



TELEVISION INTERVIEW WITH THE PRIME MINISTER
SENATOR THE HON. J. G. GORTON
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Interviewer : Mr Robert Moore

MR MOORE : Prime Minister, you came to office with a full hand, so to speak. A foreign crisis- the British withdrawal from our part of the world; a domestic crisis, a big one - the mail strike. And what we might call a political crisis - a split in the coalition; or at least the legacy thereof. Prime Minister, could it have been worse?

PRIME MINISTER: I imagine things could always be worse, yes.

Q. So you're fairly optimistic in spite of the last ten days?

PM: Yes.

Q. To turn to the British withdrawal - if in fact there is a need for British forces in South-East Asia, presumably that need will remain when the British go. What exactly is the need and how does it affect Australia?

PM: Well, we, as I think I've made clear, greatly regret the British decision to withdraw their forces from the Singapore/Malaysia area. The need, I think, is this - first of all to have ground forces there, not in large numbers, but some ground forces there, able to be backed up swiftly by naval and air support. The purpose of having them there is not to resist a major attack from some other part. It's to be a police force, to prevent small wars breaking out, to prevent insurgency, I think to contribute to the security of the area, so that it can develop economically.

Q. Now, these conditions will apply whether the British are there are not, in fact they may even be greater when the British leave, and yet one gets the impression from your press conference that in fact we will perhaps diminish our forces there as a result of the British diminishing theirs, which seems to be an odd thing to do if considerations still apply?

PM: Well, this has not been decided. We are certainly keeping our forces at their present level there, over the period of four years before the British completely withdraw. I intended to give the impression in my press conference that we could not move in and fill the gap that Britain is leaving.....

Q. Sorry, Sir, is this because we don't feel the danger is great enough, or because we don't have the capacity?

PM: We would have the capacity, but we would only have the capacity if we sacrificed other needs of Australia which I, myself, think are of greater importance to Australia.

- Q. Then in a sense the British withdrawal isn't as serious as all that?
- PM: Well, it's not serious enough for us to say we're going to sacrifice our development - we're not going to look after, with compassion, people in this community - we're not going to provide better health and education and things of that kind. In my judgment, it's not serious enough for us to do that.
- Q. If we're not going to increase our military commitment there as a result of the British withdrawal, do you see a much closer diplomatic relationship between Singapore, Malaysia, Australia and New Zealand, say?
- PM: I think that would probably follow, although it is pretty close now between those four countries. Singapore, Malaysia, Australia and New Zealand have really got very close diplomatic relations now.
- Q. It seems that Lee Kuan Yew, or even the Tunku perhaps, feels that they're not quite close enough?
- PM: With whom?
- Q. With Australia and New Zealand, and perhaps Britain .
- PM: Now, why do you say that?
- Q. Because they seem to be pressing more strongly for five-power talks than we are?
- PM: Oh, I see - five-power talks as distinct from general diplomatic relationships?
- Q. Yes, they seem to be moving much more towards a quite specific alliance.
- PM: Well, the five-power talks are something that we would attend, but not something which we would initiate.
- Q. Now, given the fact that our defence situation presumably will change in the area once Britain leaves, do you feel that this may perhaps require a new foreign policy to take account of this - that we may in fact develop closer relationships with Indonesia and Japan?
- PM: I would hope that the closer relationships which have been developed with Indonesia in the last period, would continue to be strengthened. I would like to see close relationships and friendly relationships and diplomatic relationships encouraged between Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore and, of course, with Japan which is playing a significant role in that area. Anything that we can do, short of sacrificing Australia's own needs, to create an atmosphere in which the standard of life can be raised in those countries - the burden or fear of aggression can be taken away, or subversion, we would try to do.
- Q. Prime Minister, we now turn to Viet Nam which I imagine one has to see in context with the British withdrawal as well, but not unrelated. How close in fact are we to talks with North Viet Nam?

