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Percy Spender and Club America in the 1950s

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In March 1952, almost one year into his term as Ambassador, Percy Spender wrote a long, concerned letter to Dick Casey, Spender's successor as Australian Minister for External Affairs. Spender was worried that the new Pacific Council, recently born of the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (ANZUS) (but not yet having met), was in danger of being marginalised by the amount of strategic planning activity occurring under the umbrella of NATO, supplemented by separate high-level conversations relating to Japan and Germany. Given NATO's dominance and its consideration of the broadest possible range of international security matters, that body inevitably presided on matters that would affect Australia in the Pacific. Spender therefore urged Casey to consider lobbying for some form of formal connection to NATO to avoid being constantly 'on the outer'.¹ This last comment, one that was repeated in similar forms by Spender over the next six years, sets the tone for this chapter.

Prior to his arrival in Washington in May 1951, Spender's story had been one of strong ambition and determination overcoming humble beginnings and enabling him a spectacular rise in Australian social, legal and political circles. Born in 1897, the son of a Sydney locksmith,

1 Percy Spender to Richard G. Casey, 18 March 1952, letter, Spender Papers, item MS 4975, box 1, folder 3, National Library of Australia (NLA), Canberra.

he had earned a place at Sydney's Fort Street High School, known for enabling social mobility, and he had subsequently been a night student in arts and law before becoming a successful barrister and then entering federal politics in 1937. He stood then as an independent candidate for the Sydney seat of Warringah, but soon joined the major anti-Labor party, the United Australia Party, which was replaced in the political firmament by the Liberal Party of Australia after World War II. During the first part of World War II Spender had served in Menzies' Cabinets, first as Treasurer and then Minister for the Army, and he remained on the bipartisan Advisory War Council after Labor took office in October 1941. Spender did not play a major role in the formation of the new Liberal Party at the end of the war, but he joined and became Minister for External Affairs in Menzies' Liberal/Country Party Coalition Government elected in December 1949.

As Minister for External Affairs for only 16 months (December 1950 – April 1951), Spender is rightly remembered for his key role in connection with two landmarks in Australia's foreign policy, the Colombo Plan for Co-operative Economic Development in South and Southeast Asia, and the ANZUS Treaty between Australia, New Zealand and the United States. The Colombo Plan, briefly known as the 'Spender Plan', took its final name from a meeting of Commonwealth foreign ministers in Ceylon at the beginning of 1950, and was fleshed out at two further meetings that year. These yielded a permanent organisation comprising regular meetings of participating countries in a consultative committee and a separate group overseeing technical aid. Less a 'plan' than a coordinated series of bilateral agreements, the Colombo Plan became one of the most constructive means by which Australian governments engaged with a decolonising Asia over the next 30 years.

A security pact for the Pacific was one of Spender's publicly stated goals from the moment he took office as Minister for External Affairs. He also declared, in March 1950, that he wanted the Australia-US relationship to become '[s]omewhat the same relationship as exists within the British Commonwealth',² a bold declaration given the deep ties between Australia and Britain. During the second half of 1950, after the outbreak of the Korean War on 26 July, American interest in a Pacific security pact grew, as part of a broader vision of an island chain of security running

2 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 9 March 1950, vol. 206, pp. 635–6.

from Japan to Australia. US Special Envoy John Foster Dulles visited Australia in February 1951 for talks with Spender and his colleagues that ultimately led to the drafting of the ANZUS Treaty, signed later that year and ratified by all parties by the following year. The backdrop of deepening Cold War tension was crucial in this process towards the conclusion of the tripartite security treaty – when Dulles was in Canberra in February 1951, the South Korean capital Seoul lay in communist hands and Chinese forces had joined North Koreans in a bloody struggle against American-led UN forces there. Whether the treaty would meet Spender's high expectations of access to US global strategic planning in the Cold War remained to be seen.³

A new standard

It is well documented that Ambassador Spender's life and work in the US from 1951 to 1958 marked a new high in the assertiveness and effectiveness of an overseas representative.⁴ In overview, Spender was a very successful ambassador in a number of ways. First, he drew on every aspect of real and imagined authority that came with a Minister for External Affairs (December 1949 – March 1951) translating to the position of ambassador, rather like Australian high commissioners in London who had drawn on their authority as former prime ministers, and like later ambassadors in Washington – Beale, Peacock, Beazley and Hockey – who drew on their authority as ministers. Spender thus constantly pushed the boundaries of his remit with Canberra. Even if he could not circumvent the supremacy of his Prime Minister, Menzies and also Casey, as makers of foreign policy as much as he would have liked, Spender ensured the continued rise in importance of the American alliance and the rise of the Washington embassy in Canberra minds.

