

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

SPEECH

BY

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K.T., C.H., Q.C., M.P.,

ON

VIETNAM MINISTERIAL STATEMENT



[From the "Parliamentary Debates," 4th May 1965]

Sir ROBERT MENZIES (Kooyong—Prime Minister) [3.50.]—Mr. Speaker, I have listened to the speech of the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Calwell) with acute depression. It seemed to me to demonstrate an approach to these great and vital problems that I would hardly have expected to hear described in this place. Indeed, he summed it all up in the second last paragraph of his speech. May I remind the House that he said—

Let me sum up. We believe that America must not be humiliated and must not be forced to withdraw.

Having said that by way of summary, he has said that in the clear view of his party America should be required to go it alone with no assistance from us. That, really, is a pretty neat, short summary of the speech that he has made. I will come back to it because there are a few things that should be put straight on the record, if they need to be put straight.

The first thing that I want to mention, as briefly as may be, is the grievance with which he began. It is quite true that he did not elaborate it today. I am supposed to have concealed from the Leader of the Opposition and the Deputy Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Whitlam) the fact that I

was going to make a statement on Thursday night. He did not say much about it today but has been very vocal about it in other places; so there is a widespread belief entertained by some people who are apparently willing to believe anything that this was, for some low cunning political reason, concealed from them and that I sprang it on Thursday at 8 o'clock. I just want to say something about that because it will be useful for honorable members to become aware of the basis of discussions between governments, because these allegations display a woeful ignorance of how things are done between governments and between nations. The announcement of the provision of fighting forces by us for South Vietnam was not one that could be made without a great deal of preparatory discussion, not only on the military level but also on the political level where the last responsible decisions have to be made. It has to be remembered that Australia has commitments as a member of the South East Asia Treaty Organisation and that one of the protocol nations under S.E.A.T.O. is South Vietnam. We have commitments in respect of Malaysia which have been fully stated and debated in this House. We have joint interests with the United States of America and with New Zealand under the

Security Treaty between Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America, and we have, of course, a responsibility for the defence of Australia, including Papua and New Guinea. So we have a variety of responsibilities, each of them importing some contingency that may or may not arise.

I had some exchanges with President Johnson towards the end of last year in which the possibility of increased military activity was envisaged and in the course of which we agreed that there should be, at a suitable time, discussions on the military level. These took place, in fact, in March and the result of the talks was available to us early in April. We made our formal decision in principle on 7th April, that decision being that we would be willing to provide a battalion, should it be requested and should all the circumstances render its employment useful, fitting in with the general pattern of what was being done. So it was a decision in principle. But that was not the end of the matter. Before an actual decision could be announced, discussions had to occur with the various governments with which we are associated and, in particular, with the Government of the United Kingdom, the Government of the United States and the Government of South Vietnam. A great number of broad details had to be considered and certain more detailed arrangements made at the government level.

Very properly, I wanted to have all these matters quite clearly established before making any announcement to the House. I need not elaborate. All of us who are familiar with this kind of international discussion will realise that not one of us is entirely his own master in respect of the timetable. Statements have to be synchronised very frequently in one country and another, and any statement made would need to be made with the concurrence of South Vietnam, as the nation requesting our help, with the United States, with whose troops ours would be associated in South Vietnam, and with the United Kingdom, which has accepted great responsibilities in relation to Malaysia where we have already made a substantial contribution. So we have the three governments.

When on Wednesday of last week a story about the battalion broke in sections of the Press, I felt a great deal of embarrassment

