

VISIT TO AUSTRALIA BY PRIME MINISTER KY

Extracts from Press Briefing by the Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Holt
at Parliament House, Canberra

11th January, 1967

The Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Holt, announced details of the visit to Australia by Prime Minister Ky at a press briefing in Canberra on January 11.

After outlining the itinerary, Mr. Holt spoke about the background to the visit, gave his views on what he hoped it would achieve and replied to critics of Prime Minister Ky and the projected visit to Australia.

BACKGROUND TO VISIT:

Speaking about how the visit developed, Mr. Holt said -

"Some of you pressmen who were with me in Saigon in April will remember that the Prime Minister then talked about his desire to visit Australia again. He had been here in 1956 and actually put in 79 hours of flying training in this country.

"But quite apart, of course, from any personal desire to see again the country which he had visited in this way in earlier years, he expressed a desire at our subsequent meeting together at the Manila Conference to pay a visit, to have an opportunity, as he put it, of thanking the people of Australia and New Zealand for the help they had been giving to his country.

"I have no doubt also that he wants to give the Australian people an opportunity to make some assessment of their own about him.

"Shortly before Christmas, our Ambassador advised us that he had been told of the Prime Minister's desire to pay a short visit here early in the New Year, and I brought this to the notice of my Cabinet colleagues. They authorised me to inform the Prime Minister through our Ambassador that we would welcome such a visit and the opportunity it would provide for him to have talks with us and to meet those of my colleagues with whom he had not previously come into contact.

"Quite apart from any other result of the visit, I, myself, am looking forward to hearing from the Prime Minister his own account of developments in the military field, in processes of constitutional development which are going on there, in the way in which the economy is shaping up under the pressures of military operations and the presence in that country of so vast a body of servicemen from other countries. These are things in which we are very much interested ourselves, and it is very valuable to have a direct, first-hand account from the man who heads the Government in the country. Of my own colleagues, some of them have been there. Altogether this has some relevance to the attitude which Australia should very properly take to this visit."

"There were five separate Ministerial visits to Viet Nam last year, including my own visit. There was the visit of Mr. Whitlam. Mr. Calwell decided that he wasn't going himself and requested that Mr. Whitlam be enabled to go. There was Dr. Cairns' visit. A Parliamentary delegation was there also from both sides of the House, and there have been some visits by private Members of the Parliament. All of these have been most courteously received and given every consideration and attention, hospitably looked after. I gather that Mr. Whitlam himself had an hour's interview with the Prime Minister and was given an official dinner by the Foreign Minister of the Viet Nam Republic. So it will be seen that up to this point of time, anyhow, the overwhelming balance of hospitality and courtesy has been on the part of the Government of the Republic of Viet Nam, and so I would hope my fellow Australians would bear these facts in mind when we, ourselves, welcome an official visitor and his party to this country."

OBJECTIVES OF VISIT

Mr. Holt said that both he and Prime Minister Ky were aware that the visit would not please everybody, and would be opposed by some people in Australia who had opposed military participation in Viet Nam.

He said :

"Prime Minister Ky was aware of the likelihood of organised demonstration by the same sort of people who had organised demonstrations against myself and members of my Government and against President Johnson when he visited us last year. But I am sure it must have been in his mind that his visit would provide an opportunity for Australians to form a more realistic appreciation of the main issues involved in not only the Viet Nam conflict but the problems which a government engaged in operations of war has to face in its efforts to build democratic institutions and establish a democratically-based society.

"Also there is the personal aspect I mentioned of Australians being able to make a better, and I believe, a fairer assessment of the man and the efforts that he and his colleagues are putting into this task of building a democratically-based society, despite the continuing military operations.

DEVELOPMENT OF DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

"Most of us are sufficiently close still to the events of the Second World War to recall how we in Australia had to put much of our democratic liberty in storage for the period of the war, and the Government had to assume powers under its National Security legislation of a far-reaching kind, and we recognise the need for this in the emergency of war.

