

Conclusion

At the start of this study, it was said that Australia's part in the WNG dispute, which proved a major preoccupation of the Menzies Government and the Australian people, has been unjustifiably neglected by historians of Australian 1950s and 1960s foreign policy. Consequently, generalizations concerning the nature of that policy were to be questioned. It was asked, in particular – and this constituted a central objective of this thesis – whether the notions that Australia feared SEA, and therefore believed itself to be dependent on the US and UK, are soundly based. The answer to this, as determined through close examination of three periods representative of Australian WNG policy over 12 years, has been shown to be both 'yes' and 'no'. Australia's perception of itself in relation to SEA, and to its British and American allies, emerges from the exercise as complex and variable.

Between 1950 and 1957, as illustrated in the years 1950 and 1954, Australia's response to the WNG problem reveals the nation as unafraid of the principal Southeast Asian obstacle to the *status quo* on the island – Indonesia – and subsequently independent of the US and Britain. In fact, assuming Australia was fearful and reliant in the context of mainland SEA, it is evident that Australian self-perceptions were settled along geo-strategic lines, and not in a 'blanket' manner, as is often suggested; Australians viewed their relationships with Asia and the US-UK very differently according to whether Canberra's policies pertained to the area north or south of Singapore. Specifically, Australia's satellite status in mainland SEA was contrasted by the conviction that, immediately offshore, Australia was an 'imperial' power. The latter position was manifested and instructed by Australia's independence from America and Britain on the WNG issue, and invulnerability to Indonesia on the same question. Use of the Dutch administration as proxy in maintaining NG as a strategic sphere of influence was behaviour similarly archetypal of power-political 19th Century-style thinking.

The halcyon era of Australia as a self-identified middle power, seen as able to project its influence well beyond its shores, ended during the rise and fall of the Indonesian rebel movement. In this turbulent time, traditional Government policy on WNG – hitherto symbolic of Australia's presumed standing in the immediate region – began to change. These modifications, unsurprisingly, proved rooted in greater anxiety over Indonesia, and in increased reliance on British and American influence. For example, the decision to allow policies concerning Indonesia (such as arms deliveries) to disturb Dutch-Australian solidarity was related to fears over communism, and the need for US and UK action to combat it.

Still, it was not until January 1959 that such anxiety and dependence was shown by WNG policy to be virtually all-encompassing. Here, the Menzies Government chose ‘controlled bias’, whereby Australia would back the Dutch in a low-key way, and allow the importance of events in Indonesia to temper policy, yet acquiesce in a transfer to the Republic if a selection had to be made between a ‘friendly’ WNG and a permanently hostile or communist Indonesia. This new line was developed primarily because officials in Canberra were persuaded in the latter half of 1958 that Indonesia’s flirtations with the Sino-Soviet bloc had become Australia’s most pressing security problem, and because they accepted that Indonesia had the ability to lodge armed forces on WNG. The Government endeavoured to balance such overriding concerns by leaning far more heavily on the US and UK (in areas, for instance, such as Indonesia policy and on deterring Indonesia from using its armed forces).

Having thus marked Australia as a diminished power, living anxiously, and strongly dependent, Cabinet’s views had come to accord more closely to common modern interpretations of the country’s foreign policy relationship with SEA, and Britain and America. Certainly, T. B. Millar’s view that Australia was basically fearful and reliant in an all-encompassing sense fundamentally matched Government perceptions of reality in 1959.¹ But it is notable that, apart from emerging late in the decade, these views were not shared by the Australian public – as indicated by the furore over the Casey-Subandrio statement. ‘Australia’ did not believe in these notions; only its elected representatives and some of its public servants did, and it was not until 1962 that the Government position was widely accepted. Therefore, even between 1959 and December 1961, it is not accurate to judge ‘Australia’ as subject to a fear-dependence mechanism. Instead, the country should be described as undergoing transition.

With the *fait accompli* of late 1961, coupled with the associated public announcement of the next month, the last vestiges of independence were removed from Australian minds. Asia, additionally, was set to physically touch an Australian boundary, exposing the Commonwealth to greater danger. Australia, in other words, was now believed to be more a besieged outpost of Western civilization than a power of any description. The nation was, for the first time, dominated by self-perceptions relative to SEA, and concerning the United States and Britain in that area, that coincide with current historiographical orthodoxy on the topic.

¹ T. B. Millar, *Australia in Peace and War*, Sydney, 1991, pp. 2, 130.

