



**AFTERMATH: AUSTRALIA
AFTER THE GREAT WAR**
ONE-DAY CONFERENCE SATURDAY 6 APRIL 2019
POMPEY ELLIOTT MEMORIAL HALL
403 CAMBERWELL ROAD, CAMBERWELL

KEYNOTE SPEAKER — MELEAH HAMPTON
AUTHOR OF *ATTACK ON THE SOMME: 1ST ANZAC CORPS AND THE
BATTLE OF POZIERES RIDGE 1916*



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Australia and the world after 1919:

The tentative nation

Professor Peter Edwards, AM

Over the past two hundred years, the debate on Australia’s outlook on the world has revolved around two poles. On one side are those who argue that, as we have a small population occupying a large part of the world’s surface in a volatile, potentially hostile, part of the world, we must concentrate on establishing good relations with one or more strong allies, the ‘great and powerful friends’ of whom Robert Menzies often spoke. For those who think like this, ‘alliance’ is the most important word in our strategic vocabulary. On the other side are those who say that relying on allies gets us into ‘other people’s wars’, and that we should make our own way in our region, making as many friends and as few enemies in our region as possible, and relying primarily on our own resources. For those who along these lines, ‘independence’ is the key word. Australians have always aspired to have the best of both worlds, keen to have our cake and eat it too. Governments have generally sought to assure the electorate that they have found a way of balancing the demands of alliance and independence, so that our alliance commitments and our regional relationships are mutually reinforcing, not in conflict.

In the period between Federation and the outbreak of war, Australian governments, despite their rapid turnover, were often quite innovative in this area. Remember that Federation did not mean Australia had become an independent nation: a group of six separate colonies had become a colonial federation. But successive governments, most notably those led by Alfred Deakin, were often innovative in seeking to advance the nation’s cause, while remaining within the most powerful empire the world had ever seen. On the diplomatic side, Deakin, who called himself ‘an independent Australian Briton’, and others took a number of steps to advance Australia’s national interests, while working within the imperial system. The only diplomatic mission the Australia opened before the Second World War was the High Commission in London, intended to create a channel of influence on British foreign policy

rather than to establish an Australian policy. But leaders sometimes took initiatives outside the approved system. Most famously, Deakin contacted Washington directly, and not through imperial channels, to ensure that President Theodore Roosevelt’s Great White Fleet visited several Australian ports.

On the military side, arguments between the imperial and national dimensions of policy led to a number of compromises. For example, Australia would have its own navy, not just an Australian squadron of the Royal Navy, but would place it under Admiralty command in the event of war. And Australia would have compulsory military service, but restricted to the continent’s borders: only volunteers would fight abroad. That is why the volunteer army of 1914-18 was known as the Australian Imperial Force.

From 1919 onwards you might think that the experience of the war would encouraged Australians to have greater confidence in their own judgement of military and diplomatic affairs, and rather less in the wisdom of the leaders in London. That did not happen. Marilyn Lake has shown that Australia was socially progressive in a number of fields before the war, but afterwards was a broken nation, mourning its losses, looking back rather than forward. Much the same can be said of Australia’s outlook on the world. The impetus to be innovative, to seek a more active role while accepting greater responsibilities, was lost. In the 1920s and 1930s, Australian looked inward. In international affairs, Australians – with a few notable exceptions – became more timid, more tentative, more determined to rely on ‘the mother country’ and the imperial connection. Prime Minister S.M. Bruce’s election slogan of ‘Men, Money, Markets’ meant that Australia intended to rely on the immigration of British men (and, presumably, their families), on capital raised in London, and on selling products to British and imperial markets.

In all the dimensions of Australia’s relationships with the world, Australia reinforced the imperial connection, while playing down the nationalist impulse. Little of this came from British pressure: it was generated from within Australia. Before coming to the aspect that will probably interest most of us today, the defence relationship, I would like to look at the wider framework, the political and diplomatic aspects of our international relationships, within which defence, immigration, trade and the other elements operated.

To have a more independent outlook, even while acting within the imperial framework, required several things. Perhaps the most basic was to have the rudiments of a foreign office and diplomatic service. The major, self-governing territories of the empire – principally Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the Irish Free State - were becoming known as ‘Dominions’, a curious status between colony and fully independent nation. Even while proclaiming support for the diplomatic unity of the British Empire, several of them began to send diplomatic missions, separate from the British embassies, to capitals in which they had strong interest, such as Washington and Berlin.

There was an ethnic dimension to this drive. Canada had a strong French population, the Boers or Dutch descendants in South Africa were similarly ambivalent about being regarded as British, and the Irish Free State had its own reasons to distance itself from London. But Australia did not follow that path. Instead Australians liked to proclaim that their nation was ‘98 per cent British’ – a statistical fallacy even then – and to tie themselves even more closely to London. When it came to world affairs, the most distant Dominions, Australia and New Zealand, were the most assertive of their loyalty to, and therefore dependence on, Britain.

