

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER,

THE HON. E.G. WHITLAM, Q.C., M.P.,

TO THE WORLD ASSEMBLY OF WAR VETERANS IN AUSTRALIA,

SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE, 11 AUGUST 1975

I welcome on behalf of the Australian Government the overseas delegates to this important assembly. Among you are distinguished war veterans; many of you are renowned for acts of conspicuous valour in the field or as prisoners of war. It is an honour to have you among us. Your presence is a reminder of the great world-wide fraternity of ex-servicemen - the universal kinship between men and women who have fought for their country in war. Every nation recognises an obligation to its war veterans. Australia accepts and honours that obligation.

This is an appropriate moment and an appropriate gathering at which to reflect on some of the great contemporary issues of peace and war - issues that concern you as former servicemen and as responsible citizens of your countries. Last week saw the thirtieth anniversary of the end of World War II. In the same week the heads of the European and North American powers met in Helsinki to acknowledge formally the realities of power in Europe and consolidate the basis of a lasting peace. That meeting was part of the great international movement of detente - a movement that remains the supreme challenge to modern statesmanship. Australia must lend her voice to this movement. Australia must be part of this worldwide quest for peace and international understanding.

It has not always been easy for ex-servicemen's organisations to support these causes wholeheartedly. As an ex-servicemen, as a member of the R.S.L. for the past 30 years, I admire the efforts of the league to improve the welfare of ex-servicemen and encourage the spirit of comradeship between men and women who have served their country. Yet all too rarely the sentiments and options of the R.S.L. strike a chord with contemporary generations. Too often the R.S.L. seems out of step; too often its public statements strike a note of intolerance, of fanaticism. While Brezhnev and Ford were meeting in Helsinki, what did we hear and read last week in Sydney? - the slogans of the fifties, the catchcries of cold war ideology. The week before in another capital a State Premier was advocating the acquisition of nuclear weapons and guided missiles. It takes a brave man to query fading slogans. But there have been brave men. Three years ago at the New South Wales R.S.L. Congress the Governor, Sir Roden Cutler, V.C., challenged the approach to Vietnam and a decade before the Governor-General, Viscount De L'Isle, V.C., warned the National Congress on Cold War attitudes. The R.S.L. must bring its influence and prestige to bear in a relevant and constructive examination of the problems of peace and security. Too often the younger generation likens the R.S.L. smoko, which all of our generation enjoy, to Alexander's Feast, at which the King in his cups

...Grew vain,  
Fought all his battles o'er again,  
And thrice he routed all his foes  
And thrice he slew the slain.

This year has seen the end of a long and terrible war in Asia, a war that devastated a large part of our region and baffled and demoralised the greatest democracy on earth. The full consequences of the war - its full cost in terms of human life, material destruction, world inflation, shattered morale, lost faith and broken ideals - will perhaps never be known. Perhaps the most evil consequence of Vietnam has been a general disillusionment with democratic governments. People are no longer disposed to believe what their governments tell them. They are quite ready to believe that Governments will lie and deceive their people when it suits them. The necessary trust between governments and governed has been undermined. The most urgent task for democracy is to rebuild that trust in a genuine search for peace and human betterment. And what R.S.L. leader was right on Vietnam?

Above all, we must not waste the opportunity for peaceful reconstruction and international cooperation which is now presented to the nations of South-East Asia, including Australia. Opportunities for peace in the region have been tragically wasted before; they must not be wasted again. To say this is not to belittle the sacrifice and courage of those who fought in Vietnam. To honour our war dead, it is not necessary to approve of the conflicts in which they took part. The frank acknowledgement of our past mistakes - and the greater those mistakes the franker and fuller that acknowledgement must be - is the first step to greater wisdom and security. At the root of the whole ghastly malaise in Vietnam, the whole tragic and futile struggle, was the absence of any basic popular conviction that war was just. The people did not believe in the war. The people of the United States did not support it. The people of Australia did not support it. And the people were right.

