

ASIAN TOUR 1967

SINGAPORE

ARRIVAL PRESS CONFERENCE GIVEN BY THE PRIME MINISTER
MR. HAROLD HOLT AT SINGAPORE AIRPORT

28TH MARCH, 1967

PRIME MINISTER :

Gentlemen, I thought I'd just speak quite briefly to you and then leave an opportunity for questions.

My friends from Australia who are coming around with me, I understand, have agreed to let Singapore have the questions this time rather than monopolise the time.

But I am very glad that as a consequence of my visit to four countries of the South East Asian and Pacific region, which I have not previously visited, I am able to make this short but very useful visit to Singapore again.

I am, of course, no stranger to Singapore. I've been here, and through here, many times over the years, but I always find it both useful and very pleasant, certainly very pleasant to meet members of your Government again and to talk usefully and helpfully with them, and I am looking forward tonight, in the absence of your distinguished Prime Minister, to meeting an old friend in the Acting Prime Minister, who very kindly is giving a dinner for me.

My main purposes on this visit, as I've already indicated, will be to make contact with four countries of the region, which I've not previously visited, and I hope in this way to make Australia and its policies better known in those countries, and at the same time, because of the coverage which our own press will be giving to this visit, to make these countries and their significance for Australia, their leaders, and their people better known to my own countrymen in Australia.

There is an increasing interest and recognition in Australia of our growing involvement in the affairs of South East Asia and the Pacific, of which region of course, we feel ourselves to be a part. Geography brings us together and, at the same time, there are mutual interests to be served.

We have an interest, as you do, in the security of the area, its stability and its peaceful progress, and Australia is developing an increasing trade with the countries of the area, generally speaking. So these are all good reasons why we should get to know each other better, get to understand each other's problems and, where we can be mutually helpful, to act in that fashion.

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• The countries which I shall be visiting all have a special significance for us. They don't necessarily all pursue the same policies, but, to take an illustration, Cambodia, Australia has a special relationship there in that we represent the United States' interests in Cambodia, and we represent Cambodian interests in South Vietnam.

So you will gather from this that my own country is able, in that way, to act as a useful bridge of understanding and contact between countries which don't have direct diplomatic relations with each other at the present time.

I have spoken of stability, of our interest in stability in this region. I hope that won't be interpreted as meaning some conservative resistance to change. That is not how we view it.

We have ourselves, as I think we have demonstrated, a national drive in our own development, and we aspire to rising standards for our people and the maintenance of social justice and we look applaudingly at developments in other countries of the region which have these objectives, the betterment of affairs inside those countries and the processes of change which serve to produce that betterment, but to us stability and security are necessary ingredients in this process. If you don't have security and you have instability, then you can't go ahead in the same way with orderly and peaceful progress.

But this is of the essence of my purpose on this occasion, to make better neighbours of good neighbours, more understanding between those good neighbours. It is for me an educational tour, as I am sure it will be for those accompanying me, and, at the same time, I hope it will not be without some educative process for countries which have a significance for us and with which we hope to live on terms of friendship and co-operation, building our trade and our diplomatic relationships together.

Now having said that, gentlemen, perhaps you have some questions you wish to put to me.

Q. Mr. Prime Minister, when Mr. Bowden, the British Commonwealth Secretary, recently asked about the Australian attitude to the British drawdown of troops here, he said that he believed that the Australian attitude was that you were less interested in the actual size of the British presence than in the fact of the British presence. Does this accurately reflect your views on the subject?

PM: Well, we understand all along that after the confrontation issue had either ended or substantially abated, that the build-up of British forces which had occurred to meet that situation would also abate until you had something more closely approximating the pre-confrontation level of British forces in the area, and it is a fact that in my own discussions with Mr. Bowden I did make the point to him that we were not so much concerned with the size of the British Military Establishment in the area, but we did feel that it was important, not so much in our interests - we feel that our security arrangements are adequate in any event - but in the interests of the area as a whole, and indeed in the interests of maintaining British influence and prestige throughout this area, and indeed through the world, that continuance of a British presence in an area east of Suez which, after all, accommodates these days three fifths

of the human race was, and remains, important, and so far as I am aware that viewpoint has been well understood and accepted by the British Government and has shaped its policies in relation to this area ever since.

Q. Sir, do you expect to discuss the Vietnam War during your present trip?

PM: I am not coming for that special purpose. Our own policy is well known, our participation is well-known in the conflict there, we ourselves are hoping that there can emerge a settlement which will leave a just and enduring peace and which will enable these conditions of stability and security I've spoken of as aspirations to become realities in the area. But I'm afraid there has been no encouragement in the events of recent weeks to support the hope that there can be an early termination of hostilities or the kind of settlement that we would hope to see emerge there. I'm not in any way trying in the course of this visit to make some impact on the attitudes of others on this issue. For example, Cambodia takes a different view of this matter from Australia. We can agree to differ on this matter, it's not my purpose to attempt to persuade the Government of Cambodia that they should alter their policies, they're well capable of making up their own minds as to what their policy should be.

Q. Mr. Prime Minister, will you be taking an opportunity while you are in this area to visit Saigon this time?

PM: No, I have no plans to visit Saigon. Since I was there myself there have been other visits by members of the Government and, of course, by Senior Diplomatic and Service Representatives, and the total journey I shall be making on this occasion has to be confined in 12 or 13 days, that involves four countries other than visits such as this which bring me to Singapore and Hongkong.

Q. On Indonesia - is there any chance that you'll go to Indonesia either at the end of this visit or in the near future?

PM: Well, not in the course of this visit and I've made no plans, but I think it can be assumed that I would welcome a visit to Indonesia when the Government of that country felt it was propitious for me to do so. There have been visits by our own Minister for External Affairs, Mr. Hasluck, who has, I think, developed a good relationship with the Government of Indonesia, and even through the difficult period of confrontation we were able to maintain a line of friendship which I know was welcomed there and which we were glad to hold out. We joined with others in looking constructively at the Economic problems of the country, and we hope that in the years ahead we'll develop closer, more cordial and co-operative relations, particularly in the areas of diplomacy and trade with Indonesia.