

ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE VICTORIAN WOMEN'S
SECTION OF THE LIBERAL PARTY OF AUSTRALIA

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Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. John Gorton

Madam Chairman, Distinguished Guests and all those present here :

We are meeting on the eve of a Senate election. We have far too many elections, I know. That is not my fault! You will have to look further back than that. We have far too many, but this is one, and I think a very important and significant one, particularly in the State of Victoria. Because the results of this Senate election could - they could, I don't think they will, but they could result in Labor being able to obtain a blocking half of the Senate - 30 Members, and if they did, then they would be able to do nothing constructive, but they would be able to do everything obstructive to frustrate, to delay, on occasions to throw out measures brought in by the Government to fulfil the promises it made for a three-year period only a year ago. And it could frustrate the Government achieving the objectives which it has over and above the specific promises made. . . . objectives of which I hope to say something to you a little later.

It would be a tragedy for Australia if this election were to result in such capacity for obstruction and frustration and delay, and that is why it is of such importance that we should, particularly in Victoria where we can win a seat from Labor, do everything in our power to see that in fact we do so win.

Let me tell you some of the reasons - necessarily briefly - why I think this is so.

There is a vast gap between the approach of the Government and the approach of the Opposition in the fields of defence and Australia's security; in the fields of the need to see that any gains made by the community are real gains and not merely illusory monetary gains which buy no more; in the attempt to approach the tasks before us responsibly and not to make a myriad of irresponsible, undocumented promises which can't be carried out.

Let me advert to those few headings for a start. I believe that a good deal of discussion at the election will centre on the question of whether Australia and Australian troops should or should not remain in Vietnam, and we will be called immoral because we are in Vietnam, and we will be told it is futile to be in Vietnam, and we will be told we should at once withdraw. May I examine in the light of history and of present events those matters?

There was a time, after the Geneva Conference to 1954 or thereabouts, when the people of North Vietnam had their Government and lived under it and the people of South Vietnam had theirs. There were no incursions by the Government or people of South Vietnam into the North. There were, during that period, no significant incursion from the North to the South. Both those peoples could have lived in peace. Both of them

could have lived with independence. One of them at least, South Vietnam, could have chosen the kind of government under which it wished to live - and that was the situation. But then there was incursion from the North, there was invasion of a country which wished to be left alone. There were kidnappings and murders of the people of South Vietnam. And if I may paraphrase a former great statesman, the people there were living in peace but the North was prepared to resort to war rather than to leave the people of the South to choose their own government, and the South was prepared to accept war rather than to have a government imposed on it by force from the North, and so the war came, and so South Vietnam asked for help. And President Kennedy, no great reactionary, provided that help, and we had an alliance, and we also provided that help. But who is immoral in that situation? Those who are prepared to wage war rather than let a country live in independence or those who are prepared to accept war rather than let the independence of a country be overthrown? Let us think of that.

And then, over the long years, we have had a growing crescendo of attacks, on South Vietnam, and America, and ourselves. We have had allegations of immorality leveled against us; allegations of immorality for what we have done, but over those years too, the situation has dramatically improved. We have grown used to hearing the spokesmen for the Labor Party saying "This is a dirty war" - of course it is, all wars are dirty. We have grown used to them saying "This is an unwinnable war". Yet, as I hope to show, it is being won. We have grown used to them saying that "There is no chance of deciding this matter by military means". But during all that long period, it is only the spokesmen of the Labor Party and their friends who have said this. You have never heard the spokesmen for North Vietnam or the NLF saying there is no chance of deciding this matter by military means because they know there is, and they are seeking to continue and always have been using military means to gain their political ends, and they will go on doing so until our use of military means convinces them that they are destined to failure.

