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The Prime Minister interviewed by John Penlington

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Penlington: Prime Minister, you told your Press Conference last Monday that this de-escalation was the greatest concession that the Americans had made. Now, did they make this great concession without asking Australia whether we agreed they should or not?

Prime Minister: Well, they informed us on Sunday morning that the President was proposing to make a statement and in that statement he would include the decision on removing the threat of bombing, removing bombing, from all the northern part of North Vietnam where 90 per cent of their population lives. This was conveyed to Mr. Hasluck, in fact, because I was in New Zealand, or just returning, but as soon as I got back it was also shown to me. I suppose it would have been possible for us to raise objections but we wouldn't have of course done it.

Penlington: Would it be fair to say though as it happened we were informed and not consulted about this drastic change in American policy?

Prime Minister: I think that would be a reasonably fair way of putting it. We were informed, we were informed in advance. We could have raised objections. We were asked for our reactions to the proposals but there was no week-long discussion beforehand.

Penlington: Well, had we thought that this was an unwise concession to make at the time, do you think our decision would have had any effect on the final result?

Prime Minister: Well, that's such a speculative question that I couldn't answer it but we would have had time to make our objections known had we had any objections.

Penlington: Can we assume then that as America has acted unilaterally that the actual conduct of the war is completely out of our own hands?

Prime Minister: The military conduct of the war in the sense of military operations and moving troops around and that kind of thing has, of course, not really been in our own hands except for the control of our own troops up there which has been and will remain in our own hands. I am not quite sure just exactly what.... perhaps you could rephrase the question a little...

Penlington: Can we make any suggestion about the conduct of the war and have a reasonable feeling that some action will be taken as a result of them?

Prime Minister: I think we could make suggestions to the Americans as to the conduct of the war and I am sure they would be taken into consideration but that I think is all one can expect. One can't expect, yes we will make suggestions and they'll automatically be accepted.

Penlington: Well, Prime Minister, with peace now hopefully on the horizon, would it be possible for America to accept peace terms which would not be peace terms we would like to have? Could this happen?

Prime Minister: Could America accept peace terms which we would think were peace terms which didn't give a true, just, lasting peace to the people of South Vietnam? Well, here again, you're asking such a completely speculative question that I don't think I could give you a meaningful answer to that.

Penlington: Will Australia be seeking a seat at any conference which decides on peace terms?

Prime Minister: Well, our thinking at the moment, this is the thinking of Mr. Hasluck and of myself, is that we should be in the days or weeks or however long it is ahead that these matters are under discussion, that rather than sitting round with all the nations which are engaged in the Vietnam conflict - with Thailand and the Philippines and South Vietnam and Korea and New Zealand - all constantly sitting round a table, that rather our interests would be served and it would be simpler to have bi-lateral information, exchange of information, with United States principally but not leaving out the other matters but rather just bi-lateral talks.

Penlington: Would you agree though that this would appear as though we were letting peace be decided without our own opinions being made thoroughly known?

Prime Minister: Well, I don't think there has been any suggestion for peace conferences, has there? I think the only suggestion has been that the North Vietnamese will appoint a representative to talk with a representative of the United States. Now this is the only proposal that I have heard of.

Penlington: Sir, where would we stand now, where would Australia stand at the moment on the question of allowing the N.L.F. some participation in the future government of South Vietnam?

Prime Minister: I wouldn't think of commenting on any sort of possible peace terms or any possible proposals unless they were sort of concrete and therefore could be commented on.

Penlington: Prime Minister, you said in Hobart less than two weeks ago and I'm using your words: "If there were great changes in the United States' involvement in Vietnam I think the Australian

people would be forced to accept those changes." Now, does this mean that Australia simply has to go along with whatever happens to be American foreign policy at the time?

Prime Minister: No, it doesn't mean anything of the kind. The basis of that question was, it may not have been spelt out as completely as I am spelling it out now but the whole basis and implication was unmistakable, was that if there were a change in the leadership and the administration of the United States and if as a result of that change in leadership and administration the United States in effect withdrew from South Vietnam, what would Australia's position be? And the answer, I think, is the answer I gave and quite self evident: "We can't stay there alone".

Penlington: But when you use the words "the Australian people would be forced to accept those changes in America's policy", are you really saying that we can't be independent?

Prime Minister: I am really saying that if a situation arose where other troops were withdrawn from South Vietnam that we are not the sort of country that can leave our troops there going on fighting without the United States or without... the United States, and I think that's pretty self evident.

