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"JOHN GORTON'S FIRST 1,000 DAYS"
TELEVISION INTERVIEW GIVEN BY THE PRIME MINISTER
MR. JOHN GORTON ON CHANNEL 7 TV NETWORK

Interviewer : Peter Martin

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Programme opens with film segment showing Mr Gorton speaking to well-wishers outside Parliament House on the day he became Prime Minister - 9 January 1968.

Q. Prime Minister, that was more than one thousand days ago now, more than two and a half years ago. Now, looking back on your first weeks of settling into office, you must have had some expectations about the office - what it meant - and some of those expectations, if you are like everyone else, must have been fairly solidly tested or abandoned pretty quickly. Did you have any expectations that got shot to pieces?

PM I don't think I did. I don't think I had firm expectations and therefore no expectations to be shot to pieces, and indeed, there wasn't much time to arrive at firm expectations. The first day I was there Harry Lee rang up from Singapore about problems with the British withdrawal, and then we had a postal strike and things just seemed to pour in one after the other.

Q. It was a very busy time. You also had in a matter of weeks the beginning of the Tet offensive. Did you wonder at that time what the hell you had gotten into?

PM Well I had been in the Cabinet, but I think what struck me most in the first month or two was the enormous importance everybody seemed to place on every word that one spoke. . . . and the interpretations that were put on that word. The words were taken inside out and interpreted different ways by different people, which is something I hadn't expected. I guess that is one expectation. And you mentioned the Tet offensive. At that stage I had made the statement we would be sending no more troops to Vietnam. That, of course, had been decided by the Cabinet in the previous Government. It was known to our allies and everything, but I was surprised at the surprise with which that was received.

Q. One newspaper wrote when you were elected Leader of the Liberal Party - "Fasten your seat belts, please". Some political correspondents who have been here for twenty or thirty years or so tell me that they have never seen such a tumultuous time around the Parliament in all their experience. Do you agree that this has been a stormy and eventful period?

PM Oh, I am sure it has been. It has been stormy and eventful inside the Parliament, but it has been stormy and eventful in Australia's history, I think. We reached a stage where from the defence point of view the whole of our previous concept of our history was changed by Britain's withdrawal. We reached a period of development where we took a completely new approach in trying to protect Australian ownership, as far as we could, without stopping the inflow of overseas capital. There was a completely new kind of approach there. We had to look again, or suggested we should look again at Commonwealth/State power relations. And all these matters were things that had just gone along quietly for years and suddenly they came to a point where there were new facts, new requirements, new discussions.

Q. They are all things that lead back to you, though. Do you accept responsibility for the fact that it was a stormy period?

PM For everything except Britain's decision to withdraw from the near North!

Q. Your first Cabinet was generally regarded in the Press as something of a disappointment. The phrase that was being used was "new broom". People said the new broom hadn't swept clean. You later made considerable changes, but why didn't you change at first? Were you overawed by your more senior Cabinet colleagues?

PM I don't think any of my then more senior Cabinet Ministers who sat with me in the Cabinet would for a moment think I was overawed. But they were senior Ministers of considerable standing in the Party and in the country and it could have been too much of a new broom to..... I won't mention names but there were a number of senior people and changing them all round straight away I think could have had more detrimental effects than good ones.

Q. Well, if I may be impudent enough to suggest names - because they have been suggested publicly - it was suggested that Mr Hasluck and Mr McMahon and Mr Fairhall, with their seniority were a little more conservative on many issues in Cabinet than you were and that they tended to resist the changes you wanted to introduce. Did you find that frustrating?

PM Well, I would say it was true to say that as a general thing these gentlemen were more conservative than I was on many matters. Did I find it frustrating? No, and eventually I think the conservatism tended to be overcome.

Q. How?

PM Oh, by force of circumstance, cogency of argument and persuasion and passage of time - you put it how you like.

Q. Now, it's a fairly open secret, I think, that there's not a great deal of love lost between you and Mr McMahon and between you, and for that matter, Sir Henry Bolte. Do you find that when people within your own Party disagree with you that they are harder to get on with than some Opposition members, for example?