Even at this point of coalescence, though, the frequently misapprehended backdrop remains critical to an understanding of the 1960s. Australia's confidence in British and American regard for Australian definitions of national security interest – which had braced the stubborn attitude of 1961, and even the earlier 'imperial' approach – was crushed with the remnants of autonomy. A fear-insecure dependence dynamic had been triggered, and appears central, for example, to an explanation of the origins of the Vietnam commitment. Beyond this discovery (and the scope of this thesis), the deeper impact on Australian attitudes to SEA of the perceived cultural bond with the US and UK needs further investigation. Australian shock at the Anglo-American *fait accompli* of December 1961 suggests that the Government's tendency to perceive and choose dependence in specific spheres, in response to particular fears relevant to those areas, was girded by the assumption of a 'special' relationship with the US and UK on home defence. When this assumption broke down, fears for continental security seem to have had an impact on Australian dependence further afield; the direct correlation between geography, vulnerability, and dependence no longer applied.

In general, a close study of Australia's involvement in the dispute over WNG, with a view to illuminating aspects of the national self-image, provides a corrective to popular thought on the same topics – thought which is grounded, not on proper comprehension of the WNG "preoccupation", but on a fixation with formal Government agreements and mainland Southeast Asian conflict. In looking forward from ANZUS, and backward from Vietnam, historians have simplified and misread Australian attitudes that, apart from intrinsic interest and importance, are essential to an accurate interpretation of such events and the post-War decades by which they were spanned.

Aside from the central questions posed in the Introduction and specifically answered in the discourse that followed, there are other general issues worthy of note. One of these is to observe the dominant influences on the formation of Australia's WNG policy. There is little doubt that the attitudes of Cabinet were paramount in this connection. There were times when the Government was sensitive to public opinion, and to the Opposition, particularly near elections – and there may be a degree to which the full impact of the electorate or political opponents is not revealed in the files. On the other hand, it seems clear that the often close resemblance between public opinion and Government policy had more to do with shared conviction than deliberate mimicry designed to keep the Liberal-Country Party coalition in power. When the Government wanted to change policy in 1959, it did so in spite of continuing strong support among the public for the Dutch. Even with the uproar after the Casey-Subandrio joint

statement, the new approach to Indonesia was not forfeited. And it was finally dropped, not because of public opinion, but due to a review by Menzies of the dynamics of the Indonesian domestic situation.

The dominance of Cabinet thinking over the policy-making process can also be discerned in interactions between Cabinet and the public service. The DEA, for example, never proved capable of stimulating major changes in official policy. This failure is most obviously seen in 1955-56 – a period (not covered in this study) in which the Department pushed for greater accommodation of Indonesia. Later, in 1960, the DEA's notions of a united NG were quickly dismissed by the Ministers. The Departmental suggestions that were accepted were nearly always adopted because they suited a pre-existing ministerial line. The Department of Defence may have had a little more influence than the DEA – due to the fact that 'strategic', as opposed to 'political', thoughts dominated Cabinet minds for a long time – but the same principles applicable to the DEA were usually evident. For instance, Cabinet agreed with Defence appreciations for most of the 1950s, but in January 1959 reinterpreted the relative strategic value of WNG and Indonesia against Defence advice. Fundamentally, the Australian public service exerted a much weaker influence on policy than its equivalent in other countries such as Britain and the USA.

The Prime Minister's Department (PMD) may have been an exception. Outwardly, this appears unlikely. There is little evidence that this department had an influence on WNG policy through formal channels. Memoranda on WNG, either between officers or to Menzies, are relatively scarce in its files. On the other hand, occasional records, such as Timbs' intervention against the DEA Cabinet submission of early 1960, suggest that a small group of senior officials in PMD followed the WNG issue closely. It is probable that, according to Menzies' preference, they spoke, rather than wrote, to him. Thus, it seems that an informal influence may have been exerted on policy by members of the PMD. Yet this is perhaps best characterized as personal, rather than institutional, influence. Menzies maintained a select group of advisers, headed first by Allen Brown, and later by E. J. Bunting, whose work relationships with him were defined more by his personal trust and esteem than official position.² Advisers in the DEA and other departments, by contrast, were more conventionally distant and independent – at least on WNG.

² For comment on these close advisers, nicknamed "the boys", see Bunting, *op.cit.*, pp. 96-127.

Within Cabinet itself, Menzies' preeminence was apparent. At important moments, it was often the Prime Minister who articulated or finalized the Cabinet position. For example, even though detailed minutes of what individual Ministers said are not yet available, it seems the Cabinet meetings and decisions of August 1958 were, in the last analysis, thoroughly dominated by him. Similarly, in 1960, it was Menzies who took the lead in reverting to more traditional tactics on WNG, and, contrary to common belief, he was instrumental in bringing about an end to orthodox policy.