Penlington: Well, if the United States, without a satisfactory peaceful solution in South Vietnam, began to reduce its troop commitment to Vietnam, would we be likely to do the same?

Prime Minister: Well, I'd again want to see whatever propositions were concrete propositions before I could comment on that.

Penlington: Do you think the fact that you made various statements earlier this year that our present commitment to Vietnam is virtually at its limit? Do you think that could have had any effect on whether or not President Johnson consulted you about his decision not to stand again?

Prime Minister: I am quite certain it couldn't have had any effect at all. The Americans have 525,000 men in Vietnam, the South Vietnamese army is around 800,000; there are lots of others. Another 1,000 or 1500 or whatever it might be from Australia would have no effect whatever, well, I won't say have no effect whatever, a minimal effect on the overall military effectiveness there.

Penlington: Prime Minister, can we look now at the long term significance of President Johnson's decision not to seek another term in office. Do you accept his statement that this statement is irrevocable?

Prime Minister: Well, yes, I do. It's been stated firmly, it's been stated definitely. There doesn't seem to me to be any after-thought about it. I think one must accept it. I suppose it is always possible at any time for anyone to change their mind but it doesn't seem to me to be likely.

Penlington: If the next President of the United States has an attitude towards American involvement in Asia which is very different to President Johnson's, how ready are we to adjust to that drastic change?

Prime Minister: Well, how ready are we to adjust to a change? Are you asking again could we take on a burden of defence in Asia if there was no United States?

Penlington: No, what I am really asking is, is the Government already working out what it would do if a very different President from President Johnson took a different policy towards South Vietnam?

Prime Minister: Well, we would merely have to do all we could to see that the United States remained interested in this part of

the world, with the presence in this part of the world, because the more that presence continues the safer Australia is.

Penlington: Well, how serious do you think is the present need to persuade Americans to stay in South East Asia?

Prime Minister: And, again, you're talking of to stay in Vietnam?

Penlington: Yes, Vietnam and South East Asia.

Prime Minister: ..Have a continuing interest in the area of South East Asia. Well, I believe that they can contribute considerably to the stability in South East Asia, particularly in countries not engaged, I mean South Vietnam is war, but to contribute stability in the way which the United Kingdom has, for example, contributed to stability, though it didn't prevent outbreaks of minor hostilities, contribute to stability in Indonesia, Singapore and Malaya. But therefore if they do contribute then they would help, I would think, to the building up of the living standards and the economies of these countries which in the long run contributes much more to the stability. So I hope that they would continue that interest and, indeed, we obviously rely very heavily ourselves on the ANZUS Treaty as far as Australia is concerned.

Penlington: Do you think Americans are going to need more persuasion though to stay there? Do you think they are beginning to wonder whether they should stay there?

Prime Minister: I don't think I'd have enough information to answer that question, or I doubt if anyone would without just making an assessment, a speculative reply.

Penlington: Prime Minister, if America's foreign policy moves further towards isolationism, should Australia's foreign policy towards Asia do the same?

Prime Minister: I don't think we should move towards isolationism. We have many contacts with Asian countries, many ways of assisting them, and we are so close to them. We have.. I don't mention just the Colombo Plan but I mean we have a technical capacity which can help build their industries very much; we have an agricultural know-how which has been effective up there; we have the capacity to teach, a capacity to help; and also to a limited extent a capacity to provide some kind of military training or military assistance or whatever it might be; so I wouldn't...I would hope we wouldn't...well, we would not move towards isolationism.

Penlington: As a result of the events of this week, do you think the leaders of South East Asia have any greater reason to feel less secure?

Prime Minister: Not as a result of the events of this week. I think some of them would feel perhaps less secure should the Communists win a military victory in South Vietnam because they have always felt the Domino Theory, which is disparaged by some quarters in Australia, was a valid theory.

Penlington: Prime Minister, finally, this has been the most dramatic week of your term of office so far. How would you sum up how you feel as you approach the end of it?

Prime Minister: Well, there has been an awful lot happening. Yes, it's been a highly dramatic week, but there have been others. After all, like Britain sort of accelerated its withdrawal from Malaya and Singapore which again was a pretty dramatic move. Not only accelerated its withdrawal but rethought the forces it would have available to come here, and this too was pretty dramatic. How do I feel as I approach the end of it? Well, it's been a heavy and dramatic week.

Penlington: Prime Minister, thank you very much for giving us some of your time this week.

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