

Introduction

Any student of Australian involvement in the West New Guinea (WNG) dispute between 1950 and 1962 is soon struck by one simple fact; historians of Canberra's post-War policies in Southeast Asia (SEA) have shown – and continue to show – scant interest in the issue. There is no published work, using archival material, that covers the entire period. A similarly simple, though less obvious, point is that they have focussed almost exclusively on either Australian Government attitudes to events on mainland SEA, or what are perceived as the formal manifestations of Australian policy. Two of the more prominent publications of recent years, for example, have primarily examined Australia's engagement in SEA during the 1950s and early 1960s via the Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS) alliance, the South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), commitments to Malaya, and various crises in Indochina.¹

This trend, coupled with neglect of the WNG problem, is both unjustified and unfortunate. It is unjustified because it fails to reflect accurately what was thought to be important at the time. The Liberal-Country Government and the Australian public were equally as, or perhaps more, concerned with events surrounding WNG as they were with those centred on SEA's mainland or with the treaties to which the nation was party. Sir Walter Crocker, in this period an International Relations scholar and Australian diplomat, gave a clue to the importance of WNG by asserting in his memoirs that the Government and electorate had three major "preoccupations" in these years, one of which was "the future of Dutch New Guinea".² Apart from such participant testimonies, the sheer mass of documentation on WNG in relation to other aspects of Australian SEA policy provides eloquent witness to the contemporary significance of the subject.

The neglect of WNG by historians is closely related to the failure by general commentators to account for WNG's past importance. Indeed, generalizations about Australian policy in SEA during the 1950s and into the 1960s must be deemed open to question if they are based upon samples that exclude a principal concern of the Liberal Government and the Australian public. A fundamental objective of this thesis is to determine whether certain of these generalizations are in need of adjustment, and if so, to suggest corrections.

The exact generalizations examined relate to two basic and interrelated questions that have occupied, to a greater or lesser extent, the thoughts of most pupils of

¹ P. Edwards with G. Pemberton, *Crises and Commitments: The Politics and Diplomacy of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948-1965*, Sydney 1992, and G. Pemberton, *All the Way: Australia's Road to Vietnam*, Sydney, 1987.

² W. Crocker, *Travelling Back: the Memoirs of Sir Walter Crocker*, Melbourne, 1981, p. 178.

Australian post-War foreign policy. Firstly, how did Australia perceive itself in relation to SEA and, secondly, how did it view itself in relation to the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK)? The answer usually provided is that Australia saw itself as a vulnerable outpost of Western civilization, and therefore, whilst seeking greater understanding with SEA countries, believed itself to be dependent on its ‘great and powerful friends’.³ In other words, Australians were afraid of living on the rim of SEA, and consequently sought the protection of the UK, and increasingly that of the US. In *The Frightened Country*, for instance, Alan Renouf has written that the “first hallmark” of Liberal-Country foreign policy (which included its outlook on SEA) from 1950-67 was “Deep concern for security, even fear” – a phenomenon that worked itself out in reliance upon Britain “as the keystone to Australian security”, and in the pursuit of “the same intimacy with the US”.⁴ In the same vein, David Lee, in his revealingly titled book, *Search for Security*, argues that, apart from economic considerations, Liberal foreign policy was marked by fear of war, and a decision in the mid-1950s to find refuge in East Asia primarily under a US, rather than a UK, umbrella.⁵ This position – that Australia felt exposed in SEA and sought dependence on the British and, or, Americans – has achieved such widespread acceptance that its full and explicit elucidation is often not seen as a necessary partner to its common use as a foundation for historical enquiry. Such a tendency is most obvious in the numerous works that seek to scrutinize Australia’s activities in SEA almost purely in terms of Australia’s relationships with the British and Americans.⁶ There, the overwhelming aim is to

³ In this thesis, the concepts of middle, small, major, independent, and dependent powers – all of which revolve around the key theme of reliance and self-reliance – are to be understood as follows:

A middle power is a nation capable of exerting direct influence abroad in a number of areas of national interest, whether they be geographical, political, military, or economic. A lesser state, a small power, has almost no direct influence outside its borders, except perhaps where the presence of other nations is not felt, and a major power has direct influence in most areas of interest. Similarly, an independent power is largely autonomous regarding its foreign interests, as opposed to a dependent power, which is essentially subject to the help and direction provided by a greater power. (An application of these terms would, then, be that the popular view explained in the text above is that Australia was both a small and dependent power).

Other analytical terminology in the thesis is usually used in the same way; that is, it is not used in a technical sense, but is to be interpreted both generically and in relation to other generic concepts. Such general language is employed because the predominant History debate on the period still uses broad language; it is a debate which has not yet been overtaken by technical definition. For an example of more technical studies, see R. W. Cox with T. J. Sinclair, *Approaches to World Order*, New York, 1996, and A. F. Cooper, R. A. Higgott and K. R. Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order*, Vancouver, 1993.

⁴ A. Renouf, *The Frightened Country*, Melbourne, 1979, pp. 452-54.

⁵ D. Lee, *Search for Security: the Political Economy of Australia’s Postwar Foreign and Defence policy*, Sydney, 1995, pp. 108, 166-67.