The terms of his appointment marked a new high for Australia's foreign service. He earned an annual salary of AU£3,500, plus travel and child allowances, at a fixed exchange rate of AU£1 to US\$4.86. In his final year of service, 1957, the real rate of exchange stood at US\$2.25. He also received a lump sum living allowance of AU£14,350, against which, contrary to standard departmental practice, he did not need to

3 See David Lowe, 'Percy Spender: Minister and Ambassador' in Joan Beaumont, Christopher Waters, David Lowe with Garry Woodard, *Ministers, Mandarins and Diplomats: Australian Foreign Policy Making 1941–1969*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2003, pp. 62–74.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 75–87.

produce receipts for expenditure.⁵ Not only were these terms at great variance with the parlous conditions of more junior members of the diplomatic service, they reverberated in ways that shifted the landscape of plum, politically sought-after overseas posts. It was significant, for example, that when Sir Eric Harrison was appointed Australia's High Commissioner to the United Kingdom in 1956, he argued for parity with Spender's conditions rather than any previous standard that had been used for London.⁶

The strong sense of activism and licence that Spender carried with him to Washington was especially evident during the first half of his tenure, through 1954, and was felt and mostly welcomed by other members of the embassy. Alan Renouf, then Second Secretary in the embassy, has recalled the excitement and challenges of making the running on policy without waiting for Canberra's instructions. Spender once told him to draw up a draft of an agreement between Australia and the US on shared information about atomic energy, and when Renouf suggested seeking instructions from Canberra, Spender's reply was: 'Bugger instructions. I don't need instructions on a thing like this. I know better than Canberra.'⁷

Similarly, Spender established and maintained a high profile in Washington and further afield in the US. He did so especially through accepting invitations and undertaking speaking tours offered by community groups such as Rotary and also universities wanting to add variety to their convocation speakers, in the process generating good publicity and goodwill towards Australia. Spender was particularly well-known as a speaker in different cities of the US for the English-Speaking Union of the United States, the mission of which was 'To strengthen the friendly relationship between the peoples of the United States of America and of the British Commonwealth by disseminating knowledge of each to the other, and by inspiring reverence for their common traditions'.⁸ Thanks to his wife Jean who accompanied him on

5 Casey to Menzies, 10 December 1957, letter, M2576/1 item 39, National Archives of Australia (NAA), Canberra; Spender to Casey, 2 August 1951, letter, Casey Desk Correspondence, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), Canberra.

6 Casey to Menzies, 14 June 1955, memo, enclosing Menzies to White draft letter (sent 29 June 1955), M2576/1 item 39, NAA, Canberra.

7 Alan Renouf and Michael Wilson, 23 November 1993, interview, TRC-2981/6, 51, NLA, Canberra.

8 English-Speaking Union, New York, *A Chronicle of the English Speaking Union*, New York, 1970.

many of his trips across the States and recorded details in a published memoir, *Ambassador's Wife*, we have a good record of Spender's restless energies playing out well beyond the District of Columbia.⁹

Spender's longevity was a factor in his impact in Washington. Towards the end of his tenure he had become dean of the British Commonwealth ambassadors, and he was not backward in reminding the British embassy of his pre-eminence in protocol for the Royal visit by Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh in 1957.¹⁰ Indeed, Spender struck an effective balance between drawing on the collective strength of the Commonwealth and the enduring prestige of the British (or English-speaking) world, on the one hand, while cultivating a strident sense of Australian diplomatic distinctiveness on the other. In addition to his longevity, the other material factor that helped build his profile was his successful building of embassy numbers during this time. He successfully campaigned for additional personnel attached to Australia's representation at the UN and in the embassy's publicity department. At the same time, he relished his own annual performances leading Australia's delegations to meetings of the General Assembly (after Casey had come for the opening sessions) to the middle of the decade and driving, at local and regional levels, Australia's successful campaign for an elected seat on the Security Council. Bearing out his strength as a former politician, he also ran successful campaigns to hold firm on Article 2(7), the domestic jurisdiction clause of the Charter that kept the UN from hearing domestic matters, unless there was a threat to peace, and in maintaining Western bloc solidarity on several issues relating to the Korean War.¹¹ So engaged in UN affairs was Spender, and so keen to wield his own influence, that by the time of the successful bid for the Security Council seat in 1955, Canberra was forced to think through and provide greater clarity to the relationship between the head of mission at the UN and the Ambassador in Washington. Both New York and Washington gained in quality and number of Australian diplomats during the 1950s, a product also of the more general rise in diplomacy in New York as more nation-members joined the UN, and of

9 Jean Spender, *Ambassador's Wife*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1968.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 184–5, 188–9.

11 See especially David Lowe, *Australian Between Empires: the life of Percy Spender*, Pickering & Chatto, London, 2010, and 'Mr Spender Goes to Washington: An Australian Ambassador's Vision of Australian-American Relations, 1951–58', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1996, pp. 278–95.

Casey's enduring faith in the powers of personal diplomacy.¹² Such were the new Australian expectations that one US-based British diplomat remarked in 1954:

Canberra may be content to be told that discussions are about to begin in Washington on topics of interest to Australia and that Australia will be told in due course afterwards what has happened. The Australian embassy here (whatever the attitude of Canberra) will not accept this.¹³

There is, underpinning this sketch of Spender and his legacy, a strong theme of restless, energetic behaviour; of someone who pushes to the limits the representational brief of the ambassador as he determines to give himself the strongest possible sense of licence and the capacity to be an agent of change. Such activism reflected Spender's personality and was more possible for two powerful considerations: first, for his having made the transition to Washington from the post of Minister for External Affairs; and secondly, for there being too few precedents up to that point in 1951 of Australian ambassadors overseas to have set some boundaries around behaviour. Percy Spender made the most of both these factors.

