



PRIME MINISTER

VISIT TO THE U.S. AND U.K. 1971.

WASHINGTON

PRESS CONFERENCE AT BLAIR HOUSE,
GIVEN BY THE AUSTRALIAN PRIME MINISTER, MR WILLIAM McMAHON

2 NOVEMBER 1971

Q What was the President's reaction when you told him of the Cabinet decision of the training of Cambodian servicemen ?

PM I dealt with this against the background of what I had known. And I pointed out that first of all in a Statement I had made in the House I said we would be retaining some advisory and training troops in South Viet-Nam to train the South Vietnamese and that we had agreed to train Cambodians in Australia and recently we had made in principle a decision to train Cambodian troops in South Viet-Nam in cooperation with New Zealanders and United States people. But as yet we haven't been able to spell out in detail what is likely to happen. There was no intention whatsoever to train Cambodians in Cambodia or to provide advisers there. Nor was there any intention to provide combat troops in either South Viet-Nam or Cambodia. We accept this without any question.

Q This is an in principle decision. This is the one taken in Canberra yesterday ?

PM Yes.

Q Did the President express any view of this decision given.

PM No.

Q Did he suggest that there might be (INAUDIBLE) to Cambodia.

PM No. He wouldn't be that sort of a person to be presenting a point of view and he did not.

Q Sir, can you tell us why it was necessary to make the decision before you saw the President ?

PM Wouldn't you have done so if you had been in my position? Feeling that it might be raised by Mr Laird with me. Or if not by Secretary Laird by Secretary of State Rogers. And by that time too I had received the letter from David Fairbairn. So consequently

I wanted to know Cabinet's views in case I was asked the question.

Q You would have known though when you saw MR Laird of Cabinet's decision ?

PM Well look I am not quite certain when I first received the information but I know I told Secretary of State Rogers and I told the President what the position was and it is as I have just announced it to you.

Q Are you concerned that you were not aware of the situation?

PM I was concerned ? Yes ? But I did not consider it to be a matter of, what shall I call it, very great importance. I would have liked to have known earlier though.

Q Sir, have you asked for any investigations how it happened that the U.S. asked us to do this on September 30 and you did not find out until I think on the 26th ?

PM No I haven't. You must know that I am here for a particular purpose. I am here on matters of great moment and importance to Australia and the Australian Government. I don't want to get involved in details at this time. I am sure Mr Anthony can look after it. And already the Minister for Defence has given assurance that he will try to insure that it doesn't happen again.

Q Do you feel that the actual decision for Australia to train troops in Cambodia does not mark any great departure from past policy ? Have you decided that in your absence to make this decision in a hurry and saw it as an important policy decision ?

PM First of all there will be no intentions of training any troops whatsoever in Cambodia. There will be a training of Cambodian troops in Australia and a proposal that they should be trained jointly by the Americans, New Zealanders and ourselves in South Viet-Nam. Secondly when I arrived in New York, or the day after I arrived in New York, I was handed Mr Fairbairn's letter in which he said he would shortly be raising it. And I think I gathered the impression that he had some hope that he might have been able to raise it with me before I left. Well, after hearing a question which was raised in Canberra by one of your own representatives, I asked immediately about it when I got to San Francisco. I checked again and when I was in New York I made a further check and said... 'Look this has become public knowledge. Now please let me have an answer as to where we are moving', so that the Defence machinery and the Foreign Office knew what it intended to propose so there was no difficulty in presenting it to Cabinet at its next meeting.

Q My question was you said 'Sure the announcement that we would be training Cambodian troops in Australia was in the Defence Report.' However that would seem to me to be a different matter entirely from training troops in South Viet-Nam. (INAUDIBLE) From what you have said I gather you don't see this as a major policy change but just as a normal extension of what we are doing in Cambodia ?

PM Yes, and particularly because we are prepared to train South Vietnamese troops in American training centres in South Viet-Nam. I thought it was just an extension of the existing policy.

Q Sir, was there a request from the Cambodian Government to our Government to train their men in South Viet-Nam ?

PM That I don't know. I don't think there was.....What I am trying to do.... you are putting me through a cross examination at a time when I have had so many tremendously important problems to deal with. But I haven't delved into this at all. I have wanted to touch on other issues that are vital to the security of this country in the future and to learn more about American thinking on issues - world issues of importance - so I haven't gone any further than what I just said to you.

Q Sir, we were told the other day that you had given your views to Cabinet on this matter. It seems to me that you would have gone into it fairly well before. Did you give your views to Cabinet ?

PM What do you mean give my views to Cabinet ? It had never been raised in Cabinet while I was there.

Q No but we were told that when you asked for Cabinet's decision you also conveyed your own views on the subject ?

PM I felt that this was an extension of our existing policies insofar as it related to the South Vietnamese but in having said that I realized it was a matter that had to be dealt with by the Cabinet in Canberra who have much better access to information than I had and they had to make a decision. But in principle they knew the way that my mind was trending.

Q Sir on the question of Cabinet's decision does this mean that as small as it may be there will be Australian military advisers committed to South Viet-Nam over and above those that we had decided to leave after we withdraw fighting troops.

PM Again you are pressing me on something I can't get an answer to. I can't give it because I said so far that the decision is in principle and I have not seen the Cabinet papers on it. I have seen two cables from Mr Anthony and no more.