⁶ See, for example, C. Bridge (ed.), *Munich to Vietnam: Australia’s Relations with Britain and the United States Since the 1930’s*, Melbourne, 1991, N. Harper, *A Great and Powerful Friend: A Study of*

determine how, and sometimes when, Australia came to lean on Washington more than London, but the assumption behind this goal – the dependence necessitated by fear of Asia – is rarely thought to need prominent acknowledgement or vigorous defence.

A more specific formulation of a central goal of this thesis is, therefore, as follows: to ask, using the WNG ‘preoccupation’ as a case study, whether Australians were indeed afraid of SEA in the period 1950-1962, and whether, as a result, they saw dependence on the US and UK as both a fact and a vital pursuit. In terms of method, a number of points must be made. Certain periods of the WNG dispute are examined in detail for two reasons. The first is grounded on the conviction that generalizations arising from a case study can have no authority unless the study itself is accurately constructed. This is axiomatic, and yet often overlooked.⁷ A deficiency of histories of Australian foreign policy is that they are typically written by those who have not submitted themselves to the drudgery of archival labour. In some cases this is excusable, as they were written when most relevant archives were closed; often there is no such defence. In this dissertation, an attempt has been made to connect broader observations with particular actions and thoughts on WNG. Here, the requisite level of detail is substantial – especially when writing of the late 1950s and early 1960s – because of the innate complexity of the Australian position, but it means generalizations can be put forward with more confidence than is warranted in some other commentaries on Australian foreign policy. Speculation can be replaced by substance.

A second reason for closely investigating WNG is that another objective of this analysis, subsidiary to that already stated, is to add to the lamentably minute number of works on Australian policy *vis-à-vis* the WNG dispute. At present there are only three studies based on previously closed documents, and these have been built with the benefit of only three significant non-archival works.⁸ As part of the process of supplementing scholarship on Australian attitudes to WNG, these histories will be

Australian American Relations between 1900 and 1975, St Lucia, 1987, and G. St J. Barclay, *Friends in High Places: Australian-American diplomatic relations since 1945*, Melbourne, 1985.

⁷ For an example of this fault in relation to WNG, see G. Pemberton (an historian usually of sound method), ‘An Imperial Imagination: Explaining the Post-1945 Foreign Policy of Robert Gordon Menzies’, in F. Cain (ed.), *Menzies in War and Peace*, Sydney, 1997, p. 165.

⁸ The three works using previously secret documents include two papers by R. Chauvel – ‘The Emergence of the West New Guinea dispute’ in D. Lowe (ed), *Australia and the End of Empires: The Impact of Decolonisation in Australia’s Near North*, Geelong, 1996, pp. 53-68; ‘Up the Creek Without a Paddle: Australia, West New Guinea and the ‘Great and Powerful Friends’’ in Cain, *op.cit.*, pp. 55-71 – and a doctoral thesis by P. Phelps, *Australia, International Diplomacy and the West New Guinea Dispute*, University of Sydney, 1996. The main works utilizing the public record are: J. R. Verrier, *Australia, Papua New Guinea, and the West New Guinea Question 1949-1969*, PhD dissertation, Monash, 1976; N. Viviani, *Australian Attitudes and Policies Towards Indonesia, 1950-1965*, PhD dissertation, Australian National University, 1973; and M. Haupt, *Australia Policy Towards the West New Guinea Dispute, 1945-1962*, PhD dissertation, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, 1970.

tested against the documentary record, and detailed criticisms and comments will be made in footnotes. However, the task of supplementation has overwhelmingly involved original research. This has been essential. All three archival-based studies were finished after this work was started, and, at any rate, only one – a doctoral thesis by Peter Phelps – is of substantial length.⁹

The lenses through which ‘policy’ is viewed are less original; who was making it (personalities and institutions), why (domestic, international, and personal influences), when, and how it was being implemented. A penultimate note to be made on methodology is that no attempt has been made to cover comprehensively the entire dispute. Given the dictates of the word limit, this was impossible. Instead, three periods – 1950, 1954, and 1958-62 – have been selected for detailed study. These are sufficient for the purposes outlined because the basic features of the Menzies Government policy on WNG were formed in the first period, and did not begin to change until the third. Put otherwise, the ‘windows’ chosen faithfully reflect the essential nature of policy.

A last point is to acknowledge the limitations of probing generalizations through case study. Reconstruction of the former can only occur to the degree allowed by the scope of the latter. Because WNG was not the only sphere in which Australia related to SEA or the US and UK, it cannot be used to define exclusively these relationships. To do so would be to fall victim to the same methodological error apparent in much post-War Australian history. Accordingly, it is not the actual issues used by other historians in making wider observations that are being challenged, or the rightful mirroring of these issues in such observations, it is the extent to which commentators have allowed certain issues to lead to simplistic interpretations of Australia’s self-perception in connection with SEA and the world’s two great English-speaking powers.

⁹ Moreover, Phelps’ work, when accessed, was found to have marked differences to the near-complete research that had been done for this dissertation; Phelps’ chronological focus, and his selection and interpretation of documents relevant to WNG, did not square with my own research, and has in no way had a decisive impact on its final presentation.