PRESS STATEMENT

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May 9th, 1965

For the past two or three weeks I have been wanting to talk about the Commonwealth's decisions concerning tertiary education, the proposed referendum and re-distribution, but once again something has occurred which has pushed these domestic problems into the background.

The Government's decision to send a battalion to South Vietnam is being bitterly opposed by the Opposition. Nobody for one moment likes the idea of sending Australian troops to South-East Asia, nobody likes the idea of sending Australian troops into combat, but that does not mean that a decision of this kind is not the right one when judged in terms of our own security. Too many times democracies in freedom-loving countries like Australia have put themselves into impossible positions because they did not recognise danger when it arose, because they delayed acting until it was much too late.

In the years since the last war major disasters have so far been avoided because the Western world has been prepared to act and because our opponents have known it.

On February 18th the Labour Party issued a statement about American policy in South Vietnam, and I would like to quote a part of it. The statement refers to the purpose of American intervention and action in North Vietnam in support of South Vietnam —

"This statement of American purposes is unexceptionable, and the case of the American action of recent days —

(that is referring to the bombing of North Vietnam)

--- as based on the aim of shortening the war and achieving a negotiated settlement which will establish and maintain the rights of the South Vietnamese people deserves sympathetic Australian understanding ....."

A little later on, the Labour Party's statement continues —

"The demand of the Soviet Government for the immediate departure of all American and other foreign forces from South Vietnam would be in the interests neither of the people of South Vietnam nor of the people of Australia. Its immediate consequences must be a Communist takeover in South Vietnam, snuffing out the hope of freedom and of democratic independence in that country and extending the area of Communist control closer to this country. The presence of those forces is necessary and justified as a holding operation ....."

This is adequate and rational support for American troops in South Vietnam and for American bombing of North Vietnam. It is a view which, at the time it was expressed, would be close to the Government's view. Now Mr. Calwell and the Labour Party opposes an Australian addition to these forces. There can only be two interpretations of this action. It means on the one hand that the Australian Labour Party is prepared to shelter behind the troops and the strength of the United States, while we ourselves do not make a comparable effort, having regard to our size and the dangers that confront us living on the edge of Asia; and here let me remind you that Mr. Calwell has said that the withdrawal of American troops
would not be in the interests of the people of South Vietnam nor of the people of Australia. This means that the troops are necessary, but in Mr. Calwell's eyes American troops and not Australian ones. There could be another interpretation, that the Labour Party has now turned its back on this statement of February 18th, and that it would prefer to see American troops withdrawn from South Vietnam. If this is so it is worth again recalling the paragraph from the Labour Party statement in which it said that the consequences of American withdrawal must be a Communist takeover, snuffing out the hope of freedom and of democratic independence in South Vietnam. One of these interpretations must be the correct one. There is no other possible conclusion to be drawn from the Labour Party's attitude.

The Labour Party's decision is all the more surprising because Mr. Calwell himself said in the debate -

"That there has long been and still is, aggression from the North and subversion inspired from the North, I do not for one moment deny."

A little later on he said -

"I agree that the pace of North Vietnamese aggression - that is the only word for it - has increased",

and later still, after talking of the difficulties of military operations in the Vietnamese territory, he continued -

"but it will be said, even if this is true, that there are far larger considerations. China must be stopped, the United States must not be humiliated in Asia. I agree whole-heartedly with both these propositions."

That is the Leader of the Opposition talking. How can he agree with these things and, at the same time, be totally unprepared to do anything about it. There has been a suggestion that because the Government is sending some troops to South Vietnam we are turning our back on negotiations. This is very far from the truth. A strong military stance at the present time will provide the only road to negotiations. Recent events have made this all too clear. North Vietnam and Communist China have so far refused all offers of negotiations. They have laid down two pre-conditions that the Americans must first withdraw, against the wishes of the South Vietnamese Government and that discussions could only be held between Communist groups, between North Vietnam and the Viet Cong in the South. They both rejected the President's offer for unconditional discussions on April 7th. They told both U Thant, United Nations Secretary-General, and the British Prime Minister's special representative, Gordon Walker, to remain out of Peking and Hanoi; they rejected an appeal by seventeen uncommitted nations on April 1st, they rejected the Indian President's proposal for a cease-fire and are trying to prevent the conference taking place on the problems of Cambodia, situated next door to Vietnam.

There have been several vigorous attempts to bring the parties to an appropriate negotiation. The Communist parties have rejected all of them. The Australian decision doesn't mean that we turn our backs on negotiation. It means that we are doing what we can to support our allies, and that this has been made necessary because the other parties to the conflict will not negotiate.