

# COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

## SPEECH

BY

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

ON

# CZECHOSLOVAKIA

## Ministerial Statement

[From the 'Parliamentary Debates', 22 August 1968]

**Mr GORTON** (Higgins—Prime Minister) [8.0]—Mr Speaker, the House is debating a motion proposed on behalf of the Government by the Minister for External Affairs (Mr Hasluck). The motion is:

That the House expresses its distress at and its abhorrence of the armed intervention in Czechoslovakia by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the East German regime, Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria; condemns this action as a breach of the United Nations Charter and of accepted international conduct; calls for the immediate withdrawal of the forces unlawfully on Czechoslovakian territory and expresses the sympathy of the House for the people of Czechoslovakia in their ordeal.

It may be thought, Mr Speaker, that a parliamentary motion of support for the Czechs and a condemnation of the invaders in this place is a frail weapon, at least in the short term, to set against the tanks and the Tommy guns of the Russian invaders; but it is a weapon available to us and, in the long term, in this and other parliaments may not be as frail as it at first might appear. At least it is a weapon which the Czechoslovakian mission to the United Nations, at the behest of the Czechoslovakian National Assembly, asked us to use, saying:

We appeal to parliaments of all countries and to the world public opinion and ask them to support our legitimate requirements.

Tonight, Sir, this Parliament has its chance to respond to that appeal. The history of

this sad affair is this: On 5th January this year Mr Novotny, First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, a Stalin type, hard line Communist, was replaced as First Secretary by Mr Alexander Dubcek. The Communist Party and the Government of Czechoslovakia began reforms of the existing political and economic system in Czechoslovakia. One of their objectives was to improve the material well-being of the Czechs by diverting to consumer goods those resources which had been almost entirely used for the development of heavy industry and of defence to such an extent that all that was left for the Czechoslovakian people to live on were the bare necessities of life.

The second objective was to infuse some elements of democracy into the previous tyrannous, totalitarian Communist system of government which had prevailed in Czechoslovakia, and so freedom of speech was permitted, censorship of the Press, of radio and of television was abolished. Real discussions began in the national parliament. The courts were instructed to administer the law in accordance with the rule of law. The activities of the secret police were curbed and the free practice of religion was permitted. At the same time the Communist Party, under Mr Dubcek, remained in control of the country. The Czech Government reaffirmed its 'immutable friendship and alliance with

the Soviet Union'. Czech forces remained committed to the Warsaw Pact and the military alliance between Russia, Czechoslovakia and the other Warsaw Pact members remained as firm as ever. So, Mr Speaker, there was no abandonment of military union; there was no abandonment of Communist ideology. There was merely a brave experiment, seeking to give material benefit and seeking to give the right to think and speak openly and freely to Czechs. It was sought not to get rid of Communism but to keep Communism and have a measure of freedom too.

This brief endeavour was soon to be crushed. Russia and the Communist regimes in eastern Europe, who depend for their existence on Soviet military power, could not stomach the revival of free speech and the revival of the rule of law. So at once a hostile Press campaign against the Czech Government began. In June of this year 25 infantry and tank divisions ringed the frontiers of Czechoslovakia on the north, on the east and on the south. In July tension between Czechoslovakia and Russia began to run high but it appeared to have abated following a series of meetings between Czech and Soviet leaders, ending at Bratislava on 3rd August—the third of this month—1968. After that meeting, in the communique issued at its end, the Czechs pledged their commitment to the Soviet Union, to the Warsaw Pact and to Communism, and in return the five other countries taking part in that conference expressed their 'firm intention to do everything necessary to extend all round co-operation on the basis of the principle of equality, respect for sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity'. That was in the communique issued by Russia and the other Warsaw powers on 3rd August—this month.

But in spite of that Soviet troops remained on the border and yesterday at approximately 8 o'clock in the morning Canberra time, which was night time in Czechoslovakia, Soviet and satellite troops launched an invasion over all the frontiers of Czechoslovakia in overwhelming strength while the Czech citizens slept. It is worth noting at this point, as was said at the Security Council meeting today, that that invasion so launched by Communist countries had obviously taken weeks of preparation. Millions of leaflets were dropped on

Czechoslovakia; massive forces had been deployed; a dummy radio station and newspaper had already been set up. This surely indicates that the Soviet leaders, who embraced the Czechs at Cierna and Bratislava and who had issued the communique I have just quoted to the House, had already been planning all this invasion at a time when the public air was filled with smiles. This must be taken to be a gross act of perfidy that should be universally condemned by world opinion.

By morning on the day of the invasion the country was under military occupation. Airborne troops had taken over Prague. Four to five hundred tanks ringed Prague, and the other centres of population were under military control. The glimmer of freedom which had begun to be seen in Czechoslovakia had gone, at least for now. The experiment was over, because that measure of criticism, that measure of free expression of opinion, that permission of argument which the Czechs had sought to introduce into the Communist body corporate had been judged too dangerous, too poisonous for that body to imbibe and tolerate and to live with. The invaders believed it impossible for a Communist government to survive with the consent of or even subject to any public criticism from the governed of a Communist country—surely in itself, Mr Speaker, an eloquent commentary on the Communist system seen from within.