And so just recently, because we had stayed in South Vietnam, and the United States had stayed in South Vietnam while the South Vietnamese built up their own capacity to look after themselves, to a point where we could begin to withdraw - and that point would not have been reached had we not stayed - but because we have done that, President Nixon has been able to offer a cease-fire so that the killing can stop, and negotiations so that the objective of the South Vietnamese choosing their government can be attained. We've offered that. And the cease-fire has been rejected by the North Vietnamese and the negotiations have been rejected, and yet we who offered that cease-fire are held to be immoral while those who rejected it and wanted the killing to continue presumably are moral. I don't think that Australians will accept that.

And I don't believe, having reached this point where that offer can be made, where the South Vietnamese have so built up their own strength and their own capacity - that Australians would want now to betray those people to whose help we went, to render useless the sacrifice already made, to render in the future the position of Australia more vulnerable. Rather do I believe that they would have the resolution to finish what they have started now that the light at the end of the tunnel grows brighter and would wish to see that that which was begun was finished and that those people of South Vietnam had the right to choose their own government, with communists standing for election if they want to. This will be a matter, I think of significance in this Senate campaign and it is a matter, I know, of great significance to Australia and to its future.

That's only one aspect of the defence and security of Australia which is likely to come up, because if Australia were to adopt the Opposition's policy in Vietnam, then there would be no credibility at all to any offers of help to any other nation in South-East Asia and we would see threatened not only Laos and Cambodia, whom we now find being overrun, but Thailand threatened and probably invaded and the tide moving closer to the borders of Malaysia.

And having done that, for that would be the result of a Labor policy, it would be compounded by withdrawing all Australian military assistance to the Five-Power Pact - a Pact designed to try and help those countries even nearer to us - Malaysia and Singapore. Having increased the threat, the next step we are told is to withdraw assistance to the newly threatened areas. Surely all can see what effect that would have on the security of Australia, we having taken up a position at the request of Malaysia and Singapore and as a result of us taking up that position, Britain having come back to this area of the world, we turn our backs upon it and say "Sorry, you can go away. We won't help you. We are retreating to our own boundaries alone." And Mr. Whitlam can't even pretend to justify this by "conscience" - unless he argues that his conscience will allow him to have air and naval forces in the area - but not ground forces.

Having done that, the next step we are told, is then to abolish National Service Training altogether and reduce the size of a standing Army we would need far more in those circumstances than we have ever before needed a standing army in Australia's history. These are not insignificant matters for a Senate election to affect.

But then I turn to the home front. Here, I think I can say that in the period we have been in Government, we have made promises and we have carried out more of those promises in that period than any government has carried in a like period before. We have heard much lately on the subject of pensions, but on the subject of pensions generally, ladies, the payment of the pension has increased by \$2.50 while I have been Prime Minister, and the cost of living increased by \$1. There has been a steady improvement in the buying power of the pension in that time, but this is only one fraction of what has been done in the field of social services. Let me from this bulky tome of things we have done in all kinds of areas, tell you some of the other matters that we have done in this particular field.

We have, as you know, provided subsidies to the Meals on Wheels Scheme - ten cents to one dollar - and for many living alone, unable perhaps to get out to shop, if they can get out to shop, paying more for food than is paid by the Meals on Wheels people who can buy it in bulk and cook it - finding it difficult to cook - these Meals on Wheels - cheap, hot, nutritious, are of great benefit indeed, and I am happy that we have been able greatly to assist this particular organisation because there we have a marrying of governmental finance and private work which in this field should never be lost.

We have - I speak of some relatively minor things first - set up an employment training scheme for assistance to married and single women previously restricted by domestic responsibilities. We have had quite a significant number of applications for training under this scheme, and one of them, I think, you might find of interest. There was an application sent in to us by a woman and she said to the person she was writing to - "I am forty-two years of age, but when you read that, don't think 'ah, an "oldie".' Think, by George, this woman is the same age as Liz Taylor, Sophia Loren and the astronauts." She was accepted.'