"Now here is a country where the Head of Government and his colleagues are in almost daily danger of injury or assassination by terrorist opponents. I think, myself, that it is quite remarkable that the Government in those conditions should have pressed on as it has vigorously with the effort to establish a constituent assembly. I commented on this, you may remember, when I came back from the Manila Conference. I would like to remind you of what I said at that time. . . . I said then -

'It struck me as quite remarkable that the representatives of the Republic of Viet Nam should be able to accept so explicitly and however regretfully a continuing line of demarcation between North and South Viet Nam until a decision has been taken by the people of both areas for reunification. They stated that the work of the constituent Assembly elected to draw up a constitution for the Republic of Viet Nam was proceeding ahead of schedule. They gave an undertaking that general elections to select a representative government would be held within six months of the adoption of a constitution. Believing that the democratic process must be strengthened at the local level as well as the national level, the Vietnamese leaders announced that, to this end, village and hamlet elections would be held at the beginning of 1967. They further announced that they are preparing a programme of national reconciliation. They would open all doors to Vietnamese who had been misled or coerced into casting their lot with the Vietcong. They would be given amnesty and assisted to resume a normal existence as to their employment and community participation.

"Further, the Vietnamese representatives made it clear that they were not making any demands on North Viet Nam other than that the aggression should cease. When it is considered that the Republic of Viet Nam is still subjected daily to military and terrorist attack with continuing infiltration and external subversion, the attitude of the Vietnamese representatives at the conference must be regarded as most helpful and forthcoming....."

and so on.

OPPOSITION TO VISIT :

Referring to criticism of the visit, Mr. Holt said :

"It has interested me to note that the strongest criticisms - and these include those of Mr. Calwell - have come from, in the main, people who have neither met Prime Minister Ky nor have visited Viet Nam and formed any impression for themselves of the situation there.

"It is rather significant that those members of Mr. Calwell's own Party who have been there have, with the exception of the statement which came from Dr. Cairns, refrained from comment certainly of a critical kind.

"I was very interested this morning to see that the ' Age' consistently with the fine traditions of that paper, having taken a strong editorial line, at the same time gave prominence to a special article by its Saigon correspondent, Mr. Turner which, I think, gave from my own contact with Prime Minister Ky in Viet Nam and at Manila, as accurate an assessment as I could from my own judgment - his sincerity, his earnestness, his devotion to his country, his genuine efforts to build up democratic institutions there."

Mr. Holt said that in view of the attitude which the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Calwell) had adopted, it seemed that some unpleasantness might be associated with the visit.

He continued.....

"However, I am sure that both he (Prime Minister Ky) and I will feel that the visit has been of value if it does give to the Australian people a better and fairer assessment of the man, his policies and of the issues for which Australia, together with Viet Nam and other friendly forces are fighting in that country."

Mr. Holt said he was satisfied in his own mind that the great majority of Australians would welcome the opportunity to form their own judgment. He added :

"That's the sort of atmosphere I have encountered, anyhow, in my own contacts since this was first mooted. And we are able from the sort of position in which I sit to get a fair idea of the strength of public feeling from the correspondence which flows into the office.

"It strikes me as rather odd that it was quite acceptable to Mr. Calwell for his Deputy to go to Viet Nam and be received in the manner in which he was, to be personally in discussion with Prime Minister Ky for what I understand to have been an hour, to have accepted an official function; this apparently was entirely acceptable in Mr. Calwell's eyes. To return that kind of hospitality and in a country which has taken some pride in its hospitable spirit is, in his eyes, a matter calling for the kind of condemnation which he has publicly expressed. The only other thing I will say about it is that having regard to Mr. Calwell's own serious experience and almost tragic or fatal experience from so recent times, it does seem the more remarkable that he should be actively inciting people to demonstration. While he urges that this should be a peaceful and orderly demonstration, he recognises, since he disowns any responsibility for any violence which may occur, that in that kind of emotionally charged atmosphere, there is always a danger of some disorder and even violence as I have learnt myself over recent times.

"But I think that the Australian public is able to put its own valuation on statements of this sort. I don't need to underline it."

PROCEDURE FOR INITIATING VISITS

Replying to a question about what might be considered an "appropriate welcome" for Prime Minister Ky, Mr. Holt went on to explain to newsmen the way in which such visits are arranged.

Mr. Holt began by saying he had been intrigued to see that some press commentators had envisaged Australia would be staging something comparable with the visit of President Johnson. Mr. Holt said it would be more appropriate to compare the visit with that last year by the Thai Prime Minister, Field Marshal Kittikachorn.

A once-in-a-lifetime visit by an American President was an historic event of considerable importance for this country and was treated accordingly. For instance, he didn't think that the former British Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Macmillan had expected anything of that sort when he had visited Australia.

He continued...

"Prime Minister Ky's is an important visit but it is a visit of a kind which we ourselves - or I make to other countries, and the Prime Minister is making here."

