
SPEECH

BY

The Rt Hon. HAROLD HOLT, C.H., M.P.,

ON

VIETNAM
Ministerial Statement

[From the 'Parliamentary Debates', 2 November 1967]

Mr HAROLD HOLT (Higgins—Prime Minister) [8.47]—Mr Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition (Mr Whitlam) sought unlimited time in order to present the views of the Australian Labor Party on the Vietnam issue. He read nineteen foolscap pages. He read them beautifully. Occasionally he indulged in a little preening, like a veteran Old Vic Shakespearian. But he read it all. Is there any man sitting behind him who knows the leadership that his leader has given him on the issue of Vietnam, Australia's participation in Vietnam, the policy to be adopted with relation to our troops in Vietnam, or our American alliance? Was there one word in nearly 50 minutes of declamation by the honourable gentleman opposite as to where he stands on these issues? This is what the country is waiting to hear. Does the honourable gentleman support Australia's participation in Vietnam? That is a simple question. Does he support it? Does he believe that we should be in Vietnam? I invite him to say so. He will not say so. Does he believe that Australian troops should be in Vietnam? I invite him to say so. If his Party were elected to office would it draw back Australian troops from Vietnam unless the United States obeyed the requirements of the Adelaide Conference decisions? He has not mentioned a word about that tonight.

Honourable members could go right through this speech and not find one line or one word as to where the Australian Labor Party stands on these great issues. And this is the alternative Australian government—the government which would have to sit with our allies in discussion and negotiations on the future of Vietnam. We have waited ever since the honourable gentleman was elected to the leadership of his Party to find out where he stands on these matters. I have said many hard things about the predecessor to the honourable gentleman. But at least he was an honest-minded Leader of the Labor Party. He told us where he stood and where his Party stood. The country knew where it would stand if it elected him to office. I defy any Australian to say clearly where Australia would stand on this great issue if the Leader of the Opposition were elected to govern this country.

These are vital matters because if honourable gentlemen opposite were to take office these would be the hard realities they would have to face. What would the Labor Party do about Australian troops in Vietnam? Would it reinforce them? Would it withdraw them? Would it demand conditions of our allies which our allies might well find insupportable? Would it sit in on a



Manila-type summit conference with the sort of policy that the former Leader of the Opposition had? The honourable gentleman has so often chided me, on Vietnam, with being all the way with L.B.J. Is he all the way with A.A.C. when it comes to Labor Party policy on Vietnam? If he is not with his former leader, where is he? His former leader believes, as does the honourable member for Yarra (Dr J. F. Cairns), that the policy of the Labor Party now is where it was when we stood against that party at the last general election. Those two members of the Labor Party do not run away from these issues, and I give them credit, as honest-minded men, for standing up for their convictions. What conviction has the honourable gentleman put forward tonight, that in any way can be tested, as to where a future Labor Government would stand on these great issues?

These are not just trivial matters of debate. The Leader of the Opposition has been very clever in debate. He has dodged every harsh issue that has been presented to him just as he did when Prime Minister Ky came to this country. The honourable gentleman's Party was opposed to the visit of Prime Minister Ky. His then Leader said that he was going to march in demonstrations against this visit, and he did so. But where was the present Leader of the Opposition? He was having a damn good holiday somewhere, well out of the line of fire, and no-one knew where he stood. So he came back as Leader of the Opposition. He had given the public to understand that when he came into office as Leader there would be a dramatic change in the attitude of the Labor Party to our position in Vietnam. He was the moderate man. He did not go along with his former Leader. But after the Adelaide Conference where has he gone? Did not this Conference decide—and I ask for confirmation from the honourable member for Yarra—that the Labor Party was where it was at the time of the last election? Of course it did, and the honourable member for Yarra said so, as did the President of the Victorian Branch of the Labor Party and the former Leader of the Labor Party. But where does Labor stand under the present Leader of the Opposition? I invite honourable members to follow through the 19 pages of carefully prepared and studiously avoided references

and try to find out where the Labor Party stands on these great issues. This is not good enough for the Australian people. We have never shirked the issue in two World Wars, in Korea and in Vietnam.