- PM: I don't think that at this stage we are particularly close to talks with North Viet Nam, though people are examining the possibilities of such talks. There has really been no indication that there would be talks, from Hanoi, and as you know, the United States has kept suggesting that there ought to be talks. All that Hanoi has done is say : Cease bombing and then, maybe at some unspecified date in the future, they might have talks.
- Q. Now, supposing that said : "Cease bombing, and we will", what would you say?
- PM: I would say, if they said - "Cease bombing, and we will have talks," I would think we should say : "That's fine. We'll cease bombing, you guarantee not to send reinforcements in men and material into the South, and the talks could begin at once."
- Q. Then we say : "Cease supplying the South and we'll have talks". Is that what you say? In other words, we apply the condition?
- PM: We would say : "We will cease bombing". Which condition they apply....
- Q. Yes.
- PM: "And we'll do that if you stop building up your forces in the South, which our present bombing is designed to stop, and we would then be glad to see talks opened as soon as possible. I'm expressing my view on this. I'm obviously not speaking for the United States Government - I'm speaking for myself.
- Q. Do you feel, Sir, that perhaps we might be at some diplomatic disadvantage if it looks as if we are the ones who are applying the condition now?
- PM: I don't see why because one condition being applied by North Viet Nam - a condition being applied without any guarantee of talks, and it seems to me perfectly reasonable if, as is the case, the present bombing was designed to stop the.... not to stop, because it doesn't.... hamper and hinder the flow of men and raw materials from north to south, that if we stopped that, and we didn't get at a military disadvantage so that the flow of men and materials from north to south could continue unchecked, it would seem to me all to be part of a packaged deal.
- Q. May we not be asking North Viet Nam to do too much? To put it another way, aren't we asking North Viet Nam to concede the war, if we ask them not to supply the south? In other words, may this not be an impossible condition for them, however much we desire it?
- PM: I don't think so, because the suggestion is a bombing pause, and during that pause, talks start. Now, if it's a bombing pause, there ought to be able to be a reinforcement pause too, so that the talks can go on, and I don't believe that anybody has conceded anything except two inter-related military operations would both cease.

Q. Prime Minister, can we now turn to economic aid - another aspect of our relations with the countries near us - how much economic aid should we give, and why? What should be the reasons behind our economic assistance?

PM: People tend to put a particular percentage of GNP as the amount of economic aid one ought to give. I've never understood why pluck a figure out of the air, and say this is the figure, we should attain that. I think we should give as much as we feel we can give without seriously interfering with Australia's own requirements - perhaps interfering a little with Australia's own requirements, but not seriously, because we have a nation to build and a people to look after ourselves. Having said that, the purposes of our economic aid ought, and again this is a subject with which I know different points of view can be put, ought to be designed to build up a technological capacity of countries, to enable them to look after the machines which they need to expand their industry or to look after their agriculture, or whatever it may be, and to provide a sort of capital for them to enable them to grow.

Q. Sir, you've just said, and you said earlier in your press conference this week that the amount of aid we can give is limited by the need to develop our own country, and by our own defence requirements, and this can sound either like good housekeeping or perhaps selfishness, and I would like just to pin you down a little further on your attitude here, because as many people have said, we don't know a lot about you, but I suspect much more than people are admitting.....

In the Senate on October 26th, 1967, during that part of the debate which narrowed down to Australian economic assistance to the Pacific Islands, after a brief comment by Senator Tangney, you went on to say, and I agree it's out of context but I think it's still indicative, you went on to say -

"I do not know that I have borrowed anything from humanity in general; from my point of view, what we give is assistance; I must admit that I believe that that is quite enough for the Australian taxpayers to be asked to supply to that part of the world."

Now, without being cynical, I don't think that sounds altogether a mean attitude but it doesn't sound a generous attitude either. You seem to me to be denying any kind of moral obligation that we might have towards people in a worse position than ourselves.

PM: I wouldn't think that was right when you said deny any kind of moral obligation. I think inherent in that is a statement that that is enough for us to give, which means that we are accepting that amount of aid, and presumably because it is a moral obligation, but we have to balance a moral obligation against the requirement of our own people. I think that we have to bear in mind that we are twelve million people with, as I say, a nation to build and a continent to develop. I think we need to bear in mind that if all our resources were directed towards assistance in these countries, they would not make a significant amount of difference there.

Q. Sir, to come back to this quotation, I don't want to harp on it of course, but in that you do suggest that you are worried mainly about the taxpayer being asked to give too much in forms of economic aid. Are you?

PM: I would like to see the taxpayer's money, which is the source of all money, directed primarily to developing our own country and looking after our own people, but to give some assistance, and I couldn't give you a precise level in this instance, but to give some assistance even though it might slightly impinge on that, but I wouldn't want to sacrifice Australia's growth.

Q. You wouldn't see it being a big increase in our budget then, economic aid?

PM: I don't think I would at the moment, no.

Q. Prime Minister, I'd now like to come home and to the mail strike; I don't want to go into the details of it. This is not the time and place to do that but I think it does raise a general philosophy, which I'd like to explore with you of your attitude towards industrial disputes in general, and to perhaps trade unions, and I'd like to do this in what may seem an odd way by going back to your maiden speech in the Senate back in March, 1950, which you made in the first flush of the Liberal dawn, and referring to the 1947 Banking Act as an abuse of government power, you said this -

"We do not believe that it is the function of government to work out the destiny of the individual. It is the function of the people themselves"

and you went on to say -

"This philosophy has illumined all people of liberal minds throughout the ages, and among liberal minds I include trade unionists who, in the past, fought exactly the same fight as we are fighting on this issue."

