



"FOUR CORNERS"

INTERVIEW GIVEN BY THE PRIME MINISTER,
MR. JOHN GORTON, FOR ABC TELEVISION NETWORK

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Interviewer: Michael Willesee

The Prime Minister used Question Time in the House this week to take a verbal big stick to Mr. Whitlam's health proposals and by the opinion of most who were there at the time, Mr. Gorton gave Mr. Whitlam a beating. Mr. Gorton's performance probably wasn't much of a vote-winner because Parliamentary clashes are rather an "in" thing but it was a flying start psychologically for Mr. Gorton and his team. It could well be that Mr. Gorton needs this start because he is very much the man in the hot seat. He inherited a record majority from the late Mr. Holt and there is pressure on him to hold it. Mr. Gorton could come home a comfortable winner by say twenty seats and still face criticism for the seats he lost, and he faces a hostile Democratic Labor Party. None of his predecessors had to do that. If the DLP carries out its threat of switching its preferences from the Government in selected seats, then Mr. Gorton would almost certainly lose some seats. With the election eight weeks to go, we invited Mr. Gorton to talk with us in Canberra.

Q. Mr. Gorton, firstly, have you bowed to any pressure from the DLP this week or in the last few weeks?

PM. Neither this week nor in the last few weeks nor at any time in the past nor at any time in the future.

Q. Mr. Gorton, can I ask you specifically, did you impose on Mr. Freeth last Monday to alter a statement he was making in response to an attack from Senator Gair?

PM. Which statement was this? Oh, this was a statement where Mr. Freeth was defending himself against the personal attacks that had been made on him by Senator Gair. I had a talk with Mr. Freeth. After all, it is not unusual for Ministers and Prime Ministers to talk, and indicated that I thought the proper attitude for a government and ministers to adopt was not to attack the DLP, which after all are a party of principle. We don't need to attack them or to denigrate them, merely to say that they have a right to do what they like with their preferences but they have got to consider the different policies which they must choose between. Mr. Freeth has got a right and so has anybody else to come back against personal attacks or misrepresentation of his words.

Q. In talking with Mr. Freeth, did you suggest that he add the allegation that in certain quarters of the ALP there was some sympathy for communist policies?

PM. No, he had that in himself. He had in his speech himself the words that he had thought that although the ALP itself was not communist, and I would agree with him on that - I mean, you take ALP Members of Parliament or their supporters, of course they are not communist - but he had indicated before that he felt there was communist influence in sections of the ALP through communist-dominated trade unions and matters of that kind, and he reiterated that.

Q. Prime Minister, could we go back to Mr. Freeth's statement of August 14 which started all this, and I think there is a lot of misunderstanding around it. In this statement, Mr. Freeth welcomed the opportunity of practical and constructive dealings with the Soviets and said it was natural that they should promote their presence in our area. Now, firstly, did you approve of that statement?

PM. Yes, I did. I approved of the statement and I approve of your quotation of it which is better than the quotation when you first spoke to Mr. Freeth. Do you remember when you were interviewing Mr. Freeth and you said: "Why, Mr. Freeth, did you welcome the Russians?". Well, Mr. Freeth didn't, but he welcomed the opportunity of constructive discussions and you have put it completely in its proper context.

Q. Thank you! Prime Minister, did Cabinet approve of Mr. Freeth's statement?

PM. No. I don't know of any occasion since I've been in Parliament or in Cabinet when a foreign affairs statement has been taken to Cabinet or gone through Cabinet.

Q. Did Mr. Fairhall, your Minister for Defence, see the statement?

PM. As far as I know he didn't see the statement but equally as far as I know he completely agrees with it and agreed with it and would have agreed with it.

Q. Wouldn't you think that was a little bit unusual that a Minister for Defence shouldn't see a defence statement?

PM. Well, it's not really a defence statement. It's hard to draw the line, I suppose, between defence and foreign affairs.

Q. It certainly went into Mr. Fairhall's area.

PM. I don't know of any occasions, for instance, when Sir Garfield Barwick was there or Paul Hasluck was there where statements on foreign policy ever went through Cabinet or to other Ministers other than the Prime Minister. I don't know of any.

