ELECTIONS IN SOUTH VIET NAM

Statement by the Hon. Malcolm Fraser

Malcolm Fraser, Federal Member for Wannon, stated recently that during this year he has met many people who thought that the effort to establish representative Government in South Vietnam before greater security had been achieved was a vain waste of time. So far these doubters have been proved wrong, he said, and all the indications so far received point to the fact that the Presidential and Senate elections have been held as fairly and properly as could reasonably be expected under the circumstances. Reports from Australian correspondents such as Dennis Warner, John Bennetts of The Age, and Garry Barker of the Melbourne Herald all supported this view.

It is worth remembering in talking of elections in South Vietnam, that the United Kingdom, faced with the threat of invasion, suspended democracy during the last world war by the agreement of all political parties. There was not going to be another election till the War was over. In contrast, the South Vietnamese, fighting desperately within their own borders, are attempting to introduce and make effective the normal institutions of a peace-time democracy.

He then went on to say that despite all this, last year the South Vietnamese Government undertook to organise five nationwide elections of vital importance in the span of one year.

1. Elections for the Constituent Assembly, which was established to draw up a constitution, were held in September 1966 and 80% of the enrolled electorate voted - 4,274,000 voted out of 5,288,000.

2. Local Government elections were held in May 1967, in nearly 5,500 villages and hamlets throughout South Vietnam. At this time, out of a total of 6 million electors, 4.8 million voted to elect 14,000 officials from 25,000 candidates. This was despite Viet Cong threats and acts of terrorism during the elections. Further local elections are planned in an additional 275 villages and 1,500 hamlets by the end of this year.

3. & 4. In the most recent elections for President and Senate once again more than 80% of the registered voters went to the polls - 4,860,000 out of 5,850,000. They voted for 10 civilian Presidential and one military candidate and for 480 senatorial candidates.

This record only serves to indicate the determination of the people of South Vietnam to take advantage of the opportunity that is being given to them to elect freely their own representatives. In all the elections
2. held so far more than four fifths of the people have gone to the polling booths, despite the very real threats of the Viet Cong to all those who did not boycott the elections. When one looks at the increases in casualty figures of civilians killed and wounded at election time, one realises the force of this determination. In the days immediately preceding the elections, it is reported that terrorists killed 200 civilians and wounded 1200 more. There were 28 killed on polling day alone and in all, there were 73 incidents of Viet Cong mortar and grenade attacks on villages on that day.

5. Elections for the Lower House will be held next month. It will therefore be seen that the Government kept its promise – four of the five elections have now been held and the fifth is scheduled for late October. This is surely a remarkable and praiseworthy achievement in the face of tremendous difficulties.