

PRIME MINISTER INTERVIEWED ON "WILLESEE AT SEVEN"
ON SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

Willesee

It takes a lot to call off an Olympiad. The last time it happened there was a world war in progress. But now with Russian troops occupying Afghanistan, the United States' Government wants to boycott the Moscow Olympics and so now does the Australian Government. And of course the Games have always been political. Let's not forget that, most notably Hitler's Berlin Games in '36, and again at Munich in 1972 when Israeli athletes were assassinated. But the emphasis in past Games has been directed more to nationalism, propaganda or sheer publicity. This time it is the Olympics being used as a weapon against a gross act of invasion and whether Mr. Fraser is right or wrong in this, he is certainly right when he pleads that this issue should not obscure the major issue, and that is the Russian invasion itself. To talk about this whole question in our Melbourne studio, the Prime Minister, Mr. Malcolm Fraser.

Mr. Prime Minister, thanks for coming in.

Prime Minister

Thank you, and good evening.

Willesee

What do you see as the primary reason for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan?

Prime Minister

I think it is hard to judge with absolute accuracy the reason. Also, I am not sure that the reason is entirely relevant. The more important fact is that they are there and being there that will open opportunities for them, if they want to take it and if they think there is a chance of getting away with it, of moving further either towards Iran or towards Pakistan. But you asked what is the reason. I could think of two. Again, let me make the point, the more important question is that they are there. They could have been disturbed that a communist revolution, coup, of nearly two years ago was going badly. There was a further coup a few months ago. All communist coups, or revolutions. Then a third, which they established by force of arms. They could have been disturbed that a communist revolution was going badly and might not have been sustained. They could have been concerned about the impact that would have on their own Muslim minorities. But on the other hand, they could have been saying "here is a position in a small country that is not a threat to us. If we move in there will be later opportunities for us, either in moving towards Pakistan or towards Iran and gaining influence or control over oil production", which they would see

Prime Minister (continued)

of course as a weapon of enormous economic importance.

Willesee

Well what do you fear then could happen next in that region?

Prime Minister

The more dangerous thing, the most dangerous thing, would be a Russian move towards Iran, and let's say either spontaneously or as a result of it being engineered, a minority, pro-Marxist, pro-Russia minority in Iran said that they were being persecuted under the present regime and they wanted help from the Soviet Union. That could give them the kind of excuse they need to move. Then of course, they would gain direct access to the Indian Ocean, to the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf. Warmwater ports have always been ...

Willesee

But technically that would be of enormous difference.

Prime Minister

Yes, it would.

Willesee

If the Russians go into Iran, even with some sort of request from whoever may nominally head that Government, do you see any circumstances where the Western world would allow Russia to do that.

Prime Minister

I would certainly hope not. But also may I say that the total activity of the United States, a number of other countries, and with whatever weight a nation of 14 million can throw onto the scales, what we are about now is designed to create the circumstances where that will not happen so that the worse options will not then have to be faced by a further Russian military invasion.

Willesee

Without trying to digress too much, could I just ask one question on Yugoslavia because it may be relevant. What are your fears for Yugoslavia, or your concern, in the event of Tito dying?

Prime Minister

Well, in the event of that of course, there is an obvious concern that there could be some internal problems within Yugoslavia and again, that the Soviet Union might exploit that opportunity to re-establish a Government in Yugoslavia that would be subservient to Moscow. Marshall Tito has, especially in the light of what had happened in Czechoslovakia, what had

Prime Minister (continued)

happened in Hungary, has shown enormous skill and enormous strength in establishing a very real degree of independence for Yugoslavia even though within the communist orbit, within the Soviet orbit, area of influence. Obviously, the concern is that that degree of independence would be lost.

Willesee

Mr. Fraser, is there any question of trying to get the Russians out of Afghanistan or do you see the simple priority as being one of containment, that they go no further?

Prime Minister

Obviously we will need, when I say we I mean independent nations, the United States, will need to try and establish the circumstances in which the Soviet Union might be persuaded to withdraw because of the extent and the strength of the revulsion right around the world. I think the Soviet Union would have been very surprised at that vote in the United Nations in which they had only 18 supporters and a very very large number against them from all groups, all countries around the world. But I do not think we can establish that as a primary objective.

Willesee

It's pretty unlikely isn't it?

Prime Minister

I think it is very unlikely and I have said that before. So that means that the major priority has to be to prevent any further move, establish the circumstances where the Soviet Union will believe that the price they have paid as a result of moving into Afghanistan is so high that they will not seek to move further.

Willesee

So what more needs to be done?

Prime Minister

Well, to the greatest extent possible, that independently-minded nations, nations that are concerned for their own and for the national independence of others, can build a free world consensus and act upon that, whether it is through reinforcing trade sanctions, whether it is through reinforcing what the United States, Britain, Canada and we, have said about the Olympic Games. Now quite obviously people are talking about peaceful means but at the same time I believe, and again the United States has already announced that the countries around the world need to look to their own defences budgets. The United States is, the President has already announced that. Because it is not going to be any one single act but a combination of factors, things that the United States do, things that are done in Europe amongst the NATO countries that will build up a confidence.

