

PRIME MINISTER'S TOUR OF SOUTH-EAST ASIA



Speech given by the Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Holt
at a Government Luncheon at Singapore in reply to a
speech of welcome by the Singapore Acting Prime
Minister, Dr. Toh Chin Chye

29TH APRIL, 1966

Mr. Deputy Prime Minister, your Ministerial colleagues and distinguished guests :

Thank you very warmly, Dr. Toh, for your warmth of welcome to me and to those who have accompanied me as we have gone about this phase of our journey here in Singapore.

As you have put it to us, Australia has a long, friendly association going back through some of the dramatic episodes of this quarter of a century which has now passed since the military operations in which we found ourselves involved at the time of the Second World War. And that represented a watershed of history in the life of the Australian people as far as this area of the world is concerned.

You have stressed the fact that the first major journey I have made as Prime Minister has been to various centres here in South-East Asia. I don't think this follows, that I have for the first time realised the importance of the area.

This can, I think, represent a new phase in the relationship between Australia and the area, but of course we have been actively interested in this area of the world at least dating back to the time that I have mentioned.

There was first our involvement with you here at the time of the Japanese invasion. There was later our association through the long and difficult period of the emergency when the guerilla activities had to be eliminated, we with other friendly Commonwealth forces.

And now, in association with other Commonwealth forces, we have this phase of resisting the processes of confrontation, so that we have been linked together in some of the more significant episodes and phases of historical development in South-East Asia over these years in the military field.

But, of course, there has also been an active and regular contact between us in the field of trade and commerce.

You have always maintained a very active entrepot trade. Many Australians have passed through here, either as tourists or en route to the United Kingdom and Europe, and you have come to be known to us, I think, better than almost any other country, and certainly almost any city, in Asia.

More of our people are aware of what Singapore has to offer, this very colourful, rich and most exotic city which for many Australians is the first point of contact they make with the countries of Asia.

Now we find ourselves considering together some problems which you have directly in your own economic efforts and your own security, but we also find we have a common interest and concern in developments in the South-East Asian area.

And it is in relation to these that my own visit has been of considerable value to me, and I hope that as a result of the discussions that I have been able to engage in with yourselves, and with the other Governments that I have been in contact with in recent days, our store of knowledge will have been increased and we will be better equipped to inform our own judgment as to the courses we should be following in the future.

We are together in one of the critical periods of the history of mankind as I see it, and there will be in the period ahead of us three factors which will not only make this a critical area for the future of mankind, but which will involve our own countries very directly.

The first of these is the revolution of change that is going on in Asia generally; not merely a revolution in the expectations of people, their hopes for a better order of life, but actual changes which are taking place in the way of life that they have known for centuries.

And secondly, there is the impact which inevitably will be made increasingly in the years ahead from the rapid growth of population in the area. The better health standards, a higher rate of survival, and so, taken all round, such a rapid rate of growth of population that it has been estimated that the fifteen hundred million people of Asia will be some three thousand million by the end of this century.

Now this quite obviously poses problems of adequacy of supply, the need for efficient distribution, the removal of the causes of strife so that the productive efforts of the area can be most effectively organised to meet this situation. And yet while we are facing these tasks, we have to contend also with the cancerous growth of communism in certain parts of the area to which I refer.

There is the communism of China itself. Well, we don't contest the right of any country to make its own choice of the kind of government or system of society by which it wishes to live. What we do contest is the efforts made by the aggressors to impose their systems on those who would prefer the system of their own choice, and just as we have joined together in resisting the aggression which threatened to dislocate your own country's domestic and economic life, so we have felt bound to join with others in resisting that aggression in Viet Nam.

I have come from there with a feeling of encouragement as to the future, without understating the many difficulties, both of the political, economic and military kind that lie ahead. But I think that daylight can be seen, and that there is a prospect for stability in the not too distant future.

Now we are linked by our geography, by our history, by the destiny which places us together in the midst of these quite historic developments, and with a tradition and practice of friendship between our two countries which should encourage us, and indeed enable us, by our own discussions together, to make some contribution to the future of this part of the world.

It is in that spirit that I have joined in the talks with your colleagues this morning. It is in that spirit that I hope that Australia's friendly association with your country will continue through the years ahead.

Please convey to your Prime Minister, when you are next in touch with him, my own best wishes and those of my Government. We hope that we shall be seeing him again soon, and that in the years ahead, Singapore will find a way through its problems.

What you have said to us about your trade difficulties and the need to find some solution of that will be studied sympathetically, as a good friend of the country should. And you will be hearing from us on that matter after I have been able to discuss these things which we have had outlined together for us today and which I know you already communicated on in more detail with my own government. We shall discuss those when an early opportunity presents itself.

And so, good wishes to you, and through you to the people of Singapore and my thanks on behalf of my colleagues here with me today and myself for the generosity of your hospitality and warmth of your greeting to us.
