

# COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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## SPEECH

BY

The Rt Hon. W. McMAHON, M.P.

ON

## FUTURE OF AUSTRALIAN FORCES IN VIETNAM, AND NATIONAL SERVICE

(Ministerial Statement)

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[From the 'Parliamentary Debates', 18 August 1971]

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Mr McMAHON (Lowe—Prime Minister)—by leave—Sir, I announce tonight that the combat role which Australia took up over 6 years ago in Vietnam is soon to be completed. In 1965, when Australia first sent troops to that country, the continued survival of the Republic was in dire jeopardy. The scale and weight of enemy attacks were increasing, and North Vietnam's intervention was becoming ever more brazen. It seemed only a matter of time before Hanoi and the Vietcong, which supported Hanoi's cause, would take over the country by main force in defiance of the 1954 Geneva Agreements.

Beyond the immediate threats within and against Vietnam there was a militant China—a China which was giving direct moral and material aid to North Vietnam and which had in the recent past occupied Tibet and fought with India, a China whose ambitions and policies in the area were causing great concern. Nor was that all. The independence of Laos and Cambodia were in precarious balance. Insurgent activity in border areas of Thailand had already begun. Sukarnoist Indonesia was committing violence against its near neighbours, with the then powerful Indonesian Communist Party exercising major influence over Indonesian policies.

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This, then, was the situation in 1965. This was the background against which the Australian Government decided to commit Australian forces to the aid of South Vietnam. That decision was made in the national interest pursuant to our obligations under the Manila Treaty and at the invitation of the Republic of Vietnam. Its purpose was to help, jointly with the United States and others, to sustain and develop the confidence of the Government and the people of the Republic; to help defend it; to develop its capacities to deal with both overt aggression and externally promoted insurgency; and to enable it to make its own decisions about its future in a context of greater security. That purpose has now been substantially achieved.

Today the picture is different—in East Asia, in South East Asia, and not least in Indo-China itself. The aggression by North Vietnam has been slowed and its plans for over-running the South frustrated. Security throughout the country has improved remarkably. Successive pacification programmes have extended the physical control of the Vietnamese Government over the countryside. Political, economic and social advances have been made notwithstanding that the war has absorbed so much of the people's time and energies.

Above all, the armed forces of the Republic, with considerable help from the allies, have grown in size and developed their skills, cohesion and effectiveness. This has enabled them progressively to take over responsibilities from allied forces and at the same time to conduct operations against North Vietnamese forces in Cambodia and to disrupt their supply lines in southern Laos.

To this changed and improved situation Australia has made a significant contribution. Australian forces of all arms have played an honourable and effective part in their areas of operation. They have been worthy of this country. They have been honoured by our Allies. The main Australian effort has been in the general area surrounding Saigon and in particular in Phuoc Tuy Province. There, the security situation has markedly improved. The enemy has largely lost the initiative. The Vietnamese territorial forces have been steadily developing their capacity. And in the last year have gradually expanded their own areas of operations. The enemy is still there of course, and some setbacks may yet occur. But it is our view, shared by the Government of the Republic, that the existing relative strengths are such that the territorial forces should be able to handle the likely contingencies.

In these changing and improving circumstances, the Australian Government has been giving close consideration to the future of the Australian forces in Vietnam. It has for some time been our policy to withdraw our forces progressively as and when in our judgment, and after consultation with the Republic of Vietnam and the United States, the situation has allowed it. In coming to this judgment we have on each occasion considered several factors, including whether the forces and administration of the Republic have been ready and able to assume increased responsibility for local security.

We now judge that the circumstances are such that further effect can be given to our withdrawal policy. I have recently been in correspondence on this subject with the President of the Republic of Vietnam, and also with President Nixon and Sir Keith Holyoake. I am now able to announce that the Government has decided to withdraw all remaining Australian combat forces from Vietnam. The forces will

begin withdrawing in the next few months, giving the Vietnamese time to adjust their force dispositions. HMAS 'Brisbane', due out of service in Vietnamese waters early in September, will not be replaced. Most of the combat elements will be home in Australia by Christmas 1971. Shipment to Australia of stores and equipment will be completed in the early months of 1972.

The Government has already pledged that, as the withdrawal of our forces proceeds, we will provide other appropriate forms of military assistance as well as economic aid. We have accordingly approved an aid package for the Republic of Vietnam totalling \$25m, to be spent over the next 3 years. The package will include civil projects of an economic development character as well as defence aid in the form of military training and equipment. Seven million dollars have been set aside for this assistance in the current financial year. This figure will be progressively increased during the two succeeding years.

We are also discussing with the Vietnamese Government plans to retain in the Republic some military training and advisory elements, for example instructors at the jungle warfare training centre in Nui Dat, if they are wanted and if satisfactory arrangements can be made. We hope that these elements will continue to work in close association with the United States effort in this field.

