked me if there was going to be an enquiry. We are still compartmentalising. The Department of Health has been examining how to overcome this. There will need to be in some areas consultations, discussions

PM (Contd.) with State Ministers of Health. There is a kind of overlapping field here. Their views would need to be obtained on perhaps the best way of tackling the aged long-term-illness people - should we seek as much as possible to keep them in their own homes by providing nursing services, should we provide more geriatric wards to our existing hospitals where they might be brought back to a situation where they could return to their own homes, or should we just merely seek to build on to additional hospitals or nursing homes. Look, it's enormous - I could make a speech for an hour on it.

Q. I understand that, and I think these steps are desirable, but is there a change in policy because at the time of the last Budget, Mr McMahon made it known that as much as he would have liked to have helped pensioners he couldn't because of the size of the Defence Vote?

PM: I wouldn't put it as a change of policy. Budgets happen year by year by year. You have asked me is there a change in policy. I would be sure that we would be doing something - something - and it may involve some sort of enquiry as to the best way of going about it to see that what we do is directed to the areas of real need without upsetting people and stopping them saving and making them feel, "Well, I have saved for myself and I am not being treated properly". This is not an easy problem, to balance those two things. That would need to be investigated not necessarily by anybody but the Social Services Department, but examined by us. This is the sort of thing we would need to look into, to do something in the coming Budget. This need not necessarily be a change of policy. It is just that something is going to happen in one Budget that didn't happen in the other.

Q. Do you feel on reflection that you were being a little over-optimistic in saying that what happened in the Holt Government period could be ruled off?

PM: Did I say that, that everything that happened in the Holt Government could be ruled off?

Q. You are suggesting I have misinterpreted it?

PM: My recollection of that was that somebody asked me a particular question bearing simply on Mr McMahon and Mr McEwen, and that my answer to that particular question was that in the new Government, I would propose to rule off the book.

Q. A final question. How do you intend to go about correcting the problems within the Coalition if you are going to rule off the book and start again with a new Ministry?

PM: Well, I believe that we will be able to work as a Coalition, certainly as well as the Coalition has worked in the past. I would be most surprised if that were not so. I admire and like Mr McEwen and I feel he has a liking and respect for me and this is a good basis on which to start. I have more than mere political associations with a number of his Ministers as well. Now, in any Coalition there are bound to be differences of emphasis from time to time, there are bound to be conflicts of ideas as to what should be done in some particular field, but these can be settled, these can be ironed out if the overall philosophy and the ultimate objective of the two parties are the same. It is a disagreement on methods of obtaining an overall

PM (Contd.) objective, but if the overall objective is there and if confidence is there, then those do not in my view break, or tend to break, a working partnership

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