PM Well, I suppose that anybody in any Party would find that people within that Party who disagreed with one were more difficult than people in the Opposition. You expect the Opposition to disagree, but I found Mr McMahon a very, very good Foreign Minister and a good Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party.

Q. You didn't mention Treasurer?

PM Well he's now the Foreign Minister.

Q. One of the early storms came with the. . . . one of the fairly quiet storms, I suppose, the appointment of Mr Hewitt as Secretary of the Prime Minister's Department. This brought up allegations of interference in the Public Service, and you are quoted on one occasion as saying, "I see every reason why the Prime Minister ought to be able to appoint somebody in whom he has complete confidence and with whom he has worked before". Do you regard Public Service neutrality as a bit of a myth say, at the top level?

PM No, I think the good public servants at the top level, or at any other level, can't be expected not to have their own political beliefs, but can be expected to subordinate those political beliefs to carrying out the policy of the Government of the day. But I don't think that has got much to do with what you have just quoted. I think the appointment of the Head of any Department is within the province of the Minister running that Department, and it will run much more smoothly and much better if the two men know each other and can work together well, than if they don't, and this I think is particularly true in the case of the Prime Minister's Department. Now I had worked not with Hewitt but. . . . when I was Minister for the Navy he was in the Defence Section of the Treasury and we had many an argument on that occasion, and then I worked with him when I was Minister for Education and he was the Head of the Universities Commission, and one knew each other's style of work and it seems to me had common confidence and that's a good thing to have in any Department.

Q. Do you accept the fact that Mr Hewitt is very often regarded as something of a bete noire?

PM Well, I have got to accept that a lot of people from time to time, and a number of people constantly, regard Mr Hewitt as a bete noire. Then I have also got to accept the fact that that applies to me too. So why shouldn't we work together?

Q. Well can I ask you then. . . . you have talked about your relationship with Mr Hewitt. What about at the Cabinet level? Now after you had settled in and you had the first Cabinet, you then introduced a number of other people who were associated with what people called the Mushroom Club. Do you find that you work better at say the Cabinet level with men who are close friends? Would you rather have that than a situation where some of the people who disagree with you get right in at the first level of policy?

PM No, I wouldn't. And what's more I don't see that they are mutually exclusive. I don't see why a person can't be a personal friend but have a completely different view on some matter and put it forcefully. I can't see any reason for any hangover of resentment when that happens, and indeed, it seems to me that in a way it is essential that it should happen. It would be a bad thing to have everybody just sitting around just waiting to see what a Prime Minister wanted and then saying "yes". It would be bad for the Prime Minister and for the Government and for everybody else. And in the Cabinet I don't think we have got anybody who was in any way associated with what has come to be called the Mushroom Club.

Q. Not yet?

PM Well, I don't think we have at the moment.

Q. The philosophy of the Liberal Party also seems to have come in for a lot of testing in your period of office. Apart from the Federalism issue - we'll deal with that later perhaps, the free enterprise plank of your party's platform, one of its basic tenets now seems to be accepted with perhaps a few more qualifications than before. For example, you made the MLC decision without consulting Cabinet. You also had the Industries Development Corporation, the business surrounding the guidelines for overseas capital generally. Now can you tell us now, for example, the MLC business came about?

PM Well that came about as a result of our learning that an undisclosed buyer - or buyers - were buying up large quantities of MLC shares and putting them in the names of nominees. Nobody knew who had them and they were continuing this buying process and it became evident, and I believe factually evident, that unless some action was taken fairly quickly, a stage could be reached where this buying up of shares would give whoever was buying up a controlling interest in the MLC. And we felt that that was an Australian company with a great lot of capital at its disposal, a lot of premium income, a lot of other income and that we wouldn't want that capital and the investment of it to fall under overseas control. You wanted to ask me something about that?

Q. You were in Western Australia at the time, I think. Was this a question of getting hurried phone calls?

PM Oh, no, no. We had the papers beforehand. I had to go to Western Australia, but I had studied it through beforehand and took them with me and made the decision from there, but it didn't just come up when we were in Western Australia at all.