Networks and members

This chapter now turns to another, less-explored feature of Percy Spender's tenure as Ambassador, namely his anxiety at the prospect of being left out of clubs wherein the best networks operated and the biggest decisions were made. This was evident in his concerned letter to Casey, cited at the beginning of this chapter, about the risk of Australia being left out of a NATO club. Club membership is a metaphor that has broader utility to the history of Australian representation in the US. In Spender's case, it took on particular significance for reasons that go to the sociopolitical dynamics of being in Washington in an era that was distinctive for: the development of the ANZUS Treaty and the hopes that it might constitute an open door to NATO or at least higher level strategic planning with global remit; the sudden growth of

12 Casey and Menzies to Spender, 7 June 1955, Casey desk correspondence, DFAT, Canberra; Casey diary entries, 21 September, 7 October 1955, Casey Diaries, MS6150, series 4, box 27, NLA, Canberra.

13 RH Scott (British Embassy, Washington) to WD Allen (UK Foreign Office), 30 December 1954, DO 35/10777, The National Archives, London.

the international diplomatic community through the admission of new nations to the UN Organisation; and the behaviours of the Washington 'set', including the diplomatic corps.

In other words, the undercurrent of much-sought membership of an increasingly important but elusive 'club' wherein the most important decisions affecting the free world were being made has particular resonance with the conditions Spender faced in the 1950s. And, given his recurring sensitivity to being left 'on the outer', we profit from bringing to this picture a stronger sense of what he felt it was to be 'in or out' in Washington. The contemporary observer whose work best targeted this slippery notion of 'clubbish' behaviour among elites in 1950s America was the controversial sociologist, C Wright Mills. Of three books he produced between 1948 and 1956, the best-known and most highly regarded was *The Power Elite*, published in 1956.¹⁴ In this work, Mills argued that the new wielders of power in America were effectively understood from a Weberian more than a Marxist perspective. They depended for their status more on institutional and social standing than on economic power; and they dominated positions in government, the military and the corporate world. A sharp critic of the US national security state, Mills paid special attention to the importance of schooling ('the one deep association that distinguishes the social rich from the merely rich and those below')¹⁵ and the ongoing associations and sensibilities attached to attending the right school. He noted the rise of the military and he argued that families of 'old money' were being marginalised by the new elite. Claiming that a new epoch had dawned, he wrote that:

a conjunction of historical circumstances has led to the rise of an elite of power; that the men of the circles composing this elite, severally and collectively, now make such key decisions as are made; and that, given the enlargement and the centralization of the means of power now available, the decisions that they make and fail to make carry more consequences for more people than has ever been the case in the world history of mankind.¹⁶

14 Charles Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1956. The other two titles were *New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders*, Harcourt, New York, 1948, and *White Collar: the American Middle Classes*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1956.

15 Mills, *Power Elite*, p. 63.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

The different cities of the US shaped the particular characteristics to what constituted 'society' in different locations, according to Mills. In Detroit, for example, it was who you were in the auto industry; and in Washington the equation was simple: anyone official was society. The power of wealth in the Capitol was, 'overshadowed and out-ranked by official Society, especially by the Embassy Row along Massachusetts Avenue'.¹⁷ There was no cafe society as such in Washington, because the key affairs took place in embassies, private houses and official residences: 'In fact, there is no really firm line-up of Society in Washington, composed as it is of public officials and politicians, of familial hostesses and wealthy climbers, of widows with know-how and ambassadors with unofficial messages to impart.'¹⁸

Although criticised at the time for featuring more assertion than evidence, Mills' *Power Elite* became an enduring critique of the US Cold War establishment, and, when read with President Eisenhower's parting warning in 1961 about the development of an overly influential 'military-industrial complex', its influence on interpretations of the decade has lingered. Not surprisingly, the sociocultural dynamics of exclusive clubs has also continued to interest commentators. A recent study of membership of US country clubs, for example, stresses the basic qualities of homophily – the act of mixing with people like oneself. Interactions with people like oneself instil and reinforce the unwritten laws of social life and ensure that the next generation is able to assume their rightful place; and such interactions reinforce a group's distinctiveness, divisions between 'them' and 'us'. And US club membership is a means by which you perpetuate group identity by reinforcing networks, liaisons and a shared sense of loyalty to the group.¹⁹

For many Australian politicians and diplomats of the 1940s and 1950s, club memberships of some form were the norm. In Spender's case, his rise in seniority through Sydney's masonic lodges and through the Royal Empire Society paralleled his rise in Australian politics from the late 1930s. His story was also one of transcending class origins, given his relatively humble background followed by rapid rise in law and then politics. Schooling at Fort Street High, based on excellent results at primary level, was an important platform for later success at the University

17 Ibid., pp. 83 and 78.

18 Ibid., p. 83.

19 Jessica Holden Sherwood, *Wealth, Whiteness, and the Matrix of Privilege: The View from the Country Club*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2012, pp. 15–17 and passim.

