

# COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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## SPEECH

BY

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

ON

# VIETNAM

## Ministerial Statement

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[From the 'Parliamentary Debates,' 5 November 1968.]

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**Mr GORTON** (Higgins—Prime Minister) —by leave—In September 1967 the President of the United States in a speech at San Antonio, Texas, publicly offered to halt all bombing of North Vietnam as soon as the North Vietnamese indicated that such a halt would lead promptly to serious and productive discussions on the substance of a peaceful settlement in South Vietnam. That offer was not accepted by Hanoi.

Subsequently, on 31st March of this year, the President ordered a cessation of the bombing over the major portion of North Vietnam—that part where 90% of the population lives and works—in the hope that that gesture and that renunciation of military advantage would lead the North Vietnamese Government to enter into those substantive negotiations designed to secure a just and enduring peace—a peace which his Government and the Government of Australia had for some time been advocating. Bombardment was continued in the area of North Vietnam to the north of the demilitarised zone where troops and supplies for the invasion of South Vietnam were concentrated before flowing south. The President said then:

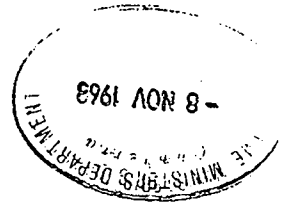
I cannot in conscience stop all bombing as long as to do so would immediately and directly endanger the lives of our men and our allies.

In the result, the North Vietnamese made no reciprocal gesture towards lessening the intensity of the fighting in South Vietnam; nor were they prepared to enter into substantive peace talks designed to discuss the terms on which peace could be attained. They refused to enter into peace talks proper. They did however agree to have discussions on the question of whether there was any basis on which proper peace talks could begin. The talks were held in Paris and have been continuing since 10th May 1968.

As a result of developments during those talks, the President recently formed the judgment that he

... began to get confirmation of the essential understanding that we had been seeking with the North Vietnamese on the critical issues between us.

Those issues were 1. That he should have reason to believe that the other side intended seriously to join in de-escalating the war; 2. That he should have grounds for believing that further reduction in bombing would not lead to an increase in American casualties; 3. That the right of the legitimate elected government of South Vietnam to take its place in serious peace negotiations should be secured; and 4. That serious negotiations on the substance of a peaceful settlement should begin. In return for these requirements being met, the President was prepared to cease bombing altogether and



to agree to representatives of the National Liberation Front being present on the North Vietnamese side of the negotiating table.

I should however emphasise that this is no formal agreement by the North Vietnamese on de-escalation of the war but only a judgment on evidence available to the United States that this response will in fact take place. For his part, the President has made it clear, and I quote:

that such talks cannot continue if they take military advantage of them. We cannot have productive talks in an atmosphere where the cities are being shelled and where the demilitarised zone is being abused.

After President Johnson had announced the cessation of bombing and the results he expected to flow from it, I made the following statement on behalf of the Australian Government:

As you have heard, President Johnson has announced that all air, naval and artillery activity on or within the territory of North Vietnam will be stopped at 8 a.m. Friday morning, Washington time—11 p.m. tonight our time.

We have been consulted by the Government of the United States and kept fully informed of developments leading up to this announcement.

It has been the attitude of the Australian Government that a suspension of bombing in North Vietnam would be justified only if in response some corresponding reduction in North Vietnamese military activity was occurring or could be expected to occur.

The Americans have shared with us the information which has led them to conclude that they can be confident there will be such a response. We believe there are good grounds for their judgment and sincerely hope it will be proved right by future events.

A further expected result is that representatives of the Government of North Vietnam intend to enter into serious and direct talks with the Government of the United States and the Government of the Republic of Vietnam on the substance of a peaceful settlement.

As these results occur we believe that they hold out real hopes of future progress towards a just peace. We will not be seeking to participate in these talks at this stage.

That is the present position. Just as the Australian Government in the past has consistently favoured genuine negotiation, so have we consistently supported President Johnson in his refusal to accept the advice—offered from some quarters—that he should order the bombing stopped unconditionally; that is, without any grounds for belief that the safety of Allied troops would not be impaired and without any grounds for belief that such action would lead to

substantive peace talks. In taking this stand, I believe events have proved us right.

Cessation of the bombing and the admission of National Liberation Front representation as components of the North Vietnamese negotiating team urged by some to be conceded without the reciprocal understandings which the President believes he now has would have been concessions made without any advance towards a peaceful settlement. Cessation of bombing and the participation of the National Liberation Front on the North Vietnamese side of the negotiating table on the understanding that de-escalation and serious peace talks will follow are concessions which do hold out the hope of an advance towards a peaceful solution and in those circumstances we welcome them with hope.

The first course suggested, if taken, would have lowered our shield while the enemy's sword point was still levelled. The course now chosen lowers our shield, but only after the negotiations have led to good grounds for expecting that the enemy's sword point will be blunted and only after agreement to hold substantive discussions on peace have been achieved.

I do not propose in any way to canvass the course which the negotiations may take or the problems which may arise. In a situation of this delicacy, on which so much may depend, I believe it would be positively harmful for anyone in this House to do this. But I should, I think, tell the House that my Government has advised the Government of South Vietnam that while we understand the reservations which it now has, we feel that its interests would best be served by its representatives attending the talks in Paris at the earliest possible date. They would attend as the representatives of the true and legitimate Government of South Vietnam. This is, in our view, a significant fact because until now the Government of North Vietnam has refused any contacts or dealings with the South Vietnamese Government.

In conclusion, Mr Speaker, I would say this. No-one can foretell how long these negotiations will continue and it is possible that there will continue to be hard fighting while the negotiations progress. We hope not, but it is possible that this may occur. The seeds of peace have now sprouted but

the plant has still to grow before we can be sure that the people of South Vietnam will be able to decide their destiny in peace and by peaceful means. What is now occurring is in accord with the pledge of the Allied countries at the Manila Summit Conference that:

We are now prepared to pursue any avenue which could lead to a secure and just peace whether through discussion and negotiation or through reciprocal actions by both sides to reduce the violence.

Mr Speaker, neither the United States nor ourselves went to Vietnam to conquer—but only to prevent conquest of that country by North Vietnam. We sought to show that such military conquest was not possible. It may be—I say no more than that it may be—that the North Vietnamese have come

to realise this, and that the negotiations to be held may produce the cessation of fighting and may produce the durable and lasting peace and the right of choice of the majority of people of South Vietnam, which we have sought from the beginning and for so long. If so, this is a consummation devoutly to be hoped for and I know that all Australians will join with the Government in seeking to do all possible to ensure that the talks attain the results so sought. In the meantime, we should not have too sanguine expectations of too early a settlement—and we shall need to keep our resolution unimpaired.

Mr Speaker, I present the following paper:

Vietnam, Ministerial Statement, 5th November 1968.