Q. On this general question. You have dealt now recently, for example, with Queensland Mines. You have dealt with MLC business. You have dealt with ESSO/BHP. This is what is generally being termed your economic nationalism. Wouldn't it be better to lay down set rules that everyone knows so that.....nominate perhaps certain industries that would be considered vital in the national interest to control locally?

PM I don't think it would. Of course, there are some industries which have been nominated as industries which shouldn't be allowed to fall into overseas hands - television stations and media, newspapers, banking - a number of industries. I don't think you could lay down a statement saying well, mining..... mining covers an awfully large field..... should not be allowed to fall into overseas hands, nor should you. I'm sorry, I'll start again..... should not be allowed to fall into overseas hands. Nor could you lay down a rule saying well, the level of investment from overseas in mining should not be more than twenty per cent or thirty per cent or **forty** per cent or whatever you mention, because there is so much variety in mines. There is so much variety in the amount of capital required. ESSO/BHP, for example is a 50/50 partnership. It requires hundreds of millions. Some other mines require far less an amount and I don't think you could lay down rules which didn't become restrictive because they were insufficiently flexible.

Q. Aren't you worried, though, about the possible feedback in future if you make another decision like that, and someone can say, "Well, Gorton's done that because one of his Liberal Party backers is in that company and he want a bit of protection," - if you do it on an individual company basis.

PM Well if somebody could say that and could in any way advance any evidence to back it, yes, one would be worried, but I don't think they ever could or would be able to say that.

Q. You are confident that you can avoid that.....

PM I couldn't avoid somebody saying in the case of a decision, "Well, somebody who supports the Liberal Party is there and that's why the decision was made," but I am quite sure that in any circumstances of that kind the reasons for the decision would be such that the vast majority of people would see that there were reasons for it, whether they agreed with them or not.

Q. Prime Minister, getting down to what might be generally called your style. Someone said of you once - you probably recognise the quote - "He's really too wilful, I think, and obstinate sometimes, rather than strong-minded. I think he is the sort which learns only from experience." Dr Darling, your previous Headmaster at Geelong Grammar. Do you accept that as a criticism of you?

PM Well, of course, he wrote that when I was at school and I have had a lot of experience since then and presumably learnt a lot from that experience - I hope!

Q. Well one of those experiences has been suggested as maybe reflecting that. It was the off-shore one - the Off-Shore Legislation crisis. Now it was suggested, for a start, that you had reached breaking-point and had a whole series of criticisms within the Party room. And then the Off-Shore Legislation came up and suggested one theory that explained the crisis that followed, and you said: "I'm sick of this now. This one I am going to stick with."

PM No, no. Well, if there were any truth in that, which ones did one not go ahead with before which would lead one to say, "Well, I am sick of pulling things off" - I mean, we did have a lot of criticism from certain quarters on the IDC and we didn't say well we won't go ahead with it. We had a lot of criticism about the Health Scheme which we introduced and theories about what might happen, but we didn't stop. We went ahead.

Q. There were some modifications, I think, at that stage?

PM Oh, I don't really think.....

Q. Well you accepted the Senate's modifications?

PM Oh, well, they were not basic in any way at all. No, the Off-Shore Minerals Legislation is legislation which is needed to define just who has got sovereignty in these areas. At some stage that will be defined one way or the other.

Q. I am not in fact querying that suggestion, but I am wondering, and a lot of people wondered whether that was really the way to do it. You haven't got that legislation through yet.

PM No, we haven't got it through yet.

Q. There was a story that one of the compromises that came up from members of your Party - Mr McEwen took it to you - you took one look at it and told him what the people concerned could do with it.

PM But these were all stories which were written by people who weren't anywhere in the vicinity. I am sure that Mr McEwen would completely deny some of the wild far-out stories that came up. There were, from memory, propositions which I didn't think were sensible propositions. But this way that people wrote about - throwing them on the floor, or something. This is just ridiculous.

Q. But couldn't you see at the time it might have been better just to pull off, wait a little and then put it through later? As it turns out, you are probably going to do that.