During and immediately after the war, Prime Minister Billy Hughes seemed to be following the tradition of Alfred Deakin and other pre-war leaders, seeking and often succeeding in gaining the best of both worlds. He attended the Versailles conference, and signed the peace treaty, both as leader of an independent nation and as a member of the British Empire Delegation. That delegation was a continuation of the Imperial War Conference, which was formed by Dominion leaders alongside the British Cabinet. A smaller group of leaders, essentially Prime Ministers, also sat in the Imperial War Cabinet. But Hughes did not make skilful use of this privileged position. It was obvious that the future of the region depended largely on the directions taken by Japan and the United States, but Hughes managed to antagonise both. He seemed to expect that the Empire’s leaders in London would genuinely consult the Dominions, but the Chanak incident of 1922, when British leaders seemed to expect military support in their position in a dispute between Greece and Turkey, proved that confidence unfounded.

That experience showed the weakness of Hughes’s ‘one-man band’ style, as he chose his advisers or associates on an ad hoc basis, from the public service or the private sector. To create and implement enduring and effective policies, even one hundred years ago, one need to establish institutions that would outlast individual prime ministers, in this case at least the rudiments of a foreign office and diplomatic service. And to do that, a government needed the political will, as well as the human and financial resources.

For most of the 1920s and 1930s, while other Dominions were making some gestures towards a degree of autonomy in international relations, Australia doubled down (to use a modern American phrase) on the relationship with London. It offered three main reasons for its relative inaction. First, any suggestion of independence would undermine the concept of the diplomatic unity of the British Empire. More bluntly, enemies and adversaries could pick off member nations individually, unless they resolutely stood together. Secondly, why should Australia spend its limited financial resources on

establishing its own foreign office and diplomatic service, when it had free access to one of the largest and most experienced foreign offices in the world? And thirdly, it was a matter of human as well as financial resources. In many eyes, Australia lacked suitably qualified men (and of course diplomacy, like many other professions, was seen as an activity for men only). As Ross McMullen’s book, *Goodbye Dear People*, has reminded us, the cost of the war was not only the sheer number of men killed and maimed, but also the loss of so many who would have been the next generation of leaders in so many fields of Australian life.

Nevertheless, there were some efforts in the direction of founding an embryonic foreign service. While Hughes was overseas, the Acting Prime Minister, William Watt, established a Pacific Branch in the Prime Minister’s Department. This was a one-man show. E.L. Piesse was a far-sighted individual, who could see that Australia’s future lay in what happened to the north, especially Japan. He travelled in the region, making his own assessment of Japan’s ambitions, and was a close friend of James Murdoch, who was sponsored by the Defence Department to teach Japanese at both Sydney University and the military college at Duntroon. But Piesse had little influence on Hughes. At one point he put forward a carefully worded proposal, arguing that Australia could maintain the White Australia Policy while handling Japan with greater tact. Hughes responded with a single word: ‘Rot’. Piesse resigned and Australia’s first attempt at founding a foreign office foundered.

Hughes’s successor, Stanley Melbourne Bruce, tried a different tack. Recognising that Australia’s only diplomatic mission, the High Commission in London, had become little more than a retirement home for former Prime Ministers, he established a two-man operation. He placed a promising and well-connected young man with a good war record, Richard Casey, in London, and specifically in the office of Sir Maurice Hankey, the influential secretary to both the Cabinet and the Committee of Imperial Defence. Casey saw many high-level documents, and was able to keep Bruce in touch with the trends in British foreign policy, but he was never instructed to insert Australian views into the

Whitehall machine. The other half of the operation was Walter Henderson, a man with highly unusual credentials for an Australian. His high qualifications in international law came, not from Oxford or Cambridge, but the Sorbonne. Lacking Casey’s flair for personal diplomacy, he was already losing Bruce’s confidence when the government fell and was replaced by the Scullin Labor government. Henderson attributed his bad relations with the Scullin government to sectarianism. An Ulster Protestant with connections to the Huguenot elite in France was not esteemed by an Australian Labor government with a large proportion of Irish Catholics. But Henderson’s own personality – combative and intellectually arrogant – did little to help. Throughout the interwar period, Labor was heavily influenced by pacifism and isolationism, and many regarded diplomacy as an activity for upper-class men in striped trousers.

The system survived the Scullin government, but little happened when the conservatives returned to office. In 1931 the British parliament enacted the Statute of Westminster, effectively granting full independence to the Dominions. Australia, unlike other Dominions, did not ratify the Statute until 1942, by which time Labor was in office and Dr Evatt was both Attorney-General and Minister for External Affairs. In other words, London offered Australia full international autonomy, but for a full decade Australia declined the offer.

