AUSTRALIA'S PARTICIPATION IN VIETNAM

Statement by Malcolm Fraser, Federal Member for Wannon.

A statement made this week by Malcolm Fraser, Federal Member for Wannon and Minister for the Army reads as follows:

When the Prime Minister announced the addition of a third battalion group and a tank squadron to our Armed Forces in Vietnam the Opposition refused to take the adjournment of the debate and under normal procedures of the House of Representatives this meant that a debate on this issue would not take place. Normal practice would be for the Opposition to move an adjournment and after they had examined the initial statement the matter would be discussed in the Parliament. The Leader of the Opposition avoided such a debate but made a statement outside the House.

It is difficult to see the reason for this. It only makes sense in the context that the Opposition was seeking to avoid discussion on Vietnam and seeking to fight the elections on purely domestic grounds. If this is so it is unrealistic. When Australian forces are engaged in combat overseas and political parties are divided over the issue it is nonsense to suggest that these aspects will not be of great importance during any election. The former Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Calwell, has said that Vietnam should be a major issue. In my view any party which tries to avoid debate on a matter as important as this is not worthy of holding the Government benches.

Despite the fact that there has been a tendency, since the Labor Party conference in Adelaide, to think that the Labor Party's policy on Vietnam has been modified, this is not the case. In fact Mr. Calwell, Dr. Cairns, Allan Fraser and various spokesmen for the Victorian executive of the ALP have all said or implied that the policy is now stronger and harder than had previously been the case. This policy therefore, would still involve desertion of our allies and the leading of Australia into isolation. It would also involve the danger of alienating many of the countries of South East Asia, most of whom support what we and the United States are doing in Vietnam.

There is no viable alternative to present policies. Our objective in Vietnam is limited and we seek to obtain it by limited means. The objectives are to preserve the independence of South Vietnam and establish circumstances in which that country can work out its own future, free from aggression. We offer no threat to North Vietnam or to the North Vietnamese regime but the Free World Forces are determined that the North's military adventures against her neighbours will not succeed. Does anyone suggest that our objectives should be
broadened and that we should now seek to destroy North Vietnam as we sought to destroy the regimes of Germany and Japan in the last war? If this course was adopted nothing would be more likely to bring China into the war. Does anyone really think that the suggestion that operations in Vietnam should be converted into holding operations, as the Labor Party now suggests, is also realistic? Mr. Hasluck gave figures in the Parliament last week which showed that there has been a considerable increase in the area and population which has come under the control of the Saigon Government in the last 12 months. Why should we cease operations which are designed to achieve this purpose? This would merely give further advantage to the enemy when he is, in fact, in the process of losing ground.

People have suggested that the bombing should cease. I have made my own views plain about this. I believe we should not deny Australia the use of such a military tactic that helps to relieve pressure on the Free World Forces in the South unless there is a reciprocal move from the North. If we did it would involve increased casualties amongst all the forces helping the South, including Americans and Australians. Even Japan, who until recently has been silent on this question, has now indicated that before the Americans could be expected to cease the bombing it would be necessary to have some clear idea of what reciprocal concessions would be likely to be made by the North Vietnamese.

Nobody likes being in Vietnam and we would all much rather be able to bring our soldiers back home, but Australians who live on the edge of South East Asia are vitally concerned with the security of the whole region. If Australia is not prepared to play its part in resisting aggression the voices opposing the President in the United States would be greatly strengthened. If the United States withdrew, I doubt very much if anything could stop Communist domination of the whole of South East Asia, including, of course, the democracies of Malaysia and Singapore. The Prime Minister of Singapore has strongly suggested that this is also his view.