PM Well it might have been. But it seemed to me to be a proper thing to happen for Australia, and it still seems to me to be an essential thing to happen for Australia. Perhaps it would have been better not to go ahead but I think the adherence to the necessity for doing this was necessary, and is necessary..... a matter of timing and other things comes into it.

Q. You have occasionally got annoyed with your critics. You referred at one stage at a time of crisis on the eve of the general elections last year, to white frog-bellied things that come out of the sewers or something. You have also criticised some pressmen for taking an attitude to your New Guinea trip, saying it was going too well - they were saying it was going too well and what could they do to denigrate it. One gets the impression that you feel sometimes, in times of stress rather plagued by people.

PM Well let's look at both those things you have mentioned. May I say that the white frog-belly or whatever it was, was not on the eve of the general elections - I'm sorry, I think it was - the day before the election. It could well have been, but it was in reply to a specific question about a lot of calumny, personal calumny that had been poured out and somebody printed photographs, denigratory photographs which didn't seem to me to have anything to do with political matters or anything of that kind - just personal calumny. And that was in relation to that alone. As far as New Guinea was concerned, well, you know I can't reveal my sources but I think the sources are fairly - I believe in the sources anyway that some of these statements were made on that New Guinea visit, and if so, I think it is a reasonable sort of a thing to say they are not quite impartial.

Q. You concede then to pressmen who rely on similarly reliable sources that they could sometimes be right.

PM Sometimes be right and sometimes not!

Q. Prime Minister, you mentioned the obvious one of the calumny directed against. Your personal criticism by Mr St John was one of the most dramatic events in the Parliament.

PM Yes, it was.

Q. What was your reaction? Were you furious? Were you angry? Were you cool?

PM I was very surprised that that should happen, not only at the strictly personal attacks but the other statements made about never consulting with Cabinet, acting like a dictator and a lot of things which seemed to have no basis in truth whatever. And it is an unpleasant thing to be publicly attacked in that way.

Q. Can you remember your very first reaction? Just surprise? Was it anger? Or did you find yourself very cool? There tend to be the two extremes.....

PM I don't think I could say one would find oneself to be very cool under that kind of approach. I do remember getting more and more surprised as all these odd accusations about dictatorship and so on came up. Nor do I really think that anger is the exact word that describes one's reaction. There is a word, but I can't think of it, but it is nearer to anger than to coolness, but it's not quite either.

Q. Another criticism that is made of you is your tendency, as one writer put it, to talk too much about what the Government hopes to do without first working out how it hopes to do it. Do you accept that criticism?

PM In one way that could be a criticism, and yet I started - perhaps I am not doing it as much now - I started with a belief that in many, many areas, a Government should stimulate public discussion on a particular subject, should go before the people and say, well, this is one way a thing could happen; on the other hand, this is another way it could happen, but on the whole we would hope it would happen this way. And that would get people writing into the newspapers, or writing columns or arguing, which I had thought was quite a good way for a democracy to function before the Government finally came down. I still think it is except that it does tend to the sort of criticism that you just mentioned being made. I don't think that that criticism leads to a better way of running a government, but it probably leads to getting into less trouble.

Q. Forgive me, but I have just thought of one example that puzzled me at the time which may come in that category. The Cape Keraudren business, the atomic harbour, that was a puzzling one because the announcement was made that that would be tried, that a study would be completed within six months, whereas in fact, in basic terms, you need two years for an ecological study to be made.

PM Well, no, at the time, the Department of National Development at that time had received this request for this to be done, for this atomic harbour to be blown, and the expense of it was to be borne by the entrepreneur who had a lot of iron leases.....and the United States people were prepared to carry out this study and those were the time scales given. But it subsequently transpired that the man who was going to finance it believed that the richness of his ore deposits was not as great as he thought they were and so he wasn't prepared to go ahead and finance it and that's what happened. But it was quite a firm proposal as put forward.

Q. I got the impression at the time that it might have been a bit of grandstanding.

PM No, it was.....

