Between War and Peace: Australia’s Past and Future

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In many countries, and especially in Europe, events large and small, official and unofficial, have been commemorating the 100th anniversary of the beginning of World War I, Next year in Australia much energy, time and money will be devoted to the 100th anniversary of the Anzac landing at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915. It is timely therefore to pause and reflect on what the world generally and Australia in particular can learn from these momentous events.

**The Anzac legend**

The Gallipoli campaign of 1915 is the story of the failed attempt by the Allied forces, originally promoted by Winston Churchill, to gain control of the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits, capture Constantinople, and open a Black Sea supply route to Russia. The campaign got off to a poor start with the ill-fated British and French naval attack on the Dardanelles Straits in February-March, at which point a decision was taken to land British, Australian, and New Zealand troops along the east coast of the Gallipoli Peninsula, while a French force would land on the Asian side of the straits.

Inadequate knowledge of the terrain and fierce Turkish resistance stalled the invading Allied forces. They did, however, manage to establish two beachheads: at Helles on the Peninsula’s southern tip, and at Gaba Tepe, subsequently named Anzac Cove in honour of the valiant Australian and New Zealand troops. To break the impasse the Allies made another major troop landing in early August at Sulva Bay. Despite the initial advantage of surprise, the Allied advance failed to make much progress. In the face of strengthened Ottoman defences and mounting casualties, the British government determined that the only viable option was retreat. The evacuation of some 100,000 Allied troops began on 7 December and was completed on 9 January 1915. In all some 480,000 Allied forces had engaged in the Gallipoli campaign at a cost of more than 250,000 casualties, including some 46,000 fatalities. In just over eight months Australians killed in battle numbered more than 8,000, while close to 18,000 men were wounded.

Since then a potent Anzac legend has been created centred on the fighting skills of Australian diggers, their mateship and heroic deeds. That many exhibited in battle great bravery and inspiring selflessness there can be no doubt. It is equally clear, however, that the Gallipoli campaign was a disaster. Some have mistakenly sought to explain this tragic failure by arguing that the landing occurred in the wrong place, whereas the head of military history at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, Ashley Ekins, insists that ‘the Anzacs landed pretty well right in the centre of the originally selected landing zone.’ Others have pointed the finger at the poor judgment of British generals, when in fact the evidence suggests a failure of Australian command. The report – published in 1917 by the parliamentary commission investigating the Dardanelles campaign – concluded that both Allied landings on the peninsula (in April and August 1915) were flawed. It points in particular to a serious underestimation of the difficulties of a military attack on the peninsula and the failure to divert resources from the Western Front to ensure its success.

Another common misconception is worth noting here. Descriptions offered by official war correspondent Charles Bean have created the impression of highly skilled, athletic and well trained bushmen, whereas several historians have since argued that Australians soldiers were drawn largely from the cities, and were at least at the outset ‘inexperienced amateurs’ that had to learn about war the hard way.

In time an even bigger myth would be constructed: that Australia as a nation came of age in World War I, and specifically that Australia’s identify as a proud and independent nation somehow rests on the heroism and self-sacrifice of the Anzacs. Prime Minister Abbott lent his authority to this interpretation in his Commemorative Address to the Australian War Memorial (25 April 2014) by quoting approvingly and at length the following passage from Charles Bean’s rendition of the Anzac legend:

. . . during four years in which nearly the whole world was so tested, the people of Australia looked on…They saw their own men – those who had dwelt in the same street or been daily travellers in the same trains – flash across the world’s consciousness like a shooting star.

In the first straight rush up the Anzac hills in the dark; in the easy figures first seen on the ridges in the dawn sky; in the working parties stacking stores on the shelled beach without the turning of a head; in the stretcher bearers walking, pipes in mouths, down a bullet-swept slope to a comrade’s call, unconsciously setting a tradition that may work for centuries; in things seen daily from that first morning until the struggle ended, onlookers had recognised in these men qualities always vital to the human race.

Australians watched the name of their country rise high in the esteem of the world’s oldest and greatest nations. Every Australian bears that name proudly abroad today and by these daily doings, great and small…the Australian nation came to know itself.