Finally, I express the Government's conviction that the decision I have announced tonight is a mark of the success which has attended our policies and actions in Vietnam over the years. This does not mean that security in the area is yet fully achieved. The Government of South Vietnam will continue to face serious problems, aggravated by the continuing and flagrant North Vietnamese aggression in Cambodia and interference in Laos. South Vietnam is confident that it can overcome these problems if it continues to receive appropriate assistance. The Australian Government shares that confidence. It is the Government's earnest hope that the war can be brought to an early end by serious negotiations, that peace and stability will soon prevail throughout the area, and that the countries of Indo-China—not excluding North Vietnam—will be able to devote their energies with the help of others to worthwhile productive efforts.

I now turn to national service. The present form of national service was introduced towards the end of 1964. Against the background of the situation at that time, which I have described, the Government decided that the strength of the Army needed to be increased from its then low level of some 23,000. It was apparent, notwithstanding pay rises some months earlier, that this could not be achieved in time by voluntary means alone. Accordingly, in November 1964, the then Prime Minister announced the introduction of the present national service scheme. Further developments in the situation led to the commitment in 1965 of major Australian Army units to Vietnam. In 1966 national servicemen were sent there. We now have a different situation.

There is improved political stability in South East Asia. We have decided to withdraw our forces from Vietnam. These factors have implications for the composition of our defence forces. The major portion of our defence manpower is obtained by volunteer recruitment. The Navy and the Air Force are both entirely volunteer forces. On the other hand for the full time Army, where the numbers are larger, more than one-third of the strength has had to be obtained in recent times by other than voluntary means to ensure an Army of the size we need. The extent of our defence manpower is measured not simply by the size of our Regular forces, but by the totality of the Regular, Citizen and Reserve forces. Fully trained former national servicemen in the Reserve are of particular significance. Reviewing the situation the Government has concluded that there can be some reduction in the number of men serving full time in the Army. The Government accordingly proposes to reduce the full time strength of the Army by some 4,000 in the immediate future. It has decided to do this by reducing the period of full time national service from 2 years to 18 months.

The present total liability of 5 years' service for national servicemen will remain unchanged. But henceforth more of this service will be rendered in the Reserve—3½ years instead of 3 years as at present. National servicemen will be required to serve only 18 months full time. There will be complementary reductions in the period

of part time service in the Citizen Forces which is at present available as an alternative to full time national service. These men will now normally serve a period of 5 years in the Citizen Forces. The number of men to be called up each year under the national service scheme, about 8,000, will be unchanged. At present, with 2 years' full time service, this means a total of some 16,000 full time national servicemen in the Army at any one time. With only 18 months' full time service, the number of full time national servicemen serving in the Army at any one time will fall to about 12,000. Correspondingly the total strength of the full time Army will fall by 4,000—from about 44,000 to 40,000. This reduction in strength will not affect the present organisation of the Army into 9 battalions. Some will be on a reduced basis.

The Government has given careful consideration to the effect of these changes on personnel already serving. We wish to ensure that the transition will be orderly and that as far as possible inequities are avoided. It has been decided that serving national servicemen who have completed 18 months service will be discharged broadly in accordance with their length of service. This will be done over a period of some 3 months commencing late in October or early in November. Legislation giving effect to the Government's decisions will be introduced as quickly as possible. I am sure the Parliament will wish to give priority to it. In deciding on this reduction in national service, careful account has been taken of the strategic situation confronting us. While as I have said there have been improvements in many aspects of the situation in South East Asia, there are many continuing elements of insecurity and some new ones. At the same time, we see changes in the defence posture of our close allies, particularly the United States. These do not affect the fundamental character of our alliances. We must maintain a defence capability that is evident both to friendly countries and to potential enemies, and which we could develop in adequate time should more immediate threats arise. National servicemen will still constitute a substantial proportion of our Army—some 12,000 in a total full time Army strength of about 40,000.

The Government will review force levels as necessary as part of the 5-year defence rolling programme. It is important against the strategic outlook for the 1970s and the 1980s to have the right balance of equipment and men in the defence forces as a whole. Close attention will continue to be given to all practicable means of increasing voluntary recruitment. Before the introduction of national service in 1964 there were improvements in pay but their effect on recruitment was only marginal. Since then there have been substantial improvements not only in pay but in other conditions of service, for example, the provision of

many more married quarters and much improved barrack accommodation. The Government's establishment of the Kerr Committee, and the decisions it has already taken on the findings of that Committee, are further important steps. The Government will continue to ensure that conditions of service in our armed forces are as attractive as they can reasonably be with the aim of ensuring that the proportion of volunteers will be as large as practicable. I present the following paper:

Future of Australian Forces in Vietnam, and National Service—Ministerial Statement, 18th August 1971.