of Sydney and at the New South Wales Bar. His career success prior to entering politics in 1937 was matched by upwards residential mobility in Sydney – arriving in Woollahra, via Bellevue Hill and Turramurra.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to interrogate Australian or US educational and social organisations in any depth, and it can only touch indirectly on privilege and class as recurrent themes in the life and work of Percy Spender (although he remained critical of these at the same time that he sought membership among those blessed by them). More central is the importance he attached to being in the right society or club at the start of what C Wright Mills called a new epoch. This was a time when being ‘in’ might prove absolutely essential, according to his conception of Australia’s interests, given the potential for far-reaching decisions, and at a time when a threatening environment and the arrival of new players made the exclusivity of a well-functioning policymaking club all the more precious. Spender, more than his former Cabinet colleagues in Canberra, saw the early 1950s as a pivotal period in which new international dangers would amplify and the shape of new or refashioned alliances would settle quickly. For Australia, a small-to-middle power in the South Pacific, it would be crucial to be sitting at the right table when this happened.

Cold War collegiality

The strategic environment of Cold War alliance and growing concern with communist advances in Asia provided the greatest alarm, from Spender’s sense of Australian security interests, and also the most logical means by which to win goodwill in the inner policymaking circles of Washington. During the early 1950s ANZUS, while ratified by 1952, was very much formative in its accepted implications. Deprived of the North Atlantic Treaty’s teeth, wherein an attack on one was deemed an attack on all, ANZUS was a work in progress, and no one could be certain of what organisational machinery – what kind of ‘O’ in NATO – might sustain it. Spender was acutely aware of the potential for ANZUS to suffer the fate of the advisory councils relating to the Pacific in the Second World. These became exercises in providing information to junior allies such as Australia while keeping them distant from strategic policymaking. While ANZUS, and the early ANZUS Council meetings arising from the Treaty, would never satisfy Spender’s high expectations for a foot in the door of higher strategic planning, he was determined

that no one should spoil the potential at least that ANZUS constituted. When, for example, he heard of the British inclination to disturb or diminish the standing of ANZUS early in 1953, he wrote to Menzies using choice language:

if we are to allow anything to interfere with ANZUS, whether on the political or military plane, we will lose the only means we have on any effective entry into U.S.A. political and military thinking at a high level and the intimacy which ANZUS unquestionably affords us. For the first time we have got a toe hold into the council of the U.S.A. which affects the world and its destiny at a high and acknowledged level through ANZUS.²⁰

For much of Spender's term, he conveyed a strong message that these were transformed, crucial times: pivotal to the outcome of the free world and to Australia's security, and that there were rare opportunities for Australians to punch above their weight in being heard in the highest policymaking circles in Washington. In the kind of language he deployed, Australia could avoid being on the 'outer' in this era of direction-setting and turn its toehold into something that was an alliance of breadth and depth. But, to persist with the metaphor, the toehold enjoyed by Australia – and by extension, for Percy Spender – was not something that would become a more solid footing without Canberra sharing his view that it was time to seize the moment and bank some serious goodwill with the Americans who mattered.

Achieving this in the context of US strategic policymaking was going to be hard, but Cold War crises threw up opportunities. It is easy now to forget how unsettled US defence thinking was in relation to developments in Southeast Asia in the early to mid-1950s. Public statements by Cabinet members could differ greatly from what State Department and Pentagon officials were saying to members of the Australian embassy. As is well-told elsewhere, some of the volatility in US policy came to the fore in relation to the collapse of the French in Vietnam in 1954.²¹ This generated a flurry of meetings contemplating some form of US intervention, possibly backed by an international group

20 Spender to Menzies, 29 May 1953, cablegram, item CRS A1838/269 TS686/1 part 3, NAA, Canberra.

21 See especially Gregory J Pemberton, 'Australia, the United States and the Indo-China Crisis of 1954', *Diplomatic History*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1989, pp. 45–66; Hiroyuki Umetsu, 'Australia's Response to the Indochina Crisis of 1954 Amidst Anglo-American Confrontation', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2006, pp. 398–416.

of allies including Australia. As a case study, the Indochina crisis of 1954 tested the embassy for its complexity, with Spender and senior diplomats needing to sort through the differing views of the Pentagon, State Department, Presidential Office and Congressional leaders. When US officials sought to clarify willingness of their allies to commit to possible military intervention on behalf of the struggling French, Spender was inclined to keep Australia in the right group – those who would respond when the circumstances demanded: ‘One of the primary aims of our policy over recent years’, he wrote to External Affairs Minister Casey:

has been as I understand it to achieve the acceptance by U.S.A. of responsibility in S.E. Asia. It is for consideration whether, if we fail to respond at all to the opportunity now presented what U.S. reactions are likely to be if and when areas closer to Australia are in jeopardy.²²

On this occasion he ran too far ahead of Casey, Menzies and a more cautious Australian Cabinet, and was disappointed to have to temper his government’s support in communications with the US State Department.²³

