

RICHARD COLVILLE - CONVERSATIONS

Question:

Prime Minister, a lot of people seem to be concerned about what might have happened to Australian soldiers as a result of the use of herbicides in Vietnam. You were Minister for Defence, I believe. What can you tell us? What is going on? What is the Government doing?

Prime Minister:

First I would just like to remind people why herbicides were used. In a very real sense, it was a protective device for Australian soldiers themselves. In jungle areas and tropical climates of heavy rainfall, the Viet Cong were very good at coming in close to positions using the jungle as cover for the protection of fixed positions. If you could knock down the growth for a distance around those positions, then obviously, your own people are getting earlier warning, and therefore be more secure. Also, if it were a question of trying to clear the Viet Cong out of the area, if the jungle again could be knocked down through the use of defoliants, it made the operation a less hazardous one for your own troops. I mention that so that people will understand the reason for the use of defoliants, which, is itself quite responsible and sensible. The Department of Veterans' Affairs is at the moment assessing the best way in which these matters should be handled. There is a question of how the examination ought to be conducted, and I hope very much that matters can be put before the Government quite shortly in relation to that.

I had spoken to Evan Adermann through the course of last week about the negotiations and consultations that the Department has already conducted. But there is obviously going to be a great deal of work to do to assess the position and make sure that any claims are properly assessed and to make sure that people who have been harmed, hurt or damaged as a result of use of defoliants, that the Government does what it can about it.

You can certainly understand the seriousness of the position, the tragedy of the position if people have been hurt and if there are serious family problems as a result of the use of defoliants. I think that has yet got to be proved, because that is what the Department of Veterans' Affairs is all about. It is there to look after the interest of ex-servicemen, and I believe it has got a very good and a proud record. There is no country in the world that looks after its ex-servicemen better than Australia. I think that is one of the proud claims of all Australians.

Question:

And if it should be proved that these servicemen were injured as a result of their service, they would be eligible for compensation?

Prime Minister:

Obviously, if it is as a result of war service, then people have to come within the provisions of the Repatriation Act. There won't be any question about that. It is a question of how matters can be properly assessed, and the Department of Repatriation is

Prime Minister:

examining this and what ought to be put to the Government. I am not giving any guarantee of time, but I hope something can be put to us in the coming week.

That won't end the matter. There will be a process of examinations going on after that. It is about how the matter should be conducted which the Department is now directing its attention to. I make no guarantees, but I hope so.

Question:

Another subject causing widespread concern, everywhere around the world, is Afghanistan. We have had some horrifying evidence being given over the past few days. What kind of information are you getting from your sources, either to confirm that, back it up or what?

Prime Minister:

Most of the evidence comes from refugees. One of the remarkable things about the Soviet Union is that when it becomes involved in international events, it has a great capacity to cause a massive flow of refugees in Kampuchea, refugees into Thailand, Afghanistan refugees into Pakistan. In Pakistan, there are about half a million, and I think they are expecting the numbers to go to about a million. Evidence from refugees has indicated that in one case, a village in Afghanistan, and this was quite some time ago, was virtually massacred. Some stories say everyone over the age of about 7 were just lined up and shot. That is because the people from that district had been showing resistance.

Now, this is the kind of ruthlessness of which we know the Soviets are capable. When I reported to the Parliament about this matter several weeks ago, I indicated that the whole world had recoiled in horror when 400 or 500 people in a European town were lined up and shot by the Nazis because of the murder of a particular Nazi. The world recoiled in horror because of that.

But two or three times the number have been murdered in this one particular extermination of an Afghan village. It seems to me that people are more inclined to let it go over their shoulder. There is a feeling around that people don't want to be involved in Afghanistan, or in the consequences of it. There is no doubt Afghans are fighting in many areas, very resolutely. There is no doubt also. There is no doubt also that the Soviets are using the armaments of a very sophisticated and modern army. The refugees are again giving a good deal of evidence to indicate the use of poison gas. We do know that there are gas units in Afghanistan, they are chronic in the Soviet army, which would certainly have the capacity to use gas either out of aircraft or through artillery shells. So it would not be surprising and the circumstantial evidence is now starting to be quite strong. Here we have the brutal suppression of a people. Initially, of course, there was horror in the minds of many Australians when, on the television screen they saw Soviet tanks moving forward and Afghans being pushed aside. But, it seems to recede, to get off the front pages. It is not on the news services to the same extent. The horror goes on, but we tend to forget it and pretend that it does not happen so it is not on our conscience quite so much.

Question:

In view of all this, how do you feel about Mr Wran's offer to subsidise New South Wales' athletes to still go on to Moscow?

Prime Minister:

I think this is one of the greatest pieces of political opportunism. I am not too sure that hypocrisy isn't a more appropriate word because Mr Wran knows that what is happening in Afghanistan has been condemned by 104 nations in the United Nations and the Islamic conference. He also knows that people who watch the Soviet Union and who understand the Soviet Union all believe that an effective boycott would be the best way of getting the message through to the Soviet government and people.

