

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

SPEECH

BY

The Rt Hon. J. G. GORTON, M.P.

ON

VIETNAM (Ministerial Statement)

[From the 'Parliamentary Debates', 22 April 1970]

Mr GORTON (Higgins—Prime Minister) —by leave—Since 1965, Australian ground formations have been engaged with our allies in resisting armed attack on the Government of South Vietnam. Since that time, the question of whether Australian forces should have helped resist that attack has been debated in Australia. This Government, as previous governments, has approached this question in the spirit which was crystallised in one sentence by the right honourable member for Melbourne (Mr Calwell) when he was Leader of the Opposition. That sentence is:

The overriding issue which this Parliament has to deal with at all times . . . must be judged by this one crucial test: What best promotes our national security, what best guarantees our national survival.

The Government believes that judged on this standard, our engagement in Vietnam is right and that it does best promote our national security, and we believe that for these reasons: It is surely incontrovertible that in Vietnam aggression is taking place and is being resisted. It is surely incontrovertible that the war there is only being sustained because large numbers of troops from North Vietnam are constantly dispatched to invade and subjugate the South,

and that if that troop flow stopped the war would stop. Resistance to such aggression does best promote our national security, because we must strive to ensure that history is not repeated and that invasion and aggression is not allowed to be successful. For if it is successful, then the short span of history through which many of us in this chamber have lived shows that once successful, it is repeated and repeated until it becomes insufferable and has to be stopped—but stopped at a cost in blood and treasure infinitely greater than would have been the case had it been stopped at its initiation.

Surely something of what happened in the last generation can be taken as experience by the present one. We saw Fascist and Nazi aggression raging unchecked and subjecting one small country after another to conquest until it had to be stopped—at the cost of a world war—which need not have happened had the aggression been stopped at its beginning. I thought that these lessons, which, let us never forget are of more import to small nations than to large, had been learned. Because for some years after the close of the Second World War, resolute action was taken to resist and defeat subversion in Malaya as it then was.

This took some 12 long years or more—years when civilians were murdered by terrorists—when bands of guerillas with grenades and Sten guns sought to overthrow by force a government the people in Malaya wanted. Australians were there, with British and local forces, resisting that aggression. We were told then—and the words are strikingly familiar today: ‘Australians should not be in Malaya. The war will go on forever. It cannot be won’. But it was won. That aggression was not successful and Australia’s national security was best promoted because of that lack of success.

Then we saw aggression in Korea. We saw the people of the North sweep across the frontiers of the South in armed formations. Because the prevention of aggression, then, was the basic concept of the United Nations, we saw United Nations forces moving to defeat that aggression. Australians were there. And the aggression was defeated. And Australian national security was best promoted because it was defeated. We saw, and the principle is the same, Malaysia threatened during the confrontation and armed incursions into Malaysian territory. Australia helped to repel this aggression. And our national interest was best served by this. And then we saw the pattern repeated in Vietnam. It is Communist aggression there as it was in Korea and Malaya, but the source of the aggression—significant though it may be—is not as significant as the fact that it was aggression. For the Government believes that if small nations are to survive and prosper, then aggression from whatever source—whether it is inspired by Communism, Fascism or old fashioned nationalism—must not be allowed to succeed.

The one consistent thread of principle—that small nations are best rendered secure if other small nations are not allowed to be overrun—has distinguished our policy through the post-war years. That is why we are in Vietnam, and that we should be there is a proposition supported by three of the significant political parties in Australia and opposed by one—the Labor Party. I put it to the House that Australian security is bound up with seeing that aggression does not succeed. I put it to the House that it is immoral to launch aggression but not immoral to resist it.

This is a proposition which has been twisted and turned inside out by those who cry that this is an immoral war. So it is—but the immorality is in those who began it, who continue to invade, who will not negotiate for peace, who are bent on conquest and nothing but conquest.

We have said that successful invasion of South Vietnam by the North would lead to further attempts at conquest in Laos, in Cambodia, and on the frontiers of Thailand. This was scouted and denied by those in the ranks of the Opposition who support the case of the invaders. But the history of recent days shows, I submit, how dangerously wrong they were. Sir, I have thought it necessary to speak of this background in discussing the latest decisions on our participation in Vietnam. It was and is right for us to help to stem aggression. It was and is in our national interest—and that of all small nations—for aggression to be defeated. It is in our interest to help to secure by negotiation peace with self-determination for the people of South Vietnam. And in the meanwhile, while the invader will not negotiate, it is right to help resist him. Against this background, I speak to the House of the Government’s decision.