Q. Prime Minister, the biggest point of debate over Mr. Freeth's statement: Was it a significant policy change?

PM. I don't think it was a significant policy change. It has been so interpreted but I don't think it was. Look, what Gordon Freeth said was this. He said we must remember that the Russians have invaded Czechoslovakia. We must remember that they have - I think I quote correctly "a pernicious doctrine of only limited sovereignty"...

Q. Yes, but whatever these qualifications they don't really alter the fact do they that he did make statements that were unusual coming from an Australia Government?

PM. Well, if they were unusual they were as a result of unusual and completely changed circumstances. Now, where does the unusuality lie? He said, and I agree, we in Australia have requirements that we would like to see carried out in the area to our North. We would like to see the countries economically developed. We would like to see trade routes opened. We would like to see the standard of living rising, and we would like to see them retain their own identity and their own sovereignty. Now, we have for some time ourselves been trying to get non-aggression pacts and things of that kind in the area between individual countries and this is in our national interest. The Russians have said something which they haven't spelt out which was that they were interested in much the same sort of thing. Now we don't know what they are interested in. What Gordon Freeth said was that if they make propositions which seem to be in line with our own national aspirations, then we would be prepared to look at them and not just reject them because they came from Russia.

Q. Would you agree then there could be a significant policy change in the light of the changed circumstances of that area?

PM. Well, if Russia went to the length of making some proposals, which she hasn't yet done and if those proposals were, in our judgment, in line with our own and didn't pose dangers because of Russia's general attitude and actions - didn't pose those dangers - then it could be, particularly if the Americans maintain the same sort of diplomatic and economic influence that they have spoken of, it could be of assistance to our national aspirations.

Q. Prime Minister, moving on to the defence cut in the Budget. Mr. Fairhall said, "We are more interested in programmes to meet our needs, not in any arithmetic of expenditure". Do you go along with this?

PM. Well, yes, I go along with it if I give it this meaning which I think Mr. Fairhall would give it. That there is no point in spending large sums of money merely to be able to point to the arithmetic and say, "Look at the large sums of money we are spending". That is fairly pointless. It is more important to get the kind of material and the kind of equipment that you want. But I wouldn't say, and I don't think he said or could have been interpreted to have said that you would cut down your arithmetical sum. Merely, that you wouldn't make that. . . . he said merely that you wouldn't make the size of your arithmetical sum the real test. The test would be - what were you getting and what did you need?

Q. Could I draw your attention then to a statement you made after last year's Budget when you said the vote or the expenditure then indicated the importance you attached to defence. Doesn't this seem a little bit contradictory?

PM. Except that after last year's Budget we were building up not only arithmetical sums of money but also the hardware that those arithmetical sums of money represented and in last year the payments fell due whereas in this year there is still coming in the hardware but payments for them, I understand, are being carried over into the next financial year.

Q. Now, despite your defence cut in the Budget and the resignation of your Defence Minister, Mr. Fairhall, do you still wish to make defence the key issue in the next election?

PM. I think that defence will be a key issue in the election. I think it must be because there are such clearly-delineated differences between the Labor Party and ourselves in this field.

Q. A couple of quick points on defence not quite related. The F-111 decision. Can you tell us when that will be taken?

PM. No, indeed I have never promised that an F-111 decision would be taken before an election though I have been so reported. What I have done is said I would do my very best to get a decision made and announced before the election and this I wanted to do and this I believe I will be able to do. I believe we will be able to make it before the election. Well before the election.

Q. Could you indicate a date? You do have the report before you now?

PM. Well, I haven't yet seen it but I understand that it has been completed. I understand it has just been completed.

Q. So perhaps a couple of weeks?

PM. Perhaps! Who knows?

Q. On the point of a phased withdrawal from Vietnam - the Americans are doing this and you have indicated we shouldn't do this. Why not?

PM. I have indicated that I thought that if and when our troops were withdrawn from Vietnam they should not be withdrawn in driblets. The ground troops which are the ones I am speaking of - being three battalions and ancillary services and tanks and so on - being a viable force should be regarded as a force and either left or withdrawn; but you don't take out some companies or one battalion or something which is what the Labor Party, I understand, is talking of doing.

