

TELEVISION INTERVIEW GIVEN BY THE
PRIME MINISTER, MR JOHN GORTON
FOR CHANNEL 7 NETWORK

24 SEPTEMBER 1970

Interviewer - Peter Martin

Q. Prime Minister, why have you taken exception to Mr Whitlam's remarks and advice to conscientious objectors?

PM Because Mr Whitlam as the Leader of the Opposition and the alternative Prime Minister is actively urging a breach of the law, is actively urging the destruction of the defence forces. He is quite unequivocally saying that persons who enter the defence forces, who are called up for service, should refuse to obey a legal and military order. I think on the occasion of the call for mutiny in Vietnam by the Labor Conference in Victoria, I had this to say :

"It is a really grave development in Australian politics for any political party in Opposition to urge - not that the law should be changed, because that is all right, it is not bad for them to put forward arguments as to why it should be altered - but to urge that it should be broken is a new and grave thing in Australian political life"

and to have the Leader of the Opposition urging this is something that I think could not..... I don't believe it has happened anywhere in any reasonably democratic country before.

Q. Can you see any disastrous effects arising from Mr Whitlam's statement, really?

PM Yes, I can. Here is Mr Whitlam saying : "I advise young men to accept the registration for call-up, to go into the Army, but once in the Army to make up their own minds as to where they will go and where they will not go" - you can't confine this to Vietnam. If they are urged to refuse to go to Vietnam, and that is right, then it is all right for them to refuse to go to any place to which the Army wishes to send them. And that would be quite destructive of the Army generally. This is not the real matter. The real matter is here is somebody who hopes to form an alternative government preaching a complete breaking of the law. That is the philosophical matter. It is also stupid because he is advising a young man to put himself into a position where he could be seriously punished, whereas if he had any sense and somebody approached him for advice and said, "I don't like Vietnam", he would say, I would think, "Well, in that case join the CMF and you will have no risk whatever of being called up and being sent to Vietnam and of being punished." That is the stupidity of the advice. The really significant and important thing is that here is somebody who hopes to be Prime Minister urging people to break the existing laws.

Q. Would that be your advice, then, to a young man who asked you in similar circumstances?

PM If a young man came to me and said, "I am subject to be called up. I haven't yet been called up, but I am liable to be called up, and I have grave worries about going to Malaya or Vietnam or anywhere, and they really are conscientious worries and I don't want to do it," my statement to him would be "There is no-one in Australia in your situation who is liable to be forced to go to Vietnam provided they will take the channels which the Government has provided for them to join the CMF, in which case they are not called up for regular service. Or alternatively, if they have got real conscientious objections to war, and to fighting, then there is an opportunity for them to go before a court and prove those." But this is ignoring that. This is saying each individual who enters the armed service should have a right to say whether he will go to a place or whether he won't go to a place, and he makes up his own mind about that and refuses to obey a legal and proper order.
