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D'ARCY AND POWER: IN SESSION
Monday 12th May 1975

FULL TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER AND BILL D'ARCY
FILMED IN TAHITI AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE PRIME MINISTER'S OVERSEAS TRIP

D'ARCY: Prime Minister, you've been away from Australia for 19 days now. You've visited Peru, you've been to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference in Kingston, and you've seen President Ford in Washington. What do you see as the positive achievement of the trip, what's the most important thing that has come out of it?

MR. WHITLAM: There are two particular matters. One is the regular opportunity which occurs every two years to confer with members of the Community of Nations, the old British Commonwealth. There were nearly three dozen of us there, and there is no organisation where there can be such a frank and natural exchange of views as takes place in the context of the Commonwealth, and for Australia, this is particularly important, because there are about 15 Commonwealth nations which are island or coastal or hinterland states round the Indian Ocean. There's no gathering place in the world for nations round the Indian Ocean to compare with the Commonwealth. Furthermore, of course, there are several countries which will be entering the Commonwealth in the South Pacific, Papua-New Guinea being the conspicuous example. Now the other great thing is that I had the opportunity to speak with the American administration and the American Congress, and there have been a great number of matters where it was interesting for them and for us to exchange views. There've been some big movements in the world in the last few weeks and we were able to discuss them.

D'ARCY: Prime Minister, it's known that your relations with President Nixon were less than warm. It's the second time now that you've seen President Ford in seven months. What sort of ^{personal} rapport have you been able to establish with him? What are the relations between you both?

MR. WHITLAM: You slipped in a reference to President Nixon, so I don't want to respond to what you say, I think you may be exaggerating it. At any rate, about President Ford, whom I've met twice in the last seven months, it would be obvious that he is a very wholesome, decent person, and he is doing a good job in very difficult circumstances. We have been able to get on very well on the two good meetings that we've had.

D'ARCY: Did you notice, Prime Minister, whether the President has been able to establish himself a lot during the seven months between when you saw him last.

MR. WHITLAM: He is respected by everyone in Congress as far as I could see. I thought that this would be the case after what I was told by the leaders of the two parties in the two houses of the Congress seven months ago. Now on this occasion I saw them again and I saw more members of the Senate and the Congress than on the previous time actually, and they all respect the President as a man. They don't always support him, of course, and this would be particularly the case on many domestic issues, but the point is, on those matters where Australia and America are concerned with each other, there is total support for the relations which

we've established, support by the Administration, the President, the Vice President, the Cabinet, particularly the Secretary of State, Dr. Kissinger, and the other people in the State Department, the Deputy, the Assistant Secretaries and so on, all of whom we met, and it's also the case that the Congress on both sides, both houses, supports the relationship which my Government has been able to establish with the United States.

D'ARCY: A statement issued by the White House after your meeting with President Ford said that the President has reassured you that the United States would honour its obligations towards Australia as far as defence. Did you seek that assurance or was it ...

WHITLAM: No, no, this was volunteered, there was no prompting by us at all, but I hasten to say it came as no surprise to me because I have kept in touch with successive administrations, Johnson, Nixon, Ford administrations, and also with Congress under those administrations. I first started the practice, I think I was the first political leader in Australia to do so, to confer with Congressional leaders back in June 1967, and I've never seen any objection or any queries about the relationship between the U.S. and Australia in that time from Presidents or from leaders of Congress.

D'ARCY: Prime Minister, one of the matters that was raised was the question of the Vietnam refugees, and you've spoken of the need to internationalise the refugee programme. Are you disappointed Sir that Asian countries in general and Singapore in particular have not joined in that programme?

MR. WHITLAM: Yes, mind you I don't want Australians to get any impression that there is some obsession or confrontation in the United States on this issue of the refugees. It was mentioned relatively briefly in the conversation with the President, and one member of the House of Representatives International Relations Committee asked a question about it, and one member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee asked a question about it, but all the other members on both occasions were interested in other issues. This is not as big an issue in the U.S. as many of the press reports have said. Congress, I believe, will be supporting the administration in placing those refugees who've got to the U.S. or have been taken to the U.S. You mentioned the position in Asia in particular. I suppose it is disappointing that all of us who subscribed back in 1951 to the United Nations Convention on Refugees, and then in 1967 to the protocol on refugees, none of us really, and I suppose Australia must accept some responsibility in this respect also, have ever put it to the Asian nations that they should subscribe to the Convention and the Protocol. In the whole of our region, the only nations that have subscribed to it are Australia, New Zealand and Fiji, and then I suppose it's relevant to point out, Britain and France have, because they have colonies in this area. The United States has, of course, Canada has, but the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the countries further west didn't, they haven't. Now this is a gap.

D'ARCY: Do you find it ironic, Prime Minister, that the Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr. Lee Quan Yew, should attack you at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference, on the question of students from Singapore in Australia, yet he will not allow some 3,500 Vietnam refugees who are on ships in the Singapore harbour to land in Singapore.

MR. WHITLAM: You're putting propositions to me for which I have no direct knowledge. I saw Mr. Lee on several occasions during the nine days we were in Jamaica together, and I also saw the other heads of Government, Tun Razak from Malaysia, Wal Rowling from New Zealand, and Harold Wilson and Pierre Trudeau. We discussed these matters of refugees among other matters. Now on this occasion, whatever might have been the situation at the last Commonwealth meeting in Ottawa in October 1973, Mr. Lee was quite relaxed and subdued. He wasn't taking a shot at us about students. He's realised that if unpopular decisions are to be made about students, he's got to share in those decisions at least. But this was no longer an issue this time.

D'A RCY: Prime Minister, can I ask you how many refugees Australia will take.

MR. WHITLAM: No, of course you can't. This has been asked of Dr. Cairns at home, and he's given you the same answer. No one knows at this stage. All one can say is that it's clearly a different situation from the one when we left home where there was still a Government in Saigon, and what one did about people who were to leave that country had to be done with the consent of that Government, and on the other hand there's the situation now where tens of thousands have left the country, got away from it, so

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There is a real opportunity, I would think, that the country will now, at last, be able to be reconstructed and conciliated in peace.

D'ARCY: Do you think that some of those displaced persons, some of those, for example, in Guam, do you think it's possible for them to go back.

MR. WHITLAM: I don't know how soon, but you remember when there were so many thousands who came to Australia after Budapest in 1956, many thousands in fact went back, and as we now know, there are a great number of Hungarians settled in Australia, some of them millionaires, who now quite freely and happily make return visits to Hungary. Now this is what will happen before many years have passed in respect of Vietnam.

D'ARCY: Prime Minister, one final question. Do you think it's ever going to be possible for you to make an overseas trip without Opposition demands for your return home because of some domestic issue.

MR. WHITLAM: Oh, I don't know, I suppose every successive Liberal leader has to cut his teeth some way or another, they haven't done it very successfully, I'm now on my fifth. Well I dare say I will digest him in due course.

D'ARCY: Thank you very much.

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