I believe the chief lesson of Vietnam has been that no longer will it be possible for governments to fight a war successfully without the broad support of their people. There is no longer any automatic or slavish patriotism among our people. Some may find this unpalatable or shocking; others may see it as a mark of enlightenment. The fact remains that the days have passed when any war could be relied upon to bring an instantaneous surge of national fervour. It was possible once to depend on such feelings in Australia. When Australia was founded half the population was in uniform. We were settled by the Royal Navy and a contingent of troops. Australians fought in every war in which Britain was engaged, up to and including the Malaysian campaign. Their first expedition was to the Sudan 90 years ago; it embarked a few hundred metres from where we are meeting. It was only in the last decade that Australians fought overseas without British troops beside them. The imperial connection which was the root of our former patriotism is no longer sufficient to stir us. The sending of a few battalions to Vietnam can no longer provoke the automatic popular response, the unquestioning commitment, that prevailed during the Boer War, for example, or during World War 1 or II. No one doubts that we were right to fight Hitler and Tojo, but can the same be said of the earlier wars in which Australia took part? From our present vantage point the horrors of World War 1 are difficult to explain and impossible to justify. I shall have the same difficulty in

justifying it to my grandson as Kaspar had in justifying Blenheim:

"And everybody praised the Duke  
Who this great fight did win."  
"But what good came of it at last?"  
Quoth little Peterkin.  
"Why that I cannot tell," said he,  
"But 'twas a famous victory."

Apart from a few isolated incidents, the Australian population has never experienced the horrors of war as the civilian populations of Britain, Japan and the European countries have done. The rigours of war have fallen on our warriors alone. It is only recently through television that we have seen in Vietnam what war means to a whole population. It is perhaps for this reason that the anti-war movement, the general revulsion against war as an instrument of policy, has been slower to take root in this country than it has abroad. It is perhaps for this reason that bellicose sentiments and cold war thinking have survived longer in Australia, as they have in the United States, whose civilian population has also been spared the devastation of modern warfare.

Our isolation has compounded these effects in another way.

As a result of the last war we embarked on a vast program of immigration. In the first years of that program many new citizens came here as refugees from Europe. Many of those who came from the countries of eastern Europe are inclined to think that those countries are the same as they were before the war. They are reluctant to accept the realities of the post-war world; they go on believing that the old regimes will somehow be restored. In the case of Yugoslavia, for example, this obsession has persuaded a sizable minority of new Australians to get together and venerate our enemies in the last war. By extolling the Ustasha and the quisling Pavelic they advocate the dismemberment today as they did in 1941 of the only nation on the continent of Europe which had declared itself our ally. It is an utter disgrace that a regime accepted internationally - a nation visited by President Ford and the Queen - should be vilified by a minority of agitators in Australia. After Helsinki, does anyone really believe that the situation in Europe will be changed by military means or that the old regimes in Europe can be restored?

Our true interests lie in putting an end to these obsessions with the past, in recognising the new realities in our region and in the world at large, and in developing humane and rational policies for peace and international cooperation. These should be the concerns of all progressive and contemporary ex-servicemen's organisations. I pay tribute to the R.S.L. in promoting the welfare of ex-servicemen and serving members of the forces. My own Government has done a great deal in this field. Indeed there is some irony in the fact that Australians with active overseas service have been treated somewhat differently from

other Australians in the provision of government services. Under our Federal system, the national Government has been able to provide for servicemen and ex-servicemen such things as health services, housing and adult training - services that governments have failed or refused to provide for the rest of the population.

There is certainly a role for ex-servicemen's organisations in looking after their members' interests. There is a role for ex-servicemen's organisations as concerned observers of the nation's defences. But let this role be discharged in honest and constructive terms. Let it take account of the realities of the world and the aspirations of people everywhere for true peace and progress.

For who can doubt that the world has changed permanently in the last quarter of a century? For all our present anxieties and immense problems, who can doubt that the world is a safer place than it was at the time of Berlin, of Korea, of Cuba? For the first time in nearly 40 years no member of the Australian armed forces is fighting in an overseas war. No Australian is on active service. The gates of the temple of Janus are closed. The comparative peace we now enjoy in our region and the comparative peace we enjoy in the wider world should renew our determination to preserve and strengthen peace everywhere. Ex-servicemen's organisations must lend their support to this process. In the presence and as the host of the most distinguished and representative gathering of ex-servicemen in this country the R.S.L. can make its contribution and bring inspiration to this noble endeavour.

---