Now, my first point is, couldn't the post office workers argue that they are fighting for their own destiny in the very terms of your liberal philosophy?

PM: Well, perhaps they could argue that way, but I don't think that it would be a valid argument, because we have set up in Australia, and we have accepted in Australia, generally accepted the belief that if people are dissatisfied, then there is conciliation machinery and arbitration machinery to which application can be made, and that after application to conciliation and arbitration machinery, then what is decided there should be accepted, and this, I think, must prevail unless there is to be law of the jungle.

Q. Is what is really wrong with the mail-strike the fact that it inconveniences the community? Is that why it is so serious?

PM: I think that there are two - I think that is one very, very serious thing, but it does more than inconvenience people; it could clog up business; it could put people generally out of employment if it continued long enough; it could stop things operating - that is serious enough. But there is also a principle involved of upholding arbitration, and I think both those are very significant.

Q. Could I come back to the first point. How, in fact, do you as a government balance the claims of a particular group of workers in an essential industry against the needs of the community as a whole?

PM: How do we balance it? Well, I don't think it's the government's job to balance the claims of a particular group of employees against the nation as a whole. I'm not quite sure that I understand you, but I think perhaps that's the job of an Arbitration Court or something of that kind.

Q. What I was really getting at was, obviously, the degree of reaction by the Government will vary according to whether the workers on strike are in a very essential industry, an essential industry, or in a trivial industry, say like ice-cream makers.

PM: Yes, it will.

Q. You come to a stage where you must step in, where the machinery has broken down. Now, it could be - I'm not saying in this case that it is a certain dispute; in fact, a group of workers have a very legitimate claim, public opinion and the government are wildly against them, but public opinion can be selfish too - it can be in certain circumstances. Now as a government, how do you balance this conflict?

PM: I think any government must balance it this way. I think any government must say that the vital needs of a community as a whole, the vital needs of the nation, must be protected - not impetuously, but they must not be allowed to be destroyed, and this must be the paramount and over-riding consideration, I think.

Q. Sir, at your press conference a few days ago, you spoke of what I think you called "an administrative reshuffle" when talking about the Cabinet of the future. I wonder whether this mail strike may not be one of the things you had in mind because it does seem to me odd that this strike should involve the Prime Minister, the Postmaster-general, the Minister for Labour and National Service, the Public Service Board, with somewhere the Arbitration Commission looming in the background. It all seems very confused - now is this an example of what you would like to streamline?

PM: This wasn't particularly what I had in mind, nor is it precisely. It's very nearly setting out the facts, but not quite precisely. It does involve the Public Service Board because initially applications are made to the Public Service Board for variations. After such applications have been made, if either side is dissatisfied, then there is a public service arbitrator, and after the public service arbitrator, then subject to the Arbitration Court itself, there is a further application to a neutral umpire in the Arbitration Court. The only way in which the Prime Minister comes into it is that the Public Service Board is under his administrative control, and indeed the only way - the two ways in which I have come into it are these. Firstly, in reply to a telegram to me asking if I would speed up meetings with the Public Service Board, bring it forward before the date when it was due to take place, I desired to minimise the chances of conflict, and I sent a telegram back saying: "Yes, I would have a meeting as soon as they returned to normal work." That's one way. The other way I came into it was making a decision with my colleagues that we have to keep the mails moving, no matter what. I would say to the community - that having been done, then the process of keeping the mails moving is in charge of the Postmaster-General and the Minister for Labour and National Service comes into it because of their general trade union relationships.

Q. Do you agree - maybe it's not confused, but do you agree that it's very complex anyway?

PM: It's not as complex as it looks, but it certainly looks complex.

Q. I wonder if we could move on, related to what you said there too, to your conception of the office of Prime Minister. A lot of people have written a lot about this and said a lot about it, that perhaps in Australia and Britain too, we're developing something more like the President - the Prime Minister is getting bigger and bigger in the community and in Cabinet and so on. Now, do you see yourself as Prime Minister as essentially Chairman of a Committee or a Super Minister?

