

Report

Some of the U.S. allies most vocal in condemning the Soviet move in Afghanistan have been Britain, Canada and Australia. As a guest on News Centre 4 tonight is the Prime Minister of Australia, Malcolm Fraser. Prime Minister Fraser will be meeting with President Carter on Thursday to talk about the situation in Afghanistan. After that he goes to Britain for talks with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. We have asked him to join us tonight to talk about his Government's positions in those areas.

Question

Mr. Prime Minister, welcome. Not only did you respond agreeably to U.S. positions where Iran, Afghanistan are concerned, but you responded perhaps more quickly than any other nation, almost in concert with the United States. Was there any pre-arrangement on these issues?

Prime Minister

We keep fairly closely in touch on a large number of important issues. But we believe that the United States was right. We also believe that if there is a free world job to be done, that obviously the United States is the most significant country in that, but there is a role for other countries as well.

Question

Which should be what?

Prime Minister

Well, if we think the United States is right, to be supportive and to do what we can in what is after all a common cause.

Question

You agreed with the grain embargo, you agreed with Olympic boycott, as I recall -

Prime Minister

Yes I do.

Question

But you have also suggested that your nation might even provide some naval support should the United States choose to make some move. Would that include a blockade? Would you participate in a blockade?

Prime Minister

That is not quite what we have said. We have a defence relationship with the United States that goes back to being on the same side in the last World War and there is a formal alliance. What we have said is that if there looks like being increasing responsibilities in the Indian Ocean, not just in the short term, just not for the

Prime Minister (continued)

time of the crisis in Iran and Afghanistan, but over a much longer haul, then we are prepared to take a larger share of that load. Therefore, we will be discussing with the United States our capacity to contribute something more to the general patrolling and surveillance responsibilities in the Indian Ocean.

Question

Do you see the Soviet move into Afghanistan as being a significant change in Soviet attitude. Does it mark the end of detente? Does it mark the return of the Cold War?

Prime Minister

It is not the return of the Cold War, because circumstances are different. That does not mean to say it will be any easier or more comfortable than the Cold War was. It will be different. I think that sort of term does not really describe the circumstance. In the years since the Cold War, the Soviet Union has been churning 12, 13, 14 per cent of her gross domestic product into defence every year, year after year. So they are well armed and they are very well equipped. The end of detente? Well, the West had one interpretation of detente, the Soviet Union had another.

Question

So none really existed?

Prime Minister

I doubt if it ever really existed. I think that really, what Afghanistan has enabled many people to do is to see the real intentions of the Soviet Union more clearly, more starkly, than they have been able to in recent times.

Question

You speak of the Soviet defence build-up, and as you are undoubtedly aware in this nation President Carter's new budget has proposed major increases in defence spending. You were once Defence Minister of your nation. Is your nation also beefing up its defences, spending more of its resources on defence?

Prime Minister

We have asked our own defence people to put options in front of us. I would believe that our own defence expenditure will be increased as a result of what has happened. We have been increasing in real terms our expenditure in the last three or four years, but our expenditure has been modest.

Question

In the Middle East you haven't quite as much at stake as we. You are virtually energy independent, are you not?

Prime Minister

In many fields, yes. We are a major energy exporter in coal, and natural gas, and a little later in uranium. We are not self-sufficient in oil - about 70 per cent self-sufficient, the rest from imports. But if, through further disruptions to Middle East

Prime Minister (continued)

oil supplies, advanced industrial economies were grievously damaged, as they could be, then that would obviously affect Australia and will affect all nations.

Question

You not only export energy, you also are a major exporter of food. Is it your judgement, it is the judgement of your Government, that food is an appropriate weapon to be used in a political skirmish? Could you withhold food from the Middle East the way the Arabs withhold oil from the rest of the world in times of political crisis.

Prime Minister

I think it would be very difficult to do that. I believe it would be counter-productive. It might lose support for the cause which we believe is important.

Question

Do you also suggest it might be immoral?

Prime Minister

I think many people would suggest that, yes.