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AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE POLICY

A STUDY OF EMPIRE AND NATION (1897-1910)

L. D. Atkinson

The work for this thesis was conducted entirely by the candidate.

(L.D. Atkinson)
War - and the preparation for war - is only part of political intercourse, by no means an independent thing in itself.

(after Clausewitz)
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P R E F A C E

What did a remote generation of Australians mean when they talked of Empire? Why were defence discussions so confused that historians still dispute the genesis of the Royal Australian Navy? Why should the Commonwealth have been first among the emergent Dominions to contemplate universal military training? Why did Australians rush toward the European maelstrom in 1914? Why was it believed that ANZAC laid the foundation for a fighting tradition and signified the birth of a nation? I have chosen to investigate these broad issues in the details of Australian defence policy before the Great War.

A preliminary survey of colonial opinion at the turn of the century, when troops were being cheered to fight the Boers in South Africa and men witnessed the meeting of the first federal parliament, convinced me that any investigation which looked back from 1914 would be misleading. It was also necessary to follow the course of contemporary discussion from the late nineteenth century; and it seemed desirable to continue the examination until 1917 when the assumptions of peace had been thoroughly tested in war. Detailed enquiry in this work, however, ceases in 1910. It is a convenient stopping point. By then enough was revealed to indicate answers to the general questions which had informed my research. By then statesmen had found a viable solution to the three interconnected problems which provide the main themes for this study: the search for a satisfactory relationship between nation and Empire; the quest for national security to suit all attitudes within available resources; and the creation of effective and distinctive Australian forces. Another generation of Australians, less remote, continued to be influenced by that solution.

The decision to exclude any detailed examination of changing imperial policy or to draw comparisons between the status of the Commonwealth and other emergent nations was taken after one of many fruitful discussions with Sir Keith Hancock. Accordingly, the Imperial context, on which no great light could be shed with sources available here, has
been taken for granted and the emphasis placed upon unravelling the issues as they appeared to Australians. I am deeply indebted to Professor Hancock not only for his assistance and encouragement, but for preventing this work from the myopia it might otherwise have suffered.

Any attempt to present for the first time a rounded study of policy must necessarily involve the examination of a process rather than the sustained analysis of separate issues. This is the case in this work where attention is focussed on policy-makers and administrators. In subordinating parliamentary attitudes and public opinion I have often drawn freely from the surveys prepared by H.L. Hall, C. Grimshaw, and D.C.S. Sissons. Divining the basis of official decisions and discussions from the scattered and fragmentary departmental material was far more difficult. Archivists of the Commonwealth Archives Office under Mr. L. Maclean greatly eased the difficulties of research and I wish especially to thank Mr. James Gibbney and Miss T. Exley for their thoughtful guidance and patient assistance. In order to make intelligible the hesitation, the prevarication, and the indignation which accompanied the process, I have sketched portraits of many of the key figures. These forays into biography seemed justified by the light that could be thrown on the texture of contemporary attitudes, on policy decisions, and perhaps on the men themselves. The hazards were somewhat reduced with the aid of Mr. L. Fitzhardinge of the Australian National University and Professor J.A. La Nauze of the University of Melbourne. General discussion with Mr. Fitzhardinge about the whole period and about the role of W. M. Hughes was always illuminating; and I am particularly grateful to him for making available drafts of his forthcoming biography of Hughes. Alfred Deakin looms large in this work; his role presented problems of a complex kind. Though I did not have general access to the Deakin Papers, Professor La Nauze allowed me to see material in his custody relating to defence without which the later chapters could not have been written with any degree of confidence. He had also kindly made available to my supervisor a copy of his own chapter on Deakin's concern with defence policy, to appear soon in his life of Deakin. I should like to make this clear
since it is possible that there may be some coincidence in the use we have made of the same material.

For the details of naval and military organization, plans and prospects I have relied on additional sources. The Archives Branch of the Department of the Navy under Mr. I. McNear was particularly helpful and I would like to thank Mr. John Ware of that section for releasing material not available elsewhere and for answering with such care all my questions. I am also grateful for the sources on federal military affairs uncovered by Mr. Bruce Harding and his staff at the Australian War Memorial; to Mr. Warren Perry for discussion, correspondence, and articles on the work of Major-General Hutton; to Sir Frederick Shedden, at present in the midst of a history of the Defence Department; and to Mr. G.L. Macandie, one-time secretary to the Naval Board, who served under Captain Creswell for many years.

