To have heeded Opposition members beforehand, one would have expected a telling and hard-hitting censure motion against the Government in Canberra last Tuesday. There would be a concerted attack and the government would be harassed, it was said. The want-of-confidence motion, a grave and serious device in Parliamentary procedure, took precedence over all other business.

But what an anti-climax it all was! Patchy .. lack-lustre .. damp squib .. these were some of the descriptions applied to the speech of the Leader of the Opposition, Mr Whitlam, by the newspapers the next morning. The much-vaunted 'censure' motion was unable to crash because it just did not get off the ground. As the Prime Minister described Mr Whitlam's effort ... 'It is a broken-winded, broken mouthed, broken down old crock of a motion put by a rider worthy of that kind of steed.'

Opposition speakers groped vainly for material to support their move, to invest it with the promised high drama that would have the government squirming with embarrassment. But they scratched about in vain, and it indeed appeared that the Opposition Leader himself seemed almost bored with the exercise a few minutes after he began speaking.

Not one argument was brought to light that the Prime Minister, Government Ministers and other speakers were not able to effectively counter or on which they were unable to put the record straight.

The Opposition Leader attempted to launch his argument by complaining that the strategic assessment supplied by the Government's advisers had been in Cabinet's hands for 12 weeks and that Cabinet had done nothing to deal with a review of the Government's defence policies. It was pointed out to Mr Whitlam that the strategic paper was concerned with various assessments of Australia's strategic approach right into the 1980's. Was it seriously argued that 12 weeks was going to make a great difference in such a long-term view, when there were so many unknowns and so many imponderables? We are involved in Vietnam. We have interest in Malaysia and Singapore. Our forces are deployed in these areas. We have a continuing interest in the region, and as the situation clarifies we will have more light thrown on the future path along which Australia's interests lie. But because of the clouds now obscuring our view, it is not possible to go beyond the short-term in projecting our forward posture in the region. This short-term period takes us up until the end of 1971, the cut-off point for Britain's military presence in Malaysia and Singapore. It was decided in principle recently - as the Prime Minister announced - to retain in the Malaysia-Singapore area two squadrons of Mirage jet fighters, two naval ships and an Anzac Battalion, and we would take part in arrangements for the conduct of the jungle warfare school in Malaysia.

The decision-in-principle was made known to the two South-East Asian countries involved, our attitude being that before the decision can become absolute we must know what assistance can be offered by the two countries in matters like provision of support for our ground troops.
The Prime Minister argued that if the Opposition Leader suggested that precise longer-term decision should be taken now before the imponderables had been resolved with greater clarity, then he was advocating an irresponsible course. In effect, Mr Whitlam was 'seeking to play politics with national survival.'

It was pointed out in the House that whenever there had been a want-of-confidence motion (and they were comparatively rare occasions) that they had focussed on a single urgent point of urgency. But the Opposition Leader's speech ranged over a very wide field - as he said himself, over the responsibilities of some 'dozen or fifteen ministers.'

On defence he claimed to see deep trouble in the fact that there had been no new three year defence review. The Minister for Defence pointed out that the last three year defence program encompassed the most far-reaching re-organisation and re-equipment of the defence services, and much of this equipment was still to be delivered.

Mr Whitlam took a feeble side-swipe at the Government's record in welfare. This was easy to encounter as the Government has taken special steps to help the sick, the poor and the old and is moving to bring further comfort to those in these categories.

The Opposition devoted one sentence to the primary industries. The Minister for Primary Industry hit back by detailing the Government's records in this field - help in overcoming the effects of devaluation and drought, and aid like the increased superphosphate bounty.

The Government side was put strongly by the Prime Minister to counter allegations of gaps in oil policy. In September, 1965, all Australian oil producers were given 67c a barrel as an added incentive to search for oil. This payment was to apply up to September, 1970. In the case of small producers the extra cost per gallon as well as freights have been absorbed into the Australian price structure without any undue increase in price to consumers or effect on the economy. But the big oil finds in Bass Strait on which the 67c a barrel was due to be paid would have added considerably to the price per gallon to the consumer and effect the economy. Negotiations took place and the Bass Strait producers agreed to forego not only the 67c a barrel incentive payment but a further 5c a barrel as well. This meant a reduction of just over 2c a gallon in the price refineries would otherwise have had to pay for the oil, and a consequent saving to the consumer.

In their abortive attempt to find a target to hit, the Opposition lashed blindly about them on tariffs, the Post Office, health, rail lines, decentralisation, the death penalty, the study of fish, urban development, local government finance, and shipping. Presumably they expected to score somewhere - but their shots were nullified. The Minister for Shipping and Transport spoke of the revolution in world shipping and of the Government's thinking in trying to enter into the Far Eastern conference - as the Australian National Line was doing.
The Prime Minister himself summed up the Opposition's motion - 'If it has served its purpose, if it has served any purpose; I am convinced that it has not served the purpose of leading anyone to lose any confidence in what the government has done and is doing. But rather it may well have served the purpose of showing up in stark relief what little confidence can be placed in an opposition and a Leader of an Opposition who can present such a motion and support it in such a way.'
Library Digitised Collections

Author/s:
Fraser, Malcolm

Title:
Labor Party Opposition

Date:
c1969

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/40514

File Description:
Labor Party Opposition

Terms and Conditions:
Copyright courtesy of Malcolm Fraser. Contact the University of Melbourne Archives for permission requests.