

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

SPEECH

BY

The Rt Hon. J. G. GORTON, M.P.

ON

PRIME MINISTER'S VISIT ABROAD

Ministerial Statement

[From the 'Parliamentary Debates', 4 June 1968]

Mr GORTON (Higgins—Prime Minister)—by leave—Mr Speaker, the House will be aware of the circumstances which preceded my recent visit to the United States of America. Briefly restated, they were that the visit had been envisaged before President Johnson made his speech of 31st March. In that speech he announced that he would cease bombing over a significant area of North Vietnam—the most populous area—in the hope that this restraint might lead to similar restraints by North Vietnam, and to the opening of talks with North Vietnam which might lead to the achievement of an honourable peace. At that time the President also announced that as an earnest of his sincere desire to achieve a just and honourable peace he had decided to devote his energies to that end and would relinquish his chances of re-election by withdrawing his name from nomination as the Democratic Presidential candidate at the next elections.

I was in doubt, in these circumstances, as to whether that projected visit by me should take place. But President Johnson urged me to come and because the visit would give me a chance to get to know the man who will be President until 20th January 1969, and to get to know some of the men who may

succeed him in that office after that date, I thought that it would be of value to myself and to the Government and to Australia to make the visit. I believe that the visit justified that judgment. I have had the opportunity to speak to, and to get to know, the President and members of the present administration—the Secretary of Defence, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of the Treasury and many others. Indeed I had, in all, six separate meeting periods with the President, either alone or with members of his Cabinet. These, I think, covered an amount of time which had not previously been set aside by any President for a visit of an Australian Prime Minister.

I did not believe that the visit would result in any new, dramatic, developments but I did think that it would give me an opportunity to assess the fears, sometimes experienced and expressed in this and other countries, that the United States might lose interest in the area of South East Asia, might return to a form of isolationism. I have had the opportunity to assess the validity of those fears, Mr Speaker, I believe they are groundless. In developing my reasons for that judgment, I should like to quote first from the remarks which I made on arrival at the White House, and secondly

from the speech in reply which the President, later that day, gave. On behalf of the Australian Government I said:

As Australians see it, the problems of the future, although worldwide, are likely to be most acute in Asia. We see there an area which needs an economic and technical base such as Europe already has. We see there an area where development and progress are essential if the peoples of these divergent nations are to support and defend something dynamic and developing—not something stagnant. We see there an area crying for technical skills, a more experienced administration, a more equitable sharing of an increasing income—and we see there an area subject, above all, to the threat of subversion, terrorism and aggression.

Perhaps, Mr President, though I don't think so, we Australians see this out of perspective—because it is here that we, contiguous to Asia—part of the South East Asia region—live and breathe and have our present and our future. It is here that we feel that we can best contribute to stability and progress and to preserving political freedom which has economic freedom as its goal. It is here that we can play our part—but we cannot effectively play it alone.

I hope the House would agree that this is Australia's approach to the region of Asia in which we live; it is certainly the Government's approach, and I believe it to be the proper approach—that we should want to see stability in the region to our north, that we should want to see economic progress in the north, that we should do what we can to achieve those objectives, but what we cannot alone see them effectively achieved in the time in which they ought to be achieved. That was an expression of the Australian Government's interest in the area and of what we believe should be done there, and indeed an indication that we feel the United States has a duty to help in that approach and that attitude in that area. That night the President replied to these remarks and I quote two passages from his speech:

I know there are some in Asia and elsewhere who are wondering tonight whether the United States will maintain its commitments in Asia; who are wondering tonight whether the strain of the struggle in Vietnam will lead the United States to withdraw and leave two thirds of humanity to its fate without American assistance or American support. . . . I cannot speak for my successor but I can speak for myself and the answer is no.

America will not withdraw. The second passage I quote from the President's speech is this:

In the years ahead we in the United States hope that the new Asia that is being born will be increasingly organised to shape its own destiny.

It should be able to do more for itself and rely less on the U.S. But I have no doubts that there will be no return here to isolationism.

