



LOS ANGELES, USA

PRESS CONFERENCE GIVEN BY THE PRIME MINISTER,  
MR. HAROLD HOLT AT LOS ANGELES AIRPORT.

29TH MAY, 1967

PRIME MINISTER: I am on a journey this time to have talks with President Johnson and with Prime Minister Lester Pearson and Prime Minister Harold Wilson, and senior members of the administrations of those three countries.

It is always a valuable thing for an Australian Prime Minister to have discussions with the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. As for the Prime Minister of Canada, we usually catch up with each other at Prime Ministers' Conferences.

But the timing of this particular conference is linked up with EXPO 67. June 6 has been marked as Australian Day at that Exposition and the President, learning that I am coming for the Exposition, very kindly invited me for talks with him. They will be very timely talks as there are several matters of major consequence we will have to discuss together. We have a very substantial concern with matters concerning Vietnam, British intentions East of Suez, the British entry - if it is achieved - into the European Economic Community, and there are always, with two countries that trade so freely together, trade and economic issues which call for some discussion between Heads of Government and Cabinet Ministers of our two countries. These are a few of the principal items which I refer to as looming large in our talks together.

I hope not only to have the opportunity of the talks in Washington but the President has very kindly invited me to stay with him for a time and I expect to do this on my homeward journey. It would not be practicable for me to do this on my way over to the United Kingdom as I have a series of commitments, some here in your own city, but in Canada - apart from EXPO and Australia's events there - I am looking forward to meeting Prime Minister Pearson. I think that our two countries, both growing in economic strength and, projecting your minds forward some years to the time when they will have a considerably larger population, growing in economic strength and numbers together. And having in mind our special relationship with the United States and United Kingdom we'll together be able to play a useful role.

In these days with less emphasis placed on Commonwealth meetings, I think a closer contact between Canada and Australia is certainly desirable. The projected entry of the United Kingdom into the European Economic Community poses some curious trade problems to Australia. The United Kingdom has a preferential entry into Australia and for our part we have a preferred entry for much of our primary production and inevitably it seems to us that some arrangements can be made and that there will be some adverse effect upon Australia's primary industries and I suspect a weakening of the United Kingdom's preferred position in our own country.

So we have this to talk about, but overshadowing that in a sense is the future that Britain has to maintain East of Suez. There is, as is well known, the British intention to reduce its military establishments East of Suez. How far this will go and at what pace is a matter that concerns your own country and certainly concerns ours. I have been assured by Prime Minister Wilson that no final decisions will be taken on these matters until we have the opportunity of a talk together. So altogether my journey will involve me in some of the most important discussions I think that any Australian Prime Minister could expect to hold.

While in this country I have a significant number of speaking engagements and at these I hope to outline in more details Australia's attitudes in relation to its participation in South-East Asian and Pacific affairs, and the trade matters which concern this country and the other countries I have mentioned.

Q. Mr. Prime Minister, you have been to Vietnam on two occasions and you have had a first hand look at the battle. What is your assessment of the situation?

P.M. Well, I made the comment when I first returned that I was entirely confident that we could not lose the war in Vietnam. I felt at the same time it could be a long and protracted struggle there, unless the North Vietnamese could be persuaded to negotiate. We had, as you will know, experience with other Communist forces in Malaya as it was then known. It was a much less complex matter, far fewer people were involved, but it dragged on for very many years. But I have seen what has happened to Malaysia as it now is, now that Communism has been brought under check and I would certainly hope that, if we can bring Communism under check and restraint in South Vietnam, there will be the same economic and political progress there that we have seen so favourably marked in Malaysia.

Q. There was a growing indication here that people were against the war and of course there was when President Johnson was down in your country. What is the general concensus of the Australian people now?

P.M. On the first proposition, I think all sensible people are against war. It doesn't suit any free democratic or liberty-loving country to be involved in military operations. They are costly in terms of life - even happiness - they are costly in a material sense and I can assure you that we are just as fullhearted as any other people in seeing a just and enduring settlement come out of the Vietnam conflict.

But at the same time, while the stress is there we believe that it must be resisted. This is not our first contact as I have just instanced of Communist aggression in South-East Asia. It can manifest itself in other places as well as in South Vietnam. I have only to mention Thailand as one of the possibilities and in Laos where I was quite recently I was told of the tens of thousands of North Vietnamese forces already infiltrated into that country. So that we feel that the struggle must be continued until there is a satisfactory outcome - a just and enduring settlement. So far as my own people are concerned I think that I can illustrate it best to you this way. The last general election was fought on Australia's participation in Vietnam and the involvement there for the first time in Australia's history of men brought in on a draft basis. The fact that we secured an all time majority in that election against the strong opposition of the Australian Labor Party indicates the Australian attitude of mind. It is interesting to note that since then the spokesmen for the Labor Party have modified their outlook quite considerably. The Deputy Leader of the Party, Mr. Barnard, who has been touring South-East Asia and has been on a visit to Vietnam in recent days was quoted before I left Australia as having said that they would have to have a fresh look at their policy, that he was not convinced that it was not a civil war or merely a guerilla war, but there was evidence of the infiltration of Communist forces from the north. This modification, in fact this drastic alteration of attitude on the part of the Deputy Leader of the Labor Party following views expressed by Mr. Whitlam, Leader of the Party, the watering down of the attitude disclosed at the election time, I think will bring a greater unity amongst the Australian people on this issue. Certainly the determination of my own Party and of the Country Party which forms the coalition which I lead is quite firm. We have had only one dissenter from the policy, one Senator who has

since become an independent, but I think that we have only had one out of a record number of Members of the House of Representatives and a large body of Senators from both those Parties indicates the unanimity of the feeling on the Government's side on this particular issue.