Sadly, this memory of Gallipoli is as erroneous as it is dangerous for it evokes a sense of Australia’s identity as steeped in war and conflict, seemingly oblivious to the other currents that have made contemporary Australia what it is.

**A progressive era of social and political reforms**

This rewriting of history or what Marilyn Lake has described as the promulgation of ‘a militarist creation myth’ has been consciously pursued by federal agencies and departments, notably the Department of Veterans’ Affairs and the Australian War Memorial, for the best part of twenty years. In this enterprise little difference has separated Labor and Liberal governments. The fact that Australia became an independent nation fourteen years earlier, not through violence but by the peaceful coming together of six colonies, is conveniently ignored. Also swept under the carpet are Australia’s pioneering achievements in democratic governance, and the contributions of countless Australians to notions of equality and justice.

Over the two to three decades preceding the First World War, Australia had established an enviable reputation as a socially progressive nation, pioneering a number of internationally significant political and economic reforms. Several of these are worth noting:

* The first Trades & Labour Council was formed in New South Wales (1871).
* The Trade Union Act recognised NSW trade unions for the first time as distinct corporate organisations (1881).
* The first NSW Government agency was established to deal with employment-related issues (1892).
* The first comprehensive legislation on working conditions in factories, shops and other industrial establishments was enacted - working hours of women and children were restricted (1896).
* The Early Closing Act 1899 restricted the length of working hours for all employees

## The Truck Act 1900 required the payment of wages in money, and prohibited employers from influencing how employees spent wages.

* The Industrial Arbitration Act 1901, the first 'modern' industrial relations statute came into force in December 1901. A separate arbitration court wa established, with binding arbitration powers.
* The Apprentices Act 1901 created the basis for the administration of all apprenticeships in NSW and reduced the hours of apprentices to a maximum of 48 per week.

## A basic or minimum wage was set for male employees (1907).

## The Industrial Disputes Act 1908 replaced the 1901 Industrial Arbitration Act and introduced ‘Wages Boards’ that can determine pay and conditions across all industries.

## The Eight Hours Act 1916 creates a standard 48 hour working week.

## A basic female wage is established (1919).

Australia’s progressive profile also emerged in the political arrangements that preceded Federation as well as those that followed soon after.

* The first colony-wide election was held in New South Wales (NSW) in 1843 and was followed by Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia in 1851.
* By 1856 all four colonies achieved responsible government through the creation of new bicameral parliaments and governments answerable to the lower house.
* In 1894 South Australia gave women the vote and the right to stand for parliament.
* Federation made the Australian Senate the first upper house in the world to be popularly elected.
* The Commonwealth Electoral Act of 1902 gave women the right to vote and stand for federal parliament, making Australia the first country in the world to entrench both rights nationally.
* By 1908 women could vote in all State elections as well as federally.

By the time Australia entered World War I, it had already demonstrated as a nation an enduring affirmation of the democratic ethic and an effective commitment to economic justice which government was expected to implement.

**Australia: the anxious nation**

There was, however, a less flattering dimension to Australia’s social and political landscape. From its very foundation as a British colony, non-Indigenous Australians viewed European settlement as tied culturally and politically to the British Empire. Even as late as 1914, 97 per cent of the non-Indigenous population had been born of British stock or had come directly from the British Isles. As a broad but reasonably accurate generalisation, Australian political leaders, throughout the nineteenth century and early years of Federation, viewed the country virtually as an extension of Britain. Though a sense of pride and an emerging national identity would colour the course of Australian politics and usher in, as we have seen, a raft of progressive social and political reforms, both rulers and ruled tended to see Australian security as dependent on Britain.

The link with Britain was underpinned by the commitment to ‘white Australia’. All Commonwealth governments accepted it as a keystone of Australia’s domestic and external policies. In 1901 Labor Senator George Pearce, notwithstanding his advocacy of social reform, stated without equivocation that his objection to Asian immigration was based entirely on racial grounds. John Christian (Chris) Watson, Labor’s first federal leader, held exactly the same position. He viewed with great disfavour the possibility of racial contamination likely to result from the admixture of races. In 1908 the Labor Party went so far as to declare one of its objectives ‘the cultivation of an Australian sentiment based upon the maintenance of racial purity’.