In the wake of the crisis, or really several crisis moments between April and July 1954, the Australians joined with others keenly interested in the security of Southeast Asia to sign the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty in September, which formally translated into an organisation, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), soon afterwards. Such was his investment in mechanisms for thickening the US–Australia relationship that Spender drafted and circulated his own version of SEATO, complete with a robust Council, a Security Bureau designed to boost the region’s capacity to combat internal communist subversion, and ambitious measures for atomic energy and economic cooperation within the group. Canberra backed away quickly from most of this, nor did the final version of the treaty reflect these more adventurous ideas.²⁴ Spender’s analysis of US thinking behind the establishment of SEATO was that it was a worrying means by which Washington was creating room to move unburdened of the need to consult allies such as Australia. It was desirable chiefly on account of the freedom of action it would lend

22 Spender to Casey, cablegram no. 326, CRS A5462/1 item 2/4/1 part 2, NAA, Canberra, underlining in original.

23 Pemberton, ‘Australia, the United States, and the Indo-China Crisis’, pp. 45–66.

24 Spender, ‘SATO’ (Spender’s draft defined South Asia generously), draft for consideration, 9 July 1954, Spender papers, item MS 4875, box 8, folder Miscellaneous Papers and Documents, NLA, Canberra.

the Americans to meet contingencies in Southeast Asia as they pleased – ‘freedom in terms of internal US politics and opinion, in terms of US constitutional practice, and in terms of international western public opinion’.²⁵

Spender feared that the Pentagon would ultimately fall back on an ‘island chain’ defence mentality, the use of US bases strung throughout islands from Japan to the Philippines, as the most reliable and realistic defence of their interests, rather than contemplating intervention against communist-led forces on the mainland of Southeast Asia. Linked with a seeming preparedness for ‘massive retaliation’ for decisive, possibly nuclear, strikes from US bases, this made good sense to American defence planners. According to Spender, this might not be disastrous to Australia’s interests, given ANZUS and Australia’s strategic significance at the end of the chain of islands, but he added that such thinking missed the point. Any apparent abandonment of mainland Southeast Asia would inevitably make Australia’s security predicament harder in the long run; reliance on ‘massive retaliation’, envisaging the possible use of nuclear weapons, offered little alternative if that was suddenly to be abandoned or unsuccessful. And finally, he wrote:

in this context there would not appear to be a great deal of room for Australia to play an effective part in strategic planning for the area. There would in fact be little strategic planning to be done outside the Pentagon. In other words the U.S. would take general responsibility for planning and policy – either alone or, possibly making some provision for limited co-operation with the U.K and perhaps Australia, in a ‘standing group’ on NATO lines. There is distinct possibility in my opinion that Australia might be regarded as having given through ... SEATO the equivalent of moral support to whatever actions flows from U.S. planning and policy, but would have little opportunity of influencing either.²⁶

It seems that Spender was somewhat deflated by the terms of SEATO and what he observed to be the low regard in which it was held in Washington. He did not give up, however, suggesting to Canberra, in relation to subsequent episodes such as the offshore islands crisis endangering Taiwan in 1955, that an Australian preparedness to state

²⁵ Spender to Casey, 8 October 1954, Ministerial Despatch no. 6/54, CRS A 4231/2 WASHINGTON 1954, NAA, Canberra.

²⁶ Ibid.

firmly the conditions under which they would join in US-led military action in Asia might help firm up the quality of American collaboration in security policy.²⁷

Complicating internationalism

The growth of the international community constituted a challenge to the exclusiveness of the kind of inner-circle membership Spender sought for Australia. While he was in Washington, and also representing Australia at the UN meetings in New York, he witnessed an explosion in membership of the UN. Indonesia's joining at the end of 1950 was significant, and then 19 further members were added in 1955–56, several of them recently independent or members of the communist bloc. Their opposition to Cold War polarity and the accumulation of nuclear weapons, and their support for rapid dismantling of remaining empires and their lobbying on behalf of countries still colonised, became a feature of the new members' activities in the UN. In May 1955, the collective gathering of 29 representatives from Asian and African nations at the Bandung conference in Indonesia lent further strength to these causes while ushering in the non-alignment movement. Cumulatively, such developments radicalised the international community.

As is well-known, Spender was proactive in response. He was one of the most vociferous in his invoking Article 2(7), the domestic jurisdiction clause of the UN Charter, in efforts to keep Indonesia away from what was then called West New Guinea; and this was matched by a more general determination to defend Australia's record and the record of other enlightened colonial powers. In one of his early skirmishes with the anti-colonial group, in the Assembly at the end of 1952 he signalled his impatience with the groups of members who were amplifying the principle of self-determination to histrionic levels, devoid, in his view, of any sense of a colony's development and readiness for self-government.²⁸ Referring to some draft resolutions along these lines, Spender said that they:

27 Spender to Menzies (from London), 26 January 1955, cablegram, TS No. 82, CRS A5462/1 item 3/13/4 part 5, NAA, Canberra.

