

TELEVISION INTERVIEW GIVEN BY THE
PRIME MINISTER, SENATOR JOHN GORTON
FOR B. B. C. "PANORAMA" PROGRAMME

22ND JANUARY, 1968

Interviewer : Mr Michael Charlton

Q. Hello, is that Prime Minister Gorton ?

PM: Yes, Mr Charlton

Q. Prime Minister, could I first of all congratulate you on your appointment.

PM : Thank you very much.

Q. And ask you what you feel is going to be the lasting effect of Britain's withdrawal from the Far East on the very special relationship that has always existed between Australia and Britain?

PM: I doubt if there will be lasting effects on the relationship between Australia and Great Britain. We are very disturbed at the power vacuum that will be created in that area by Britain's withdrawal. We do feel that a comparatively small number of troops on the ground there could contribute more to world security than they could in any other place in the world, say, for example, in Germany, but that's a decision for the British Government to make.

Q. Surely this decision has done no more than hasten a trend which was already firmly established and generally accepted by Australians.

PM: Well, it has done, I think, more than that. It has certainly hastened a trend and hastened it in a way which we thought was not going to take place. But that's talking only of the withdrawal of the ground troops. I think, possibly, it has also gone this far - that the provision of a quickly available land and quickly available naval and air support which was ear-marked for the area in case of need or which we thought was going to be ear-marked for the area in case of need, it's now doubtful whether that will be available.

Q. The feeling is that it will make you lean very much closer to the United States?

PM: Well, I think that our own security is perhaps bound up now more with assistance from the United States but I'm not sure that this actual move will contribute much to that. You see, we don't see this withdrawal as necessarily putting Australia itself in danger; why we deprecate it is because we see the opportunity of small wars starting in this area, of insurgency starting in this area which might not start or which could quickly be stopped if there were a relatively small number of troops there.

Q. Could I suggest to you that many Australians would possibly regard this in the same way as they regarded the shock of the decision of Britain to join the Common Market some years ago. As a spur towards understanding that it had an independent nationhood to fulfil. Now, won't that accelerate this process, make Australia more aware of its own position as a power in Asia and contributing itself to all this?

PM : Well, it will certainly strengthen what I think Australia already believed and that is that it had to play an independent role and it had to develop itself as far and as quickly as it can, but we haven't got the capacity to be, ourselves, a power in Asia or anywhere else. We are twelve million people. What is the population of London?

Q. About that.

PM: Yes, well we're about the population of London. We can't at this stage, whatever the future may hold and the future may well show that at some stage we can, but at this stage we are not able to be a power in our own right.

Q. What effect do you see it having on the future of the Commonwealth, the idea of an evolving Commonwealth, a multi-racial Commonwealth with Britain at its hub, at its centre?

PM: I think that that is probably something that I would have to wait for time to tell.

Q. What are you prepared to do to strengthen Commonwealth links yourself now?

PM: Well, we are already of course contributing quite a lot to various Commonwealth activities. I haven't got any specific plans to do anything more than we're doing.

Q. But do you fully support, for example, the British Government's policy towards Rhodesia?

PM: I don't think you could expect me to comment on the British Government's policy - I think that would be wrong for me to publicly comment on the British Government's policies.

Q. But you, yourself, are less of a traditionalist, aren't you, than either of your predecessors, Sir Robert Menzies and Mr Holt - you're not as emotionally involved in the Commonwealth idea with Britain as its head as they were?

PM: I think that would be a pretty accurate assessment. I'm not as much a traditionalist.

Q. Well, how do you intend to be different from them?

PM: Well, I would like to think that I could be as efficient and as good as they were in many ways - perhaps I could put it this way - that the first and over-riding and paramount consideration in my mind on all things would be Australia's interests and that would come before anything else.

Q. I notice you said the other day that you, when asked to choose between Australia and ^{between} the United States and Britain, you said you would be Australian to the boot-heels. It's only a couple of years ago that Sir Robert Menzies was saying that Australians were British to the boot-heels. Now, can you explain the difference in those two statements?

