

CHANNEL 7

TAHITI 11/5/75 FOR REPLAY 12/5/75

Question : In general terms, what was the most significant single thing about this trip as far as you are concerned?

Mr. Whitlam : I wouldn't like to dramatise it in the terms of any one particular thing. There were two important things we did; one was to have the far-ranging, frank exchange of views at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Jamaica, and the second one was to have a pretty thorough round-up of views, exchange of views, in Washington with the Administration and with the Congress. I wouldn't choose which was the more important of those two.

Question : As far as Jamaica went, there was some suggestion, some criticism that perhaps you adopted a slightly lower profile than you would have wanted to and perhaps you should have. I'm obviously referring to the Vietnam question. Why was it that you didn't push it a little stronger there?

Mr. Whitlam : What we are intent on doing, of course, at the Commonwealth, is to discuss those things which interest a fair number of us. Now I did point out, quite briefly, and everyone immediately accepted the proposition, that on Vietnam which was obviously a land-mark in world history, we ought to express the view that nations should contribute as much as they can to the reconstruction and rehabilitation of that country and to bring it into the community of nations. I raised that, and in fact - it was raised by Mrs. Gandhi and Mr. Lee Kuan Yew in the general discussion on world and Commonwealth trends and then I later made the point that there should be a reference to it in the communique and there was. There was no dispute about it, so it didn't need to take up very much time. I have seen some suggestions that we ought to have spent more time on it, or I should have. I don't see any basis for that. There was no need to spend more time on this. There were some aspects of Vietnam, such as refugees, which of course, I did mention to, I suppose half a dozen Heads of Government there who were interested in these matters - New Zealand, Fiji, Britain, Canada, Singapore and Malaysia.

Question : Of course later with President Ford, this was a major point of discussion.

Mr. Whitlam: What was a major point?

Question : Vietnam in general, Indo-China of course.

Mr. Whitlam : In the general, regional set-up, in the aftermath of Vietnam, obviously. This was quite an important thing, not only with the President and the Secretary of State, Dr. Kissinger, and Deputy Secretary and Assistant Secretaries of State, but also of course, with the two Houses in Congress.

Question: You said in Washington that as regards reconstruction there, you weren't going to shirk your responsibility. We would be a ready and willing partner to the U.S. Exactly what will we be doing as regards reconstruction?

Mr. Whitlam : In the budget for the financial year which is now expiring, we made provision, and I think we did in the previous budget, for reconstruction and rehabilitation in Vietnam, both South and North. I think we spent about five times as much in the South as in the North because it's taken longer to get the structure of reconstruction going in the North. They have not been accustomed to getting it and they've been a bit suspicious of international organisations through which we prefer to make our contribution. Now, the United States is not likely to make as big a contribution to these matters because of her recent experiences there, but obviously countries like Australia, which are in a position to contribute, should do so.

Question : Would you place any sort of time period on reconstruction? Would we be looking at that sort of thing?

Mr. Whitlam : I wouldn't like to say. I mean what do you mean by reconstruction?

Question : Do we presume that we will provide funds for reconstruction for the next five years or the next fifteen years or can't you set a time?

Mr. Whitlam : I'd say five's more likely. Because if one thing is clear, it is the astonishing resilience of the Vietnamese people. They have had a bigger battering for a longer period, than any nation in modern times. You would have to go back hundreds of years before you could think of any nation which has been so battered or so bruised or even brutalised as the people of Vietnam. But they have shown an amazing resilience, astonishing, and they will come through this. They are after all, a nation which has a very considerable history of identity and they've been willing to fight against people who wanted to buy into their affairs. They did it against the Chinese before last century, they did it against the French in the end of last century and the first half of this.

Question : Do you foresee a period of real stability now in the Indo-China region?

Mr. Whitlam : I'm reasonably optimistic that the energies of the Vietnamese will be devoted to reconstructing their country.

Question : You say you are reasonably optimistic. Can you see anything going wrong?

Mr. Whitlam : It's obvious that things can go wrong. The astonishing thing is that all the Heads of Government in countries which are concerned - I've seen them all for hours at a time in the last six weeks - for instance, President Suharto came down to Australia and spent a few days with me and then in the last couple of weeks in Jamaica, I've been with the Prime Ministers of Malaysia, Singapore and other countries further away, such as New Zealand of course and Britain, we have discussed all these matters as well as in North America.

Question : If I might move on now to the question of refugees. Where do we stand now on the question of accepting adult refugees from Vietnam?

Mr. Whitlam : The situation has changed quite clearly from the time when we set out together from Australia because at that time there was still a Government in office in South Vietnam and whatever one did in those circumstances had to be done with the concurrence of that Government. Well the Government is now defunct and there are tens of thousands of refugees who have fled from the country, so there's obviously a different situation now.

Question : That means we will be accepting them given some international programme?

Mr. Whitlam : Yes. There has been, for many years of course, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees organisation - an experienced, a respected body - and we have in all our programmes for refugees active through that body and that is the sensible, the humane, the effective way to work now. We were among the first to invite the UNHCR to come into this question and we have already this financial year contributed millions of dollars to his programmes.

Question : When will we work out just how many we are going to take?

Mr. Whitlam : This will be a matter of international arrangement clearly. It might be some weeks before one could make any responsible estimate of such matters.

Question : How quickly would you like to see these refugees catered for? In other words, how quickly do you think we might see them in Australia?

Mr. Whitlam : Well, obviously, the sooner the better, as long as it can be done effectively or humanely. You want to upset people as little as possible, you want to settle them down as quickly as possible.

Question: Would you expect any sort of backlash for this idea of allowing adult refugees into Australia?

Mr. Whitlam : I don't think we can overlook the fact that there will be some resentment about people coming into Australia at a time of unemployment and also people from a very different way of life, many of them not speaking English for instance. Now obviously there will be doubts or even resentment among Australians in this respect and I suppose it was a bit disappointing that Australians didn't contribute more generously to the fund which was set up for these matters. But nevertheless, Governments have to do the right thing whether it's popular or not, so we will be taking a fair share of refugees under the auspices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees - the body which has most experience in this matter, the body which has done the job best.

Question : Do you think that perhaps your whole visit has been overshadowed by domestic events? Does that disappoint you?

Mr. Whitlam : I wouldn't think so. I don't know what you can suggest. I naturally think that what I was doing was of greatest importance to the country. The Commonwealth of Nations is an important body. There are three dozen of us almost in it and there is no organisation where the countries of the Indian Ocean can get together as they can in the Commonwealth and it is also a valuable body for the countries of the South Pacific. Australia, really through the Commonwealth, has better associations with her neighbours to west and east than through any other organisation. Then, of course, there was the very timely opportunity to have an exchange of views with the United States Administration and Congress at a time when there have been some very big changes in the world.

Question: You go back to Australia happy with the past two weeks with no qualms about the coming fortnight?

Mr. Whitlam : Of course not. I'm quite content with what we have been able to do while we have been away.

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