Q. But if you did take some out wouldn't you then go back to the arrangement you had before, before you built up.

PM. Yes, you would. The arrangement which was found to be unsatisfactory, to be inefficient, to probably present greater dangers to the two battalions who are left than the three who are there now. You go back to a situation which was unsatisfactory and which we corrected.

Q. Prime Minister, before we leave this area, what is your reaction to DLP threats?

PM. I think the DLP is a party which has a perfect right to make up its own mind as to which policies it should follow and nobody can have any objections to that. And if they feel that some other policy is better than our own, then they have a right to direct their preferences or seek to direct their preferences as they may wish.

Q. That is not a reaction, though, is it, when they threaten you?

PM. Oh, what is my own reaction. . . . Well, is this a reaction then? That I feel that since they are a party which was formed, believing in the importance of defence and thinking the Labor Party would not provide it, since they are a party formed believing that there was, through communist-dominated unions influence on the Labor Party and not on ourselves, I do not see how they can in principle support at this election a Labor Party whose defence policies are so different from ours, so much further away from theirs than ours. Is that a reaction?

Q. Perhaps! How many seats do you think you owe the DLP? How many seats have they delivered to you?

PM. How many seats have they delivered to us as a result of. . . .

Q. Their preferences.

PM. Well, it depends on whether you count all the seats in which perhaps we needed five or eight or ten per cent of their preferences. I would not count such seats as seats which were won as a result of DLP preferences, even though we might have needed ten per cent or fifteen per cent, because I believe they would have been likely to have come anyway. I would say there might be four or five, possibly six, where we would need fifty per cent or in some cases seventy per cent of DLP preferences. So in that sense, without being able to answer you exactly, that would be about of the order. Of course, the DLP owe, I would say, at least two and maybe more seats to us for our preferences.

Q. Is that a counter-threat?

PM. No, no. Just pointing out one of the facts of life.

Q. Prime Minister, I would like to look more closely at you and firstly your impression, your personal impression on government. You have been accused of political patronage in government - guilty or not guilty?

PM. What does political patronage mean?

Q. I would think bringing a friend in, all things being equal perhaps?

PM. I would think, on the whole, not guilty. The last two appointments that I made to the Ministry, I think, were one of the causes of this. Now, Mr. Freeth could scarcely - though I like him very much - have been described as a great friend of mine. For example, when we were contesting the Prime Ministership he was quite openly and quite decently and quite honestly doing his best to defeat me, so there could scarcely be a charge of patronage there. On the other hand, Mr. Dudley Erwin was supporting me. There again, he was the Whip, which is not always but usually - not always - the stepping-stone to an appointment further up.

Q. Whether guilty or not guilty, do you think it is necessarily a bad thing to have this sort of political patronage?

PM. Yes, I do if the person is not competent to do the job. I don't think it's a bad thing if the person is - you know, other things being equal - is as good as anyone else.

Q. In various ways, commentators talk about your independence. Firstly, is it true, and if it is, is that a natural thing or some sort of deliberate policy?

PM. Independence? Of what?

Q. Oh, independence of the Party, of Cabinet, of the bureaucracy.

PM. Well, I think one ought to be not independent of, but certainly not swayed by the bureaucracy. One should listen to their advice but one should then form one's own judgment after having had the benefit of that.

Q. Could we make it comparative? Do you think perhaps you are more independent than perhaps Prime Minister Holt?

PM. Well, I think comparisons are fairly odious. I would just say that I don't believe one ought to be swayed by the bureaucracy. I think one should pay attention, considerable attention to what people in one's Party say, not be bound by it, and this has always been the way in which Liberal Prime Ministers have operated. This is not something from me, myself. As to the Cabinet, then there again, when you have a strong majority feeling one way, I think one should do what the Cabinet wants unless one believes that something is so highly significant and highly important that one couldn't go along with it oneself.

Q. And that has happened fairly often with you in two years, hasn't it?

PM. Not terribly often - maybe once or twice.

Q. But haven't there been six, perhaps ten occasions when you have stepped in and taken over a matter that would normally be under the responsibility of a Minister - shipping, MLC.....

