

VIETNAM — REFUGEES,  
BORDER WAR, REHABILITATION

Hon. E.G. Whitlam, AC, QC

The contribution I might be able to make to this seminar flows from an overseas visit I made in May and June. When I planned that visit I had in mind to look into three matters concerning Vietnam. First, the position of refugees, which nobody has mentioned up till now, although it is a matter which is going to concern Australia as much as any other nation in this region for many years to come. Secondly, I had in mind to study how serious in fact was the conflict in the region. Would it lead to a war between Vietnam and China? Thirdly, I wanted to see to what extent rehabilitation was required in Vietnam. In all these matters you will notice that I was looking at it very much from the point of view of how directly was Australia involved, and to what extent could Australia—because of our resources and distance this would largely mean in cooperation with other countries or through international organizations—have an influence on these three issues.

First, the refugees. I looked into this matter in Geneva with the International Committee of the Red Cross and with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. I also discussed it in Bangkok, in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, and in Nanning, the capital of Guangxi province, next to Vietnam, and also in Guangzhou. In the European context refugees used to mean at the beginning of the century those who were leaving the Tsarist Empire. Forty years ago they used to mean those who were leaving the German Empire, largely Jews. Thirty years ago they used to mean those who were leaving the new Russian Empire. Nowadays those whom we call refugees may not be so classified in the technical sense under the relevant international conventions. The Jews were free to leave Germany before the outbreak of the Second World War. The people who are leaving Vietnam now in general are free to leave Vietnam. It is arguable whether they are refugees.

Not only in the State Department, as one of our American speakers has observed, but in Australia too there are a great number of people who are intent on saying 'We told you so'. They said three years and more ago there would be a bloodbath in Vietnam when the country was reunited and the Americans were expelled. There has not been a bloodbath in Vietnam and there is not likely to be one. Emotion is played up very crudely with evil nostalgic motives. I am not suggesting that there is not distress in social and economic life in Vietnam. I must stress one point about refugees which is not understood in Australia. I did not really appreciate the full extent of it, only a fraction of the extent of it, before I met Mr Paul Hartling, the former conservative Prime Minister of Denmark who is now the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. He pointed out that he was also going to help the refugees into Vietnam; there were already 150,000 of them. There have been almost as many refugees going into as coming out of Vietnam. You would never believe it reading the Australian press.

Without going into any great detail, let me read the notes I made in June after my discussions in Vietnam.

I was accompanied always by Professor Hoang Minh Giam who is the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the National Assembly, an old socialist like so many of the people whom one meets in the capacity in which I went to Vietnam. They are people who have had experience in the public affairs of their country for up to forty years. Whatever one may think of people in communist countries of different brands, they are at least people who know their jobs. One misses the exhilaration in Washington where one finds that a person is a master of a job after three months in it. In Vietnam one meets people who know all the nuances and have been familiar with them for more than a generation. Now this does not mean that they are always sufficiently flexible. I got the impression that in Vietnam people were pretty well played out, they rather felt let down after the war. Nevertheless these people did have a long-standing, coherent view of what their country should represent. They knew their history. They knew it under various self-appointed

protectors. I shall read what I was told by Mr Xuan Thuy, now the Vice-Chairman of the National Assembly in Hanoi. He said there were people of Chinese origin wishing to return to China and they were free to do so as long as this was done by lawful means. Vietnam did not wish to stop them going; he asked me about the number of Vietnamese and Chinese in Australia.

Next, I saw one of the vice-ministers of Foreign Affairs, Mr Phan Hien, the one who has been to the ASEAN countries and to Australia. He said the Cambodian regime's excesses are a direct consequence of their doctrinaire views and inability to govern the country effectively. Their brutality is impossible to understand except as an over-reaction by an inexperienced and frightened group of men. Their hostility to Vietnam is an attempt to bolster their credibility and rally some support from the increasingly disillusioned populace. The extent of their brutality, which verges on genocide, is difficult to believe. It is, however, corroborated time and again by Cambodian refugees who are forced to flee to Vietnam. Regarding the Chinese who wish to leave the south, he expressed the view that they simply wanted an easy life, that there was no easy life in sight for any Vietnamese, but that if they wished to leave Vietnam his government would not stand in their way.

The last person I saw was Mr Phan Van Dong, the Prime Minister. He said the Cambodians were hard to understand, but essentially they were dependent on their northern friends. (May I interpose a comment here. One finds in Russia or China, and I found in Vietnam too, that you never name the country or the nation opposed to you. You refer to it in directional terms. Zhou Enlai in a conversation with me seven years ago referred to the Russians as 'our northern neighbours'. Mr Kuznetsov, who stands in for Brezhnev and has had a long experience of foreign affairs — he brought Czechoslovakia into line — referred to 'southern neighbours'. He used the term often; only once did he use the word China ('Kitai').) Mr Phan Van Dong also said that there were people of Chinese origin who wish to leave the country. They were free to do so through normal channels, he said.

From other sources I formed the impression that if one had \$3,000 one could leave by air; if one had \$2,000, and I have heard from other sources \$1,500, officials look the other way when one sets off by sea. The departments in Australia seem to think that half of the 'refugees', as they call themselves, are Chinese. That proportion will be seen to be an understatement as the years pass. The simple facts are that refugees move both ways in Vietnam and are going to move around in our area for many years. Australia cannot hope that the refugees will fade away. Even if some of them are pirates, they can stay under the principle announced by Senator Greenwood some years ago — anyone opposed to communists can do what he likes, he is welcome in Australia. It is not sufficient for the Australian Minister for Immigration to investigate the problem of Vietnamese refugees by visiting every country in the region except Vietnam. The shadow Minister for Immigration has proposed that we should set up holding camps in Australia until the United Nations or some other international body can find another home for them. I cannot think of any investigations or proposals that are more futile.