In the Lyons government in the early 1930s, Sir John Latham became, for the first time in decades, the first person other than the Prime Minister to be appointed Minister for External Affairs. He led a mission to what was still called the Far East; but there was little follow through in policy or policy-making. While other Dominions sent separate legations to Washington and other capitals, Australia only adopted the feeble half-measure of appointing an Australian officer to occupy a desk in a British embassy, starting in Washington. It should be said that other countries, most importantly Japan and the United States, wanted to deal directly with Australia, and London was not standing in the way: the reluctance came from Australia itself.

Eventually in the mid-1930s the government established a Department of External Affairs and started to recruit some able young men (still exclusively men), who would become leading Australian diplomats in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. And in April 1939, on the day he first became Prime Minister, the young Robert Menzies announced that “what to Britain is the Far East is to us the Near North”, and that Australia would establish its own diplomatic missions in the United States, Japan, Canada and China. As Australia had no corps of trained diplomats, the first heads of mission were recruited from politics and the judiciary. There was no little irony in this development. Menzies had been a longstanding opponent of separate diplomatic representation, but he took the decisive step some two decades after it could have been initiated.

Given that history, and the attitudes that lay behind it, it is not surprising that the military dimension of Australia’s outlook in the 1920s and 1930s also displayed a reversion to reliance on the mother country and the Empire. In many cases the pre-1914 initiatives towards a more independent role in defence were slowed, if not reversed. The huge army of 1914-18 was run down, and the tradition of military leaders coming from the militia led to Australia having a very small permanent army, which was badly treated. It was assumed that, in the event of another war, Australia would once again rely heavily on recruiting civilians into a Second Australian Imperial Force, with most of the senior ranks filled from the militia. In the early 1920s, in the vain hope that disarmament would make another war less likely, many of the great powers scuttled much of their navies. Australia relied heavily for its strategic policy on the Committee of Imperial Defence, which was based in the Cabinet offices in Whitehall, and on the Royal Navy for its security. But scuttling of fleets under the Washington treaties left British with essentially two major battle fleets, instead of three.

The defence problem for Australia was very clear. It was always assumed that Japan would be the threat, even though it had been an ally in 1914-18; but Japan was only likely to take aggressive action

if the circumstances in Europe were favourable. How, then, could Australia rely on British naval support in the Pacific, if the Royal Navy were fully committed in Europe? If one British fleet were committed to the North Sea, to guard against Germany, and the other to the Mediterranean, to cope with Italy, what would be available to deter, or if necessary to defeat, Japan?

The answer from London was the so-called Singapore strategy. The concept was simple. Singapore would be developed as a major naval base. No fleet would be based there, but it would be equipped to supply and repair a fleet which would, so the British government repeatedly promised, be sent out from European waters in the event of Japanese aggression. Since it was obvious that Japan would only act if and when Britain was fully occupied in Europe, the strategy was fundamentally flawed. At one point, Bruce returned from an imperial conference admitting that he could not see how this strategy could work, but he accepted assurances that it could and would. It was, quite simply, a triumph of blind faith over evidence and clear thought.

We all now know what happened in late 1941 and early 1942. The surrender of Singapore on 15 February 1942 was not only the greatest disaster in British military history, as Winston Churchill called it; it was also a disaster for Australian strategic policy.

In short, Australia's outlook on its place in the world during what we now see as the period between two world wars was far from edifying: it was backward looking and tentative. Both sides of politics must share some of the blame. The conservatives, in office for most of the period, were unwilling to do anything other than to cling even more closely to the mother country. Labor offered few alternatives, tended in its own way to be inward-looking, influenced by isolationism and pacifism, and opposing ventures towards independence in defence or diplomacy. In the late 1930s John Curtin

thought of placing more reliance on air power and submarines to defend the continent, but by this time it was too late.

Finally, there are some uncomfortable parallels between Australia’s strategic outlook in this period, especially in attitudes towards Britain and Japan, and today’s dilemma as Australia seeks to manage relations with the United States and China. Once again, Australians are worried about the potential threat of the rising power in Asia, and concerned whether our great but distant ally has both the will and the capacity to ensure our security. The great difference, of course, is that Japan was not our major trading partner in the 1920s and 1930s. But, as some commentators have pointed out, Australian leaders sometimes seem to be ‘doubling down’ on the American alliance, at precisely the time when Washington seems unwilling or unable to exercise the global leadership from which Australia has benefited for the last seventy years. If there are lessons from this period for us today, they are that Australia needs to invest more in its diplomacy as well as in its defence capacity, and above to engage in clear thinking and robust debate about our regional and global relationships.