Australian governments of the period consciously and openly pursued a ‘white Australia policy’, for which they periodically provided an economic, cultural and political justification. The policy was given perhaps its most eloquent articulation by Alfred Deakin when he spoke in Parliament on 12 September 1901 in support of the Immigration Restriction Bill. This famous passage deserves to be quoted at length:

. . . we should be one people; and remain one people without the admixture of other races. It is not necessary to reflect upon them even by implication. It is only necessary to say that they do not and cannot blend with us; that we do not, cannot, and ought not to blend with them. This was the motive power which swayed tens of thousands who take little interest in contemporary politics - this was the note that touched particularly the Australian born, who felt themselves endowed with a heritage not only of political freedom, but of an ample area within which the race might expand, and an obligation consequent upon such an endowment - the obligation to pass on to their children and the generations after them that territory undiminished and uninvaded

A more blatantly racist exposition of the same policy appeared in the pages of *The Bulletin* magazine*:*

Australia doesn’t care whether the Asiatic was born in Asia or Sheol. It doesn’t care whether he is black or brown or bright green with red feet and a blue stripe down the back . . . Australia objects to the whole Asiatic, African and Kanakar tribe because they work for wages on which only one person far lower in the scale of civilization can live . . . It objects to them because they introduce a lower civilization.

The defence of the white Australia policy spanned a range of formulations, some crude as in *The Bulletin* others more sophisticated as in Deakin’s speech to the Parliament. Some emphasised its economic inspiration, others drew attention to its cultural and political significance. But it is fair to say that for much of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century the policy expressed, with a few notable exceptions, the view of the large majority of Australians.

For many a ‘white Australia’ constituted the most effective bulwark against the ‘yellow peril’, a phrase used in the late nineteenth century to depict Australia’s vulnerability to mass Asian migration. The sense of danger was associated in the public mind with the ‘empty north’, a figure of speech that referred to the large stretches of land where sparse settlement made it difficult to defend against foreign intruders. An entire literary genre emerged in the last decade of the nineteenth century, depicting Australia as an ‘isolated outpost of western civilisation’. These mass consumption novels reinforced Australia’s sense of remoteness from Europe and the cultural otherness of its Asian neighbours.

**A culture of dependence**

Against this backdrop the organic link with Britain was deemed essential. The cultural and racial sentiment that underpinned Australia’s connection with the British Empire was so strong that it could overcome the physical distance that separated it from the ‘mother country’. So it was that Australians would repeatedly show them themselves eager to fight in British wars even when there were no obvious Australian security interests at stake.

Here then lies the key to the Australian psyche of the time. The vast majority of non-Indigenous Australians saw themselves as an integral part of the British Empire which conferred on them a guarantee of security as well as the other benefits of Western civilization. Australian political leaders were thus resigned to leaving the larger questions of defence and foreign policy to the British government. Simply put, they understood the limits of Australian sovereignty. Some attempts were made, especially under Deakin, to obtain for Australia a measure of naval autonomy, but with little success. In 1916, Andrew Fisher, reflecting on his own experience as Australian prime minister, candidly admitted the extent of Australia’s dependence on Britain:

If I had stayed in Scotland, I should have been able to heckle my member of Parliament on questions of Imperial policy, and to vote for or against him on that ground. I went to Australia – I have been Prime Minister. But all the time I have had no say whatever about Imperial policy – no say whatever.

Somehow this lack of freedom in the conduct of Australia’s external relations and ‘loyalty to the protector’ were able to coexist with Australia’s nascent nationalism.

The British settler did not feel that he had made a complete break with his former homeland. He had simply transferred from one part of the empire to another. Australian children were taught British history as if it were their own history. On the eve of the outbreak of World War I, few Australians were acquainted with the issues of European politics, with the nature of Germany’s objectives or England’s intentions. But the moment Britain formally declared war, a wave of British patriotism swept throughout the Commonwealth as dramatic and intense as was to be found in England itself.