PM. MLC, yes. MLC is a complete point in support of the case that you are making. Shipping is quite the reverse. I think there were six Cabinet meetings on shipping initiated by the Minister for Trade, and at one stage culminating in the Minister for Trade being sent by Cabinet to the United Kingdom to make a negotiation the terms of which were in a Cabinet decision and which were very very close to the ultimate terms decided on.

Q. How about the recent Budget where it appeared that your imprint was fairly strongly on that because it wasn't quite the advice the Treasury had given you?

PM. Yes, I think.....well, I wouldn't say it wasn't quite the advice the Treasury had given me. I am not going to venture into that matter. But such things as assistance to social services and the tapered means test are certainly things which I felt very strongly on and fought for. Not alone - other Ministers were with me too.

Q. Prime Minister, in talking about you in this area of your impression on government, the name Cyrus Hewitt often comes up. You appointed him to head your Prime Minister's Department. He is sometimes said to have unusual power. Firstly your comment on this and also could I ask you perhaps whether you regard him more as the sort of adviser that an American President might take to office with him?

PM. I don't think he has got unusual power at all. People have been writing this for some time now. You know, journalists tend to each other up a little. Somebody writes it and somebody else repeats it, somebody else repeats and after a while it becomes part of folklore. But I don't think he has got any unusual power whatever. He certainly hasn't with me and I don't think he has with other Ministers and I doubt if he has with the Departmental Heads. He would be one of the advisers I would look to but as I say, one looks to the Heads of the Bureaucracy for advice and then makes up one's own mind.

Q. Prime Minister, in this question, I am not inferring any unusual amount inside criticism, but presuming there must always be some, do you concern yourself about criticism from the inside or do you feel.....

PM. You mean from the Party members.....

Q. Yes, perhaps more particularly Cabinet, but also within the Party.

PM. I don't concern myself with criticism from within the Cabinet because I think there is very very little. I may be quite wrong but I don't know of any anyway but it is quite possible it could be but if so I don't know of it. Within the Party, one seeks to do one's best to give Party members the opportunity to express their views, to realise that the things that they really believe in and really put forward are thoroughly examined and are not accepted for what can be argued to be good reasons. Having done that, then I think one just has to put up with the criticism, because whatever one does with a large group of people, one is never going to please everybody, so there is always going to be some criticism.

Q. How do you see your policy-making role in relation to the Liberal Party?

PM. Well, I think that the time has come, and I think it is evident in this country that it has come when the Liberal Party has got to re-examine the dogmas of the quiet past in the light of the changing present. We have got to re-examine our defence and foreign affairs commitments because of the changes of Britain going, of the United States perhaps not being so interested in providing troops assistance to our North. We have got to examine the requirement for as much Australian participation in development as is possible, instead of just accepting without question, without asking for Australian participation.

Q. In these respects do you see yourself as a man of change?

PM. Yes, I think so. I think too in seeking to re-evaluate social welfare and to move from a situation of merely raising 50 cents or one dollar across the board to try to find areas of need and doing what you can in them and at the same time trying to reward thrift and seeing that is not held back. These are changes and these are things we are doing.

Q. When you talk about the need for the Party to change, are you suggesting some section of the Party at least might be lagging behind?

PM. No, I think they are going along I think the Party is very happy with these sorts of changes. We want to try and provide opportunities for the individual to express himself - not just to have a job though it is essential that there should be full employment, but to have the chance to do the sort of job which appeals to him and which he can feel happy in doing rather than one which he just has to do unhappily in order to earn a living. Now these are things you can do through education, through technological education, through the opportunity for adult education and re-education and you can do it too through expanding the opportunities in the arts and this again is something I think

Q. Prime Minister, to wind up, how long would you like to remain Prime Minister?

PM. Well it depends on how I am feeling. If I am feeling good and healthy I think . . . well, you know, when I am feeling good and healthy I think it would be lovely to be there for a long time. If you get a little tired you think, oh, it's a bit wearing and it's my fault there is a drought in Queensland and I can't sleep and it's my fault that something has gone wrong somewhere else or it's my fault there is an argument in a union. This sort of thing.

Q. Does any consensus come out of this?

PM. Oh well on those occasions you think to yourself, well, really I don't want to be Prime Minister for more than another twenty years.'

Q. Prime Minister, thanks for talking to "Four Corners".
