

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

SPEECH

BY

The Rt. Hon. HAROLD HOLT, M.P.

ON

GOVERNMENT POLICY

Ministerial Statement

[From the "Parliamentary Debates," 24th March 1966]

Mr. HAROLD HOLT (Higgins—Prime Minister [8.2].—Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Calwell) has proposed an amendment to the motion that the paper that I presented to the House on 8th March be printed, that motion providing an opportunity for honorable members to debate my statement. It is one of the major ironies of Australian politics that the amendment, which is claimed to be virtually a motion of no confidence, has been submitted by a leader who is unsure of his leadership of his party and, indeed, unsure of the deputy leadership of his party, to say nothing of his party's policies. He is certain of only one thing—that each member of his party must toe the line of dictation from its outside organisation or face expulsion from the party. This, Sir, is the alternative government that the Australian Labour Party offers to the Australian people. However, I do not intend tonight to engage in a lengthy political argument with honorable gentlemen opposite. I have more important business to attend to in the limited time available to me and there will be other opportunities for these issues to be thrashed out between us.

The amendment proposed by the Leader of the Opposition challenges a major aspect of the Government's financial policy and

military strategy. He has attacked a vital aspect of the measures designed to maintain our military forces at the desired level and at their highest degree of effectiveness. The gulf that lies between the Government and the Opposition in these matters has been clearly revealed and the Parliament has very properly been concentrating its attention on this division over what becomes for governments and parliaments the most important subject that they have to discuss—the security of the nation. There is a clear choice between what the Government has decided and what the Opposition proposes. These matters have been vigorously debated. The Government and its supporters hold firmly to their view of the necessities of the situation. Indeed, as recently as yesterday Government supporters in both Government parties and in both Houses of the Parliament requested me to say publicly on their behalf that they unanimously support the Government in its policies in relation to both South Vietnam and the use of national servicemen. The Opposition persists with its resistance to the point at which it describes these issues as being appropriate for determination at a general election. Sir, the Government accepts full and final responsibility for its decisions and will be answerable for them. It is confident that as

the public becomes fully informed about what is involved in these issues the people will give strong backing to it.

One thing that should be noted is that the Government, while it has final responsibility, has acted after seeking the best advice available to it from its own defence advisers and on information that it has obtained from allied and other friendly governments. This Government takes its decisions on defence against the background of advice from competent and experienced officers, both Service and civil. I should like to make it clear that the Government does not act in a vacuum or on impulse or for some political purpose. The first concern of any Australian government must be the security of this country, and procedures have been established to assist the Government in arriving at sound decisions in this vital area of policy. The Government works on the basis of long range strategic appreciations submitted to it by its professional advisers in the fields of external affairs and strategic, military and economic matters. This advice is channelled to the Government through two principal bodies. There is the Defence Committee under the chairmanship of the Secretary of the Department of Defence. It is composed of the Chiefs of Staff and the Permanent Heads of the Departments of Defence and External Affairs, the Prime Minister's Department and the Treasury. This Committee deals with questions involving the widest issues of defence policy. For professional military advice, the Government looks to the Chiefs of Staff Committee, which is composed of the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff and the heads of the three Services.

The strategic appreciations placed before the Government take into account future trends in the international situation, the assessment of possible threats to our security, and contingency plans developed in consultation with our allies. A great range of information is available to the Government from our own and allied sources, though naturally this cannot all be made public. There is an analysis of this as it bears on the problems of Australia's security, and conclusions are placed before the Government by men of experience and judgment. This is something which proceeds on a continuing basis, for we do not get our advice

from a Federal executive outside this Parliament. We get ours from the Government's official advisers. By a systematic process of discerning the fundamental issues that determine our security, we project our thinking forward as far as is reasonably possible. The decisions on defence, I repeat, are decisions of the Government. But in arriving at those decisions, the Government takes into account the considered conclusions of its professional advisers in all the relevant fields.