PM: Well, I don't like that sort of super-Minister thing - it's got overtones of Supermac or Superman. I don't see myself that way. Now, I don't see the Prime Minister as Chairman of the Committee. Ideally, of course, perhaps if we had an ideal world, the Prime Minister shouldn't have to do anything at all except go round and meet people because he ought to have Ministers in charge of all various areas, and leave them to do the job, and they should do it and talk to him about doing it, and he should just sit back and think about what we're going to try and do next, the goals we're going to reach. I don't think we'll ever reach that ideal stage, and there must be Cabinet responsibility for a number of matters. But I would believe that the Prime Minister now or in the future is not to be Chairman of the Committee so that a majority vote in the committee says what's going to be done. He should put to the Cabinet or the committee what he believes ought to be done, and if he believes strongly enough that it ought to be done, then it must be done.

Q. I'd like to move on from there. It's sometimes said that the most important decision a Prime Minister has to make is the making of his Cabinet. Now, it isn't the time to canvass the details of what you have in mind, but I wonder if I could put it on the pessimistic side which seems to be the quickest way of getting an answer. What would you look for in deciding to drop a Minister, if I can put it that way? What is it that makes a bad Minister? What is a failure in politics?

PM: I think that's a very hard question to answer. I really do - I don't think it's a question that, flung at me like that, that I can answer.

Q. Can I put it this way? Is it because a Minister is a bad administrator or because he gives bad advice in Cabinet, or because he's politically unsound? I mean, we could make a longer list than that, but I'm just wondering what it is in fact that a Prime Minister takes into account when he decides that Bloggs must go?

PM: So and so is a good Minister - so and so is a bad Minister?

Q. Yes.

PM: I'd like notice of that question because it is.....

Q. I wonder if perhaps we could take it up another time then?

PM: Possibly

Q. Thank you very much. Could I turn to the Coalition. Mr McEwen, a few weeks ago, indicated that he would not serve under a particular Liberal Party leader. Now, for your part, would you refuse to allow a particular Country Party member to serve under you as a Minister?

PM: No. I would not believe that I had that right; just as the Leader of the Country Party doesn't believe that he has the right, to say he refuses to allow a particular member to be made a Minister. He believes his right is limited to saying this: "I will not serve under so and so." He doesn't believe that he has the right to say: "I will not serve with."

Q. So, in return, you would accept a package deal, if I can use that word, from the Country Party?

PM: Yes.

Q. Do you think there is any problem, in fact, in having some Ministers less directly responsible to you as Prime Minister, than others?

PM: I don't think so. I don't think it's arisen in my experience, with relation to other Prime Ministers, which I have been able to watch from the outside, but it just doesn't seem to have appeared. And we have an understanding, and I think the understanding was held by Sir Robert Menzies with Mr McEwen, and by Mr Holt. We don't go in there as two separate teams with Caucus beforehand, and decide block votes beforehand, or put similar opinions. We try to, and I believe we do, go in as individual members of a government, and on many, many occasions you'll find discussions in which the Liberal and Country Party Ministers agree to something, and Liberal and Country Party Ministers on the other side raising doubts about it.

Q. You don't think that your position, in fact, may be weakened by events of the past few weeks?

PM: I don't think so. No.

Q. I think one of the most interesting things that observers will be watching, with perhaps a certain degree of well-intentioned malice perhaps, will be how you handle the Senate. There's a certain irony in your becoming the Prime Minister, and you're on record at the time of the postal regulations debate and so on, as suggesting that perhaps the Senate is in danger of over-stepping its role in certain directions? What are you going to do about it?

PM: There's absolutely nothing anybody can do about it unless you have a constitutional referendum, and I haven't got that in mind. The Senate, I think, has not over-stepped its role in the past, except that I was a bit dubious about that postal regulation one; I think that perhaps that was perhaps a little over the line. But it hasn't rejected Budgets; it hasn't refused supply; it hasn't made the House of Representatives go to the people. If it did, it would certainly be acting, I think, irresponsibly, and wrongly. But it has a role to

PM
(Contd.) examine legislation, to try and improve it, to make amendments, to send it back for further examination. And provided it acts responsibly, I think it has an advantage to a government. Now, we have not had a majority in the Senate for some time, but things - well, they've been held up, and there have been arguments and so on, but things have gone on. We're in no worse position now than we were before, in fact it might even be said to be in a rather better one.

Q. I want to mention one name, and one name only. What are you going to do about Senator Wright? Woo him, or contain him?

PM: Woo him or contain him? Would you care to define your words?

Q. Well, are you going to elevate him, promote him, win him over, or are you going to try to isolate him or bring him into line?

PM: I've always had quite a regard for Senator Wright, except from time to time when we've had an argument. But I'm bound to say that during the period of time when I was Leader of the Senate, and I think you'll see this if you look at the record, that he was of great assistance to the Government. He came in and supported the Government on a number of occasions, and put our case for us very well.