As the Russian tanks rolled over the border to occupy the main centres of the country, as airborne troops dropped throughout Czechoslovakia, reports came over the Prague Government Radio. Those reports announced the invasion, announced that it was happening without the knowledge of the President of the Republic, the Chairman of the National Assembly, the Premier or the First Secretary of the Communist Party Central Committee. Indeed, the Central Committee of the Czech Communist Party met and asked for calm in the population. They sought a lack of resistance to the marching troops, for the odds were too great and they did not wish a repetition of the blood bath of Hungary.

On the next day, 21st August, the Czech Embassy in London issued a statement from the Central Committee of the Czech Communist Party which said:

The invasion of Czechoslovakia and the armed intervention by five states of the Warsaw Treaty were made against the will of the Government, against the will of the President of the National Assembly and other constitutional organs.

No legal organ of the state power in Czechoslovakia had given consent to it or had requested it. Then came statements from the Czech mission to the United Nations, issued by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, transmitting a resolute protest at the Russian action and demanding the withdrawal of all armed troops forthwith. Mr Speaker, the troops remain. The whereabouts of Czech Government leaders are unknown. Whether or not they are safe, whether or not they live, is unknown. Faced with the need to justify an action which the world had hoped it would never see again, a repetition in the same unhappy country of that aggression which Hitler committed in 1938, the Soviet Union now seeks to pretend that its troops were invited into Czechoslovakia. It has issued, through Tass, a long statement which purports to be the text of an appeal by a group of members, unnamed, of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and of the Government. The text of the statement is signed simply and anonymously: 'A group of members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party'. They are still unnamed, or at least they were still unnamed this afternoon. They will remain unnamed unless and until some puppet government can be installed by the military. Some people who, I believe, will forever after be reviled by the Czechs may be bought into accepting the rule of these invaders.

On this matter our own mission at the United Nations has cabled us tonight that the shattering weakness of the Soviet case was that Malik, the USSR Ambassador to the United Nations, was unable to name even one prominent Czech in the Government or the Communist Party who could be identified as one of those who allegedly had asked for the Soviet intervention. He did not in fact name any Czech Government or Party leader at all.

Because of what I have said in recounting the history of this matter and because of the facts I have previously presented I do not believe the Russian claim. The Government does not believe the Russian claim. I think the Parliament and people of Aus-

tralia do not believe the Russian claim and I doubt that anyone really believes the Russian claim, although it is perhaps significant that as far as we know only one government has made a broadcast in firm support of the Russian action in Czechoslovakia, and that broadcast was made over Radio Hanoi.

What we have seen is brute military strength used to crush a military ally, an ideological partner, because some measure of free opinion had been risked. All that is needed to add a postscript, almost tragicomic, to this sombre story is something that appears in a letter written by the Soviet Ambassador to the United Nations to the Secretary-General of that body. In that letter the Soviet Ambassador said, on instructions from his Government, that the Soviet Union vigorously opposed consideration of this question by the Security Council 'and takes this opportunity to call once again upon all states to observe strictly the principles of sovereignty and independence and of the inadmissibility of direct or indirect aggression against other states or peoples'. There must be, Mr Speaker, no limit to the impertinence of these people. This is a perfect example of what George Orwell called double-think.

There is the history of this sorry matter. There are the reasons why this Parliament is asked on behalf of the Australian people to vote—unanimously, I hope—in condemnation of this Russian aggression, in support of the Czech Parliament, which has asked for our support, in support of the immediate withdrawal of the invading forces. The telling of this story may, perhaps necessarily, have been dull and detailed. But behind the words that describe the events that have happened are human tragedies in Czechoslovakia and a check to humanity's hopes in the world. I ask you to imagine the scenes, reported over Prague radio to a stunned world, of bloodshed as an invading tank crushed those who stood in its way and of bloodshed as a Czech woman was cut down by a tommy gunner in the streets. Perhaps a transcript of one such broadcast will underscore this point. Over the sound of cannon and machine gun fire which came across on the broadcast came the announcer's voice as follows:

This is the last appeal. Shooting is heard outside. The end is near. Dubcek—Dubcek—Dubcek.

And then the broadcast ended—as, for a while, Czech hopes for freedom are ended and as, in sadness, are ended the hopes of so many of us who had hoped that European Communism might slowly allow the leaven of freedom to work and might slowly become more liberal. The falsity of these hopes, at least for the present but I hope not for the future, are now starkly clear. [Extension of time granted]

I thank the House. I will not trespass for long on what has been granted to me. Perhaps it may be said that this event does not at once impinge on the Australian people, but it does. Czechoslovakia, striving for freedom and some independence, never was, and is not now 'a far away country of which we know nothing'. Indeed, that excuse for ignoring its agony, which was once before used in the time of its former travail, impinged not only on Australians in the long run but on the world, since it was one of those steps which led to World War II.

Czechoslovakia is a part of the community of nations. When the bell tolls for her attempt at freedom it tolls for attempts at freedom everywhere.

There may be little enough that we can do at present but let us do the little we can. Let us pass this motion in the belief that in this Parliament and in the other parliaments throughout the world, and in the minds and hearts of people who elect the members of this Parliament and the other parliaments of the world, there will come a force which, in the fullness of time, will see that the torch of Czech freedom is again raised high, as I believe it will be; that in those other countries which now have crushed Czechoslovakia the leaven still will work; that they will get those measures of freedom and, having them, will not feel in any way impelled to interfere with the rights of other countries—because in this way, Sir, and in this way alone, ultimately lies the path to peace.