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FOREIGN POLICY—WHAT NOW?

The Foreign Editor of Tribune examines Australia's options in foreign policy following the collapse of the previous policy based on calculations of a United States' victory in Vietnam.

IT IS PROBABLY 27 years since an Australian government has been in as deep trouble over foreign policy as the Gorton Government is at the present time. In October, 1941, the pre-war Menzies Government was thrown out of office because of the manifest bankruptcy of its political disposition in the face of the aggression of the Axis powers. This opened the way for the Curtin Government and a period of independent foreign policy activity such as no Australian government has matched before or since.

It is unlikely that the Gorton Government will suffer just now the same fate as its Menzies-led predecessor did in 1941. But it certainly deserves to. The turn of events in Vietnam, where the valor and effectiveness of the Vietnamese liberation armies have combined with mighty political and financial factors at home to produce at last a US willingness to talk on a settlement of the war, has left the Gorton Government literally gasping for breath.

One could sense the astonishment and anguish of the Government through the words of the former Navy Minister, Mr. Don Chipp, speaking in the supposed secrecy of a government party meeting, but reported by a pressman as saying, directly to Gorton: "Would I be exaggerating, Prime Minister, if I said that five months ago in this party room there was a unanimous view that victory was on the way in Vietnam? Now, does anyone believe that Vietnam will resolve as satisfactorily as Malaya, Korea or Berlin?"

It is hard to imagine a government so outflanked by events, so unprepared for a dramatic turn in a situation of prime concern to it. But being outflanked and unprepared is one thing. The quality of the response to such a situation is another. With his statement of March 31 announcing a limitation of the bombing
of North Vietnam and his decision not to seek another term of office, President Johnson exercised the unconscionable right of the leader of any great power to do precisely what the interests of that power require in precisely the way he thinks fit. He did not in the least find it necessary to consult his Vietnam ally, Australia, about what he intended to do.

One is reminded of a 1940 discussion between President Roosevelt and the Australian Minister to Washington, R. G. Casey, in which Roosevelt told of a US Cabinet discussion held a short time before on what the USA should do in three contingencies—an attack on Canada, an attack on a Latin American republic, or an attack on Australia and New Zealand. Gist of the decision was that of course if Canada was attacked, the US would be involved; if the Latin American republic was attacked, the US would be involved provided the republic was not too far from the territory of the USA; as for Australia and New Zealand, well, the implication was, the element of distance was so great it was altogether too bad! Reported in Sir Alan Watt's *Evolution of Australian Foreign Policy, 1938-1965*.

The Gorton Government's pique at being thus ignored is understandable, considering the picture of a "special" Australian-US relationship which its spokesmen are so fond of projecting. But governments, like men, must sometimes know how to swallow feelings of hurt pride. If, swallowing its feelings, the Gorton Government had been able to come back smiling, to welcome the turn of events in Vietnam, and to wish success to the talks, it might have been saved some credit for itself.

What has happened, however, is that it has not succeeded in hiding its feelings of sullen resentment at the beginning of the Paris talks, and has even, according to the US magazine *Newsweek*, permitted itself to get drawn into a so-called "co-ordinating committee" along with the Saigon puppets, the Thais, South Koreans and Filipinos with the purpose of all pulling together at the coattails of the US the moment it looks as if the US is ready to move towards a meaningful settlement in Vietnam. This committee of the internationally tenth-rate is the kind of company Australia is consorting with in the 19th year of Liberal control of Australia's foreign policy destinies.

What this action of the Gorton Government reveals in all its nakedness is just how the Liberals understand the American Alliance of which they talk so much. Their understanding of this Alliance amounts to a craven, immoral and maybe-to-be-disappointed hope of keeping the USA involved in killing Asians, of keeping American power involved in Asia as a means of guaranteeing that the US "protect" Australia in some unspecified future.
contingency. Crass and base are the only words to apply to this kind of stance in international politics.

It is surely a measure of the disservice done to the Labor Party by the leadership of Mr. Whitlam that at the moment of the most open display of the political and moral bankruptcy of the government, his party should have been more concerned with an internal crisis precipitated by himself than with pointing out to the electorate the pass to which the Liberals had brought the country, and Labor’s prescription for the way out. Indeed, far from getting after the Government over the fiasco of its Vietnam policy, one of the points the prideful Mr. Whitlam was holding against the Victorian executive of the Labor Party was that it had presumed on its own account to make statements in line with ALP federal conference policy denouncing the Vietnam war.

Not for a long time had the dream-world quality of Australian political life as it is lived at present by the country’s major parties been so clearly displayed. Of all political parties, only the Communist Party was not taken by surprise by the turn of events. As early as the first week in February, the report delivered to a meeting of its National Committee by National Secretary Mr. Laurie Aarons had laid out the inner meaning of the Tet offensive—the assumption of an offensive strategy by the Vietnamese, and basic military defeat for the Americans—and foreshadowed the events which have now come to pass. (The report was embodied in a resolution published in Tribune under the headline, “Time To Rethink On Vietnam,” on February 14).

