

BACKGROUND BRIEFING GIVEN BY THE  
LEADER OF THE LIBERAL PARTY,  
SENATOR GORTON, AT PARLIAMENT HOUSE,  
CANBERRA

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9TH JANUARY, 1967

SENATOR GORTON : Well, I have no statement to make but perhaps you have some questions.....

Q. Perhaps you can give us the mechanics of the business tomorrow?

A. I expect to be sworn in as Prime Minister at 2.30 tomorrow afternoon. I do not propose to make any changes at all in the Ministry which will carry on in the same way it is carrying on now until after the Higgins by-election is concluded.

Q. When will that be?

A. That I can't tell you because I have to speak to Mr Aston, probably Friday or Monday, or some time like that, and I would like to speak to the Liberal Party organisation down in Victoria. I would say perhaps a month, perhaps five weeks, perhaps three weeks. Say between three and five weeks. After all, it is more likely to be four weeks than three. We have got to send a letter to the Country Party, we have to send a letter to the Labor Party, we have got to make sure from the Speaker that the writs are properly issued, and that kind of thing. About four or five weeks.

Q. What are the mechanics of your transfer? For instance, how long can it be between the time you resign from the Senate until you contest an election? Is there a statutory period?

A. No, but I think if I can rephrase your question: What is the time during which I can continue as Prime Minister without being a Member of either House of Parliament. The answer is three months.

Q. Are you sure you will be nominated or selected for the seat?

A. Oh no. I think it likely!

Q. Does that mean no Parliament until March?

A. I think it might mean that. I would like to meet the House when it first met.

Q. What are the reasons that would make you delay the Ministry until then?

A. Well, after all, one can't in this world take things for granted. I do need to have the Higgins electorate committee endorse me and select me. I do need to win the seat of Higgins at a general election. On figures, it looks as if this is likely to happen. Higgins is a very good seat indeed. But I think it would look a little odd, I think it would be a bit peculiar if one has upheavals when there is a possibility, even a remote possibility of one not being confirmed in the position. I think it would be much better to wait until after the Higgins by-election.

- Q. When will you resign from the Senate, Sir?
- A. I think I will resign from the Senate on the day before nominations close for the seat of Higgins.
- Q. Who do you have in mind for the Leader of the Government in the Senate?
- A. I will have to consider that.
- Q. When are you going to hold your first Cabinet meeting with the present Ministry?
- A. We are going to hold the first Cabinet meeting - but not the first Ministry meeting - on the day after tomorrow.
- Q. You will be leading the talks with Thomson?
- A. I will be sitting in the chair when the talks with Thomson take place. I don't know that it would be entirely accurate to say that I will be leading the talks with Thomson because I think the present Prime Minister has been immersed in the materials on which these talks will take place, and I would expect a great deal of assistance from him sitting on my right hand.
- Q. Who will take part - the Defence and Foreign Affairs Committee?
- A. The whole Cabinet. Not the whole Ministry, the whole Cabinet.
- Q. Did you meet the whole Ministry tonight, or are there some Country Party people who are not here?
- A. I recollect they were all here
- Q. What was the purpose of this meeting tonight, Sir?
- A. Well, this is somewhat of a history-making event in Australia. There has never before been a Senator who has been sworn in as Prime Minister. There has never before, as far as we know - it is possible I may be wrong about the very early days of Federation - been an occasion when somebody would be Prime Minister during a period of time when they were members of neither Houses of Parliament. This will occur in my case because I will resign just before the nominations close, and during the period of the by-election, therefore, will not be a Member of either House of Parliament. I haven't really checked this out, but I hope and trust I continue to be paid my salary as Prime Minister. I won't get any salary as a Member of Parliament. This is therefore precedent-making and an unusual event, and I think that the present Prime Minister felt in advising the Governor-General he would like to have the complete backing of the whole Ministry that this is what they wanted to happen, and this is what they wanted to happen.
- Q. Will the Government the day after tomorrow announce or decide on the names of the commissioners for the redistribution?

- A. No. The Cabinet the day after tomorrow will be concerned with the business of the British Minister.
- Q. Will it be the Gorton Ministry or the Gorton-McEwen Ministry?
- A. I hope and believe that it will be the Gorton-McEwen Ministry just as it was the Menzies-McEwen Ministry.
- Q. What were the voting figures?
- A. I haven't a clue, have you? But if you find out let me know. I'll be interested.
- Q. Did all the Ministers pledge to continue in their present portfolios, or is there any indication that any of them might not?
- A. I haven't noticed any of them jostling around to resign.
- Q. Can we take it that you have not concluded your discussions with Mr McEwen on the coalition?
- A. I think you can take it we have.
- Q. Would it be correct to say that the coalition is on the same basis as with the Holt and Menzies administration?
- A. This is right.
- Q. Were you surprised at this result today or did you always think you had it sewn up? You have been regarded as favourite for a long time.
- A. Yes, I know. But an awful lot of favourites get beaten in an awful lot of races. I am not a betting man; that's what punters tell me. I don't know whether I was surprised or whether I was astonished. You remember that story so I won't go into it. But I was pleased.
- Q. When will you move into the Lodge? Have you thought that far ahead?
- A. No.
- Q. You have got less distance to travel than most Prime Ministers.
- A. I have got to let my house first.
- Q. How well do you know the President of the United States?
- A. Not very well. I know him only from the meetings we had with him when he came out here. I would hope to be able - and I only hope to be able - to build something of the same kind of relationship with him that the late Prime Minister built with him. I think it was almost a unique relationship, just as I think his relationship with the Heads of Asian countries was, as far as Australia is concerned, something quite new, the relationship that he built, and something of enormous significance to us. And when I can - and I don't know when I can because there are a lot of problems crowding in - I would try to see the foundation that he laid was built upon to be an enduring structure.

- Q. Mr Holt 's first mission abroad was to Viet Nam. Do you propose to do the same?
- A. I clearly must go to Viet Nam as soon as it is possible,
- Q. That will be your first trip.
- A. You always want to get these things down in a sort of black and white....this is his first trip..this is his second trip. I clearly must go to Viet Nam as soon as it is possible in order to continue the great work which Holt did in this direction. And to other countries during that trip. I don't know when that will be. All I can say is that will be as soon as the other problems which are crowding in would permit me to do it.
- Q. It looks as though you will be pretty tightly leg-roped here until Easter.....
- A. Well, I have got an election to fight!
- Q. Mr Bruce did lose one, didn't he.....
- (Interjection) : That was in Flinders.
- A. Flinders is miles away, way down the peninsula. What's more it was on the question of whether there should be an Arbitration Court or not. Are you trying to scare me or something.
- Q. Will you continue with your present portfolio?
- A. For a while, yes, but I would hope to have somebody called in to take over the duties of it, just as Menzies originally called me in to take over the duties of it.
- Q. Could we take it that since you are not making any Cabinet changes you won't fill the vacancy....
- A. Until after the Higgins by-election.
- Q. The vacancy will remain until after then?
- A. Yes.
- Q. You talked about upheavals, Sir. Can we take it you are thinking about extensive changes....
- A. Who talked about upheavals?
- Q. You mentioned upheavals a minute ago....
- A. Oh, well, I just meant....let's amend that and say "changes". After all, all changes are upheavals in politics.

Thank you.

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