because the time had not quite arrived when I could feel that our relevant discussions had concluded. On Wednesday a rumour was circulated that I would be making a statement on Thursday night and that that statement would relate to the provision of an Australian battalion. At that time I literally did not know whether I could be ready by Thursday night. The Leader of the Opposition inquired at my office on Thursday morning at a time when I was heavily engaged on a matter of some urgency. He said he would like to know what was happening. That was a very reasonable request, I thought. He said that he had plans to go to Sydney in connection with the election campaign and could hardly change them. He added that he thought that any statement might be made or could be made on Tuesday night, that is, tonight. After this had been conveyed to me, the Leader of the Opposition was told that it was possible that I would be making a statement on Thursday night but that it was not certain and that when I knew definitely I would let him know. He was told that if I found myself in a position to make a statement I would hope to be in a position to give him the text of it by 5.30 p.m. I follow these rules, if I may say so, very strictly. At 4.45 p.m. the Leader of the Opposition inquired again as to whether there were any further developments as he and the Deputy Leader of the Opposition were about to leave for Sydney. He was told that it was still not certain that I would be in a position to make a statement—it was possible, even probable, but not yet certain. The Leader of the Opposition said that he was leaving the honorable member for Melbourne Ports (Mr. Crean) in charge and asked if I would let the honorable member for Melbourne Ports know of any further development. This I agreed to do. I think the Leader of the Opposition would agree that that is a straightforward narrative of what occurred.

The final international messages which I thought I should have before making a statement arrived at something after 5.30 p.m. and I then decided that I would make the statement at 8 o'clock. The honorable member for Melbourne Ports, who was leading the Opposition in the absence of the Leader, was informed of this as soon as possible and was told that the text would be available to him at 7 o'clock, and this was

done. The result of all this was that when I made my statement I was in a position to do so with the approval of the President of the United States, the Prime Minister of Great Britain and the Prime Minister of South Vietnam. I will not need to say to honorable members that, in view of the spread of newspaper headlines on this matter, I simply could not defer my statement until today, without acute embarrassment to myself and to the other governments concerned. Clearly, I could not have made my statement over the weekend because it is in this Parliament that such a statement ought to be made. This Parliament is entitled to hear all of these matters direct and to have the opportunity of debating them. Therefore, the choice was to make the statement on Thursday or to let all the rumours flourish, to let the news go on breaking all around the world and then come along today and make the statement.

Mr. Clyde Cameron.—How did the Press get the news?

Sir ROBERT MENZIES.—I wish I knew, but I do not. The Press certainly did not get it from me or from the Government. For all those reasons I made the statement. The notion that either the Leader of the Opposition or the Deputy Leader of the Opposition was deceived or that something was concealed from them is really shown to be completely without foundation. Each of them knew that if I did make a statement it would be related to this question, because the dogs were barking it around the premises. The newspaper stories had made that quite clear. Perhaps I have mixed up two notions in saying that. Notwithstanding these circumstances, the two honorable gentlemen opposite left the House—no doubt for very good political reasons—and they were competently represented by the honorable member for Melbourne Ports who had a copy of the statement and heard it. Therefore, the grievance to which the Leader of the Opposition made a faint reference at the beginning of his speech, is without foundation.

I now turn, as he did, to the merits of this matter. Where does the Labour Party stand? I have been asking myself this question for some time. We heard the answer today. The Labour Party is against us on the merits. This is a clear cut issue of whether

or not we should provide forces in South Vietnam. The Opposition says "You should not do it", for a variety of reasons which I invite honorable members to study and to understand, if they can. I turn to the merits for three reasons. One is to establish the rightness of our position under all the circumstances that exist. I do not propose to repeat what I said in my statement to the House on Thursday, because I dealt with the substance of the matter and the merits of the case on that occasion. But I do want, once more, to remind the House that, when the 1954 Geneva Agreements had been entered into and they were reported in statements to the House, I myself made a statement relating to this matter right here. I said that the Government of Australia would view aggression in violation of the Indo-China settlement as a threat to international peace and security. That was a perfectly explicit statement. It is because we believe that there has been a breach of international law and a violation of the Charter of the United Nations that we have, in relation to the present matter, notified the President of the Security Council of our decision, adding these words—

This decision has been made at the request of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam and it is in accordance with Australia's international obligations.

That is the formal ground on which we stand. But this is not a matter that lends itself to decision with reference to formalities only. Therefore, it is necessary to continue an examination of the merits of the matter. I must say that the Leader of the Opposition rather puzzled me because in the course of his speech—he was courteous enough to give me a copy of it when he came into the House—he made two statements of really splendid simplicity. One was—

That there has long been, and still is, aggression from the North and subversion inspired by the North, I do not for one moment deny.