Mr Birrell—What do you mean by 'we'?

Mr HAROLD HOLT—When I say 'we', I mean the Australian people. I have the honour tonight, as Leader of a Government elected with the greatest majority in the history of this country, to speak for the Australian people. The Leader of the Opposition tried to confuse the issue for us by quoting Lee Kuan Yew, the Prime Minister of Singapore. Has he overlooked the statements that Lee Kuan Yew has been making recently about the mincing machine and about what would happen to Singapore and other South East Asian countries if America withdrew from Vietnam? The Leader of the Opposition made a cheap sneer at my colleague, the honourable member for Evans (Dr Mackay), and quoted a number of eminent clergymen. I do not like quoting clergymen on matters of this sort because I believe that we, as the elected representatives of the people, have to take the decisions on these matters. But when the honourable gentleman purports to give the view of eminent clergymen, why does not he quote the view of Archbishop Loane of Sydney? Why does he not quote the view expressed publicly and which appeared in more than one newspaper, of Cardinal Gilroy on his return to Australia? Both these gentlemen spoke of the importance of this resistance to Communism in South Vietnam. I am not going to quote them extensively tonight but the quotations are here if anyone want to check them.

The Leader of the Opposition took a long time to read a mass of material. I am not seeking half the time he took and I do not want an extension of time. But I can say a great deal about where the honourable gentleman stands, or more correctly, fails to stand. Consistent with his normal processes of deception or at least evasion, the honourable gentleman tried to convey the impression to us, not once but repeatedly, that the Secretary of Defence in the United States of America is somehow

out of sorts with his colleagues in the Administration on the question of bombing. A great deal can be said for and against the bombing. But the view held by the United States Administration and the view held by this Government and other allied governments has been that bombing serves valuable military purposes; that it helps to raise the morale of the South Vietnamese who do not feel themselves abandoned in this struggle; that it helps to prevent the flow of men and materials to the South; and that it helps to save allied lives which otherwise would be endangered if this flow of materials and men were not impeded in this way. That does not mean that we are not able to look, as the occasion arises, at some move for a suspension or pause in the bombing if it is genuinely felt that this would serve some purpose in attracting the North Vietnamese to peace negotiations. We have never taken a hard and fast line on these issues.

The honourable gentleman, from the comfort of this place, slanders us repeatedly as men who have no wish for peace. I reject that and throw it in his teeth. We want peace as much as anyone in this country. We want peace for Australia because there are great things that we can do with our country, given a situation of peace. How can any man knowing the views of other leaders in South East Asia, and knowing the view so recently and so movingly put to us by the leader of a country that is currently under invasion and aggression by the forces of North Vietnam, talk in the way that the honourable gentleman has talked to us tonight? If the Australian people are to look for leadership and guidance from the present Leader of the Opposition they will look in vain. He will be the artful dodger as long as he can go on dodging, until he has to face up to this issue directly. We ask him to face up to it. Would he pull Australian troops out of South Vietnam? Would he endanger our alliance with the United States? We argued last November that Australia was in Vietnam for the same reasons that it had been in two world wars and in Korea. We said that we recognised that we were not merely defending a country against aggression and defending the way of life we believe in but also that we were giving strength to our own alliance with the

United States, a country which, above all others, can help to keep Australia secure in our alliance under ANZUS. The honourable gentleman has made no mention of these matters tonight. Is he reckless or regardless of the effect it would have on our alliance with the United States if we were to pull our troops out of Vietnam, as the Adelaide Conference proposed? That alliance was vital to us before the British decision to withdraw east of Suez. It is even more important for us today now that we know there is a time schedule on the British presence in this area and certainly as a land force in the Asian area. These are vital matters for the people of this country. The people are not to be fobbed off by a long speech that covers up with a smoke screen of words the basic points that are involved in these proposals that we have to face. I would like to hear the honourable gentleman at some time—and he has not yet done so in his long period of leadership—face up to these matters.