28 See David Lowe, 'Australia at the United Nations in the 1950s: The Paradox of Empire', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 51, no. 2, 1997, pp. 171–81.

form part of a campaign ... which some countries, I regret exceedingly to have to say, see fit to wage against what they call colonialism. They see in this colonialism everything bad and identified with exploitation. They ignore, or pretend to ignore, all or most of its achievements. Many States now Members of this Organization have been led, by the friendly tutelage of a mandate system and by this self-same colonialism, to the attainment of their complete sovereignty and independence.²⁹

Spender's embrace of postwar internationalism was real but heavily qualified by his expectation that it would be some time before conditions in the international community enabled a body such as the UN to fulfil its potential. The hopes of 1945, he thought, had fallen well short due to the lack of great power unanimity. It was a case of being optimistic that some of those hopes of 1945 liberal internationalism might one day move closer to realisation but in the meantime there was a need to be mindful of where power lay. 'The Charter of the United Nations is no substitute for power', he said on the 10th anniversary of the UN's formation, in 1955. 'On the contrary, it assumes the existence of power and seeks to see that it is employed for the defence of liberty and not for the enslavement of free people.'³⁰

In particular, the atomic arms race, taking hold in the 1950s and assuming ever deadlier proportions in the size of weapons being tested, meant that great power and responsibility lay in the hands of those who possessed bombs. In speaking to the possibility of apocalyptic nuclear war, at the First Committee in November 1953, he said, '[t]he truth of the matter is that it is not within this organization that any solution will be found'. While disarmament efforts foundered on Soviet intransigence over provisions for inspections, Spender reminded members, 'were it not for the supremacy which the US of America in particular possesses in atomic weapon power, and its awful deterrent to war, the peril to the free world would have been very great indeed'.³¹ Taken in conjunction with Spender's concerns that voting patterns in the UN would be harder to control with the increasing assertiveness of the Afro-Asian bloc after

29 *UN General Assembly Official Record*, Seventh Session, 403rd Plenary Meeting, 16 December 1952, p. 372.

30 Spender, speech delivered to Lincoln University, Nebraska, 11 July 1955, Spender Papers, item MS4875, box 4, folder 19, NLA, Canberra.

31 Spender's statement in the UN First Committee, 11 November 1953, Spender Papers, item MS4875, box 3, folder 17, NLA, Canberra.

1955, it was a case of managing this forum rather than expecting it deliver in the interests of Australian security – at least in the foreseeable short-term.

The Washington set

As Mills described with reference to officialdom and diplomats in *The Power Elite*, the Spenders were very much part of ‘society’ as it took shape in Washington. ‘Parties, parties and more parties’ was how Jean Spender recalled the city, likening it to a social merry-go-round but one that was also competitive and of ‘intense interest to so many people’.³² Among the private papers of Percy Spender held at the National Library of Australia is a 560-page first draft of what became Jean’s published book, *Ambassador’s Wife*.³³ Mercifully, the transition to print saw a significant reduction in the relentless number of social encounters described, but the unabridged version remains valuable for its rather literal capture of the contents of formal engagement books that Jean kept. As their teenage sons, Peter and John, settled into school and then university (St Albans for the younger John and Yale for both), she and Percy observed with interest the elaborate etiquette attaching to debutante balls, 21st birthday parties and other rituals accompanying the young elite of Washington.³⁴ Peter embraced the networking opportunities that came thick and fast. He worked at Westinghouse during the summer of 1953 and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from Yale in June 1954, and in the same month was married at Georgetown Episcopal Church. His bride, Ann Foster Lynch, was the daughter of Charles Francis Lynch, a US Navy Captain, and grand-daughter of the late Judge Rufus Foster, a former senior judge of the US Appeals Court.³⁵ Peter’s brother John graduated from Yale with a law degree three years later. At one point, in May 1956, John benefited from the comments of his father’s friend, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, on one of his longer essays. As Dulles noted in passing on his admiring comments to Percy, ‘[i]f my associates in the State Department knew that I had

32 Jean Spender, *Ambassador’s Wife*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1968, p. 34.

33 Jean Spender, Unpublished manuscript of *Ambassador’s Wife*, Spender Papers, item MS4875, box 9, p. 350, NLA, Canberra.

34 *Ibid.*, pp. 74–5, 257.

35 *Truth*, 23 May 1954, in Spender Papers, Newscuttings Album, item MS4875/32, NLA, Canberra.

taken the time to read anything so extensive, they would be very jealous because I assure them that I cannot read anything more than about two pages long'.³⁶

While awash with social occasions, Washington was also slightly more manageable for the Spenders in the 1950s than later. When they arrived in May 1951 the number of foreign embassies there stood at just over 60; when they left in 1958 there were more than 80, which made the obligatory calls for any new ambassador especially gruelling. And the after-effects of US servicemen passing through Australia during World War II were strong in this period. The Spenders were struck by the number of people who approached them in the wake of a speech or some other publicised activity to pass on their thanks for Australian hospitality that had been extended to one of their men-folk.³⁷

Washington suited the Spenders for its opportunities to advance certain causes in both formal and informal settings. Percy and Jean enjoyed developing an understanding of the Washington hostess – in Jean's words, 'apart from offering great enjoyment to their guests, they also offered opportunities for encounters and discussions on neutral ground between many official people'.³⁸ They made friends readily among senior political and military families, including Admirals Carney, Radford and Burke, Herman Phleger, legal adviser in the State Department and friend of President Eisenhower, and the Dulles brothers, as well as Oscar Hammerstein and his Australian wife and interior decorator Dorothy. By 1954, Australian newspapers were describing the Spenders as 'ornaments of the social scene, not only in the national capital but at the cocktail parties of the UNO set in New York and at the summer colonies of Newport, Southampton and other fashionable centres'.³⁹