PM: Oh, perhaps we've changed our shoes.

Q. Now, as far as the withdrawal goes, you've said that it needn't necessarily imply danger for Australia but the Foreign Secretary has said here recently that Britain will maintain a capability to come to your aid. Now are you reassured by that?

PM: Not really, no. I'd like to know a lot more about it, what it consists of, what its availability is, how it is going to get here and a whole lot of questions ^{to} which at the moment I don't know the answer.

Q. It sounds as if you feel that may be impractical in view of the withdrawal from bases.

PM: Oh no, it's just that I don't know the answers to a lot of questions.

Q. You, yourself, Sir, have departed from the tradition of sharing the burden with Britain of defence. I mean, when you were the Minister of the Navy, you were buying American ships in preference to British ships. Do you not feel that Australia may be paying some of the price of not helping to share the burdens of defence in the Far East to your North?

PM: Well, I don't think you're entirely accurate in what you say. I did, when I was Minister for the Navy - yes, I bought some guided missile destroyers from the United States, that is true. At the same time, I bought some Oberon submarines from the United Kingdom and re-equipped the fleet air arm with large helicopters from the United Kingdom. It seems that you were putting only part of the question.

Q. Yes, more generally, though, Australia's defence Budget was running only at 3 per cent for a very long period after the Second World War.

PM: Yes.

Q. And, of course, Britain's was three times its size. Australia has only just lifted its defence Budget to 5 per cent, I think, hasn't it - Britain's is still greater. Now, do you agree that you could have eased the burden in the past from Britain?

PM: I don't think so. I don't. What is more, I think that there is a different situation in the United Kingdom and here. We have a continent to develop and a nation to build. New things have got to be done calling for more people, calling for more capital, for effort, and in the long run, the building up of a nation with greater numbers, greater industrial muscles, greater capacity would, I think, be a greater contribution than subordinating that at the present time to the purchase of military hardware.

Q. Well, do you say, therefore, that Britain's ability to participate in this, in development, has been impaired by her decision to withdraw?

PM: No, not at all. There may be - we haven't seen it happen yet and I hope we won't - there may be some impediment in the flow of British capital out here to help in this development and to participate in this development, but if that happened, it wouldn't be as a result of anything we did. It could only be as a result of something that England did.

Q. I was wondering whether you felt that psychological factors in Australia's disappointment that Britain has withdrawn might do some injury to the prospects of British imports to Australia?

PM: I don't believe so, for one moment. I think this could get out of perspective a little. We understand Britain's problem. We had talks in which there was no rancour, no recrimination and I think that the nation has no rancour and no recrimination at all about this. But we do feel if overseas exchange were to be saved, then a greater contribution could be made to general peace-keeping in that area - Singapore, Malaysia, than by keeping battalions in Germany, but that is Britain's decision.

Q. But in view of what has happened, would Australia, faced for example with having to make a choice between American capital, Japanese capital and British capital, in a hypothetical situation - is it more likely to reject British capital now, in favour of the other two, bearing in mind the reality of what has happened?

PM: We would not reject capital from Great Britain for one minute, nor indeed would we reject capital from the United States or Japan. We need capital - there is in this country argument and discussion as to whether it should be debenture capital, of how much Australian capital should be required to be invested in some particular development project. But that really has nothing to do with the subject you are opening up. We need capital, we would hope to continue to get it.

Q. And lastly, Prime Minister, can I ask you about whether devaluation in this country, which cost you, I think, something in the region of £130 million plus the withdrawal East of Suez, is likely to encourage you to diversify your holdings of Sterling here in London? Are you likely to try and spread this more evenly in other parts of the world?

PM: I haven't considered this. It's not something on which I could make any comment at all because anything I said could have something read into it and really, nothing should be read into anything I say, so I'll say nothing.

Q. Thank you very much indeed, Prime Minister. Good night.

PM: Good night.