The fundamental difference between the attitude of the Government and its supporters and the attitude of Opposition members is that we see the events in South Vietnam against the historical background of postwar Communist aggression. It seems to us utterly lacking in realism to ignore the part that Russian and Chinese Communism has played in the encouragement of aggression in South Vietnam and the material assistance given by the Russian and Chinese Governments to the Communist Government of North Vietnam. The members of the Vietcong have taken their direction from Hanoi. It is only by ignoring the role of Communism in the postwar ideological contest that the Leader of the Opposition and his supporters can have come to the hopelessly unrealistic conclusion that this is merely a civil war and that we should let the Vietnamese, North and South, sort out the situation for themselves. It should be noted that of the four political parties represented in the National Parliament, three—the Liberal Party of Australia, the Australian Country Party and the Australian Democratic Labour Party—take the same view of events in South Vietnam and of their significance. The view of the Commonwealth Government is in accord with that held by three successive Presidents of the United States of America—first, President Eisenhower and President Kennedy and now President Johnson. On the benches opposite we have representatives of the one party that challenges the judgment of the country's expert advisers and of these three friendly Presidents of our great ally, the United States.

South Korea, which was itself so recently threatened by Chinese Communist aggression, is supplying in South Vietnam forces which, proportionate to its population, represent the same scale of assistance as is

being given by those of the United States. Australia is helping the free Government and people of the Republic of South Vietnam to defend their freedom and independence against an attack directed and in large part supplied from North Vietnam. We are helping to prevent the success of Communist aggression. If honorable members opposite want any further proof that this aggression is Communist directed, Sir, let them examine the findings of the Legal Committee of the International Commission for Supervision and Control which was established to supervise the observance of the Vietnam ceasefire of 1954. The Commission is composed of Indian, Polish and Canadian members. The Legal Committee, with Poland objecting, reported in 1962—

There is evidence to show that arms, munitions and other supplies have been sent from the zone in the north to the zone in the south with the objective of supporting, organising and carrying out hostile activities, including armed attacks, against the armed forces and administration of the zone in the south.

One could quote at length the findings of this Committee firmly establishing intervention from the North. In the three year period from 1959 to 1961, the North Vietnam regime infiltrated 10,000 men into the South. In 1962, 13,000 additional personnel were infiltrated and by the end of 1964, North Vietnam may well have moved over 40,000 armed and unarmed guerrillas into South Vietnam. Most recently, Hanoi has begun to infiltrate elements of the North Vietnamese Army in increasingly large numbers. Up to the end of January 1966, there was evidence that nine regiments of regular North Vietnamese forces were fighting in organised units in the South. This is the civil war that honorable gentlemen opposite persist in proclaiming it to be.

In the long run, the threat to South Vietnam is a direct threat to Australia. That is the view of this Government. We are much more dangerously placed than is the United States of America. The previous Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, announcing in Parliament on 29th April 1965 the decision to send the 1st Battalion to Vietnam said—

The takeover of South Vietnam would be a direct military threat to Australia and to the countries of South and South East Asia. It must be seen as a part of a thrust by Communist China between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Yet honorable gentlemen opposite continue to deny that this is the situation in that part of the world.

Mr. Calwell.—We do.

Mr. SPEAKER.—Order! A number of honorable members persist in loudly interjecting. I remind the House that the Prime Minister is limited to 20 minutes. The challenger was unlimited. I ask honorable members to observe the Standing Orders. If they do not do so, I shall have to deal with them.

Mr. HAROLD HOLT.—We cannot leave the containment of aggressive Communism in Asia to our allies and their national servicemen. The United States has made a sustained, firm and large commitment to the South Vietnamese Government and people. As leaders of our own Government have said previously our stake in preserving the security of South East Asia is at least as great as that of the United States. It would be outside the character of the Australian people to leave the fighting to the Americans in what we know are also our interests and our causes.

It is within our capacity to make the enlarged contribution which we have offered. The Army forces to be deployed to South Vietnam will constitute approximately 10 per cent., in terms of personnel numbers, of the strength of 40,000 to which it has been approved the Army is to rise by 1967. The Government's enlarged contribution to South Vietnam has been measured against all our other commitments including those to Malaysia and Singapore. It has been of great value and reassurance to us to know of the United Kingdom's declared intention to maintain a strong military presence in this area. The deployments to South Vietnam are also, of course, fully consistent with our obligations and requirements to retain adequate forces for the defence of Australia and its Territories, including Papua and New Guinea.

