

DOORSTOP, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA - PROCEDURES IN PARLIAMENT ON
Tuesday, 26 February.

Question:

Prime Minister, would you agree with Sir Billy Snedden that yesterday's performance in Parliament was deplorable?

Prime Minister:

It certainly was deplorable, and I think people are entitled to be slightly surprised by Mr Hayden's reaction because what I had said was mild and extraordinarily accurate. I have made it plain that there is a thread in the Australian Labor Party which seems to want to find excuses for the Soviet invasion - that doesn't mean to say they approve it, but it seems to want to find excuses for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, or if not that, at least find reasons why Australia should do nothing about it. One of the odd things I find in this whole circumstance is that Mr Hayden condemns the invasion, he then says that a boycott of the Olympic Games would be, if not the most effective, a very effective way of bringing the message home to the Soviet government and people, and then he sets about immediately, virtually, undermining the boycott that many nations are trying to achieve.

Now, those statements just don't tally up. On the one hand he condemns the invasion, and the second he says a boycott would be an effective means of doing something about it, and then he immediately sets about trying to destroy the prospects of an effective boycott.

On trade matters, on economic sanctions, where we have taken some quite resolute action - comparable with that of other countries - he almost tries to imply that we are not doing enough, but says we shouldn't do more, and ends up by saying we shouldn't do anything. Really, I thought what he said was the language that comes from somebody who is very worried and very unsettled.

Question:

Will you be raising the issue of Parliamentary behaviour in the Party room today in your own joint Party room meeting?

Prime Minister:

It might come up - we have a short question time which is generally much better behaved than the question time in the Parliament. What had happened in this instance and what happened in the Parliament over the energy matter also - I was quoting something Mr Keating had said which made it perfectly plain they were going to raise more money from their energy policy than we raise by the oil levy, more money out of oil producers. - I made some comments about that, but because the Labor Party doesn't like it, because they know they have exposed their flanks on a number of issues on a number of occasions, they try to stop the answers being given by noise, by a row in the Parliament, by the kind of larrikin, barnyard behaviour that we saw yesterday, led by the leader of the Opposition, but supported by a large number of others.

Question:

Do you think the scene has been set, Prime Minister, for this sort of thing to continue, and not much progress on legislation?

Prime Minister:

We will make progress on legislation, don't worry about that. But, I would hope that this sort of thing would not continue because we, quite deliberately set about trying to establish the circumstances where there could be a bi-partisan approach to the major international matters that are of concern to, I think, all Australians.

But that approach, if it is to work, puts certain obligations, responsibilities, on the Opposition, and on the leader of the Opposition himself. Those obligations would be ones which plainly do lend a degree of support to what the Government has done instead of trying to undercut that support, trying to undercut the policies that we have pursued, whatever his motives might be.

Question:

Prime Minister, on something I know that you do feel is of fundamental importance to Australians, and that is the question of interest rates for home loans. Do you think the Government can hold the line or that you will be forced, as newspapers are saying this morning, to put up Australian savings bond rates?

Prime Minister:

I don't want to add to anything that the Treasurer has said on this issue, but let me only say that against the background of the interest rates that have applied in the United Kingdom - 16-17 percent, even higher, 15-16 percent in the United States - the Australian economy up to this point stood up to it with remarkable strength, and it has done that because of a perception of this Government's economic policies, because of the strength of the balance of payments, because our rate of inflation has been lower than that of Britain and the United States, but if there is a very substantial differential in interest rates between those two major countries and a country such as Australia, it is inevitable that there will be some implications for us, and I think really that that is what you have been seeing for the last week or so. But I can't add any more to that at the moment.

Question:

But do you think our strength is still there?

Prime Minister:

The strength of the economy is still there, but let me make the point again - against the background of the capacity of capital to move between nations, against the background of the kind of interest rates that have been present in the United States and the United Kingdom for a very long while, it is not possible for the Australian economy not to feel some impact, some effect, and that I think, is what has been happening over the last week or so.

Question:

Would you expect this to hit home buyers?

Prime Minister:

I don't want to say anymore about this at the moment.

Question:

In relation to question time yesterday, what do you have to say to the suggestion that you weren't quoting Mr Keating in full?

Prime Minister:

Well, to quote him in full means to quote a whole article. I am perfectly happy to have that whole article tabled in the Parliament or incorporated in Hansard where it will show quite plainly exactly what Mr Keating said, and he was saying that Afghanistan was no business of ours, who would want Pakistan, who would want Afghanistan or whatever it might have been, indicating that he had no concern for the issue whatever. I just don't believe that that is good enough. It is very much reminiscent of the kind of remarks that Neville Chamberlain made in relation to Czechoslovakia in 1938, and I have said on many occasions that in these vastly important issues, as I understand President Carter's actions, as I understand the joint declaration from France and Germany, the statement of the British Prime Minister - they are all trying to establish the circumstance in which, in the 1980s, the world does not go down the tragic and disastrous path that it pursued in the latter part of the 1930s.

The tragedy of this present circumstance is that since Mr Hayden believes he has got to make every issue a political issue, since he believes that there is no issue, virtually, on which he can support the Government, and that seems to be the way he reacts, he therefore puts himself in an equivocal, ambivalent and very difficult position over the Afghanistan issue.

Question:

On the question of Afghanistan, since your meetings with President Carter, the lack, or the activity in the Indian Ocean - the American defence activity - has been confined to fleet units sailing and having itself photographed. In fact, what is the latest assessment? What is happening in both Afghanistan with the Soviet Union and Western defence in the Indian Ocean?

Prime Minister:

I don't think I can tell you what is happening in Afghanistan much more than you have seen over the news reports. There has obviously been a very unsettled circumstance in Kabul, there is obviously enormous opposition, not only from the alleged rebels who are fighting against the Soviet army, but from the people of Afghanistan itself who have been independent, fiercely proud for centuries, wanting to do it their way and they ought to be allowed that privilege and that right as an independent people. There are, as you know, estimates which vary from between 75,000 and 90,000 Soviet troops in the area. There have been some reports that there have been more troops starting to move towards Afghanistan and I wouldn't be at all surprised in that because I think that if they are going to stop the discontent and the opposition, and at the same time remain in Afghanistan, they are going to need double the number of troops that they have got there now, if they are really going to suppress the freedom and independence of spirit of the people of Afghanistan. In the Indian Ocean, in the

Prime Minister: (cont.)

in the northwest Indian Ocean, the United States has placed much, much greater naval and maritime capacity and their forces there now are really quite formidable.

Question:

...the wool dispute. Can you indicate what your position would be if the growers decided to take action ...?

Prime Minister:

I have got nothing to add to the joint statement that Mr Nixon and some growers put out yesterday. I would only say that the intention there was to invite the brokers and other parties to a meeting which I would hope would be held today which could work out a strategy for handling this particular dispute. It is a disastrous one, it is a serious one and one that does challenge the arbitration system. I think the growers are very determined and the Government is, but since there are discussions in progress I haven't really got anything specific to add to that statement that was released last night.

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