The spirit of the country was expressed by Liberal Prime Minister Sir Joseph Cook in his opening election speech soon after the dissolution of the federal Parliament:

Whatever happens, Australia is part of the Empire, right to the Full. When the Empire is at war, so is Australia at war. All our resources are in the Empire, and for the preservation and security of the Empire.

Andrew fisher, leader of the Labor Party, made his party’s position clear in even more militant language:

Should the worst happen, after everything has been done that honour will permit, Australia will stand behind the Mother Country to help and defend her to our last man and our last shilling

Political declarations of this kind mirrored and reinforced public sentiment.

In the course of the war, Australians gave generously to the Red Cross, to relief for Belgian refugees, and in support of their own troops. By the end of 1914, more than 60,000 men had volunteered to join the Australian Imperial Force. The government sent most of them to Egypt to complete their training. There, they joined with New Zealand volunteers in the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC). Following their defeat in Gallipoli in what was their first major encounter, they were moved to the western front. During three years of trench warfare, nearly two out of every three Anzacs were killed or wounded. In all 61,522 Australians lost their lives in World War I.

**The ‘conscription’ debate**

At first Australians enlisted in World War I in large numbers as volunteers. But as the scale of casualties on the battlefield became widely known, the enthusiasm for the war soon diminished, much as had occurred in Europe. With rapidly mounting casualties and no quick end to the war in sight the Australian government came under strong pressure to provide additional troop reinforcements – as many as 5,500 men per month. With recruiting campaigns not producing the desired result, Prime Minister Hughes decided to put the question of compulsory military service to a referendum. The question put to the Australian electorate was:

Are you in favour of the Government having, in this grave emergency, the same compulsory powers over citizens in regard to requiring their military service, for the term of this War, outside the Commonwealth, as it now has in regard to military service within the Commonwealth?

Deep divisions soon emerged between the pro- and anti-conscription camps – divisions that would fracture the entire society.

Billy Hughes had miscalculated that the widespread emotional support for the mother country would readily translate into support for the war effort generally and conscription in particular. As it turned out, a great many social currents – and movements that were ideologically at odds on many issues – were able to coalesce in unusual and unexpected ways in opposition to the call for conscription. A small but vocal minority opposed what they regarded as an imperialist war; others were opposed to conscription as a principle; others, particularly those on low incomes, were concerned that war would adversely affect the economy; others still viewed the war as endangering the advances made by the trade union movement; and others still were distressed by the British suppression of the Irish rebellion in 1916.

The Melbourne Peace and Humanity society (PHS) was established in May 1900 and local branches of the London Peace Society were formed in 1905. They were joined by the Australian Freedom League (AFL), the Women's Political Association (WPA), the Political Labor Council, and the Victorian Socialist Party (VSP) in opposing militarism. Within trade union circles the Industrial Workers of the World opposed the war on the grounds that it was a fight between rival capitalist interests. On the motion of John Curtin and R. Thorne, the Victorian Trades Hall Council (THC) declared its opposition to war early in 1914.

Many women actively opposed both the war and conscription. The Women’s Peace Army adopted the motto ‘We war against war’ and several members, notably Vida Goldstein, Adela Pankhurst and Cecilia John, became eloquent critics of the militarism of the times. The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, with Eleanor Moore as its Secretary, also made an important contribution

Though the Anglican Church was solidly in favour of conscription, elements of liberal Protestantism would play a leading role in peace activism, espousing either pacifist positions or advocating international arbitration as a substitute for war. Soon after the outbreak of World War I, the Australian Peace Alliance (APA) was formed as an umbrella organisation bringing together the VSP and a range of other peace groups with a view to enhancing their organisational muscle and public presence, while also stiffening resistance to the censorship of peace literature. APA’s initial membership of 13 societies grew to 54 by 1918 and to 80 in 1921. The conscription debate had given renewed impetus to the peace movement and enabled the disparate elements it comprised to find common cause.

