

PRIME MINISTER'S VISIT TO U.S. AND U.K.

Press Conference given by the Prime Minister,
Mr. Harold Holt, at Blair House, Washington.

1st July, 1966.

Q. Would you sum up how you feel about this visit?

MR. HOLT: Mr. Cox, as you know, my main purpose in coming to Washington was to establish a closer working relationship with the President and senior members of his Administration. I think it can be fairly claimed that this objective has been completely satisfactory and successful viewed from my standpoint. Certainly I have been shown a warm kindness and generosity of reception, and in my discussions I have found all those with whom I have talked forthcoming in giving me whatever information was sought from them. I have had some very useful discussions with some of the leading members of the Administration, and these will be helpful not only to a better understanding of United States policy as it applies henceforth, but I will have a background to developments as they occur from now on.

I am the more strongly persuaded than ever that the President is making every conceivable effort to secure a peaceful outcome to the struggle in South Viet Nam, but I am also firmly clearly of the mind that his own resolution remains unwavering, and in that he has the full support of his colleagues. That is the strong impression I have gained from my talks with him.

Q. Mr. Prime Minister, there is some criticism in Australia in one or two newspapers and in one or two political quarters that you are being too fulsome about American policy. Any comment?

MR. HOLT: Well, if I am fulsome, I believe we have every reason to be. If Australia cannot be appreciative of what America has meant to our country in terms of security and comradeship, then there is little room for gratitude left in the world. That does not mean that we have to agree at all times with everything that is done or said, but what it does mean, that there is a basic friendship and comradeship between us which surmounts any minor differences which may arise from time to time in some aspect of government.

Q. Mr. Prime Minister, may I ask something going to the point of how much consultation there is between the two governments? For instance, on the decision to bomb Hanoi and Haiphong, were you informed just as the planes were about to take off or did you have enough advance notice that you could express your views?

MR. HOLT: We had enough advance notice.

Q. Does that mean, sir, before you left Australia?

MR. HOLT: Well, I do not want to go into detail about what is obviously highly confidential discussions between governments. I made the point before to you that from the time I took office, President Johnson made it known to me that he wished the same intimate basis of consultation which has developed between Sir Robert Menzies and himself to continue, and that has been the situation between us. What this visit has done has been to put all those intimate consultations into a framework of personal association.

Q. Does that mean, Mr. Prime Minister, it is between the President and the Prime Minister, or on the State Department External Affairs level? Just the machinery, I mean?

MR. HOLT: Well, there are at times communications which remain on a President to Prime Minister basis. We both have the responsibilities of final judgment and leadership in our respective Administrations. There are other occasions and other topics on which clearly discussion inside the Australian Government is sought and it occurs from time to time.

Q. Are your talks this week, sir, in anything of the nature of decisions on any points or understandings?

MR. HOLT: Well, they haven't been talks on mere generalities or expressions of good will, however sincere and desirable. There have been some good working sessions on matters in which we are both interested, but I am afraid I cannot develop the themes.

Q. Mr. Prime Minister, could you give us your appraisal of the situation in communist China, and to what degree it is now affecting the situation in Viet Nam? Do you think there are any efforts towards peace?

MR. HOLT: Well, I am not sure that I apprehend the question completely. I do not think anyone can have a very authoritative view at the present time as to just what is happening inside communist China. In fact, I doubt whether the communist leaders themselves can have a very clear view of all the currents that appear to be swirling around in that country. There appear to be significant changes occurring, and this is something quite distinct from the ideological conflict or tactical conflict that has been going on between China and Soviet Russia. With an ageing leader in China, it appears that there are forces working towards the day when some change in leadership will occur. But how far there are fundamental policy changes, it would take someone more highly specialized in analysis of the China situation than myself to answer that question.

Q. Mr. Prime Minister, has your visit to Washington shown you any way in which Australia can take initiative towards peace in Viet Nam?

MR. HOLT: I do not think so. It is well known that we support the efforts for peace. There has been no indication that at any level the Hanoi Government would be receptive to a peace move. Australians are a friendly people and a conciliatory people.

I think that they would be glad to join in any capacity in the task of securing peace, if this could be negotiated, but there is no fresh initiative that seems possible while, as Dean Rusk puts it, the other fellow keeps hanging up the phone.

Q. He said this in Canberra yesterday?

MR. HOLT: Yes.

Q. Sir, does the position of Australia in firm support of the United States policy in Viet Nam have any overtones for you when you have your discussions with Prime Minister Wilson in London next week? Will there be an effort at persuasion made there?

MR. HOLT: NO. I look forward to having a very frank and full discussion with Prime Minister Wilson. It goes without saying that it will be a friendly discussion, and it would be a sad day in the affairs of our two countries when we could not speak frankly to each other, exhibiting those in which we can find full agreement and those in which some differences may exist. I do not myself foresee difficulties in discussion, but they would be not worth the journey from the distance that I have made if they were not to be in fact frank and searching discussions. I am sure we shall have those.

Q. Do your talks give you any -

MR. HOLT: I was going to make a comment about the introductory part of your question. I don't know whether I have yet made it sufficiently clear in this country that Australia's attitude in relation to same is not merely a process of following in the wake of American policies. That Australia has seen the struggle in South Viet Nam as more directly involving it than the United States itself. I think it is an act of far-sighted statesmanship for the United States to join in the resistance to aggression there, but if there were not champions on the mainland of Asia, then Australia and many other countries would feel far less secure than they do at this time. And so we have quite an independent judgment which fortunately leads us to the same conclusions as those which have been reached by the United States.

