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Introduction

Andrew Carr and Sita Sargeant

> You can't depend on your judgment when your imagination is out of focus.
>
> —Mark Twain

The purpose of this book is to explore the concept of strategic imagination and, through it, to honour the person who developed it, Brendan Sargeant. Strategic imagination is an unusual intellectual conjunction. It unites the world of strategy, which prides itself on pragmatism and hard-headedness, with the world of imagination, which is often associated with an aesthetic, enlightened sensitivity.

To Brendan, a defence intellectual in the richest sense of that term, the union made perfect sense. Where strategy is the world of experience and action, imagination offers frameworks in which experience is reconciled with identity and history. These ideas create the contours for action to be developed and applied to the world. Each relies on the other and, given humanity's inherent desire to gather and tell stories about who we are and how we want to engage with the world, our societies cannot help but develop a strategic imagination. As Brendan observed in a 2021 paper outlining the concept:

> [A] country does not exist without the people who have created it out of their actions, stories, desires, and their sense of who they are and where they belong. A country will possess a strategic imagination which will have evolved over time in response to the influence of geography, history, culture, and the many other tangible

> and intangible forces that go to create a community and its vision of itself. A country's strategic imagination is a living thing, dynamic and evolving in contact with the world, and full of contradictions.[1]

At the time of his unexpected passing in February 2022, Brendan was working on a manuscript-length study of strategic imagination. The introduction to that study is published here for the first time, as Chapter 2 of this volume. He saw this as urgent work if the world was to grapple with the historic shifts under way, in both the political order and the biophysical environment. In this book, *Strategic Imagination: Essays in Honour of Brendan Sargeant*, the authors have come together to tell their own stories about Brendan and to complete his project.

Together, we seek to provide an academic foundation for the idea of strategic imagination. While many of us see great merit in the idea, our intention is to propose rather than assert, to open it to the debate and disagreement that all academic concepts must rightly face if they are to enter common use. Many chapters are written by those who worked with Brendan, wanting to offer reflections on how he thought about and engaged with the world. Other authors contributed despite never meeting him, recognising in his concept of strategic imagination the gem of a new idea for interpreting the world.

The imagination of a strategist

Brendan, the administrator, engaged with the world before him, while Brendan, the reader and writer, engaged with the world that could be. His concept of strategic imagination emerged from a life at the borders of practical experience and creative pursuit. Brendan often said he was drawn to borders because they were where the new was born. You only had to look at regions like South-East Asia and north-east India to witness the conversation that occurs when two distinct cultures and histories meet. Borders are places of creativity, imagination and growth. They were places where Brendan could not help but find himself.

1 Brendan Sargeant, *Challenges to the Australian Strategic Imagination*, Centre of Gravity Series Papers 58 (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University, 2021), 5, hdl.handle.net/1885/233085, sdsc.bellschool.anu.edu.au/experts-publications/publications/8022/centre-gravity-series-challenges-australian-strategic.

For much of his life, Brendan worked as a bureaucrat in the Australian Public Service, authoring many significant strategy and policy documents, some publicly available but most still classified. After long days in the office and dinner with his family, he would sit at his desk, exploring and creating new worlds late into the night. Driven by a genuine interest in everything, he hardly discriminated in what he read or wrote. At the time of his death, his personal library contained more than 18,000 books. Brendan claimed to have read about one-third of them, saying he would read the rest in his retirement, though he knew he would never read them all.

Working with near-graphomaniacal intensity, Brendan produced thousands of poems, short stories, essays and novels. He completed two master's degrees: one in literature, with a thesis on the poetry of William Blake and William Wordsworth, and another in creative writing, during which he wrote a children's novel set in India. He also maintained a daily journal—a practice he began in his early thirties. All this he achieved while raising a family and working full-time in increasingly senior roles. Brendan's contributions to both worlds would have filled many lifetimes.

When Brendan was 18, he moved from Melbourne to Sydney to live in a derelict share house in Kings Cross with artists and screenwriters. He was determined to pursue a creative life, but, like many young people before and after him, he soon realised that life in Sydney was not cheap. Broke and finding the dole insufficient, he began working part-time as a bank teller. This income covered rent, cigarettes and, most importantly, books. He spent all his spare time exploring the city on foot, working on his first novel and reading everything he could get his hands on. During these years, he read many classics and fell in love with literary theory and criticism. While Brendan was never a quick reader, he was a close one, reading and rereading sentences until he fully understood their meaning. The beginnings of the canon from which he would draw for the rest of his life, particularly when it came to informing and inspiring his approach to policy and strategy, were being formed.

After a few years of working in various jobs and trying to make it as a writer, Brendan decided to go to university. He studied part-time while working full-time to support his family, having learned at the age of 22 that he was going to be a parent. After finishing his degree, Brendan applied for several graduate programs in the Australian Public Service and was hired by the Department of Defence. Joining the public service was, in many ways,

a strategic choice for Brendan. He wanted a career that engaged only part of his creative capacity, wanting to preserve most of it for personal endeavours. This steered him away from academia and teaching.

From his first days at the Department of Defence, Brendan spent his spare time reading the department's historical documents: white papers, policy documents, ministerial correspondence—anything he could get his hands on. His years as a creative and his time at university had taught him the importance of understanding the broader context of his work. Despite not having previously studied defence policy or international relations, he intuitively recognised that understanding an organisation's history was key to making effective policy today. Brendan could not help but merge his new role as a public servant with his lifelong role as a creative thinker. Just as he had when he began his career as a writer, he formed a canon for the Department of Defence through close readings of its official and unofficial documents. This meant he understood on a very deep level how the department had evolved and how it articulated what it was, enabling him to write policy that built on this foundation in innovative ways. Looking through Brendan's library, you can see the different areas in which he worked reflected in the books in his collection. Whenever he entered a new area, he sought to learn as much as possible about its context and, in so doing, he added to his canon not only of Australian policy but also of literature.