It soon merged that the issue would deeply divide the Labor Party. Hughes and other ministers vigorously supported conscription, denouncing anti-conscriptionists as traitors, but the bulk of the Party, in which Catholics were a dominant presence, aligned itself closely with the trade union movement in supporting the ‘no’ vote. The call for conscription had polarised Australian society along both class and religious lines. The Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne, Daniel Mannix, would emerge as a central figure in the conscription debate. His role would sharpen the already deep divide between Anglicanism and Catholicism. The Catholic Church’s position is not hard to explain. Being of Irish descent, the majority of Catholics were highly critical of the British use of force against the Nationalist rebellion in Dublin. They also harboured grievances for what they perceived to be the discriminatory practices to which they were subjected in their country of adoption.

These concerns and misgivings were powerfully expressed by Mannix, who arrived in Australia from Ireland in 1913 to take up his episcopal appointment in Melbourne. He was appointed Archbishop of Melbourne, in 1917 – a position he would occupy for 46 years. He made his first major speech on conscription in September 1916:

I am as anxious as anyone can be for a successful issue and for an honourable peace. I hope and I believe that that peace can be secured without conscription. (Applause) For conscription is a hateful thing, and it is almost certain to bring evil in its train. (Applause)

I have been under the impression, and I still retain the conviction, that Australia has done her full share—I am inclined to say more than her full share—in the war. (Applause). . . Australians, brave as they have proved themselves to be in the field, are a peace loving people. They will not easily give conscription a foothold in this country (Applause).

. . . And I incline to believe that those who propose it have misjudged the temper of the Australian people in the mass and their passionate love for freedom. (Loud applause)

Campaigning for the first referendum was launched by Hughes at a large overflow meeting in the Sydney Town Hall, and was followed on 21 September by another huge pro-conscription meeting at the Melbourne Town Hall. Anti-conscriptionists were able to stage their own mass mobilisation, with a large crowd filling the Exhibition Building on 20 September and even larger crowds (ranging from 25,00 to 60,0000) gathering on the Yarra Bank and in Swanston Street in mid to late October. The referendum of 28 October 1916 was narrowly defeated with 1,087,557 in favour and 1,160,033 against. Unwilling to accept defeat, Hughes having defected from the Labor Party and won the 1917 election, remained unflinching in his support for the British war effort:

In this war, no Australian citizen can be for Australia who is not also for Britain and the Empire. . . Are you for the Empire or against it? Close your eyes to those insidious and treacherous counsels that whisper that Australia’s safety does not hang on Britain’s protection. . . do not live for a brief moment in a paradise for fools, for I say to you that but for Britain, but for the Empire Australia is surely doomed

And so, Hughes would put a modified proposition to a second referendum on 20 December 1917, in the hope that the electorate, having recognised the error of its ways, would now accept the need for conscription. The referendum was again defeated, this time by an even wider margin with 1,015,159 in favour and 1,181,747 against. It is worth noting that in each case Australian troops supported conscription but by a narrow margin.

**The Aftermath of World War I**

At the end of the war, Hughes could point to the Australian effort with satisfaction and an element of self congratulation:

We sent out a greater army than Great Britain herself had ever sent out before, and we transported it over 12,000 miles of ocean. We maintained five divisions of fighting men at the front line.

The sentiment was widely shared in Australia. The wider society had a collective sense of pride in the sacrifices that its soldiers, their families and friends had made in support of the war effort. No one could deny that the war had given Australia a new status, but the nature and significance of the status had yet to be worked out. In fact, Hughes, acting in Australia’s name, had to fight several diplomatic battles to make sure that this enhanced status would mean something more than an international compliment by Britain and its allies.

His first objective was to secure for Australia separate representation at the 19191 Peace Conference. In his subsequent statement to the Australian Parliament in September 1919, he explained himself in the following terms:

It was abundantly evident to my colleagues and to myself that Australia must have separate representation at the Peace Conference. . . Britain had very many interests to consider beside ours, and some of those interests did not always coincide with ours. It was necessary therefore – and the same applies to other Dominions – that we should be represented. . . *By this recognition Australia became a nation and entered into a family of nations on a footing of equality* (italics added)*.*

This last claim has been central to the Anzac myth that would gradually take hold over subsequent decades, namely that Australia had come of age because of what it had been willing to sacrifice in blood on the battlefield.