Gregarious and cheeky, Spender was fond of singing current tunes, and made a habit of ending some parties with a rendition of Hank Fort's popular song, 'Put your shoes on, Lucy'. The Ambassador actually bumped into Fort at some of the Washington parties, and sang with

36 Dulles to Spender, 14 May 1956, letter, Spender Papers, MS 4875, box 1, folder 5, NLA, Canberra.

37 Jean Spender, Unpublished manuscript of Ambassador's Wife, p. 40.

38 Ibid.

39 *Telegraph* (Sydney), 7 June 1954, Spender Papers, Newscuttings Album, MS4875/32, NLA, Canberra.

her.⁴⁰ There was something apt about Percy's love of a song about a wide-eyed Tennessee girl taking up an invitation to go to Manhattan with her 'highfalutin kin' where she saw all the sights, did some 'flirtin' until her bare feet started 'hurtin', and she had to put her shoes on.⁴¹ On one of the many other occasions Australia's Ambassador broke into song, he joined with Mariana Radford, wife of the then Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, in a special-service train on their way back from a Navy versus Army football match.⁴²

Percy embraced the distinctive Washington atmosphere of mixing with like-minded officials in different contexts that resembled the characteristics of club membership, blending social occasion with business opportunity. Having already become an Australian Director of Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company in 1944, he relished the trappings of this association and the greater opportunities to connect with Goodyear headquarters in Akron, Ohio. He loved it, for example, when the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company sent its own plane to fly him to meetings in Akron. In October 1953, the *Akron Beacon Journal* feted him as the company's guest speaker at the 55th anniversary banquet.⁴³ His own interests and his observations of the interconnectivity of corporate, military and government realms led him to urge other Australians to recognise that there were fewer sharp lines between different spheres of business in the US, and that they should adjust accordingly. Early on in his tenure, in some of his longer, more reflective messages to Casey and Menzies, Spender conveyed a sense of Washington policymakers as different from the British for their inclination to see relationships as a package that should not be unpicked into different policy areas: 'The United States official', wrote Spender, 'is not as inclined as his United Kingdom counterpart to draw a firm line between political and economic co-operation and regard as friendly those countries that co-operate politically even though they will not co-operate economically'.⁴⁴

40 *Washington Post*, 1 June 1955, Spender Papers, Newscuttings Album, MS4875/33, NLA, Canberra.

41 Hank Fort, lyrics for 'Put your shoes on, Lucy'.

42 Jean Spender, Unpublished manuscript of Ambassador's Wife, pp. 337–38.

43 *Akron Beacon Journal*, 5 October 1953, p. 1.

44 Spender to Menzies, 29 April 1952, letter, Spender Papers, item MS4975, box 1, folder 3, NLA, Canberra.

Insider

Spender used the information gathered from his networks to try to intervene in policy discussions at the most propitious time. His drafting of his own version of what was to become SEATO followed his being tipped off that his friend in the State Department, Herman Phleger, was about to draw up the first US draft of the treaty. Spender handed his copy to Under Secretary of State Walter Bedell Smith, and members of the British, New Zealand and Canadian High Commissions, and only then told Casey what he had done.⁴⁵ Timing was, of course, everything, and on this occasion it resulted in Casey's annotating some heavily inked question marks on the letter informing him, post-hoc, of these events. Near this time, Spender also wrote one his most strident pleas for Canberra to fall in behind American defence policy for Southeast Asia, and to internationalise the crisis in Indochina in 1954 in a manner that might lead to military support for the French. As noted above, he argued that to have the US committed in Southeast Asia was a primary goal of Australian foreign policy, and to forego the opportunity to facilitate this was, he implied, madness.⁴⁶ Significantly, this message came after some long hours spent down the road at the house of John Foster Dulles.

Arguably, Spender became somewhat seduced by the notion that talking to the right people at the right time could make a huge difference in how Australian interests were advanced. He seemed to live with a feeling that the window for Australian influence was small and usually took the form of unscripted, informal encounters; if you missed your chance then you were destined to be swept to one side as old patterns of behaviour dictated how US foreign policy would unfold. At the height of to-ing and fro-ing with Canberra over American thinking about Indochina after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, Spender set out his expectations thus:

Whether the question be how any settlement in Indo China is to be effectively guaranteed – or in the absence of any settlement – what can and should we do either by way of assistance to the French, etc. or by way of general security arrangements in South East Asia – these are all questions which must in the end be settled by careful and I fear long consultation between at least ten powers. If we delay such a consultation too long the capacity of Australia – since it is not a party to Indo China

45 Spender to Casey, 12 June 1954, letter, Casey Desk Papers, DFAT, Canberra.

46 Spender to Casey, 6 April 1954, cablegram no. 326, CRS A5462/1 item 2/4/1 part 2, NAA, Canberra.

discussions – to influence events which can and will bear seriously upon its destiny will I fear diminish, since US thinking one way or another is likely in the meantime, by however tortuous processes, to crystallize.⁴⁷

He finished this cable to Casey by suggesting that Australians had played a big role in ensuring that the Americans had become fully seized of the security importance of Southeast Asia, and it ill behoved Australians now to let the Americans down by appearing to be unwilling to pull their weight.⁴⁸ Any ambassador walks a fine line when they allude to a certain ‘insider’ status among leading policymakers of the country in which they are based. Spender’s references to private meetings with Dulles, to consulting with him in Dulles’ home and to having access to ‘very private information’⁴⁹ seemed to cross a line with Menzies, in particular, who began to find it hard, in Spender’s communications, to distinguish between Spender’s thoughts and those of Dulles.