We have brought in the increases in pensions generally of which I have spoken, brought in, as you know, a tapered means test, provided capital for homes for handicapped children, brought in hearing aids for pensioners, helped the Flying Doctor Service, provided help for nursing homes from \$2 a bed to \$5 a bed for people requiring heavy care, given greater assistance to homes for the aged, increased tuberculosis allowance, helped in the case of deserted wives, increased grants to the Australian Council for the Ageing, increased the age allowance which is the level at which taxation begins on old people's salaries, advanced vocational training for widows, helped widows widowed overseas, paid pensions to persons absent from Australia, increased unemployment and sickness benefits. We have introduced a Health Scheme which costs the patient less and provides the patient with more than the discredited Labor Scheme. I don't want to go on, there are too many things here. I believe there are thirty new approaches which have been made in this one field, and of that no one of us needs to be in any way ashamed.

But this area - this area of social help is the other great area to which I think we must direct our own attention. There are still some promises to be fulfilled. We stated, just a year ago, that we would provide more help for low-income earners with large families. This we will do. But there are other objectives not yet clearly stated, not yet clearly put in the form of promises, but objectives which we have before us.

One of these is to further help those who have long-term illnesses, not in hospitals because we have helped them, but long-term illnesses in nursing homes. Some help has been given, but yet there is still a great and unsolved problem which is a weight, I know, on many families.

Another of them, another real objective, must be to set up throughout Australia, or to help with the States to set up throughout Australia kindergarten-cum-child-minding centres, because now so many families are both working and so many children do not have areas to which they can go and be properly cared for and perhaps be taught a little while their parents are away. This I would regard as of very high priority.

May I touch very briefly on two other great objectives because I think perhaps I have spoken long enough already. But there are new problems now which are not yet solved but are crying for solution. I think indeed that in the last two and a half to three years there have been more new problems, and more old problems, greatly exacerbated than has occurred in any similar time. Some of them in the Defence field I have touched on, but one of the really significant problems for us all wherever we live is the problem faced by many of our rural industries, problems brought on because the world either will not buy what they produce in the quantities in which they produce it, or if they will buy it, are not prepared to pay for it sufficient to enable it to continue to be produced. There is no simple answer to this. But that it is a problem of immense significance, I am sure you will agree. My Government believes it is and believes that it is one of the great tasks before it in the ensuing period of its office. And I know this - that the problems of the rural industries, the difficulties which they face, will be greatly exacerbated and their economic position will greatly deteriorate if the Opposition and Mr Hawke, with whom the Leader of the Opposition works so closely, can bring in a 35-hour week in the rest of industry, and can unrestrictedly increase wages in the rest of industry without any regard for the productivity of the economy as a whole. This will hit rural industries more than anything else, for this will raise the costs to them which they cannot pass on. And this is what we seek to avoid. We want to see insofar as it is possible, that all those working in this country in whatever jobs, get wages as high as they can be, provided they are real wages which will buy real things and not merely figures on a sheet of paper which will not improve their real wages or their living standards at all.

After all, what is earned by an individual, or what is earned by the companies for which those individuals work is not the end of the story. That is take-home pay, if you like, for the worker - take-to-investors pay, for the company. But then out of that there must come all the requirements that the community wants. Out of the company profits must come half - or virtually half, at once, for the schools we need and the hospitals and the social benefits I have been talking about. And out of the pay packet taken home must also come some of the cost of these amenities which, looked at properly, are in fact part of the take-home pay for all people in Australia. Now, if we are to develop as we can, provide the things we need, one of the essentials should be that we do it genuinely, that we do it without so inflating prices that what looks as though it is going to be done is not done, that we work with real money and not fool's gold, and this is the other great objective before this Government. That's what I meant, when I spoke of a responsible approach instead of an irresponsible string of glittering promises.

So this is important, this election. The matters which can be affected by it are important. There are many others I can't touch on now, but I thank you for having given me the time to touch on those I have, and I look to you all to see that in Victoria our three Senators are elected for the good of Victoria and for the good of Australia.
