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The Monarchy and Australia

Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies--Conference on the Monarchy and Australia.

Welcoming the Queen: or how I learned to give up the monarchy and love the Commonwealth.

John McLaren

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When her Majesty Queen Elizabeth came to Australia in 1954, I was one of the loyal troops sent to Canberra to honour, guard and welcome her. A Colour Sergeant, marching at the rear of the massed bands and Imperial battle honours of the regiments of Her Australian Army, I proudly bore the flag of a battalion of non-combatants, the Melbourne University Regiment. As soldiers of the Queen, we were honorary members of every club in Canberra--not a great number at the time, but an important privilege in an age when hotels closed at six. We travelled by troop train via Albury, reviving folk memories of wartime transport. It was the height and glory of the ~~first~~ scheme ~~period~~ of the military conscription ~~enforced~~ introduced by the Menzies government in the midst of the anxiety generated by the Korean War. Yet the visit itself, for all the enthusiasm with which it was greeted at all levels of society, was rooted in nostalgia and celebrated a social ideal that was already dead. It is the contention of this paper that the seeds of the present republican debate were sown during the Korean War, nurtured by the experience of the Vietnam war, and have come to maturity since the end of the Cold War has left Australia acutely aware of its position as the lonely country at the

bottom of the world. Even those see this position, as I do, as a cause for hope, nevertheless are conscious of the consequences for Australia of a consolidation of the global economy around three overlapping trading blocs centre in the North Atlantic, the North Pacific and Southeast Asia. In these circumstances, the debate between republicans and monarchists is as much an expression of anxiety as of hope.

The generation born during the Depression--my generation--was both fortunate and unfortunate. Too young to go to war, we were squeezed aside in the postwar years by those who had and who had survived to become returned servicemen. They filled the universities and dominated their politics, and provided the backbone for the postwar reconstruction with which the Chifley Labor government transformed the country. Yet Chifley and his cabinet also felt a strong loyalty both to the British Empire, symbolized by the pound sterling that dragged the Australian pound with it as the American dollar soared, and to their colleagues in the British Labour government. Australian Labor was sympathetic to Indian independence but rather more ambivalent towards Indonesia until the trade union movement forced the government's hand by direct action. Domestically, it achieved its policy objectives of full employment and available housing--the minimum rewards for returned heroes and for those who had endured depression poverty and wartime austerity at home--only by imposing stringent controls on prices, consumption and investment. These generated a cumbersome bureaucracy and widespread evasion, and consequently fuelled the general public resentment which, together with a fear of communism, returned Menzies and the conservatives to office at the end of 1949. This

victory was not so much a vote for any particular policies as a vote against wartime and the postwar austerity that was symbolized by the continuation of wartime controls and rationing. Menzies' return to office seemed to fulfil the hopes that had been expressed throughout my wartime childhood in the phrase that prefaced most discussions: "When the war is over . . ." It was a rejection of the other wartime dream of a new society in favour of a return to a past that never was.

Although the Korean War came as a rude interruption to this trance of nostalgia, a reminder that the world was still a dangerous place, it also received a degree of welcome from those of my generation who thought of it as "our war". I was at that time boarding in a conservative school which placed the greatest importance on sport, cadets and examination results, in that order. Many of the dominating personalities on the staff and in the cadet corps were returned servicemen from the first and second world wars. Fortunately, the school also had a good library and encouraged the discussion of public affairs. At the state school I had attended earlier the history and geography of Asia and the Pacific had been taught, with particular reference to the independence struggles in Indonesia (then the Netherlands East Indies), and in the library of the private school I first came across the term 'Near North' in a book of essays on contemporary Asia.[1] These were small signs of the changes that were to engulf Australia over the next twenty years and so complete the process of realignment that had begun with the Fall of Singapore and Curtin's famous, if ambivalent, ~~speech~~ statement in which he ~~turning~~ turned for support from Britain to America.

[1] This was presumably R.J.Gilmour and D.Warner, (eds), Near North: Australia and a thousand million neighbours, with a Foreword by H.V.Evatt, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1948.