Q. Do you consider President Johnson has done everything possible to negotiate with the North Vietnamese?

P.M. I am sure he is sincere in his desire to produce an early negotiation. Indeed, I think he has gone a very long way in regard to the important objective he must hope to secure out of any negotiation on behalf of the proposals which have been put on behalf of the United States administration. I have seen a good deal of him as you are aware during the past twelve months, possibly more in point of fact than the head of any other government. The circumstances which brought me here twice last year, his visit to Australia, our participation together in the Manila Conference, gave me many opportunities of seeing him and talking closely to him, and we keep in close touch by correspondence. I believe he is genuinely concerned to bring about a peaceful settlement as soon as that can be arranged with decency and honor and justice.

Q. Your country has a considerable military combat force in Vietnam. As a military participant in that conflict do you, Sir, see any hopeful sign for a settlement?

P.M. You can't claim to see a hopeful sign from anything that emerges from Hanoi, but I am quite certain on the evidence - and I had a briefing yesterday which ran over the best part of two hours with Admiral Sharp of the US Navy and officers in Honolulu on the situation there - that it is evident that the Hanoi administration and the people are taking terrific punishment. Now what are they hoping to achieve? They can't win this war and they delude themselves if they think they can. Surely there is enough realism for them to accept that they can't win this war and that they face a continuing destruction of their industrial assets, means of transportation and other things that go to make a vibrant economy. They can't look at the present troubled state of China with any confidence of a continuance of the present strength of support from that source. I have had enough dealings myself internationally and domestically with the Communist mentality to sustain a hope that even when you seem to be up against a brick wall in negotiations with them, once they have decided that the game isn't worth the candle they can, without regard to consistency, logic or anything that they have said before, stand around and decide that the time has come to make a deal.

Q. What is your present commitment in South Vietnam and is your Government considering increasing that commitment?

P.M. I am not proposing to comment, but the size of the commitment is known. The commitment in a national sense, of course, is clear. In the military sense it is affected by our obligations in other directions and at the moment it is not clear to us just what the British intention is East of Suez. But Australia does not really need prodding by the United States or for that matter by any other country to what it should contribute, having regard to its resources. It is perhaps useful to remind an earlier generation of Americans that my country lost more men killed in the first world war than the United States did and we didn't require any prompting about that. We have as I mentioned undertaken a major political issue in bringing in for the first time a selective draft of Australian young men to fight away from our own shores. We fought an election on it and put our political existence at stake.

Now at the present time not only do we have our political situation there to consider, we have certain obligations in relation to the Malaysian-Singapore area. We have recently been involved in meeting Indonesian confrontation, we have defence obligations as we see them to Papua and New Guinea. We have more than doubled our defence expenditure over the last four years. It may interest some of you to know that as a percentage of our gross national product Australia contributes more to defence than any Western country other than the United States and the United Kingdom. And remember that although we are geographically the size of the metropolitan United States, we are a small country of 11½ million people against your 190 odd million people.

Q. Do I take it you are not contemplating any increase in your commitment?

P.M. We have no present intention of increasing the Vietnam commitment, but may I just add this. It is not perhaps generally known that Australia is the only country assisting the United States which has representation from the three armed services, the Army, Navy and the Air Force. We are also contributing in civil aid and that we do this entirely at our own expense. The Koreans have a much larger numerical strength, but as I understand the position they are largely financed by the United States of America. We don't receive a dollar of aid for the defence contribution we make.

Q. What will be the effect on Australia's defence if the British pull out of East of Suez?

P.M. I am not going to deal with that hypothetical question. I am going to see Prime Minister Wilson and see if I can get a clearer view of his intentions there. He has assured me that there will be no final decisions until we have had some talks.

Q. How does the present crisis in the Middle East affect Australia's security? There is a speculation that the Russians are using this crisis as a lever to get the United States out of Vietnam.

P.M. Well, on the first point; Australia, as its record in two world wars has demonstrated, and as our participation in Vietnam demonstrates - remember Australia was the first country to join you in Korea, and one of the few countries to join you in Vietnam - finds itself concerned wherever the peace of the world is threatened, and we are naturally concerned with anything which is likely to threaten the peace of the world such as the events occurring in the Middle East. But Australia is not a significant factor in that situation in the sense that we believe ourselves to be not without some significance in respect of South Vietnam.

As to the Russians using this as a lever to reduce the American effort in South Vietnam, well I can only express a personal view on that. I think that is a rather far-fetched view. I don't even think the Russians want trouble in the Middle East any more than the United States or Great Britain want trouble in the Middle East. I see this as a product of Middle East politics and in particular the aspirations, the ambitions, the objective of Nasser and the chronic ill-feeling that exists between Egypt and other Arabic countries and Israel.

Thank you gentlemen.

Thank you, Mr. Prime Minister.

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