However, even when viewed from the vantage point of the elites most inclined to articulate this reading of the place of war in Australia’s past, the policies that would soon emerge had more to do with the politics of dependence rather than the emergence of a newly found national independence.

Hughes had secured for Australia a separate voice in the deliberations of the Versailles Conference, but the task of defining Australia’s interests and objectives had barely begun. The question was: how might the peace settlement help to satisfy Australia’s security needs? The way Hughes formulated his answer to that question was to have a major impact on Australia’s future foreign policy, for it would cement both in the policy-making process and in the Australian psyche the concept of ‘forward defence’.

The words Billy Hughes chose to define his conception of the future are worth quoting at length:

In order that Australia be safe, it is necessary that the great rampart of islands around the north east of Australia should be held by us or by some Power in whom we have absolute confidence. Recollect that our coastline is so vast that to circumnavigate Australia is a voyage as great as from here to England, and no 5,000,000 people can hold this continent when 80 miles off, there is a potential enemy. Well stretched out from New Guinea there are New Ireland and New Britain. There are literally hundreds of other islands stretching out and out, every one of them a point of vantage from which Australia could be attacked. The possession of those islands was necessary therefore, for our safety.

Here is perhaps the first and clearest official statement of the threat driven approach to security that would underpin Australia’s external relations for the best part of a century – right to the present moment.

Australian forces had occupied German New Guinean in 1914 at the request of Britain. With the end of the war, Hughes was determined to retain control over these islands, but in this aim he encountered the total opposition of President Wilson. A compromise was eventually reached whereby Australia obtained a ‘C’ class mandate for New Guinea. Having given a detailed account of the provisions of that Mandate, Hughes went on to justify the policy by returning to a familiar theme:

The White Australia is yours. You may do with it as you please; but, at any rate, the soldiers have achieved the victory, and my colleagues and I have brought that great principle back to you from the Conference. Here it is, at least as safe as it was on the day when it was first adopted by this Parliament.

Here was as clear a statement as any of the government’s continuing commitment to a white Australia umbilically connected to a great and powerful friend.

The publicly expressed consensus was for keeping Australia ‘British’ and an integral part of the British Empire. Though Australia would over time develop an external presence and a defence capability, these would ultimately rest on continuing dependence on Britain, which, it was thought, alone could meet the perceived threat posed by potentially hostile Asian nations. For both Hughes and Stanley Bruce who succeeded him as prime minister, the primary task of Australian diplomacy was to ensure a united imperial policy in which Australia could participate. To this end, Bruce in a bid to achieve better lines of communication with the Foreign Office, appointed Richard Casey as his political liaison officer in London. In 1932, Prime Minister Joseph Lyons appointed Sir John Latham as Minister for External Affairs. Subsequently the Department of External Affairs was re-established as a separate department with its own head, and plans were announced for a career diplomatic service.

In 1938 Richard Casey was able to write:

Australia today is fully informed and feely consulted by Great Britain on all questions of foreign policy, and Great Britain welcomes Australian criticism and comment. . . I may say without exaggeration that Australia today receives as much information on the foreign affairs of the United Kingdom as most members of the British Cabinet.

In the same year, a perceptive observer, Professor Fred Alexander offered a somewhat different assessment:

The fact nevertheless remains that many, if not most of the important decisions on foreign affairs in recent times have been made without prior consultation between Great Britain and the Dominions. Where the decision has been that of the Government of great Britain, which it generally has been, the device of keeping other governments of the Commonwealth ‘fully informed’ has sufficed to give Downing Street the free hand it seems to have desired while leaving the Dominion governments the satisfaction of not having to commit themselves beforehand. This doubtful satisfaction appears to have outweighed criticism of the inadequacy or the belatedness of the information supplied.

Such an unflattering assessment of Australia’s diplomatic role in the Empire exposed the naiveté of government and public opinion. On the eve of World War II it may seem puzzling that seasoned politicians should still speak of Australia as being part of the Empire, of one British family. It would be well to remember, however, that throughout this period school children could still let off their fireworks on ‘Empire Day’ as if it were their national day.