Mr McNamara, at the conclusion of his statement before the Preparedness Investigating Sub-Committee of the Senate Armed Services Committee, on 25th August 1967, said:

In conclusion I would like to restate my view that the present objectives of our bombing in the north were soundly conceived and are being effectively pursued. They are consistent with our overall purposes in Vietnam and with our efforts to confine the conflict. We are constantly exploring ways of improving our efforts to insulate South Vietnam from outside attack and support. Further refinements in our air campaign may help. I am convinced, however, that the final decision in this conflict will not come until we and our allies prove to North Vietnam she cannot win in the south. The tragic and long drawn-out character of that conflict in the south makes very tempting the prospect of replacing it with some new kind of air campaign against the north.

He was talking against those who were then advocating a very much more intensive bombing campaign; he was not critical of the campaign being conducted. He was giving his explanation as to why he was resisting more intensive bombing. He continued:

However tempting, such an alternative seems to me completely illusory. To pursue this objective would not only be futile but would involve risks to our personnel and to our nation that I am unable to recommend.

Later on he continued:

The bombing of North Vietnam has always been considered a supplement to, and not a substitute for, an effective counter-insurgency campaign in

South Vietnam. These were our objectives when our bombing programme was initiated in February of 1965. They remain our objectives today.

Our bombing campaign has been aimed at selected targets of military significance, primarily the routes of infiltration. It has been carefully tailored to accomplish its basic objectives and thus to achieve the limited purposes toward which all our activities in Vietnam are directed.

Having said that, I hope that the House will not hear this distortion again from the honourable gentleman who has tried to present some picture of either disloyalty or disagreement between the United States Secretary of Defence, his President and other senior members of the Administration. The honourable gentleman began his speech by twitting the Government for the fact that it had not gone on with the debate on Tuesday night. He said that a move came from honourable gentlemen opposite. It is interesting to recall that the vote was put and the motion to go on with the discussion on Vietnam attracted twenty-two votes from the Opposition and was resisted by fifty-three votes from this side of the House.

Mr Birrell—How many were absent from each side?

Mr HAROLD HOLT—A lot were missing from each side because nobody expected the debate to come on at that time. It resulted from a move made by the honourable member for Yarra (Dr J. F. Cairns)—I stand subject to correction on this—without consultation with his leader.

Dr J. F. Cairns—I correct the Prime Minister forthwith.

Mr HAROLD HOLT—Does the honourable member correct me? Did he approve of the motion?

Dr J. F. Cairns—Yes.

Mr HAROLD HOLT—Although the Opposition could only amass twenty-two

votes for that particular motion I am glad to hear there is this identity of view and purpose between the honourable member for Yarra and the Leader of the Opposition. At least they could come together on the statement that the Leader of the Opposition has made, because he has carefully avoided every issue on which there was any possibility of conflict between any member of his Party and any other member of his Party. He has left unresolved for the people of this nation where the Australian Labor Party stands on the issue of Vietnam. He has not told us whether or not Australian troops should be there. He has not told us whether or not, if elected to Government, he would carry out the Adelaide decisions. On television, on an earlier occasion, I think he did go so far as to say that this would be the policy of his Party. Why has he not reasserted it here in the national Parliament? He is the one who is always demanding that the Government come and debate against him, yet when the Government debates against him in this Parliament he will not face the issues that the public are anxiously expecting to hear resolved.

The plain fact of the matter is that today the Australian Labor Party stands, despite the facelift and despite the glamorous new leadership, where it stood at the last general election. It still stands for a troops-out policy in Vietnam. It still stands against our participation in Vietnam. As long as that is the policy honestly presented by the Australian Labor Party then the Australian people will have no truck with it. It is because the Australian people will have no truck with it that the honourable gentleman spent 50 minutes tonight setting up a smoke screen to obscure the fact that he is not prepared to tell the people of Australia where the Australian Labour Party stands on this matter.