Q. Did you say he supported the Government on a number of occasions?

PM: Yes. I did.

Q. On other occasions?

PM: Oh, I'm sorry. I mean, actively supported - actively came in. We argued well and put active support rather than just.....

Q. Sir, I'd like to touch on one aspect of your own career in the Senate, and one only, and I do it for perhaps not the apparent reason. And that's the VIP affair, because I feel anyway that if there was ever a time when you made your name and came before the public as a potential Liberal Party leader, if ever the occasion arose, it was then. My own personal view is that if there was ever a time that you made your run without knowing it - what is interesting is that in the newspaper reports of your tabling the documents in the Senate that day, the word "insist" crops up - "Senator Gorton insisted on tabling the documents" and this phrase.....did you in fact insist, and if you did, against whose advice did you insist on tabling them?

PM: I don't know where the newspapers got that particular word from. You know, they have political correspondents, and they go round and talk to people, and then they come out with their own words as to what happened. I just prefer to put it this way, that having discovered that these things were in existence, and believing it proper that a House of Parliament should have information as to the expenditure of public money - how it was spent. And the House having asked for that information, it was a proper thing to do to provide it.

Q. Well, if you didn't have to insist, did you have to resist dissuasion, and there I'll leave it - when you've answered that.

PM: There was some discussion about it.

Q. Sir, I'd like to end this discussion, to turn to your more general political philosophy, and I'd like to begin on the economic side of it. You are on record as saying that you oppose monopolies, and that you're all for free competition, not for disastrous competition, but for free competition.

Now, is the logic of this attitude a two-airline system, a three-airline system or a four-airline system?

PM: I think it's a two-airline system. You can't apply this logic all across the board. You musn't say: "I believe in this and therefore in every field this must happen". I mean, I'm not in favour of a two-railway system, that kind of thing. The philosophy that I was seeking to express was this: That I believed that the community was better served, and people themselves were better served, and that they had more opportunity to develop their own individual capacities and try something out and see how good they were in fields where there was free local competition. But I think history has shown that it's not awfully comfortable always for businesses to have competition, so they tend to amalgamate in many fields, and after a while that might mean - it could mean that competition just wasn't there at all. Well, if competition wasn't there at all, you would have a private monopoly - that could be controlled by government of course, higher taxes moving in, but what would be a better way of controlling it, in my view, is to provide competition from a government. It wouldn't then be a monopoly, but instead of having a private monopoly, you provide competition from a government instrumentality, and let them fight it out.

Q. I still can't see, Sir, why you object to having, say, two private airlines and one government airline?

PM: Well, I suppose the answer to that would be, perhaps not philosophical, I suppose the answer to that would be that there is just not enough traffic and passengers and revenue for an extra airline.....

Q. Couldn't you allow the entrepreneurs who disagree with you the right to go broke?

PM: Yes, I'm not sure that they'd go broke without expecting to be baled out.

Q. One other point, Sir, and this is not strictly speaking the concern of the Federal Government, but I think it is a concern of Liberal philosophy. Does your philosophy allow restrictions on the production of margarine, say, or restriction of the consumer's choice?

PM: I would have thought that that was a matter for State legislation.

Q. I think it's still a matter for general Liberal philosophy?

PM: Yes, it is.

Q. What is your view on that?

PM: This is of course a matter for Liberal philosophy - you're entirely right on this. It is also a matter for decision by the sovereign States. I wouldn't like it to be thought that I was expressing a philosophy here which might be designed to interfere with what the sovereign States thought they ought to do.

Q. So, you're not a centrist after all?

Well, Sir, I'd like to end on your quite specific political philosophy, and I'll be very brief on this, but going back in your maiden speech in March, 1950, you said that -

"In the past there has always been a tendency on the part of governments of every kind to gain more and more power because, I suppose, Members of a government believe that they are good men and will not abuse it. But that danger always exists."

Well, that's what somebody else has called "the never-ending audacity of elected persons".

Now that you're on the other end of the government stream, how are you going to protect yourself from falling into this abuse of power? Are you conscious of it?

PM: I would be conscious of it because it.....because ever since Acton, I think it was, said - "All power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts absolutely" - this has been one of the things that one's always had in mind in the field of politics. But, it still remains true that, although I might be conscious of it, I might subconsciously be led to say - "Well, I know I'm right here so I'm going to do it" and that danger exists.

Now, I'd try to stop it myself. If I didn't, then I'm pretty sure that the Party would, or the House of Representatives would, or the Senate certainly would.

Q. Prime Minister, thank you very much for giving us your time.