Backgrounding the press, Mr. Holt said -

"I think you should try and get in the heads of some of your editorial writers the way these things occur. If I want to go overseas as I did last year, for example, to see our troops in four different countries, I don't sit back and wait until somebody says 'Come and visit us' and then as an incident to that seek to see them. If I have a purpose which seems to me to be important enough to go to a country, soundings are made through the Ambassador as to whether such a visit would be acceptable to the government concerned. You may work out a bit of detail as to the kind of visit it will be and where it will take you, and then when these details are completed, a formal and official invitation comes as a matter of courtesy. This is protocol conduct from the government concerned to the visitor. These things are done, but I don't imply from that that this is an unwelcome visit."

The press briefing concluded with the following questions and answers :-

Q. Will representatives of the Opposition be invited to Commonwealth functions?

MR. HOLT: Well, this raises a problem. You see, Mr. Calwell is the official leader of the Labor Party. He has made his attitude, as spokesman for the party, clearly known. He made it clear that not only would he not accept any invitation but that he would demonstrate against the visit personally and lead demonstrations against the visit. Well, if we were to go behind his back and invite individual members of his party, I think we could rightly be accused of trying to make mischief in his own ranks. If, on the other hand, there is a desire by members of his party, or he conveys any such desire to us that they should be present at those functions where it would be appropriate for Members of the Opposition to be present, of course we would take account of that.

Q. This approach would have to come through Mr. Calwell, would it, or would you take it from individual Labor people?

MR. HOLT: Well, I think I would deal with it when I knew what had occurred and the circumstances. but I don't imagine that we would receive individual approaches. He speaks for his party and he is, at least pro tem, the leader of the party.

Q. Before Mr. Calwell started sounding off, did you contemplate giving time for Mr. Calwell to have a private meeting with Ky?

MR. HOLT: In the ordinary course of events, I am sure that not only would we have wished to provide an opportunity but I am certain that Prime Minister Ky would have been glad of an opportunity to talk to members of the Opposition.

Q. Would you provide this opportunity now for Mr. Whitlam in spite of the circumstances?

MR. HOLT: Well, as I say, what is the proper course for a Head of Government to follow when he has an official Leader of the Opposition? I don't think it would be the proper course for me to go behind the back of the Leader of the Opposition to individual members of his party.

Q. Sir, had Marshal Ky kept entirely private his wish to come to this country, and approached you unofficially, privately through the Department of External Affairs, would you have invited him to come now?

MR. HOLT: If he had made known his desire to come, what reasons would I have for not acceding to that wish? My colleagues were made aware of the matter, of course; it is not my sole responsibility. We work as a Cabinet on decisions of this sort. But can I remind you that already in recent times, the Prime Minister has visited Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, the Republic of China, Malaysia and Honolulu which does happen to be one of the United States. So there are six countries, most of them associated in military operations.....

Q. Was the United States involved in any way in negotiations for this visit? Did they seek to persuade us?

MR. HOLT: Officially, I make no comment. Unofficially, I can say to you there was certainly no attempt to dissuade us, or for that matter, persuade us. We naturally let them know that this visit was in contemplation. We keep in close contact with them. We are in virtually daily contact with them on the Viet Nam situation.

Q. Mr. Prime Minister, apart from this being a sentimental journey, will there be any hard political discussions?

MR. HOLT: Well, I thought I had made it clear that I thought our discussions in Cabinet would themselves be of considerable value. I would hope to see the Prime Minister give us an up-to-the-minute cover of how things are developing in the military respect. You will remember out of Manila, instead of a "search and destroy" operation, there was a shift to the "clear and hold" type of operation. I would like to know how that is working out in his eyes, his assessment of the latest operations there, how the civil aid programmes are moving, and also what he feels about the position of the economy under these pressures I spoke of. Now that will be valuable in itself for me and for the more senior of my colleagues who have already had some contact with him, but for others who have never met him, I think it will be very valuable also. I am looking to the opportunities which will arise at one or two points here for closer and less formal discussions with him myself.

Q. Sir, will you be in any position to discuss any expansion of civil aid?

MR. HOLT: I did mention to you earlier, I think, at our press conference just before Christmas that a good deal of work is in progress in the relevant Departments, reviewing our civil aid activities, but I am not in a position to speak in any detail on that now, nor would I expect to go into detail with him on that. That will call for some further Cabinet consideration.