Q. When you drop these phrases at first, as you fly a kite, it can look a bit like grandstanding.

PM Yes.....but this was what happened to this one. It was going to be financed by the big businessman.....

Q. Now, Prime Minister, one of the areas where you have had criticism has been in the External Affairs area, the Foreign Affairs area where you have taken the initiative yourself on a number of occasions. Now very early in your Prime Ministership you said "No more troops in Vietnam". Shortly afterwards you were saying "Well, I am not quite sure. I don't want to be committed all the way into the future". or to that effect.

PM Yes.

Q. You have also said during the last election campaign, or a bit before it, as far as the troops in Vietnam are concerned, it's "one out all out", but in fact it will be one battalion back. Is this the function of your speaking too soon?

PM No, I don't think it is, but you can make your own mind up about that. We had made a decision as a government that we wouldn't be providing any more troops to Vietnam and the question actually asked of me was a question about the immediate future because of the Tet offensive and so on, and I announced what the Government's decision had been. But later on I was asked "Does this apply forever", and no-one can say that something applies forever because a whole scene might change, but it did apply and in fact did apply all the way up until now. On the question of the withdrawal of our own troops, we had three battalions there carrying out a particular function, and they were a viable force - we could have people at rest and people out. And they would not be able to carry out that same function, and they won't be able to carry out that same function with a part of them being withdrawn. They will have to have a modified and different function. But if they were to have carried out the same function that they were carrying out at that time, then they would all need to stay there or the whole lot would have had to come out.

Q. You don't think you could have foreseen that at all?

PM I don't think so, no, on the advice I had at the time.

Q. There was only a matter of about seven weeks, I think, between the two statements.....

PM Well we did have, if I remember rightly, further movements towards Vietnamisation and other changes in the overall picture in Vietnam.

Q. One gets the impression at times, if I can put this to you, that sometimes in our Vietnam commitment, on one or two occasions anyway, you have seemed to have been a little annoyed with the Americans. There was the instance that came out in public to some extent of the bombing pause that President Johnson announced just after Mr Fairhall had made a very strong speech in Parliament saying no bombing pause was out, Vietnam pulling out, giving concessions. Do you have problems or have you had problems over this two and a half year period in the relationships with the American people?

PM No problems in the relationship with the American people or with the American Government. I think at the time you were speaking of - and one has got to cast one's mind back quite a while for this - I think we had a feeling if there was going to be a bombing pause, we might have been told sooner than we were that that was the actual policy of the United States. We were told but not far in advance.

Q. There was then the thing which I think Mr St John raised to some extent and it has also been raised by other people, that you held a midnight press conference on October 17 and you said that there was only - gave the only official confirmation, I think, throughout the world at that stage.....

PM This has been alleged, of course. What actually happened there was that the cables were running hot from the United States and perhaps from Europe - I don't know - the media cables were running hot with statements of what was going to happen and what the United States were going to do, and our own press people wanted to talk to me about it. And so I came back to the House and talked to Alan Barnes of the "Age" and some other man.....

Q. AUP

PM Ken Braddick of AUP. They seemed to get slightly different stories and Braddick's was a little bit the more interpretive, I think, than Alan Barnes' and led to this allegation of official confirmation of something. I think if you see the stories that Barnes wrote or that somebody in the "Sydney Morning Herald" wrote covering him, they were rather different from what Braddick himself wrote.

Q. Then again in the foreign affairs area, the Malaysia Five Power talks, and the Malaya/Malaysia controversy. This was also one which struck me at the time. In that same speech you referred to "Malaya" rather than "Malaysia". You also suggested to the Malaysians that they should tidy up their own affairs a bit.- they were having racial trouble. Was that diplomatic?

PM I don't know, but I think it was necessary for Australia's position to be made clear to everybody and Australia's position was that we were not going to get mixed up in inter-racial strife. I think it might have been more diplomatic to say something which could be interpreted several different ways, but it wouldn't have been as clear to all concerned and on the whole, in the long run, I think it is rather better for a nation's attitude to be quite clear in relation to things like that. And so that was made clear. Also we did not wish to become involved in any quarrel that might arise between the Philippines and the claims to North Borneo. We therefore drew some distinction between the commitments that we felt we had in - I'm sorry, Malaya - or the Peninsula of Malaya. I think everybody knows what that means as distinct from the other component parts of Malaysia. And I think it's proper to make one's position known in these matters.