Here is a proposition of fact which I thought would represent common ground on both sides of the House. I am very glad to have it stated by the Leader of the Opposition. I have said it in my statement and on other occasions. That there is aggression from the Communist North is not denied, and that there is subversion from within, fostered by the Communists of the North, is not denied now by the Leader of the

Opposition. I have heard it denied in a sense, but it was not denied today. This is a very significant fact. It describes the origin of the whole of this business in which we find ourselves involved.

A little later in his speech the Leader of the Opposition made another statement which I will read. He said—

I agree that the pace of North Vietnamese aggression—and that is the only term for it—has increased, though estimates as to its extent vary considerably.

So, here is the admission that while all this is going on the pace of aggression from the North, the pace of the positive action by the Communist North, has increased. That is the state of affairs—it is now common ground between the Government and the Opposition—in which we have had to consider whether we should withdraw from the scene, whether we should make our contribution by words, whether we should leave the United States to go it alone, or whether we should, with all our partnerships and involvements and all our risks in this part of the world, determine that we will play our part, although it may be a small one, in positive action. Broadly, that is what we have done and why we have done it.

I do not understand how my friend, the Leader of the Opposition, can delude himself on this matter. He used some fine words, some rather emotional words, towards the end of his speech. But does he really believe that Australia should walk out on this matter? This is the question. Does he really believe that the United States of America, of whose actions he has approved and re-approved, ought to be allowed to continue to carry this burden and that we, as one of the S.E.A.T.O. powers, with South Vietnam requesting our help, should say: "Sorry; there is nothing we can do about it"? This is a very serious position, I venture to say, for the Leader of the Opposition to get into. It certainly is not a position that we want to get into.

It is in the continuing interest of this country—to put it on no higher ground than that—to be regarded and to remain as a valued ally of the United States, which is, in this part of the world, our own most

powerful ally. I would hate to be the head of a government which had to say to the United States on an occasion like this: "Sorry; we can do nothing about it. We will help you with debate in the United Nations. We will offer some fine words and some good sentiments. But, as for practical action, no; that is for you. American soldiers from the Middle West can go and fight and die in South Vietnam, but that is not for us". I think that is a disastrous proposition for any opposition to put forward.

I do not want to prolong this speech. The whole essence of this matter seems to me to be clear. The Leader of the Opposition may be right; perhaps I oversimplify it. I am a great believer, when it comes to determining international obligations, in simplifying a proposition so that it stands out stark and clear and so that we all know what it is we are deciding, what we are debating, and what we are to do about it. From things that have been said one would think that this decision by the Government was not entirely consistent with statements repeatedly made by us in this House. Indeed, an attempt has been made here and there to suggest that this decision came rather as a surprise, a little bit out of the blue. May I remind the House—I am sure the Leader of the Opposition needs no reminding—that this approach of ours has been stated repeatedly in this place and from this table.

I have just quoted what was said after the Geneva Agreements were entered into. Without labouring the matter, everybody knows that announcements have been made from time to time about sending military instructors to South Vietnam. The number has grown from a small 30 to a substantial 100—very substantial, considering our own requirements in this field. We have provided aircraft: Caribou aircraft have gone there. We have provided a substantial amount of economic aid. We have supplied much appreciated groups of people of a military order, and equipment of a military order—not large in numbers, but very significant from their moral effects not only on the problem itself but on the opinion and feeling of the United States of America. Therefore, it is idle to say that this is something new and that we have a new approach. The Minister for External Affairs (Mr. Hasluck) made an extraordinarily able

statement in this House comparatively recently in which he outlined the whole of our policies in these matters in the clearest possible terms. I have, in my own fashion, though not as well, tried to say very much the same kind of thing. I do not think anybody has any ambiguity in his mind as to where we stand. Certainly nobody in the American Administration has any; certainly nobody in the United Kingdom Government has any; certainly none of our friends and allies in these various places have any: Why should there be any existing in this place? It has all been completely clear.

