

PRESS CONFERENCE GIVEN BY THE PRIME MINISTER,  
MR. HAROLD HOLT, FOR MEMBERS OF THE PARLIAMENTARY  
PRESS GALLERY, AT PARLIAMENT HOUSE,  
CANBERRA.

21ST APRIL, 1966

Q. Can you tell us, Sir, whether you are going to make any statement today, before you go away, on the call-up of aliens for National Service?

MR. HOLT: Well I can give you some comment on both those matters - the alien call-up and the question of the voting age. I can give you comment in the sense that work has been proceeding but no finality has been reached. On the voting aspect, Cabinet has considered the matter and has come to a view which it wishes to discuss with its own party room supporters. It is clearly desirable to have the widest area of agreement on a matter of this sort and I would expect to be in a position to take this up with members of the Government parties shortly after my return.

On the alien matter, I did indicate a general view of my own in the House some time ago, and at the same time said that there were some complications about the matter arising from our international relationships and practice on these matters between countries. Work has been proceeding at Departmental level. There has been some further consideration on it in Cabinet, but at the moment we are awaiting the outcome of discussions which have been taking place through our Department of External Affairs and some of the countries which would be affected so far as their nationals are concerned, if the Government were to proceed with a scheme along these lines. I was told when I last enquired that there would probably be three or four weeks of time involved in bringing this matter to a sufficiently advanced stage for Cabinet to have another look at it. But we shall press on with it when the information reaches us.

Q. Any particular countries heavily involved - overseas countries?

MR. HOLT: Well, I think most of you know where our main sources of migration come from. It is not difficult to list them.

Q. Any indicating any opposition?

MR. HOLT: Well I am not well enough informed on it myself to comment on that at this stage and I don't think it desirable to make piecemeal comment about it. When we are in a position to say firmly what the policy is to be and what problems, if any, persist with that, I shall do so. I would hope that it will be possible to do this before the end of the Session.

Q. Mr. Prime Minister, reports have been floating around that the United States Government has consulted Australia on the possible bombing of Hanoi, and the reports say also that we have told America at this stage that we are not very keen on it.

MR. HOLT : Well, as I said in the House the other day, no particular significance should be read into this in relation to the matter you've mentioned that there are virtually daily exchanges between Australian Governmental representatives at some level or other in relation to some aspect or other of the conflict in Viet Nam. I don't think it is desirable to make running comments on the substance of these discussions. We are both involved in military operations in the area and naturally, matters of a tactical kind or a strategic kind are discussed from time to time between us, and I don't want to get into a practice of commenting on possible tactical moves which might be made in the military field. But the President of the United States has stated quite emphatically that it is not the intention of the United States Government to destroy the economy of North Viet Nam or to prevent it from maintaining a viable existence, and we have supported that view. I have said this publicly myself.

Q. Can you say what our attitude is to the bombing of Hanoi, Sir? Do we believe in it or don't we?

MR. HOLT: No, I'm not going to comment because your question has to be read against the background of what has been said about our objectives. Our objectives are not to destroy the economy, the livelihood of the people of Hanoi or to prevent North Viet Nam continuing as an economic entity.

Some of you were interested, I understand, as to whether I would be participating in the Queensland elections, and I can tell you quite firmly that at the invitation of the members of my own party in Queensland - the Parliamentary party and the organisation - I have agreed to participate. I did have a talk with Mr. Nicklin about this before finally making up my mind on it, and he made it clear to me that I would be welcome so far as he was concerned.

Q. Mr. Prime Minister, your talk with the Indonesian Ambassador yesterday has aroused some interest. I wonder if you would care to tell us what your hopes are for closer relations and also for the removal of the points at issue?

MR. HOLT : Well, I had a very friendly talk with the Indonesian Ambassador. He was gracious enough to express on behalf of his Government very warm appreciation for Australia's gesture in giving some assistance recently at the time of the floods in Java, and it is quite apparent from what he said that the promptness with which Australia acted and the genuine friendliness behind the move on our part was received with pleasure and appreciation by the people of Indonesia. We both expressed the hope that the relationship between our two countries would improve in the period ahead. He made it clear to me that I would be welcome in his country if I found an opportunity to visit it. It was known to us both that, having regard to the timetable and the fact that I was limiting my visit on this occasion to those countries in which Australian servicemen were stationed, this would not be an opportune or practicable time from my point of view. But we had a very cordial discussion and I know that his Government is well aware that Australia has a continuing desire to maintain a course of friendship with Indonesia. We look to a future in which there will be practical opportunities for us to develop, not only mutually advantageous relations but mutually advantageous trade, and for our part in Australia, we regret the continuance of the policy of confrontation which hinders the full development of this relationship.

