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War Protesters Celebrate Smearing of Gorton

London Sunday Times
LONDON March 24—In a ground-floor apartment in Earls Court last weekend a committee of war protesters assembled to celebrate their latest achievement — John Grey Gorton, Australia's unpredictable Prime Minister was trying to fight off a smear campaign built around a late-night drinking party and two young women.

The success of their mission was more than they had dared to hope when these Australians and New Zealanders decided three months ago to adopt the policy of personal attack.

It was on Jan. 5, in the back bar of the Prince of Wales public house in Notting Hill Gate, that the committee met to consider how it could enliven the demonstration they had planned for the next day, when Gorton was due to arrive in London for the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference.

Some of the members were disconsolate about the likely ineffectiveness of straight antiwar slogans: A few "Get Out of Vietnam" banners were hardly likely to be withdrawn of Australian troops.

A new tactic was necessary, and the group decided to use information sent them from Canberra and Sydney about Gorton's alleged relationships with Liza Minnelli, the 23-year-old daughter of Judy Garland, and Geraldine Willesse, 19-year-old daughter of an Australian Labor Party Senator.

Miss Minnelli has described the story linking her with Gorton as "vicious lies." Miss Willesse says that she simply went with the Prime Minister to the U.S. Embassy one night and stayed until 3 a.m. while American officials served a few drinks and explained the Vietnam bombing halt.

When Gorton and his wife arrived in London on Jan. 6, their limousine was greeted at the Savoy Hotel by 12 demonstrators whose main banner declared "Hands off Vietnam" on one side and "Hands Off Liza Minnelli" on the other. Gorton merely grinned. His off-the-cuff unpredictability and contempt for ceremony provide a marked contrast to the staid patronage of a former Australian Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies. But Gorton's press secretary, not picked up the gossip, warned him the next day that political opponents might use such rumors against him. Gorton replied, characteristically: "I know people gossip about me, and it hurts. But, hell, if a man can't be himself, what's the place coming to? I like a few drinks when I finish work. I like parties when I can sing and dance and yarn. Yes, I even like talking to women. Do they want me to live in an ivory tower, and meet only diplomats and politicians? Well, damn it, I'm not going to. This is an experiment in a Prime Minister being himself."

Story Balloons

When the Gortons got back to Australia, the story had ballooned, particularly in Things I Hear, a political scandal sheet put out by an anti-Gorton journalist.

No one in public life took the story seriously except for a few dissident Liberals within Gorton's own party and one Labor Party leader. They were the ones who brought up the matter in Parliament last week and forced the Prime Minister to defend his private life.