

'GORTON AFFAIR' STIRS AUSTRALIA

But Prime Minister Appears
to Be Weathering Storm

3/23/69
By ROBERT TRUMBULL
Special to The New York Times

SYDNEY, Australia, March 22—"I've had 30 passengers in here so far," a Sydney taxi driver said today, "and every one of them has talked about nothing but the Gorton Affair."

"The Gorton Affair," an episode certain to be an issue in the National elections next November, concerns allegations aired in the Australian Parliament this week impugning the personal conduct of Prime Minister John G. Gorton.

No sooner had Mr. Gorton withstood an attack related to a meeting in a Sydney nightclub last year with Liza Minnelli, the singer and daughter of Judy Garland, than he was again under fire for taking a 19-year-old female reporter to the American Embassy for a late-night meeting with Ambassador William H. Crook last November.

The embassy incident resulted in a demand by Representative Edwin H. St. John, a member of Mr. Gorton's Liberal party, that the 57-year-old prime minister resign.

Saying he was not suggesting "any kind of impropriety," Mr. St. John contended it was "unfitting, unseemly conduct for a married man to go off with this 19-year-old girl and to arrive at the embassy with her."

Gave Girl 'Lift' Home

Mr. Gorton said in Parliament that the girl, Geraldine Willesee, a junior reporter for an Australian news agency, had asked him for "a lift home" after a dinner in the Prime Minister's honor by members of the Parliamentary press gallery. He said he had received a telephone request from the ambassador that he stop by the embassy residence after the dinner and that he took Miss Willesee and his press secretary, Anthony Eggleton, along.

This statement, seemed to dispose of the matter until Miss Willesee, the daughter of a Senator belonging to the opposition Labor party, issued a statement in which she said it was Mr. Gorton who had suggested "the lift."

Mr. Gorton had said that

they went to the ambassador's residence around midnight, a time that the embassy corroborated in an official statement, and stayed about half an hour. Miss Willesee said that they had called on Ambassador Crook at about 1 A.M. and had stayed for two hours. During this time, she said, the Prime Minister talked with her in one end of a room while the Ambassador and other guests were in another.

Again Mr. Gorton's credibility and discretion were brought into question by critics. With the recess until Tuesday, it remains to be seen whether the debate in Parliament on the Gorton Affair has ended.

To Confer With Nixon

The episode, especially awkward for the Prime Minister because of his trip to the United States at the end of the month to confer with President Nixon, followed closely upon attempts by the opposition party to make political capital of a "spy scandal" this month. In a series of newspaper articles, Mrs. Gerard Hoffmann, who once served as a secretary in the Japanese Embassy in Canberra, told of obtaining secret data for the Australian Security Intelligence Organization.

One day, according to her account, the Japanese Ambassador found her with embassy papers and a copying machine.

She wrote that the Ambassador had asked her what she was doing and she had replied: "I'm stealing secret documents."

She said the Ambassador had laughed and left the room.

The sensation blew over quickly. The Japanese Government laughed the episode off as "trivial." Mr. Gorton invoked the accepted rule that the Government does not discuss anything having to do with the intelligence agency. The majority feeling in Australia so far as can be ascertained in the absence of public opinion polls is that Mr. Gorton, apparently will survive the attacks. There may even have been a reaction in his favor.

"Never read such nonsense in my life," a girl clerk at the Sydney telegraph office said of the attacks on the Prime Minister.

"It's hitting below the belt," a waiter in a restaurant declared.

Said the taxi driver: "So he goes out with a young bird, that's fair enough."

The cabbie, who had taken an unofficial poll, said: "The big majority of my passengers were for Gorton, except a few wowsers, Calvinist types, who wanted to chuck him out." Since the attack on Mr. Gorton, he has received assurances of support at meetings of the Liberal party in three of Australia's five states and the Canberra capital territory. Further endorsements are expected to follow. The newspaper editorials also have been mostly friendly.