In 1950, however, these changes were perceived, at least among my schoolfellows and our teachers, not so much as changes in the structure of world politics as merely the latest episode in the contest of great powers that we were familiar with from our studies of history. Although the state schools taught something of the history of Australia, in the private schools the emphasis was on Britain and Europe, and Australia figured only as a part of the story of Empire. This meant that we were able to welcome the independence of India, under the auspices of the almost royal Mountbatten and the Anglophile Nehru, as the logical culmination of benevolent British tutelage. Indonesia was more worrying, because its independence seemed to come as a consequence of the withdrawal of the mantle of imperial safety. China was more threatening, both because its new government was communist, and because it had annihilated all the symbols of European superiority and Christian endeavour that we had learned to respect at wartime Sunday schools and which, as the exiled missionaries of the China Inland Mission never wearied in reminding us, were the only defence the Chinese people had against the barbarism of their leaders. The Korean war, fought initially under the leadership of Australia's wartime saviour, General Douglas MacArthur, therefore came as a welcome return to the certainties of great power conflict. It also marked a return of American power to Asia and the Pacific, leading to the signing of the Peace Treaty with Japan in 1951. This also brought Australia back under great power protection through the ANZUS treaty signed in the same year as the price paid by America for Australia's agreement to the terms of the Peace treaty.

These events all fitted within the familiar conceptual

framework of global conflict in which small countries such as Australia played a part only as clients of the great powers. This perception had been strengthened in 1949 by the Coal Strike at home and the Berlin Blockade abroad, both of which were taken as evidence of the international ambitions of the new enemy, Russia. During 1950 it was even believed, presumably by elements of the RSL, that a Communist insurrection was about to take place in Australia, and two of my schoolfellows spent a night guarding the cadet corps armory against an anticipated Communist raid up the Yarra.[2] The Korean War was just another opportunity for Australia to play its familiar part in the cycle of struggle between contending power blocs, and National Service, which had in fact been planned independently but on the same strategic and historical assumption, was welcomed by the greater part of the general population, and certainly at the school, as complementing this task.[3]

John Hooker captures the mood of this generation admirably in his novel of the Korean War, Standing Orders.[4] The central character in this work, David Andersen, is brought up by patriotic parents during the second world war on a grazing property that preserves the bush ethos, the British perspective and the pastoral hauteur of the landed classes. He grows up with Country Life and the Illustrated London News, Beano, Film Fun, Champion and Hotspur, the novels of Edgar Wallace, John Buchan, Rider Haggard and, indiscriminately mixed in a melange of world-faring adventure, Fenimore Cooper and Richard Dana. I

[2] Desmond Zwar, The Soul of a School, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1982, p.16. Zwar was one of the cadets involved; I have confirmed the story independently from the other.
[3] Jeffrey Grey, A Military History of Australia, CUP, Cambridge, 1990, pp.193-213. On National Service, see pp.200-01. On the Korean War, p.202-4. On ANZUS and the Japanese Peace Treaty, pp.208-09.

would add Arthur Mee's Children's Encyclopedia and Children's Newspaper, the William books and the various adventurings of Biggles of the RAF. A curious mixture of little England and high imperial responsibility. But whereas this upbringing took David Andersen through the Royal Military College to Korea, disillusion and disaster, it took most of us merely to National Service and history replayed as farce. The irrelevance of this facrce was partly obscured by the fact that the Korean conflict itself settled into the kind of formal and static warfare familiar from histories of the Great War, but destined to be the last of its kind. The wars in which Australia was to become involved were as much cultural as military engagements, and demanded skills and tactics quite other than those practised, however ineffectively, in National Service.

The Australian Army, ~~coping~~ faced with the manpower demands of the National Service training and Korean War, had the resources to cope with neither. Our National Training Battalion was over-soldiered and understaffed, mainly with refugees from the British forces who had fought in Palestine or Malaya or with Australian veterans who had not been able to settle down in civilian life. At the inaugural parade the training officer warned us that they knew of the Communists and trouble-makers hiding in our midst, and the chaplain ~~warned~~ advised us to think of our mothers. The Company Sergeant-Major, a former doorman from the Silver Grill at Melbourne's Australia Hotel, lectured us on the glories of the British military tradition. Our platoon commander arrived only after the first two of our fourteen weeks' sentence and left a couple of weeks later for Korea, where he served valiantly and was ~~injured~~ maimed for life. The platoon comprised farm-boys and labourers, and a sprinkling of university students who had had

their
~~our~~ service postponed until the summer vacation. During our time, ~~the~~ King George VI died, the Royal Tour of Empire on which Elizabeth and Phillip had embarked was abandoned, and rumours swept the camp that world war was about to break out fully and that we would be required to serve indefinitely. It didn't and we didn't, and at the end of the fourteen weeks we were released back into civilian life armed, uniformed, but initiated into no more of military life than the most futile of its routines.