It is not suggested here that Spender is best understood by his ‘going native’, a fate sometimes imagined of long-term overseas representatives. Indeed, Sir Percy Spender derived a lot of his cache and even a little mystique from his hybrid identity as a part of the British world but something more exciting than your general Britisher. And his strident Australian nationalism, often manifest in diplomatic exchanges at the expense of the British, was well-noted. He wanted to be an insider, become a club member, more than going native, and he could not mask this in his communications with Canberra. In the latter half of his tenure he would boast about the ‘purely personal basis’ upon which he was given information, or upon which US delegates had helped him muster support against the Indonesians in General Assembly voting on West New Guinea.⁵⁰ It is not that the personally provided, in-confidence information was something flowing only to Spender. It is very likely that other Australian representatives overseas prided themselves on special connections that gave them privileged insights; but for Spender it took on an elevated importance.

47 Spender to Casey, cablegram, TS no. 551, CRS A5462/1 item 2/4/1 part 4, NAA, Canberra.

48 Ibid.

49 Spender to Menzies and Casey, 6 June 1954, cablegram no. 568, CRS A5462/1 item 2/4/1 part 4, NAA, Canberra.

50 Spender to Casey, 14 December 1955, Ministerial Despatch no. 3/55, CRS A4321/2 UN 1955, NAA, Canberra.

Spender was widely seen as fitting into the Washington diplomatic scene very readily. A little over a year after his arrival, British journalist Kenneth Harris wrote that 'Of the 70 or so ambassadors who are stationed in Washington, the one who has made the widest and most agreeable impact upon the American people is Spender'.⁵¹ Another journalist, Australian Peter Hastings, who admired Spender, wrote at the end of 1953 of Spender's popularity in Washington; his more relaxed manner and ready wit being well-attuned to after-dinner speeches, his connections to the Dulles brothers clearly a good thing; and his thirst for hard work much admired.⁵²

The Washington 'scene' suited Spender's temperament. He enjoyed the sporting aspects of country clubs, including tennis with his wife and sons at Chevy Chase and at other clubs when visiting outside Washington. The Louisville *Courier-Journal*, for example, reports on a game between the Spenders and Walter Lippmann and his wife in 1955.⁵³ In her memoir, Jean comments several times on her fascination or intrigue at the formality of summer houses and country clubs, and the wealth and privilege attached to them.⁵⁴ She recalled visiting the Lippmanns' retreat in Bar Harbor, Maine, and learning that when a property had come on to the market, neighbours had rushed to ensure it was purchased – for one dollar – by someone suitable, rather than allowing the market to decide. In this case, the Ambassador for Luxembourg was successfully encouraged to buy.⁵⁵

As was suggested in Jean's description, Percy was similarly most likely taken aback at this. He had, in earlier days, decried the closed membership shops of clubs such as the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron and Royal Sydney Golf Club, but he had also worked hard to ascend in social circles.⁵⁶ He loved testing himself against others and remained keen to impress. Washington society, as sketched by both C Wright Mills and more admiring commentators, was the perfect testing ground.

51 Quoted in *Daily Mirror*, 13 October 1952, Spender Papers, Newscuttings Album, MS4875/30, NLA, Canberra.

52 *Sunday Telegraph*, 13 December 1953, CRS A5954/1 item 77/5, NAA, Canberra.

53 *Courier-Journal*, Louisville, 22 July 1955, Spender papers, Newscuttings Album, MS 4875/33, NLA, Canberra.

54 Jean Spender, *Ambassador's Wife*, pp. 41, 60.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

56 Lowe, *Australian Between Empires*, p. 28.

Conclusion

The character of Percy Spender of course adds a special dimension to his wanting to be a member of the most important club – the policymaking elite club – in Washington, and his determination not to be left on the outer. He arrived in Washington saying that this was where the most important decisions affecting the international community would be made, and he set about trying to work his way into the groups of policy influencers who mattered the most. He also arrived with a capacity to shape the parameters of his ambassadorial activities that was unprecedented and has not been matched since. For a growing embassy, his determination not to be left out of clubs and networks that mattered was a boon; for the Ambassador himself, it was a goal destined to produce both good results and some frustration, as the ‘power elite’ set boundaries around its otherwise warm embrace of a gregarious and sharp Australian. From Canberra’s point of view, Spender must have seemed the right man for Cold War diplomacy in a growing, volatile national security state centred on the US capital, even as he reached the limits of his influence both in Washington and in Canberra.

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