Q. Have your talks given any indication at all whether a termination of the war can be measured in terms of years or months?

MR. HOLT: Well, I will put it in a slightly different way. I find rather more optimism here, as I did in Canberra, than I have known at any earlier point of time as to the outcome. But I think it is best that I don't put a time factor too precisely in this sort of thing, but undoubtedly there is a feeling which was reflected by the Foreign Ministers and others at the SEATO Conference coming from the area themselves, and I find that reflected also here in Washington at all levels where I have held discussions.

Q. Even among the critics of the Johnson Administration, sir?

MR. HOLT: No, No, I am speaking of those inside the Administration. Perhaps there hasn't been time or perhaps people are rather too polite when they encounter me.

Q. I know, sir.

MR. HOLT: But I haven't touched off a debate on this matter.

Q. I notice some of the guests at dinner parties have included strong critics of the Johnson Administration. I wonder whether you had any chance for argument?

MR. HOLT: No, I haven't had and they haven't sought to make an argument of it. At the White House luncheon I think sitting immediately opposite me was Senator Fulbright, but he made his views known clearly and vigorously enough.

Q. Did you get across to him, sir, how many troops there are? Did you get across to him how many Australian troops are in action?

MR. HOLT: I am still finding it a little difficult to have people realize that Australia is not represented merely in Viet Nam, and I have been rather surprised to learn the extent of ignorance in relation to the Australian population. Even our good friend the President yesterday gave an enlargement to the point that as a former Immigration Minister that delighted me, but I found in a number of places some surprise that Australia has as yet only reached eleven and a half million people. It is rather flattering, really, because we appear to make a bigger noise than that.

Q. Did I understand you to say, sir, that you find it a little difficult to impress upon people that Australians are actually fighting in Viet Nam?

MR. HOLT: Oh, No, No, that Australians are at other points around South East Asia.

Q. Yes.

MR. HOLT: For example, we have troops in West Malaysia, we have them in Borneo, we have them at Ubon, in Thailand. We have responsibilities in respect of Papua and New Guinea, and we have a requirement to use superior trained regular service men for the expansion of our own forces both in the regular army units and the civilian military force, the CMF, as we call it.

Now, all of the general run of newspapers knows about it, that Australia has a task force of four and a half thousand in South Viet Nam and that doesn't seem very much, but as a force of regular well-trained troops, including the National Service component, in order to get the numbers up, and having regard to the rotational aspect of that service, this is not without some stress on our fairly limited resources. But we have shown ourselves in a situation of need. This has been demonstrated certainly in the two world wars, of supplying that need when it is required of us.

I think that it is well recognized now by the Administration here that Australia does have a problem of development as well as a need to supply forces in the defence field. There is I think as a result of the discussions we have held from the beginning of this year onwards a recognition that these development tasks do create demands on our resources which place some limit on our capacity in other directions.

I don't know whether I have quoted to you before the figure of savings in consumption in Australia, which amount to about 28 per cent of our gross national income, and in the United States and Great Britain there is a with-holding from consumption of about 17 to 18 per cent as against 28 in Australia, and ours is the highest figure of any country in the world with the exception of Japan, so that we are using our own resources and abstaining from consumption of what we produce ourselves, in order to develop and defend.

Q. Could you expand a little on what makes the situation look a little brighter in South Viet Nam?

MR. HOLT: Well, a combination of factors. I think the military operations themselves are proving much more effective. The defection rate is quite significant. There is more information being gathered which is enabling more effective military actions to follow up. I think that the political situation has brightened internally, at least to the extent that Prime Minister Ky is coming through his trouble with the buddhists rather better, I think, than most observers had expected. We shall still watch with interest the emergence of the Assembly, the constituent Assembly, following its elections, and no doubt there will be political problems associated with the drafting of a constitution. But there is amongst the diplomatic and military representatives not only of the United States, but of Viet Nam, of our own country and other countries represented there, a feeling that significant progress is being made both in the military field, in the organization of the country, and with some improvement in the political atmosphere.

I think, too, there are portents around the area in other countries which have their own significance. I firmly believe that you would not have had develop on the scale and the manner that it did the action against communism in Indonesia, if there had been a general feeling in Indonesia that communism was going to win in Asia, and the announcement of military participation by Thailand, the final discussionⁱⁿ the Philippines to make engineers and security forces available, I think these things all reflect the assessments which governments of both countries make of the situation.

Q. Did you get any kind of clues about the kind of government in South Viet Nam which would be tolerated by Australia and America, in the event of elections or in the event of a pacification, especially the election?

MR. HOLT: I do not think it is for us to try to dictate a form of government. What is desired, I think, is a government capable of running the country effectively, protecting individual liberties, providing for an improved economic management and rising standards - that is the sort of government that South Viet Nam is looking for. Until the military operations can be brought successfully to a conclusion, clearly you are going to have a strong military influence in any government which may be formed.

Q. Prime Minister, it is 10.00 o'clock, so I think it is best we should close.

MR. HOLT: Thank you for the very generous cover that you have given to our visit here. That certainly helped towards making it more successful.