And now the Leader of the Opposition criticises. I would say to him that he had better look at himself, at his colleagues and at his Party. He has really, of course, disclosed their approach. He has not, I am happy to say, got down to the level of one or two of his supporters by suggesting that this was an indecent bargain for dollars, which I thought was a monstrosity of a proposal and which, as I have said, reveals only the murky recesses of the minds of the people who make it. The Leader of the Opposition has not said this: He would not dream for a moment of saying it. But he has put his case in the curious, evasive and defeatist terms to which we have listened today. I say defeatist, inactive. He says in effect: "Kind hearts are more than coronets. Do not let us have actual forces used to repel force—to repel open Communist attack, to repel Communist aggression and subversion from the Vietcong. No, do not let us use force to meet force, because that is wrong."

I noticed that the Labour Party—I suppose it is permissible to describe it in that phrase—issued a policy statement not long ago, on 18th February. I have been enriched with a copy of it and it has one or two interesting things to say. It states—

In its statement to the Security Council on February 7th, reporting the air strikes against military installations in the south of North Vietnam, America insisted that its object in South Vietnam, while resisting aggression, is to achieve a peaceful settlement maintained by the presence of international peacekeeping machinery and that it would not allow the situation to be changed by terror and violence.

Then it goes on—

This statement of American purposes is unexceptionable.

The Australian Labour Party starts by saying: "Yes, that is right. You say this is what you are doing. This is the object of the exercise. You are going to repel the aggressors. You are going to attack their lines of communication. You are going to do everything you can to produce stability and get rid of civil war in South Vietnam". Then it says: "It is all right if the Americans do it, but it is no good to us. God made the United States our protectors and we ought to leave it to the United States".

Now Sir, this is a matter which, I venture to say, is unarguable, but the last point that the Leader of the Opposition undertook to make was that in South Vietnam there was a poor government—a corrupt government. This word "corrupt" comes trippingly to the tongue. Every government of this kind is "corrupt" or it is "Fascist". I know of no evidence that the Quat Government in South Vietnam is corrupt. I certainly have had no evidence that the government of Ngo Dinh Diem was corrupt. I thought he was a brave and honest little man, and a patriot. But to say, "They are corrupt. They do not have ordinary elections in South Vietnam", what sort of nonsense is this? On the honorable gentleman's own showing, South Vietnam is torn apart, torn to pieces, by the activities of the Vietcong in all their little pockets around the country. In those circumstances there cannot be the peaceable processes of election, there cannot be what we call a democratic self-governing system if people are in that position.

Why are they in that position? It is through no fault of their own, and no-one suggests it is. They are in that position because the Communists have set about two tasks. One is to make life intolerable for the South Vietnamese along their northern frontier and to cross over thousands of people to help the Communist forces, and the other is to maintain a system of Communist subversion which is designed to overthrow, by force, the Government of South Vietnam and to substitute for it a government which will never be elected by the people but which will be a simple Communist dictatorship corresponding to that of Ho Chi Minh in North Vietnam.

Therefore, I venture to say there is a good deal of humbug in talking of South Vietnam as though it were exposed to criticism because of the manifold difficulties it

has had in securing stability, just as there is more than a shade of humbug in saying that what we ought to be doing is getting on with the work in the Mekong Valley. I ask members opposite to get on with it; to go along pretending that there is no fighting going on—pretending that the Vietcong are not there and pretending that there is no North Vietnam. Really, Sir, this is the height of absurdity.

I recognised the somewhat pathetic note in the honorable member's speech when he turned to his own people and said, metaphorically and literally: "We will be un-

popular but we will stick to it. You must remember that we are ready to suffer in an unpopular cause". All I can say is that I wish he were willing to suffer in a good cause of his own, because I have not the slightest doubt that on the merits not only we in Australia, but also all those governments and people with whom we are associated in this tremendously important exercise which is so significant for the security of our own country, are on the side of the great majority. If I may end on a horribly political note, it is a good thing occasionally to be in a big majority.