From the outset I encountered a problem in the scale of this work. Each of the three major themes could be a subject for independent study and with all pulling in different directions it was difficult to strike an appropriate balance. The initial result was that many of the first eight chapters were four times their present length. I am, therefore, deeply indebted to Dr. K.S. Inglis for editing much of the work and correcting the remainder. The flaws which remain are due to my ignorance or obstinacy, or both.

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SUMMARY

The continuing debate about the role of Australians in their own country and the position of their nation in the Empire provides the dominant theme of this work. It suggested that the study of defence policy might appropriately be divided into four parts, each coinciding with a particular era and all in chronological order: colonial, federal, national, and Imperial.

Colonialist defence policy was the result of an effort to make the self-governing portions of the Empire self-reliant in military affairs. In Australia this was achieved through dependence on British advice and cooperation with Whitehall to produce a special squadron which would ensure local security. Yet self-defence in the era 1860-1897 meant, in essence, the defence of the capitals. Little interest was taken in mutual support and less in national schemes. Since the prime danger lay in fugitive attack from the Queen's enemies which the Royal Navy promised to limit, this view seemed to many justified. If colonial policy was stabilized, however, colonial attitudes were not. To the questions "What should Australians do when the Queen was at war? How could they maintain their dignity and their security?" came a variety of answers: separate from the Empire; declare the colonies neutral; unify the Empire; and federate Australia. By the end of the century the federationists' solution was accepted and the first federal parliament set out to ensure that the old colonial forces could support each other and that Australia, while not neutral, might assume an attitude of passive belligerency until it examined the justice of any Imperial conflict in which it was involved.

Federalist defence policy between 1901 and 1905 involved the amalgamation of colonial schemes and remained federalist in substance so long as it respected colonial policy and practice. It was successfully
implemented by applying the principle of self-reliance, as it had been understood in Australia, to the whole Commonwealth.

Nationalist defence policy had far less respect for colonial – or state – susceptibilities. It strove to assert the authority and the identity of the central government over all Australians. It rejected federalist solutions either because national aspirations were not fulfilled or because too much cooperation with Great Britain had involved an unmanly dependence. The emergence of Japan and the dwindling of British sea power between 1905 and 1909 seemed to many nationalists adequate justification to ignore Imperial commitments and to defend Australia until it became an impregnable fortress in coloured seas. Debate proceeded apace on the form a national navy and a national army should take. National sentiment justified the discussion; Imperial sentiment provoked men to object to the creation of a "little Australia".

Imperialist defence policy was sketched in 1909. It satisfied national aspirations by creating a sea-going navy and a mass citizen army. It satisfied Imperial sentiment because that navy would materially assist the British in time of war and because, from the reservoir of trained manpower produced by universal military training, expeditionary forces could be organized. With some of the trappings of a nation-state, the Commonwealth entered into an unwritten alliance with Great Britain to defend the Empire.

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From this brief summary it is clear that the study involves changing attitudes and policies. The work has therefore been structured so that the assumptions and the developments of each era are presented in the opening pages of each of the four major parts. Since it is the texture of those assumptions with which we are concerned further precis
here would not serve any useful purpose. It is, for instance, impossible to state briefly what passions moved Imperialists in Australia without doing violence to contemporary views.

Insofar as there is one proposition basic to the investigation, it is this: defence policy was influenced as much by sentiment as by the demands of cost and security. Aware from the early nineties that they were creating a nation, Australian statesmen demanded that defence systems satisfy their aspirations as well as allow an appropriate relationship with Great Britain. Insofar as there is one continuous argument it is this: until a distinctively Australian policy was forged integration into any general scheme of Imperial defence was impossible. Aware that they were endowed with a large measure of security from the amalgamation of colonial policies between 1901 and 1905, Australian statesmen demanded naval and military proposals more worthy of the nation they represented. The year 1909 saw the culmination of protracted discussion and the blurring of many differences between Australian and Imperial sentiment. Largely at the advice and the suggestion of the British, a defence policy was forged which seemed to satisfy the demands of nation and Empire.

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