Q. Was there any invitation to go to Indonesia, Sir, or vice versa?

MR. HOLT: I didn't interpret the discussion as a specific invitation to visit Indonesia in the course of this visit but I don't think any particular significance should be read into that. It was well known to him that my opportunities were limited, that the timetable had been fixed. But he did, I repeat, make it clear that I would be welcome if I found it practicable in the future to make a visit, and I would hope to do so.

Q. Have we a standing invitation to Sukarno to come here?

MR. HOLT: I understand there was an invitation.....

Q. Would you be ready to go when the time was suitable?

MR. HOLT: I am always ready to travel in the service of the nation where it can be of value to Australia, and I would so regard a visit to Indonesia, but this is not within the realm of present planning. I also have a desire to visit, of course, the Philippines and Taiwan and other countries in the area of particular interest to Australia, but opportunities have not so far arisen.

Q. Japan, Sir?

MR. HOLT: Well I have had two visits in recent years to Japan but, of course, a country of such importance to Australia would certainly call for frequent exchanges of visits from Heads of Government or senior ministers of the government.

Q. Sir, just to complete the Queensland election answer. Do you know exactly when you hope to go there and where?

MR. HOLT: I understand they are planning a couple of meetings in or around Brisbane, one in Brisbane itself, one at Ipswich and another meeting in North Queensland, probably Townsville. This would be on the Thursday and Friday of the week prior to the final week of the campaign, whenever that is.

Q. Would you hope to go to Bingil Bay?

MR. HOLT: Don't put temptation in my path. It is getting awfully close in relative terms when you get up that far. This would depend on what demands there are on me down here at that time, but I suppose even a Prime Minister is entitled to have a weekend off some time. If not off, at least, someplace that is agreeable to him.

Q. There is still some speculation, Sir, that there will be a snap election following your forthcoming visit.

MR. HOLT: Well I don't think that is terribly sensible when regard is had to the fact that there is an election in Queensland. We don't like having overlapping elections in this country. The word "snap".....I don't think you can have an election under five or six weeks from the time that you announce that you are going.

Q. On the matter of visits, if I could just refer to them. Is there any intention of holding a Prime Minister's Conference in London this year, do you know?

MR. HOLT: Well, I am not able to speak with any authority on that. Arising from the Lagos Conference, there was, as I recall it, an expressed intention of having some further meeting to discuss issues which had been raised there in July in London, but whether that was a firm arrangement or not, I am unable to say. I imagine that Mr. Wilson, with an election to be faced himself, was keeping his own mind fairly open as to what should be the planning thereafter. I am not in a position to give any definite information.

Q. Do you propose to go to London in the winter recess, Sir?

MR. HOLT: Well, that is a strong possibility but it will be affected perhaps <sup>by</sup> the question of a Prime Ministers' Conference and it could be affected by the course of events in Australia, but I think it is clearly desirable that there should not be too delayed an opportunity taken to contact the leaders of governments of such importance to Australian interest, and the United Kingdom and the United States certainly stand in that category. President Johnson has been good enough to indicate to me that he would very much like to see me there and this would, of course, be considered in any planning I might do for overseas journeying later in the year. Incidentally, while on that, I had a visit yesterday from the Ambassador for India who conveyed to me a formal invitation from the Government of India.....

Q. You mean the High Commissioner.

MR. HOLT: Yes, I'm sorry, the High Commissioner.....to visit that country and this, of course, will also be a matter of considerable interest and value, but I can't see the opportunity arising in the early future. I took the opportunity on behalf of the Government to issue at the same time a most cordial invitation to the Prime Minister of India to visit Australia whenever that might seem practicable to Mrs. Gandhi.

Q. On the French nuclear tests, Sir, has Australia given landing rights to French military planes to fly across Australian territory?

MR. HOLT: I would like to refer you on the detail of that to Senator Gorton. The matter was raised and there were certain assurances given, I understand, which were regarded as satisfactory by our advisers in the External Affairs field and by the Minister, but I don't claim to be abreast of the detail on it.

Q. Broadly, we do let them, Sir, subject to those conditions?

MR. HOLT. This was the arrangement, as I understand it.