Mr Hayden also says that. But then the Labor Party here tries to work against the establishment of that kind of effective boycott, and I think we are entitled to ask why. If it is the most effective way of getting the message through, and if they do condemn the invasion as they say, why then do they not want the message got through. Why do they work against an effective boycott?

I think people sometimes believe that the Australian government is acting in advance of others in this particular issue but that is not so. In our own part of the world, the governments of Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, I think also Indonesia, certainly Papua and New Guinea, Fiji and New Zealand all believe that there ought to be an effective boycott of the Olympic Games - because that would get the message through.

There was a delegation from the ASEAN countries in my office this last week. They praised the Australian government for the forthright way in which it had spoken out on the issue, because they understand the seriousness of it. They don't want a Soviet Union spending \$3 million a day supporting the invasion of Kampuchea, and they are much closer to it. I find it very difficult to understand those who suggest that business would go on as usual. We have got to get the message through, and we have got to prevent the world making the same tragic mistake as it did in the last of the 1930s.

Question:

A lot of people still adhere to the view, and Lord Killanin is one of them, that sport and politics just shouldn't mix, and you shouldn't really be interfering in something like this.

Prime Minister:

The Australian government in the past tried to adhere to that point of view, and in relation to apartheid in sport over South Africa where there was a racial segregation in relation to sport. If they claim that they government is involving politics in sport, then it is very difficult, indeed impossible, for other countries to maintain the view that sport and politics are separate. But in the Soviet Union sport is political business. It is run by the state as everything else is. A large part of the sporting teams are in the army - they are professional sportsters, if you like. But let me, if I may, quote something from the Soviet Union itself in a document called "Soviet Sports - Questions and Answers", published in Moscow.

"The view popular in the West that sport is outside politics finds no support in USSR. This view is untenable in our country. When for instance, Soviet representatives called for the expulsion of

Prime Minister: (cont.)

South African/Rhodesian racists from the Olympic movement, this is of course, a political move. So whenever somebody says that sport lies outside the framework of political relations, we feel the remark is not a serious one".

Now, that is how the Soviet Union judges it. But in relation to the Moscow Olympics, Lord Killinan has tried to say sport and politics should be separate. But then, a week after they have taken that view - the International Olympic Committee - Taiwan was expelled from the Olympic movement on totally political grounds. Earlier South Africa had been expelled on totally political grounds.

So, the heads of the bureaucracy of the Olympic movement would appear to have very plain double standards. If it is to pursue something like they want - in other words, the Moscow Olympics - they try to pretend that fiction that sport and politics must be kept separate, is a real one. But then, when other matters come in a week later, they adopt a different principle that spoil these kind of politics and expel countries from the Olympic movement - or states from the Olympic movement.

I don't think the International Olympic Committee has done the Olympic movement any good at all, because its behaviour over this issue has exposed double standards and a very selective demonstration of morality.

Question:

Prime Minister, what is your reaction to the demonstration at Monash University last night?

Prime Minister:

I think it is probably to be expected of Monash. Apart from going in the door and a couple of people trying to throw eggs and tomatoes from a long distance, they might have hit one or two people, but it is a real disappointment that they didn't hit Tamie and myself. But, I think it is a pity. Universities are meant to be the home of freedom, of intellectual and academic freedom, freedom of thought. It ought to be there case where there is tolerance in differing political views.

Three years, of course, I went to Monash to the opening of a centre of buildings for the study of handicapped children - the Krongold Centre as it is called. The police were not ready on that occasion. It was a serious, and could have been in real terms, a dangerous situation because there was a mob almost out of control.

There is a very strong Liberal group at that university - there has been right through. They have maintained their beliefs and their convictions publicly in the university against considerable difficulty. At an earlier point, I think one or two of them were quite badly beaten up because of their political conviction. That is one reason why I like to give them the encouragement and support by appearing at Monash in particular. They have shown courage in the past by carrying the Liberal banner, the Liberal ideal, when it has not been popular or fashionable in the university. Therefore, because of that in particular, I have been very happy to support them.

Prime Minister: (cont.)

Last night was a celebration of 25 years and was organised very well. It was a magnificent lecture theatre, and they could make an awful lot of noise outside, but the lecture theatre is so well constructed that you can't hear any of it from the inside. If they think they are disrupting you, you are not even aware that they exist. So, the demonstrators were happy outside and we were happy doing what we wanted to do.

Question:

Do you think demonstrations at Monash against you will become an institution? It seems that every time you go there there is one arranged for you.

Prime Minister:

You had better ask me that question in 15 or 20 years time.

Question:

Will you go back there if you are invited?

Prime Minister:

Of course I would.

---o0o---