With each passing year, the worlds of the writer and the bureaucrat became increasingly intertwined. Events in one world shaped his experiences in the other. Always on the hunt for a good story, Brendan took inspiration from the world around him, carrying a pocket-sized notebook and fountain pen wherever he went. He stained more than a few shirt pockets with fountain pen ink. Everyone had at least one great story to tell, and he wanted to hear it. He would reshare his favourites—perhaps, as his family would say, a few too many times—over the dinner table and with friends. Those who knew him best had probably heard these stories so often that they felt they had experienced them themselves. Brendan loved nothing more than reading or hearing and then subsequently sharing a great story.

In many of Brendan's poems and short stories, he referenced the life of the administrator. In one of his unpublished novels, 'The Great Library', the librarian is responsible for maintaining and organising the library but not questioning its existence or interpreting its contents. At one point in the novel, the librarian shares a story about another librarian who left the library

searching for a book that held the inner consciousness of the universe. However, he quickly dismisses this as something he would not do and says, 'Of course, I do not engage in such speculation. As a practical administrator, I have my hands full with the world before me, including this Library.' The librarian spends his time overseeing the library, not imagining what could be; that is a task left to others. The role of an administrator was to focus on the practical aspects of managing the everyday rather than getting caught up in the more philosophical or interpretative aspects. Sometimes, Brendan's writing was pure imagination, but often you could find the world he experienced reflected in his work. Neither world existed in isolation. His writing, both for the public service and in his creative life, reflected a life straddling the borders of two worlds.

While the chapters in this book speak to Brendan's concept of strategic imagination, two great works were growing in his mind: the idea of strategic imagination and an Australian epic that would reflect all he had learned over the years. This epic novel had been building in his mind for at least a decade, but he had only begun seriously working on it in the months after he retired from the public service. It would engage with the Australian landscape and national identity and dive into the broader history of our region and a connected Australia. This was going to be the novel that truly delved into and explored many of the ideas he had spent decades thinking of while in the public service. The novel would explore his ideas in a way that only a creative piece can. Brendan would speak about his idea of strategic imagination and this unwritten novel with the same passion.

For Brendan, it was never enough to read or see something; it had to become something—whether a piece of writing or a conversation. As a result, he had more ideas than he knew what to do with. Regardless of when he died, his life would always be unfinished. His love of sharing, whether through poems, stories or book recommendations, is what many remember him for. It is what made him an excellent teacher. Brendan left the public service in 2018 and a few months later joined The Australian National University. For someone like Brendan, academia made a lot of sense and, if he had not valued his creative life as much as he did, it is a path he might have taken at a younger age. At The Australian National University, Brendan once again found himself at the intersection of two worlds. However, this time, he had shifted his focus from primarily living in the world of practical experience to living in the world of the in-between. He spent more time than ever actively working in the borderlands, using his experiences of both worlds to create something new that others could access. Brendan was working to become

a more official bridge between these two worlds. His unique perspective allowed him to step outside each world and see it as both an outsider and an insider. Brendan had this exceptional ability to make his way of seeing accessible to everyone. He had a gift for clarifying complex concepts, making even the most esoteric topics clear and easy to understand. When Brendan explained them, they just made sense.

Through his concept of strategic imagination, Brendan takes us to the borderlands of two worlds. He shows us the power that comes from such a life. He challenges us to see beyond our expectations and perceptions and to envision new possibilities. With his concept of strategic imagination, Brendan has provided us with a way of viewing the world as he did naturally, distilling his innate approach into a framework accessible to all.

Structure of the book

While most books reflect their author, we are hopeful this book will reflect its subject. There is a deliberate eclecticism to the content and approach of this book. In disciplinary terms, our authors have backgrounds in history, strategic studies, policymaking, aesthetics, law and complexity science. Many of the contributors have worked as academics, some have been policy officials and a few have crossed between these lines, as did Brendan.

To properly think through the concept of strategic imagination, the book is divided into three sections. In section one, authors were asked to think about the *concept* of strategic imagination. Why is it necessary and how should it be understood? In section two, authors apply the *practice* of strategic imagination. How can different ways of viewing strategy and imagination improve analysis and clarity for policy choices? Finally, in section three, SDSC staff offer a series of remembrances of Brendan. What was he like as a colleague and friend, and how did he seek to view the world? The last word, then, fittingly, goes to Brendan, in a speech he gave at the fiftieth anniversary dinner for SDSC in 2016. Brendan took as his theme the novel *The Plains* by Australian author Gerald Murnane. In this text, a young filmmaker tries to move to 'interior Australia', seeking endlessly to 'see what was worth seeing'.

That struggle to see clearly, to go beyond impressions to the truer core, is a fitting way to understand the concept of strategic imagination and the mindset needed to utilise it. Across the concept, practice and remembrance

sections, a common theme is that strategic imagination encourages us to seek fresh ways of viewing situations, looking out for what is new or unusual to see more clearly what is meaningful in a situation. We hope this book will inspire current and subsequent generations of scholars and practitioners to engage with the concept of strategic imagination. There are many topics that are ripe for consideration under the strategic imagination framework that we did not have space to address. Climate change, for instance, may require fundamentally new forms of relations between humanity and its habitat, along with bold efforts to think through the various scenarios and prepare our societies adequately. Artificial intelligence is another subject that challenges our wish for a comfortable world that slowly evolves, rather than occasionally revolts and shakes as new eras are born. Strategic imagination is a tool for thinking through such challenges and the way in which our societies may better approach them. This book offers a starting point for others to explore its merits, grapple with its challenges and hopefully use it as a bridge to reach a better world.

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