For the next two years, while I was required to serve the balance of the allotted term on week nights, weekends and annual camps with the Melbourne University Regiment, I worked diligently to obtain promotion to the rank of Sergeant. This achieved, and with it the right to join the Sergeant's Mess and so enjoy the facilities of its bar, I lost all further military ambition. However, the pay was useful, and so when a new Royal Tour was announced for 1954, I took the opportunity of visiting the capital and amassing a further week's pay. The duties entailed lining the streets while the royal couple drove past to their various engagements, and parading before Parliament House as part of the combined display of Australia's military might. Just as this royal tour was the last extended visit by royalty to the Commonwealth, so this is probably the last time that so many Australian servicemen took place in an imperial display of this magnitude.[b]

Although Australia continued until 1966 to send forces to

[4] Collins/Harvill, Glascow, 1986.

[b] For details of the tour and public reactions to it, see Annette Shiel and Peter Spearritt, (eds.), Australia and the Monarchy 1954, National Centre for Australian Studies, Clayton, 1993, particularly Spearritt,'Australians and the Monarchy', pp.6-9; Kimberley Webber, 'Celebrating Q-Day: street decorations for the royal visit', pp.24-26; and Judith Brett, 'Menzies and the Monarchy', pp.30-32.

participate in defensive actions in Malaya and Borneo, its main future military activity would be in alliance with America rather than Britain, which finally withdrew its forces east of Suez during the time of the Wilson government. This alliance in turn brought strong opposition during the Vietnam war, and although it still forms an official part of Australian policy is now seen within the context of an independent policy aiming at self-sufficiency in situations short of global war. In this sense, military policy has followed the same path as the cultural evolution from proud assertion of dependence on powerful friends to aspirations of national independence.

In retrospect, the spectacle of 1954 marked the end of an order, not its re-establishment. The national servicemen who took part could not share the enthusiasm of the veterans who used the occasion to salute their past. Soon after we returned from Canberra the futile scheme of universal National Service was wound back, to be finally abandoned in 1959. Yet while its subjects acquiesced in the vainglory of the moment, and later prospered through the years of somnolence under Menzies, from their numbers came the professionals who ~~educated~~ influenced the generation that provided the protests against Vietnam. They were not for the most part republicans, most probably voted for Menzies, but the indifference to royalty engendered by the futility of military service, symbolised by the empty pomp of the displays in Canberra, repeated in the state capitals to the intense enthusiams of the populace, provided fallow ground for the seeds of republicanism. Eventually, these were sown when, in November 1975, the conservatives made one last use of the aegis of royalty to cloak their activity in the present.

At the time the Royal Tour of 1954 served its purpose in convincing Australians that under Menzies we were returning to the time of hope and confidence suggested by our childhood reading. The symbolism of the young Queen representing the glorious past of Great Britain fitted with the idea of a young nation taking this heritage into a new age. This symbolism was however based on contradiction. Far from leading the way to a new age, the young queen represented the power structures of the past. The symbols of royalty concealed the ~~contradictions~~ facts reality that this return to the security of Empire was dependent on the ultimate protection of the United States, and that prosperity at home depended on the labours of the influx of newcomers, mainly from outside the Empire, who rebuilt the material fabric of the economy before they started to transform its insular anxieties into a cosmopolitan culture. The chief consequence of the tour was to enable Australians for another generation to live in a world of royal mythology and to avoid engagement with the consequences of the dramatic changes that were reshaping their world. National Service contributed to the same myth, but as the Korean war bogged down in an endless stalemate and new forms of conflict started to occupy defence planners, the perceptions of reality that gave the myth its power started to crumble. The crumbling of the myth in turn robbed royalty of its last possible relevance.

that the chief ~~threat to~~ influences on Australia's security lay ~~with~~ were domestic political changes to our north rather than alterations in global balances of power,