Secondly on the war between Vietnam and Kampuchea. With all respect to Ian Wilson things have changed since China resorted to war in Korea. Her northern neighbour was then supporting her. When she tried to resort to war in 1958 she didn't have the ships to incorporate Quemoy and Matsu. In 1962, when she rectified the imperial border with India, it was not known, not fully realized in the West that she and the Soviet Union had split up. I would think it very unlikely that China will invade Vietnam; it would be so easy in those circumstances for the Soviet Union then to invade China. Maybe I do not know enough. I have not spoken to Cambodians other than in Canberra since November 1973 when rather to the displeasure of the Foreign Affairs Department, I called on Prince Sihanouk in his residence in the old French legation in Peking. I make bold to doubt all the stories that appear in the newspapers about the treatment of people in Cambodia. I am sufficiently hardened to believe that the last refuge of the patriot in Australia is to blast the regimes in post-war Indochina. Nobody will justify them so your criticisms will not be countered. I also have a hearty

suspicion of every official statement coming either directly or through the press from the Soviet Union or the United States. There has been so much disinformation spread from those two sources that I tend to disbelieve half of them. One factor that has not been mentioned but might be in Vietnam's mind is that she wants to ensure her north-south communications. The Ho Chi Minh trail is now a big highway but it is vulnerable to attack from across the border. We are still in the same phase in regard to the Indochina situation as we were throughout the sixties in regard to China and the Soviet Union. We could not rid ourselves of the idea that communists must always be monolithically conniving at the destruction of the rest of mankind.

The antipathy between the Vietnamese and Cambodians is long-standing. In my conversation with Sihanouk he said if it had not been for Napoleon III, the Annamites would have destroyed his nation. There is also two thousand years' resentment by the Vietnamese against the Chinese. The rivalry between Vietnam and Kampuchea is now fomented by the rivalry between the Soviet Union and China. I would very much doubt if Vietnam would have proceeded as far as she has but for the support of the Soviet Union or that Kampuchea would have done so but for the supplies that she has received from China. My views on this issue have been derived from conversations in Moscow, in Hanoi and, to a lesser extent, in Bangkok and Canton.

My third concern is the rehabilitation of Vietnam. It is painful to see, particularly in Hanoi, what an immense amount needs to be done. If one looks at the bridge over the Red River on the road to the international airport, one sees at once that this sort of infrastructure is worse even than one sees in Bangladesh. I suppose that as a practising politician until recently I have to think out some arguments to bring home to people the urgency of such matters. Therefore I put my argument on the level of international politics. If the Soviet Union is the only practical friend that Vietnam has she will become more attached to the Soviet Union. The only nation that has given any support to Vietnam for years, other than China and the Soviet Union, is Sweden. The

ideology of the Swedish government which initiated it of course is one which would appeal to me. We in the West can be very thankful for the Swedes. Otherwise the only people whom the Vietnamese would recognize as ever having done a thing for them would have been the Soviet Union and China.

Our Ambassador, a very fine career man, was somewhat disturbed when we took the long drive to the international airport from Hanoi. It took nearly two hours. We were in a large vehicle and were clearly Europeans. When people, young people in particular, wanted to show their pleasure at seeing us they would hail us as Russians. The urchins who ten years ago saw Europeans in Saigon used to yell out 'Americans'. The Europeans with whom the general population now identifies in Hanoi are the Russians. We (Australians) are doing a little in Vietnam and it is relevant and appreciated. We are doing what is urgently necessary, I would think, throughout Indochina — that is developing the resources of the country in agricultural, pastoral, rural areas. Over a million people have been sent from Ho Chi Minh City to the countryside, and more are to be sent. Why people out of that city and Phnom Penh have been sent is because the population of such cities inflated by war, can only be fed by imports. Now the Americans are not disposed to send their surplus grains there and the European Economic Community sends its agricultural surpluses elsewhere. The present population cannot be fed. Their food supplies must be increased. Australia is helping very well and it is appreciated. Aid is coming from the Asian Development Bank, no thanks to the Americans. It is coming, I believe, from the World Bank, no thanks to the Americans. I take the point, however, that there are no votes to be got in America from spending money on Vietnam. I also take the point that it is more urgent for America to normalize relations with Peking than to normalize them with Hanoi. One has to sympathize with the Americans: this is the only war they have ever lost and the loss was catastrophic in inflation for them and for the rest of the world, including us, and in a diminution of American prestige and interest in our area. Nevertheless if we wish to encourage prosperity and security in our region we will do what we can to see that the Americans are as magnanimous as they can be when in a good mood.

They could do more than any other people in the world to help in rehabilitating this country which is in its present position because of their obsession with isolating and boycotting China ever since the revolution in 1949.

I have confined myself to three matters, but they are continuing issues and issues on which Australia can have some influence and should certainly try to exercise it.

THE VIETNAM-KAMPUCHEA-CHINA CONFLICTS:  
MOTIVATIONS, BACKGROUND, SIGNIFICANCE

Malcolm Salmon (ed.)

Working Paper No 1

Department of Political and Social Change

Research School of Pacific Studies  
Australian National University

March 1979