Now, Sir, I turn to the question of the introduction of national service. The Menzies Government conducted a review of Australia's defence position in 1964 against a background of an accelerated deterioration in the strategic situation in South East Asia. China had committed open aggression

against India. North Vietnam, with the encouragement of China, had increased its terrorist and insurgency campaign against South Vietnam. Communist armed activity continued in Laos. There was a resurgence of Communist terrorism in northern Malaya, and Indonesia had stepped up its armed confrontation of Malaysia.

In his report to the Parliament on 10th November 1964, the then Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, pointed out that Indonesian attacks against Malaysia could create a real risk of war, and that Australia must prepare for all eventualities including the control and, if necessary, defence of the frontier between West New Guinea and the Territory of Papua and New Guinea. Our defence review showed clearly that the likely military situations Australia must be prepared to face had increased in number and complexity. Does anybody opposite deny that? It was apparent that the tasks already entered upon must be maintained and that a rapid buildup of ground forces would be required to enable this to be done and to prepare against further possible contingencies including an increase in cold war commitments; meeting agreed commitments under collective security agreements if called upon; providing bilateral assistance to our allies if required at short notice; increased provision for the defence of Australia and her Territories; and the development of forces against a further erosion of the strategic situation in South East Asia and as a basis for rapid expansion in the event of war.

The Regular Army strength at the time was 22,750. The assessment by the Chiefs of Staff Committee of the actual, foreseeable and contingency tasks showed that an effective Army strength of 33,000 was required by the end of 1966. All practicable steps were taken to attract an increase in volunteers for the Regular Army. Pay was increased, conditions of service were improved, quarters were modernised, the number of married quarters was increased, amenities were improved, the retirement benefits scheme was streamlined and an intensive recruiting campaign was undertaken. These measures produced some additional recruits. It became evident, however, that in a time of great prosperity with over full employment and intense com-

petition for young men, it was not possible to obtain the necessary increase in effective strength within the time required. A survey of recruiting trends showed that some 3,000 volunteers would be recruited each year for the Army. Allowing for wastage as members completed their engagements and return to civil life, the net increase in strength would be only of the order of 750 a year. To obtain an increase of some 10,000 in strength in two years, there was no alternative to the introduction of selective national service.

No party in this place has a monopoly of concern for the young manhood of Australia and it is an unwarranted presumption on the part of any member of Parliament to claim it. But this Government has concern for the national security of Australia and when our security, on the advice of expert advisers, had to be supported in the way we have been told as to the numbers required, we faced quite realistically and firmly in the national interest the harsh decision which then lay ahead of us. We have an illustration of how the Opposition would have met that kind of challenge. Our national security produced the need for a national service scheme and, accepting that need, what fairer or more democratic method of selection could be devised?

Mr. Calwell.—The lottery of death.

Mr. HAROLD HOLT.—That is the way the Leader of the Opposition distorts the situation. He is running true to form because when his own former leader introduced in a time of national peril a scheme to call up young men in this country for national service, he opposed it. The honorable gentleman resisted it and he is running true to form again. The honorable gentleman cannot get his mind on economic matters away from the depression years of the 1930's. On the defence matters, he cannot get his mind outside the conscription issues of 1916 and 1917. What Australia needs is a government which faces up to the reality that here we have a country which is expected to shoulder its own share of obligations. With maturing nationhood, it is proud to take its share of that responsibility. I say that, sure as I am that the young manhood of Australia will accept its obligations with pride and will serve Australia with credit.

I am glad to be able to tell the House that in the course of the next month, as I indicated in my statement, I shall be visiting our troops in a number of their stations abroad. I am quite certain that when I come back to this Parliament it will be with a heartening recognition that this young Australian battalion which has served us with such distinction in Vietnam, and our troops in Thailand, in Malaysia and in Borneo, are helping to discharge the national obligations of a country which can

stand before the rest of the world proudly, knowing that it has faced up to the need to maintain the eternal vigilance that is necessary for the preservation of freedom throughout this troubled world.

We shall not be deterred from that course by the threats of the Opposition. We are confident that once the Australian people know the realities of the situation they have to face they will support this Government and they will support Australia's young manhood in the testing time that lies ahead.