Q. We have very little time left, Prime Minister. I want to touch on a couple of other areas, one is New Guinea and the controversy you have been involved in. It seems to have been, for a start, the only area in which that I can think of where you have used the Menzies technique of stealing the Opposition's thunder when you appointed Mr Johnson as Administrator.

PM Why? Were they going to do that, or something?

Q. Well Mr Whitlam had mentioned him favourably in the House.

PM Well he had been mentioned favourably to me by quite a number of people who knew him and had known him during his Army days and ever since. And in fact I especially asked him to do it, and great credit is due to him because he had been appointed as the Head of a College of Advanced Education in Tasmania at a far more comfortable job, a far less straining job, and I could imagine at least at the same amount of remuneration, but he went back there because he felt that was his duty. I think it was a good appointment, as I think the new Secretary, David Hay, was a good appointment.

Q. The hot issue of New Guinea is still the Mautaugans, and it is a continuing one it looks like. Can you understand, follow their argument against the way European and Chinese influence may be increased unnecessarily - in their view - by having a Multiracial Council?

PM No, I can't but that doesn't matter. That doesn't matter whether I can or not. I don't believe the European. . . . I can't understand how a multi-racial council, made up as it is, could increase the European or the Chinese influence. But if the people of the Gazelle Peninsula believe this that's a different matter and that is why I said, "Well for goodness sake let's find out what the people want. Let's have a referendum and we will abide by the result".

Q. Are you confident that we can avoid the kind of thing that has been in Africa?

PM No, I'm not. I think if we precipitately withdraw that we could lead to the situation where the majority of the population would be sorry that we had withdrawn - I am speaking of all the Highlanders and many in other areas - would not wish to be ruled by the elite and where there could be repetition of some of the internal struggles that we have seen in Africa. And this is one of the great, great problems of New Guinea.

Q. Can't we also get into a situation as in Kenya where we find ourselves having to put people in gaol? And then finding them national leaders. That happened in so many.

PM I suppose that that is so, but isn't the difference between our approach to New Guinea and the approach to Kenya that we say and mean that when we can discover the wishes of the majority of people then we will meet those wishes. There is no question about that. Certainly we have given evidence of our continuation along the path of handing them more self-government, but the real difference, I think, is that we say, "Right we will get out". Now, it is hard to know exactly the best way you can discover what the wishes of the majority of the people are, but it could be done either by statements and votes in the House of Assembly, it could be done by a referendum of some kind, it could be done by something which is more natural to them than to us, which is sitting down and getting a consensus of opinion. But I wouldn't go into the means of it, but I do think we should find out what they want before we take action.

Q. Prime Minister, one final question, because we have run a bit beyond our time in fact. Does it perturb you as a proclaimed Australian nationalist that the time of your office has seen some of the strongest emotional divisions in the Australian community - the youth/age problem, which wraps up with drugs and marihuana to some extent, and different standards of morality, the anti-Vietnam movement, and the growth of conscience issues rather than economic issues to some extent?

PM I don't think the growth of conscience issues in internal matter is divisive. You are thinking of people saying, "Well, more ought to be done for the poor, and more ought to be done in preserving the environment," and these matters, and I don't think there is any strong antipathy between the people who are saying "More should not be done for the poor" or we shouldn't look after our environment. It is disturbing that the Vietnam question should have raised the controversy it did but then I think it's a matter of decision as to whether we are divisive or whether those who use the methods against observance of the law are divisive.

Q. Prime Minister, what do you see in the next one thousand days?

PM Well I hope there will be a little more peace and quiet at some stage during that thousand than there has been during this thousand which has seen more changes, more new problems, more solutions of many problems than I think any other thousand days has probably seen.

Q. Thank you, Prime Minister.
