

The Vietnam Situation

If the position of Communist China in the world community is a source of underlying concern to many Canadians, the conflict in Vietnam creates open anxiety and leads to controversy.

The Canadian involvement in Vietnam arises from our membership in the International Commission for Supervision and Control, which was created by the 1954 Geneva Conference to supervise the Cease-fire Agreement between the French Union Forces and the People's Army of Vietnam. The Commission was given no executive role, and has always worked within the mandate given to it to supervise and report to members of the 1954 Conference on the implementation by the two parties of the provisions of the Agreement. It is sometimes overlooked that it has never had the power to bring about compliance with its recommendations.

It could be argued, and, indeed, it sometimes is, that, in the new and unforeseen situation now existing in Vietnam, the Commission serves no useful purpose and should be disbanded. The Government has examined this possibility on a number of occasions in the past, and has rejected it for what I consider to be sound reasons. None of the parties involved in Vietnam has, at any time, suggested that the Commission should be withdrawn. Both North and South Vietnam continue to look to the Commission to consider and adjudicate their charges, and the Commission is still able to conduct some investigations.

I should hope, for example, that the Commission would be able to establish the facts about recent violations of the Demilitarized Zone and take action designed to deter any future violations and to re-establish its demilitarized status. Success in ensuring that both sides respect the zone as a form of cordon sanitaire could be a first step, however modest, on the way to de-escalation and might serve as a pilot project for the sort of supervised settlement which must eventually be achieved.

The Commission also exists as the only remaining symbol of the 1954 Geneva settlement. We cannot discount the importance of the Commission as a reflection of the continuing interest of the Geneva powers in a situation which engages their international responsibilities. Finally, I continue to hope and to work for a situation in which the Commission might be able to assist in the achievement of a peaceful settlement. For all these reasons, therefore, we consider that the maintenance of the Commission is both necessary and desirable.

The war in Vietnam began as a symptom of the instability of Asia. As it goes on, however, it can become the cause of instability not only in Asia but in other parts of the world. Unfortunately, all attempts to bring about negotiations have been unsuccessful. We remain convinced, however, that the time for negotiations will come, must come, and that Canada has an obligation to contribute to the search for ways to bring them about.

Our Commission role has one further and very important advantage in that it gives us a special opportunity, available to very few others, of access to the capitals most directly concerned in the conflict. We have used this access and will continue to do so. Most of you will be aware of the two visits to Hanoi made by Mr. Chester Ronning as a special representatives of the Canadian