Q. Mr. Whitlam, Sir, wants you to release Gunner O'Neill from the unpleasant predicament in which he now finds himself. Are you likely to be sympathetic?

MR. HOLT: I am sympathetic to most of my fellow men. Many of us run into trouble of one kind or another at some stage of our lives, but I did say in the House yesterday that I would examine this matter with my colleagues, the Minister for Defence and the Minister for the Army. I have raised the matter with the Minister for Defence and it is currently receiving his consideration, and no doubt he will in turn be in consultation with the Minister for the Army, but these are matters in which a great deal of weight must be given to the view of the Service people who themselves know the situation in their own Service and the conditions which give rise to good order and discipline needed to sustain morale. We would, of course, be very much influenced by their judgment after our own dispassionate examination of the facts.

Q. Sir, do you wish to say something about your trip today?

MR. HOLT: Well, I think you know the details. I will be in the House until the end of Question Time. It will be a quick journey from there. We have had to use the Civil Aviation plane to catch the 12 o'clock aircraft leaving Mascot, so assuming the fog has lifted there - there was some fog there this morning, I understand - I shall, because of the time factor, just go from one aircraft to the other. That's one reason why we are meeting you people here this morning. It won't be practicable to do that in Sydney. I have on board with me several of the official party - the Chief of the General Staff, the Chairman-designate of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, General Wilton, will meet us in Perth, and we proceed from there to Singapore. Tomorrow morning, I think it is, we set off for Saigon from Singapore, so that by lunch-time tomorrow we should be right in the heart of the matter.

Q. Sir, the W.A. Premier after his recent talks with you suggested that he expected a decision on the Ord this session. Do you think this would still hold?

MR. HOLT: Well, I would have thought that this was one of the matters that would be considered in a Budgetary context so that it would be a matter considered not later than in a Budgetary context...

Q. So you would suggest little hope of seeing it this Session?

MR. HOLT: Well, I don't think that adds up to anything much. It has to be a Budgetary matter, so even if a decision were taken on it beforehand - assuming it were a favourable decision - you would have to make some Budgetary provision for it. There is no desire on our part to delay consideration of it. It may well be that Cabinet will be looking at it ahead of the Budget but this matter is currently in the hands of the Minister for National Development and when he brings it to Cabinet is a matter which at this stage is in his hands.

Q. Will you be officially meeting Premier Ky in Viet Nam?

MR. HOLT: Oh, yes.

Q. Do you think this could be taken by the Vietnamese as a sort of de facto interference in their internal politics.

MR. HOLT: Well I would most certainly hope not and I would make it quite clear in my own statements, if that seemed necessary, that this was not so. I have made it abundantly clear, I would have hoped, and this would have been reported in Saigon and other capitals which I shall be visiting that the principal purpose of my visit is to make contact with Australian Servicemen in the field, and to develop in this way a more intimate awareness of their problems and the conditions under which they are to serve. But quite obviously, it is desirable when visiting these countries, to take such opportunities as I can find of talking to people who are either the Heads of Government or in a position of authority in the Service or governmental field. The other aspect which must not be overlooked is that Australia is increasingly - and this is how it is seen in the eyes of the countries we shall be visiting - a country giving assistance in a variety of forms; not merely military assistance as we are in respect of Malaysia and Singapore and South Viet Nam, but technical assistance and material assistance through the Colombo Plan and other agencies, a major contribution to the about-to-be-formed Development Bank for Asia. In these and other ways, Australia looms fairly large in the eyes of the people of these countries, the more so because so frequently our assistance is related to personalities who go there to do a job for Australia and it is quite heart-warming to find how well they are received, what a splendid impression they make. I don't know if any of you saw a documentary recently on Cambodia in which a motor repair shop run by a couple of Australians was one of the popular features of the industrial life of the place. They had been given a mass of buses of various kinds from various countries. You know, the large volume of aid from countries like Russia, the United States and elsewhere. But nobody knew how to make the buses run if anything went wrong with them and our boys have been training people there and doing a very good job and in the process apparently making a lot of friends for Australia. When the Prime Minister of Thailand was here, he was telling me of the technical training school that we have established in his country, designed for people going into the Services, but has become so well and favourably known that apparently employers bombard the place and people who are being trained to lure them away before they ever get to the army, but at least the economy of the country derives some benefit from this.

Well, I think that is about all.

Good luck, Sir!