Following a review of the situation in Vietnam which led to the earlier United States decisions to reduce the level of its forces by 115,000 by the middle of this month, President Nixon yesterday announced his decision to introduce a new and long range programme of United States troop reductions involving the withdrawal of 150,000 men over the next 12 months. On 16th December last I announced the Government’s decision that when the military situation in Vietnam permitted a further substantial withdrawal of allied troops, then some Australian units would be included in the numbers scheduled for withdrawal. Since then we have, with South Vietnam and the other allies, continued to keep developments and prospects in Vietnam under close study. The Communist side maintains its intransigence and continues to set its face against a negotiated settlement. There is no progress to report as regards peace talks.

As the President has stated, there has been some overall decline in enemy force levels in South Vietnam in the last few months, though their actions in Laos and

Cambodia must give us all cause for concern. The development that gives encouragement is the progress in what has been called 'Vietnamisation'—the movement towards South Vietnamese self-reliance. We see one result of this in the progressive reduction of allied forces. But it must be understood that 'Vietnamisation' means much more than the assumption by South Vietnamese forces of a greater share of the combat burden. Behind it lies a massive programme of expanding and modernising those forces. And behind that again is the progressive assumption by South Vietnam of the responsibility for all aspects of the war—a war fought across the widest fronts, embracing a complexity of military, political, psychological, social and economic factors. In all these areas much still remains to be done by South Vietnam, assisted by its allies across a wide civil and military spectrum. Yet progress has been such that important qualitative changes are being made, and will continue to be made, in regard to the assistance required by and given to the Government of South Vietnam in pursuit of the objective shared over the years by that Government and its allies.

I reiterate that that objective is to establish the circumstances in which South Vietnam can determine its own future without fear. There can be no thought of abandoning that objective by a precipitate withdrawal of allied forces. But in continuing to give assistance to South Vietnam, our intention will be to take account of their own growing strength and to strike the most appropriate balance between an Australian military contribution and other forms of Australian assistance to Vietnam: We are mindful particularly that the process of 'Vietnamisation' obtains no less in Phuoc Tuy Province than in other parts of Vietnam and that it is both desirable and feasible for Australia to undertake, as the circumstances permit, qualitative changes in the shape of our overall contribution towards the goal we seek.

Accordingly, I now announce to the House that after consultation in recent weeks with the governments of Vietnam and the United States, who understand and accept our approach, the Government has decided that one Australian infantry battalion and some supporting personnel

will be withdrawn from South Vietnam. This reduction to our force in Vietnam will be effected by withdrawing, without replacement, the 8th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, which at present is scheduled to complete its tour of duty in November next. This will require a modification of the role at present played by our forces—a modification made feasible by the forces of Vietnamisation and national acceptance of responsibility by the Vietnamese themselves in Phuoc Tuy.

But let no-one say that because there is a modification of the role we play therefore we should play no role at all. Reducing our forces because the Vietnamese are able to assume more responsibility is one thing. Totally removing our forces before the Vietnamese are able to accept full responsibility for replacing them is quite another.

The timing of the battalion's departure from Vietnam remains to be determined. It will be governed by general circumstances within the area in which Australian forces are operating and by the progress of Australian projects to assist the growth of greater capability in the South Vietnamese forces, and I shall touch on those later. Whether or not the battalion's departure may be brought forward from the November date will depend on developments in these fields.

After the initial withdrawal, should the progress of pacification and Vietnamisation succeed as the President hopes and believes that it will, then at some stage during the 12-month period, we will consider phasing additional troops into the planned withdrawal. But the future situation is so uncertain and the future strategical situation so unpredictable that it is impossible to be any more definite than this. In co-operation with the Government of South Vietnam, in pursuit of our basic objectives, we are actively examining further ways in which we can contribute to the growth in South Vietnamese self-reliance.

Following consultations with the Vietnamese Government, we have decided to provide a number of small mobile Army teams, totalling some 130 men, to work with the regional and popular forces in Phuoc Tuy province. The teams will have a liaison and training function and will operate on a pattern similar to that developed by some members of our existing

Army Advisory Training Group, which will continue its work. We are also developing a further proposal that Australia provide instructors and other assistance to a South Vietnamese training centre for junior leaders—leaders of the popular forces and regional forces—planned for establishment on the site which will be vacated by the Australian battalion to be withdrawn from Vietnam. It is envisaged that courses at this centre, which would accommodate 400 to 500 students at a time, would give particular attention to instruction in methods of jungle warfare which have been developed by Australian forces.

In addition, Cabinet will give urgent attention to the results of comprehensive

studies now being made of other forms of assistance which might be offered to Vietnam. Sir, I am glad to be able to tell the House and the people of Australia that the situation has been reached when withdrawal of some Australian forces can be made. I would be yet happier when all Australian forces could be withdrawn, provided that our object is in no way endangered. And I believe that history will show that Australia in Vietnam was right, as she was right in the other instances of which I have spoken, not to stand idly by and refuse to lift a finger to help a small country attacked from without. For whenever one small country loses its freedom let us not ask for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for all.