

BIDAULT TELEVISION INTERVIEW

Statement in the House of Representatives on Thursday,
28th March, 1963, by the Rt. Hon. the Prime Minister,
Sir Robert Menzies.

I must say that the speech that we have just listened to represents such a muddled-up indictment that it is very hard to know what the point of it is. In one breath, the honourable member for Eden Monaro (Mr. Allan Fraser) waving an arm at the Postmaster-General (Mr. Davidson) said that he believed that this interview should never have been made. But the honourable member for Eden Monaro has stated exactly the same thing. He also believes that it should not have been made. So his whole argument becomes so self-contradictory that one wonders why this matter has so suddenly been thrown upon us for discussion.

There was no sign of it at the beginning of the week - not a hint - not any question at question time from a fighting Opposition, stimulated, as some of them are, by corridor exercises in recent times. Not a hint of it! But when they found that a matter had been suggested for discussion today which they would have found highly embarrassing, to wit, the giving of instructions to members by outside bodies, they at once said, "We cannot have that. We do not want to have that debated. That would be very awkward. We are going to move a no confidence motion next week. We must not fire off any of our stuff in advance. We must at all costs avoid discussing the matter suggested by the honourable member for Barker."

So they trotted out this matter. What is the substance of it? I will go with the honourable member for Eden Monaro to the first and most powerful part of his speech. He said - and I agree - that this television interview should never have been made. This interview was made by a body which is, after all, if not the servant of the British Government, the creature of the British Government.

I do not agree that the man with whom the interview was made is a poor, broken down old fellow. I saw this man myself, full of self-satisfaction and leering at his audience. The interview was made with a man who is at this time wanted for a capital offence against the Government of France. He is wanted for treason. He is being pursued, in effect, or is pursuing himself around the world. He is wanted as the head of an organization which has already made unsuccessful but violent attempts to assassinate the President of France. This is the man that we are hearing about.

Of course this interview should never have been made! It could do nothing else but give this man and his views publicity. It would serve to give him a certain amount of prestige as a person worth interviewing and presenting over the principal television service in the U.K.

It is little wonder to me that there were violent protests in France. It is little wonder to me that there were protests in the House of Commons. As an unfriendly act towards a friendly power, I can scarcely think of anything more stupid and more offensive. I imagine that we all would agree with that. Certainly the honourable member for Eden Monaro agrees with it, but having said all those things - that the film should never have been made by the BBC and so on - he went on to say that it should have been put on by the Australian Broadcasting Commission in Australia, or at any rate, that a Minister should

not have dared to prevent it. That, Sir, is a form of reasoning which completely escapes me.

We in Australia are not only friendly with France; we are associated with France in the South-East Asia Treaty. Through our allies in the old world, we are indirectly associated with France in NATO. We are not a member of NATO, but Great Britain is, and France is in a key position in the western European structure. Are we supposed to be quite indifferent to the fact that a body commonly regarded as the agent or the mouthpiece of the Australian Government - not here; we know better, but commonly so regarded outside - should put on an interview which, by concession, we say should never have been recorded? Of course, the reason that is put forward is a very high and mighty one - "Well, this involves censorship." It is one thing to prevent a programme from being put on; it is another thing to close up a few newspapers completely. Honourable members opposite had better search their own record. How fortunate it is that the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Calwell) is not here today.

When this direction was given to the A.B.C., it was, I repeat, in my opinion a proper direction on a matter which concerns the relations of this country with a friendly power.

Mr. Allan Fraser - In fact, you would do it again?

SIR ROBERT MENZIES: As a matter of fact, if it would be effective, I would do it again, certainly. I am not making any apologies. I have publicly conceded that we then found ourselves in a position in which the prohibition against the A.B.C. would be rendered completely futile and discriminatory. Therefore, we withdrew it.

Mr. Peters - Did not you know that before you issued it?

SIR ROBERT MENZIES: I did not think of it, I suppose. I do not know. When you find that a position has developed which is untenable, it is good sense to go away from it. I have no apologies to make for that. All I want to say is that Opposition members had better make up their minds as to whether they agree with their spokesman about the nature, quality and propriety of this particular interview. If there were power in one stroke to prevent the presentation of a matter offensive to an allied power - not merely offensive, but a matter which involved putting forward and giving publicity to a man wanted for treason - then I hope I would have enough firmness, whenever it cropped up, to do everything I could to prevent it.