While acknowledging Menzies' role, the basic unanimity in Cabinet must not be forgotten. There is no evidence of division between the Ministers before 1958. Late in that year, some disagreement over the problem of a military guarantee emerged. But this was short-lived. By 1959, Cabinet was united in strong support for a policy that did not allow for material assistance to the Dutch. This unity explains why Menzies' personal influence was in fact rarely manifest. It also warns against putting too much emphasis on the authority of individual Ministers such as Spender, Casey, or Barwick. Spender may have brought a certain energy to bear on WNG policy – and Casey his own urbane touch – but both operated within the limits of a general consensus. The same may be said of Barwick, for all his pretensions to radicalism.

A secondary purpose of this thesis was to supplement and assess the small amount of scholarship on WNG that has emerged thus far. In terms of the latter task, past work does not stand up well. Material based on the public record, while perhaps reasonable in view of the limited sources, proves of little use in any meaningful analysis of the WNG problem. Given the penchant of the Menzies Government for secrecy on foreign policy issues,³ such histories perhaps obscure more than they reveal. For example, Viviani and Haupt are wide of the mark in speculating on the state of Australian policy in 1950, and on the fact and meaning of Australian involvement in the events of 1957-58. Their conclusions provide no reliable foundation for generalization by historians unacquainted with the topic. The document-based studies – a doctoral dissertation by Phelps, and two short papers by Chauvel – suffer from both lack of accurate detail, and, conversely, arbitrary selection from among the minutiae of Australian and international records. The result is a failure to construct a narrative faithful to the main features of Australian policy, and to misidentify or exaggerate the importance of smaller issues. This is not to underestimate the task of converting the thousands of papers on WNG into a coherent history of Australian attitudes during the

³ See Pemberton in Cain, *op.cit.*, pp. 170-72.

dispute. It is a massive task, and made infinitely more difficult by the lack of interest shown the subject thus far. Certainly, the efforts required to make the current study readable were substantial, and more could be said. The period from 1958 onward is highly complicated – not least in terms of the actions of the Menzies Government – and needs more thought than was possible in the time available. It is hoped that subsequent scholars find an appropriate base for further scholarship on what are fundamental questions about Australian perceptions of their place, capacities, and policies in the region.

A postscript to Australian involvement in the WNG dispute is that of the continuing concern of the Commonwealth Government with events on the island of NG after January 1962. In July 1962, the Netherlands and Indonesia agreed to a plan that specified a phased withdrawal of Dutch personnel from the territory, and their replacement, under temporary UN supervision, by Indonesian officials. It was also agreed that an act of self-determination would occur by 1969 – though this was widely (and correctly) regarded as a façade for an Indonesian takeover. The reality of Indonesian control well before 1969 meant NG was less valuable to Australia as a buffer zone. It was no longer possible for Australia to seek, as had been done under Spender and Casey in the 1950s, the exclusion from NG of a possibly hostile Asian influence. This did not mean the island was viewed as strategically unimportant.⁴ East New Guinea housed bases that could still be of use for defence ‘in depth’ and that, conversely, could make defence of the mainland more difficult if held by an unfriendly power. This explains in part the strenuous efforts made by Barwick after January 1962 to get assurances from the US that it would not tolerate Indonesian expansion into ENG in the same way that it had over WNG.⁵ Similar motives were behind the pains taken to steer ENG towards independence of a kind that would suit Australian defence requirements – that is, to create a state that would be part of Melanesia, not Asia, and to ensure that this state was friendly to, and dependent on, its southern neighbour.

These continuities and changes in Australian attitudes towards NG after 1962, and what they mean in terms of Australia’s relationship with Indonesia, SEA, and the US – including what they show of evolving perceptions in Australia of the nation’s

⁴ See Menzies’ comments in November 1964 on the importance of being prepared to defend the north-south NG border (Verrier, *op.cit.*, p. 189).

⁵ These efforts are described by Pemberton, *All the Way*, pp. 104-5.

influence – deserve the attention of historians. This is especially so as more documents on the period become available – and the same will be said as current documents become available in 30 years’ time. Indeed, Australia retains security interests in NG,⁶ and these continue to speak of the complex problems faced by Australia as it looks to the future in SEA.

⁶ For example, Ian McLachlan, in 1996 the Australian Minister for Defence, has said that “Australia’s security clearly benefits from a secure and prosperous PNG protecting our north-eastern approaches.” See Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Trade, *Papua New Guinea Update: Report on Proceedings of a Seminar 11 and 12 November 1996, Canberra, Canberra, 1996*, p. 17.