Willesee

On that military side, the President of the United States, of course has done more than look to his budget. He has an increasing military presence in the region now. If President Carter asks Australia, when you talk with him Sir, to assist militarily, what can you do?

Prime Minister

I doubt if anyone is at the moment considering using military forces. Quite obviously the presence is being increased and again the objective is to make sure that military forces do not have to be used. But we have already said and we volunteered it, that we would be prepared to participate with a greater degree of patrolling and surveillance over the Indian Ocean area. Now we have our own ideas about how that could be done. I will be putting those when I go to Washington. But that is one thing that we can do, we are equipped to do and we are prepared to do.

Willesee

You've said that you see this as the biggest threat to world peace in 35 years since World War II. So what do you propose to do with your own defence budget?

Prime Minister

I think a little while will unfold that. We have already asked our officials to examine the circumstances, I think a month or more ago, when this first unfolded. I asked our defence advisors to see how this affects the strategic assessment, which had been examined shortly before Christmas. It was a new event and an important event and therefore how it affects our own defence planning and defence preparedness. All that work has been going on for some weeks.

Willesee

When would you see something eventuating, in the budget, in August?

Prime Minister

It may well be earlier than that.

Willesee

It just seems to me that if the threat is now then presumably believing that you take some action now?

Prime Minister

Look you are starting to impinge on matters that I do want to put and discuss first in the United States. So maybe we do not have to go too far down this particular track tonight.

Willesee

Yes I respect that with defence matters you often can't answer, but equally the people watching tonight - one of the first things I think they'll have in mind, when you say this is the greatest threat in 35 years, is what we're going to do about it and how it will effect them. Can you tell us at least that we will be spending more money on defence?

Prime Minister

I think I have already said that I am very glad that that increased oil revenue had not been committed in some area, whether it is by tax reduction or the rest, because we do need to look to Australia's defences. I would be surprised if there is not an increased requirement coming out of that.

Willesee

So you'd be looking at that extra billion dollars or so a year from tax...?

Prime Minister

Well look I am not putting a figure on it. But what I am doing - look we are taking this very seriously. We have already offered increased facilities or use of facilities and increased patrolling and surveillance in the Indian Ocean on Australia's account.

Willesee

But that's not building our forces.

Prime Minister

Ah but it might well require, depending upon the nature of the obligation undertaken - that could perhaps require, built up over time, some greater capacity. Because we were not making that offer against a short term circumstance - something that could happen for a week or a month, or two or three months, but against a long term chain in Australia's strategic circumstance. So we were looking at, offering a long term obligation.

Willesee

So you foreshadow a greater expenditure on defence?

Prime Minister

It is inevitable. It really is.

Willesee

Well it's inevitable in the normal course of inflation.

Prime Minister

I am not talking about just inflation. I am talking about it in real terms. Let us not forget that even though we have had one or two budgetary problems over the last three or four years, defence expenditure has been increased in real terms in each of those years.

Willesee

But our defence forces have been rundown over the last couple of governments haven't they?

Prime Minister

They were run down over a period. We have done some rebuilding.

Prime Minister (continued)

We have now - when we came into office the amount spent on capital equipment was about 6 or 7 per cent of the vote. We have got that up to about 15 or 16 per cent of the vote. We want to get it higher.

Willesee

What about manpower? Would you rule out looking again at conscription or even national service?

Prime Minister

I do not see it as being a requirement for that at this point. I do not imagine that that would be one of the options that the defence planners would want to put to us when we are considering these matters. Because I think it is important - you have repeated my remark, that this is the most serious circumstance for 35 years. - can I just take a second to say why that is so.

Willesee (After commercial break)

Mr. Prime Minister you wanted to explain why you see this threat to world peace as being the worst since World War II.

Prime Minister

Yes. There have been a number of crises, especially in the Cold War period - Berlin, Korea, Cuba. Now all of those were important in a regional context. They were also important because they were a threat or a challenge to the strength, to the determination of what was known as the free world. Now those elements are present in this crisis. But there is an additional element that was not present in the Berlin matter, North Korea or Cuba. And that is, if the Soviets take the step further we were talking about, if they do a turn into Iran and start to gain an entrance or a control over some part of Middle East oil production then they have an addition, the capacity to vastly damage or even to destroy the economies of advanced industrial countries. And that is why I believe you have not only the strategic circumstances, you have an economic element that was not present on earlier occasions. And that is why I think it is more dangerous and more important than those earlier occurrences.

Willesee

Mr. Prime Minister you say you believe that and you've had some criticism of various kinds for saying that. Let me put the most serious personal criticism bluntly. Has your thinking on this matter been influenced by the fact that this is an election year?