The President went on to point out how in Administration after Administration since 1941, whether the Administration had been Democratic or Republican, the same thread had run through the approach of all the United States Presidents, that there was a duty and an obligation to maintain an interest in this part of the world, to give, where it was required, military assistance against attack, but above all to seek to raise the economic living standards of the peoples in the area so that they would be the more able themselves to resist any threatened attack, so that they would be the more able themselves to help themselves to provide a better standard of living for their people.

Mr Speaker, these public statements, and the private conversations with the President and his Cabinet which occurred, have left me in no doubt—and this is a judgment which is only to be taken as a judgment—that the present Administration will continue the struggle in Vietnam until a peace which assures the South Vietnamese a chance to choose to elect their own Government, free from threat, is secured. And they have left me in no doubt that the present Administration will continue its interest in, and its help for, the South East Asian region. But this is an Administration which is in office only until January next year—although this is some 7 months away—and it is a reasonable and proper question to ask: What will the attitude of the United States be after that date? I can only say that I have had the opportunity to hold face to face discussions with Vice President Humphrey, who is a candidate for the Democratic nomination for President, with Governor Rockefeller, who is a Republican candidate for nomination for President, and to hold a conversation—unfortunately by telephone, not face to face—with Mr Nixon who is the other Republican candidate for President.

After these contacts, my own assessment—and that is all it can be—is that I do not believe, should any of these candidates be successful, that there would be any basic change in the interest of the United States in this region. I do not believe that there would be any retreat to isolationism, and

if this assessment is true it is an important factor on which Australia's future decisions should be based.

The visit helped us in getting background to assist in the formulation of our own decisions as to what we can and should do in this area in the future, for our security in the future is bound up with, and cannot be disentangled from, the security and stability of the whole of the region in which we live. It is necessary for us in those circumstances to make our own decisions as to what we can do to bring about security and stability in the region; but in making those decisions we cannot but be affected by judgment as to what others will do for the same purposes in the same area.

The assessments which I have made have helped us, I think, towards formulating those future decisions so important for the area and so important for ourselves. There are other matters still to be judged and still to be assessed; other discussions still to be held—such as the five power talks in which we will participate—but at least I feel that some of the imponderables, some of the unknown factors of which the Minister for Defence (Mr Fairhall) recently spoke, have, as a result of this visit, been able to be better assessed by the Government.

The talks held in Washington ranged over a wide compass. They covered the present situation in Vietnam, they covered the progress or lack of progress at the preliminary talks at present proceeding in Paris, they covered the broader aspects of regional security—not only military but economic security—and they covered the problems caused by the announced British withdrawal from South East Asia. They were essentially private talks in many aspects. But I would say to the House that I formed a judgment firstly, that the United States, as I have said, would continue to have a presence and an interest in the area of South East Asia; secondly, that the Paris talks were making little or no progress but at least were continuing and that the United States was not prepared to accede to what President Johnson has called a fake peace in Vietnam; thirdly, that the United States

was as interested as we are not only in providing military assistance to threatened countries but also in helping them to help themselves economically; fourthly, that the British withdrawal from the Malaysia-Singapore area caused them some considerable disquiet in that they felt that the stability in that area might by that withdrawal be impaired; and fifthly, that the ANZUS pact has a real and genuine meaning and is the greatest guarantee that Australia itself has against aggression. Its application to areas outside the Pacific area is not so definite as is its application to ourselves; but neither should its application to areas outside the Pacific area be discounted.

Mr Speaker, these may be modest conclusions from a visit of not long duration but the purposes of the visit were themselves modest. Those purposes were to seek assessments of the matters of which I have spoken which were amongst, but were not all of, the imponderables and unknown factors of which the Minister for Defence spoke in his speech on defence. But the conclusions reached, together with those which we shall draw in the future from the progress of the five power talks shortly to be held, will be those conclusions on which our future defence and economic assistance plans will be predicated. Those plans cannot be projected into the future yet for the future is as yet too unknown.

But I think—and on this note I conclude the report of the visit, Mr Speaker—that some progress has been made in helping us to assess and to judge data on which we shall in the future make our decisions. Those decisions, based on this and the other conclusions which we draw from other discussions, will lead us at the appropriate time, when we have what we regard as sufficient on which to make judgments, to come to the Parliament and to present to the Parliament what the future plans of the Australian Government will be for the protection and the advancement of the region in which we live. And this is of the essence of the protection and the progress of the country which we represent.