Labor leader John Curtin did inject a new and contrasting note into the policy debate by arguing for an independent security policy:

. . . the interests of Australia can best be served by giving paramount consideration to the safety of our own people and the safety of our own soil. The defence of this nation is best served by a policy of national self-reliance rather than one which embroils us in the perennial disputes in Europe. . .

But when it came to the crunch, it soon became clear that Australia’s response to the impending European war would be determined by Britain’s decision. In a broadcast statement Menzies once again reminded the nation of its ties with Britain:

Her peace is ours, if she is at War, we are at War, even though that War finds us not in European battlefields, but defending our own shores . . . The British countries of the world must stand or fall together.

As the war progressed, Australia had to contend with the realization that Britain’s declining military muscle, graphically symbolised by the fall of Singapore in February 1942, afforded little protection in the Pacific. In this sense World War II brought to an end a long chapter in Australian history. But one question remained unanswered. Would the demise of the British empire signal the emergence of a more independent, internationally oriented foreign policy less prone to war making, or a mere switch to dependence on another ‘great and powerful friend’.

The answer to the question was not long in coming. After a hiatus of four years, when Evatt sought to endow Australia’s external relations with a stronger internationalist orientation and an emphasis on the peaceful settlement of disputes, Australia during the long Menzies period soon returned to more traditional perceptions of external threats and the consequent need for great power protection. Within a relatively short period the transition from dependence on Britain to dependence on the United States would be consummated with the establishment of the ANZUS alliance (signed in September 1951 and ratified in April 1952) Since then Australian governments have participated in a succession of military expeditions, in most cases at the behest of the United States, or with its blessing. These include the Korean War (1950-1953), the Malayan Emergency (1950–1960), the despatch of forces to Thailand during the 1960s, the Vietnam War (1965-1973), the Gulf War (1991), the Afghanistan War (2001-present), the Iraq War (2003-2011), and the return to Iraq in 2014.

For several decades now, every Australian government has claimed ultimate reliance on US nuclear weapons. As the 2013 Defence White Paper made clear: ‘As long as nuclear weapons exist, we rely on the nuclear forces of the United States to deter nuclear attack on Australia.’ Australia’s military capabilities are increasingly integrated and interoperable with US conventional forces. A 2,500 strong US Marine Air Ground Task Force on ‘permanent rotation’ in Darwin is expected to become fully operational in 2016. The US military has access to major Australian airfields and port facilities in northern and Western Australia. The Australian Defence Satellite Communications Ground Station at Kojarena (WA) with its powerful signals interception facility is part of a worldwide satellite communications system which forms part of one of Australia’s most important defence agreements, the UKUSA Agreement which links it to Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Undoubtedly the two most important facilities that Australia has put at Washington’s disposal are the Naval Communication Station Harold E Holt at North West Cape in WA and the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap. The NW Cape facility, built in the 1960s, was placed under sole Australian control in 1999, but on 15 July 2008, Australia and the US signed a bilateral treaty governing the future joint use of the facility for the next 25 years. On 6 December 2013 it was announced that the Space Surveillance Telescope (SST), part of the US Space Surveillance Network, would be relocated to NW Cape. In addition there are plans to locate there two new space surveillance sensors which will enable US strategic command to monitor space, including anti-satellite, warfare. Pine Gap outside Alice Springs is generally considered the most important US intelligence base outside the United States. It has been described as the jewel in the crown of Australia-US intelligence sharing, detecting nuclear weapons and intercepting communications around the globe. For the past decade it has also been involved in the US drone program, which has killed thousands of militants and many civilians in countries including Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and Iraq.

To put things simply but not inaccurately, Australia’s approach to security – and the most challenging issues of peace and war in our time – has changed but little over the last hundred years. To meet current perceived threats (which governments associate with a resurgent China, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or more generally the rising threat of terrorism) we are told that we need enhanced, state of art defence technologies. Over the life of the current Parliament Australia will acquire the Canberra Class Landing Helicopter Docks, the Hobart Class Air Warfare Destroyers, the Growler variant of the F/A-18F Super Hornet, and the first two of Australia’s F-35 Joint Strike Fighters. A decision is also expected about a replacement for the Collins Class submarines. Let’s be clear these capabilities are sought not because they can counter any of the proposed threats directly, but because they are thought to provide leverage with our powerful ally, the United States. As our current support for air strikes in Iraq indicates, we are willing to contribute to the war efforts of our protector in the hope that such support will be reciprocated in the event of a direct attack against Australia. Exactly the same logic has driven our involvement in two world wars and our military intervention in a series of conflicts far from our shores, during the Cold War and since.