Prime Minister

No, not at all. And I know one or two people have said that. But the people who have said that have also indicated as I believe that this is a very serious occurrence. Look this is the kind of thing

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Willesee

I'm sorry I wasn't suggesting that even your critics think that you are blowing up the fact that it was serious when it's not. I'm sure even they believe that it's quite serious. But you must take into account things like politicians do tend to be a little more sensitive in an election year, and you've seen President Carter's popularity go up over Iran and Afghanistan.

Prime Minister

Oh I have. But I was not worried about events that were going to occur at the end of this year anyway, because I had a total confidence in that. But let me only say that nothing will please me more if there can be a unity and a cohesiveness within Australia on this particular issue. I do not want it to be a matter of division. It is far too important for that. And when I spoke to Premier Lowe in Tasmania about the fishing matter and said that we had knocked that off and said that I was sorry because I know how important he regarded it, he said: look, I don't quarrel with the decision. In the circumstances he could not have done anything else. I had gone through the range of the decisions with him and he supported. I think that shows a bipartisan attitude which I hope on this issue can be echoed right around Australia, because it is of vast importance to all of us.

Willesee

I think the question is not so much the seriousness of it but whether you might be overreacting. The Labor Leader Mr. Hayden I think was quoted today as saying that you were being hysterical about it.

Prime Minister

Well all right. You know he said on one account that it was overreacting but on another account he said he did not want us to say anything about the Olympic Games unless a whole lot of countries were going to, so that we would know it would be an effective boycott. So that seems to be not really very important.

Willesee

Even if you want to leave political matters out of this, they can still come into it of course, even as a by-product, did you say as somebody alleged in a written commentary, to some of your colleagues, that this Russian aggression was electorally useful to your party?

Prime Minister

No. Of course I would not have said that. Because it is too important. It is not a matter to be dealt with on a partisan basis. It is a matter to be dealt with, and especially from my position, above all as Prime Minister of this nation, as one of the greatest possible seriousness and one in which there is only one thought in my mind and only one thought in the mind of this Government - the wellbeing and security of all the Australian people.

Willesee

Mr. Prime Minister did President Carter's decision on the boycott of the Moscow Games, dependent on the Russians not getting out by February 20 - did his decision jam you into an early decision?

Prime Minister

Obviously we were influenced by his decision. Because it is necessary to understand in matters of this kind where we believe that basically the United States President is taking a proper course, is acting from firmness and strength and that he is right - it is important for countries such as Australia to lend what support they can. He has got the loneliest job in the world - the President of the most powerful free world country. It is important from his point of view and from the point of view of the United States people and the support that they give their President, to know that there are people in other parts of the world with a similar view, a similar concern. I make no apologies for that.

Willesee

I understand that logic. But on the question of timing obviously there would be some wisdom in waiting a little longer to see if it was going to be an effective boycott.

Prime Minister

Oh look you could have argued that. That is a legitimate point of view. But if every country is going to stand back and wait till they know the boycott is effective there will never be a boycott. Somebody has to be amongst the first half dozen. If it was Australia's lot to be that then so be it. Quite a number of countries, on the advice we have at this moment, seem to be moving in that direction. It is early days yet but time will show us.

Willesee

On the question of our own athletes going to Moscow if they still wish to. You were not specific in saying how far you would go in not supporting them. For example the \$500,000 cheque which is due: would you hand that cheque over on condition that it is not used to send athletes to Moscow?

Prime Minister

It is going to be handed over. Mr. Ellicott is going to do that. I said in the letter to the Olympic Committee that no matter what happened we wanted that money to be used to provide opportunities for Australian sportsmen and sportswomen. There is no question of the Government seeking or wanting to take that money back.

Willesee

Will you allow that money to be used to send athletes to Moscow?

Prime Minister

It is still on one scenario. The Games in Moscow could even have our support. But if the Russians are still in Afghanistan we would not want that money used for that particular purpose. We would want the Olympic Committee to use it for other purposes to advance

Prime Minister (continued)

the interests of Australian sportsmen and women.

Willesee

So at this stage you are not freeing that money for athletes to go to Moscow with it.

Prime Minister

No. Not for Moscow, no.

Willesee

And could you be even firmer and take some action to stop athletes going?

Prime Minister

We have not considered that and it is too early. We believe, well I certainly hope, belief at this stage might be too strong, but I hope very strongly that the Olympic Committee will support the Government in these particular matters. I know they have got a serious and a hard decision to make and I know how much it can mean to an athlete who has trained and been in competitions, international competitions, wanting to get to the pinnacle at the Olympic Games. But I had immense respect for that young Australian on one of the Melbourne channels last night, a swimmer, who got up and made it plain that he said that he believed a gesture had to be made. And no matter what it meant to him, he thought that the Games should not be held in Moscow. That must have taken a great deal of saying. Because I can understand the hard work and the ambition and the hopes that lie within an Olympic athlete's heart.

Willessee

Mr. Prime Minister thanks for your time tonight.

Prime Minister

Thank you very much.

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