The Labor Party’s predicament on this occasion has particular significance. It showed quite clearly that for all Mr. Whitlam’s facile presentation of an “image,” his persistent failure to seize the nettle on questions of foreign policy constantly vitiates his leadership. And this failure arises directly from his political position, his whole outlook on politics. It sends one’s mind back to the crucial episode in modern Labor Party history, the split of the middle ’fifties. This split, which led to the formation of the Democratic Labor Party with its ultra-Right foreign policy, occurred as a result of the party’s efforts, at its 1954 Hobart conference, to re-orient its foreign policy in line with the modern needs of Australia. The issues on which the split occurred—the question of the recognition of China, withdrawal of troops from Malaya, and the banning of nuclear weapons—are substantially the great modern Australian issues, upon whose resolution the country’s future depends.

Acceptance by the Labor Party of the bi-partisan foreign policy with the Liberals which was essentially advocated by its far Right would have condemned it to abject political sterility.
The history of the ALP since that time can be seen as a history of struggle between those who wish to take advantage of the party’s opportunity to present a bold alternative foreign policy, and those who see electoral advantage in minimising the foreign policy differences with the Liberals, in playing down foreign policy. The main representative of the latter trend, Mr. Whitlam, has spared no effort to bend, for example, the firm decision of the opposition to the Vietnam war adopted by the 1966 federal Labor Party conference to what he sees as the prevailing mood of the electorate.

Mr. Whitlam’s efforts to mute his party’s foreign policy differences with the Government are paralleled in domestic matters by his constant hankering for some sort of accommodation with the DLP forces. On both counts, he is profoundly mistaken about the nature of modern Australian politics. By adopting the position it has, the DLP has ruled itself out as a significant opposition force in Australian life. It simply agrees with the government on all the main questions of foreign policy.

These questions are up for resolution. They would have been so anyway, but the 19-year record of Liberal governments, and the present state of Liberal foreign policy, make their resolution more urgent than ever. To the extent that the Labor Party seeks to evade these questions and to accommodate itself to Government-DLP positions, to that extent it fails to do its duty to the nation, and also passes up the most serious opportunities it has to regain office. In the months ahead, as the foreign policy debate mounts in intensity, and pressures grow from the Right for still more reactionary foreign policy positions for Australia, including the acquisition of nuclear weapons, the Labor Party may well face a moment of truth as significant in its own way as that confronting the Liberals at the present time.

It is impossible to sort out from the babel of voices arising from Government ranks at the present time any clear or dominant line of policy. But all leading Liberals who have expressed themselves adhere in one form or another to the concept of military force as the decisive element in our relations with Asia. There are “big pact” men (who want a new South-east Asian military grouping including Indonesia), there are “little pact” men (who want arrangements limited, perhaps, to Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore), and there are some who look to Japan.

The reservations expressed by the Government over accession to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty has publicly displayed the strength of those in the Government party who want to keep
Australia’s hands free to seize the nuclear weapon, should occasion arise. Prime Minister Gorton himself, a politician noted for his close personal connections with senior members of the armed forces, appears to be developing ideas which break with the “forward defence” thinking which has dominated Government policy for years. But in its stead Gorton appears to be advocating some kind of “fortress Australia” strategy.

The drift of the Prime Minister’s thinking was indicated by Sydney Morning Herald reporter, Ian Fitchett, when he wrote on May 21: “In the Government party room, Mr. Gorton is reported to have said that Australia would have to give far more attention to the example of defence efforts by countries like Israel.” It is well-known that there is a strong school of thought among senior army officers, whose ideas could be assumed to be well-known to Mr. Gorton, that far too little attention has been paid to such military arms as the Citizen Military Forces, the kind of force so strongly developed in Israel, a state which is bellicose and beleaguered all at once.

Given the state of flux in Liberal thinking, there must be increasing pressure for the Labor Party to take some strong initiative on foreign policy questions, to move into the “vacuum” which is so painfully evident on the government side. It is impossible to ignore the signs of a significant shift of forces within the Labor Party, under the impact of recent international developments. The emergence of Dr. J. F. Cairns as indisputably Mr. Whitlam’s strongest rival for leadership of the party in the April caucus ballot is perhaps the most impressive of these. The fact that Dr. Cairns ran Mr. Whitlam to a 38-32 result cannot be dissociated from foreign policy matters, given Dr. Cairns’ unequivocal identification with Leftwing Labor Party positions on questions of international relations.

Whatever the immediate outcome of the struggle in the Labor Party, it is certain that the great imperative of our national life — the finding of a viable, morally-based set of policies by which Australia can accommodate its own legitimate national interests with the legitimate national interests of our neighbors — require a much more active attack on the foreign policies of the Liberal Establishment than is evident at present. Such an offensive, advocating positive alternative policies designed to safeguard peace in the region, would find a ready response in the developing mass movement of protest and dissent over Liberal lines of foreign policy. Contemporary experience in other countries is clearly demonstrating the power of the unity of diverse social forces to quickly transform apparently immutable situations.