Security policy continues to be premised on the notion of ‘forward defence’, which our policy makers have come to regard as essential insurance for protection in the event of accident. However, to secure such an insurance policy we must be prepared to pay the necessary premium. Sadly, we continue to hold on to this policy even though the costs of the premium almost certainly exceed the benefits we are likely to derive from the insurance policy. Indeed, as several recent wars indicate, notably Vietnam and Iraq, the insurance policy is of a kind likely to precipitate the very risks the policyholder is seeking to avoid..

**New Directions for the Future**

The Anzac centenary offers, then, a unique opportunity to review the past and think more creatively about the future. Notwithstanding the current hysteria about the Islamist threat or China’s alleged expansionist ambitions, both of which have been greatly overstated, the fact remains that Australia is blessed with a particularly favourable strategic environment, far removed from the major theatres of conflict. Now as in the past, Australia’s geography, its size and terrain present any-would be conventional aggressor with enormous logistic difficulties. There is no imminent military threat to Australia. This alone should be enough to encourage a well overdue reappraisal of our attitude to security and our relations with the rest of the world.

In the midst of the hysteria about terrorism and the Islamophobia which it nurtures, it is well to remember that life always entails a measure of insecurity, a degree of uncertainty. If we wish to cultivate a more secure environment at home, the more promising avenue is to cultivate a vibrant multicultural society, in which dialogue with our Muslim communities is given pride of pace, and with government listening more attentively to the concerns and grievances of our Muslim brothers and sisters.

Security very much depends on overcoming irrational fears. Such fears, though subject to media manipulation, have deeper roots. In Australia’s case important elements include racism, guilt (arising from our treatment of Indigenous Australians), ignorance of those around us, and the alienation and fragmentation of communities.

Unless we are vigilant, our political system, much less democratic that we are often led to believe, can easily become a psychological breeding ground for irrationality and prejudice. Our political, bureaucratic, military and intelligence élites generally remain addicted to the power they associate with imperial centres. They see themselves as having privileged access to an exclusive club – once the British club, now the American club. They have yet to internalise the demise of the former and the slow but steady decline of the latter.

Equally important is the need to cultivate in Australia as elsewhere an understanding that a less militarised world offers the best hope for enhanced security in which the resolution of conflict is no longer dependent on the large-scale use of force, in which national armed forces are no longer regarded as the pre-condition of national autonomy, and in which the principle of common security underpins international relationships.

For Australia this means on the one hand active collaboration with the entire UN system, and creative efforts to renew it in the light of changed circumstances. It also means constructive engagement with our Asian neighbours with a view to developing in the region a more effective framework for confidence building, preventive diplomacy, and peaceful settlement of disputes. It means constructive disengagement from ANZUS, a nuclear and conventional alliance with the United States that puts a brake on international good citizenship and prevents us from taking effective action together with others in support of the elimination of nuclear weapons, an alliance which instead leads to military engagements that exacerbate conflicts, deepen sectarian hatreds, and further destabilise already vulnerable societies.

It is time to initiate a full-scale, multi-faceted national conversation on security and foreign policy Such a conversation should pave the way for more effective public and parliamentary scrutiny of the actions of government generally and intelligence gathering operations in particular. It would mean introducing legislation that guards against violations of civil rights and ensures respect for the autonomy and democratic processes of other countries. It would also mean thinking through the constitutional changes needed so that any decision to commit Australia to the use of force, outside of the auspices of the United Nations, is made either by a clear majority of the two Houses of Parliament or by referendum.

The task of rethinking Australia’s past and future is overdue. The effort needed will be long and arduous, yet it is both feasible and imperative.