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## Strategic Studies in Australia

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*This essay was previously published in the 40th anniversary edition. It is reprinted here in its near original format.*

Having had the pleasure of reading the chapter by Tom Millar, I endorse every word of it, and congratulate him upon it. Perhaps I can add a few footnotes before I say something of our original hopes for the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (SDSC) and the climate of opinion within which it was established.

First I want to claim just a little credit for myself. I do not think Millar knows that it was I who told Australian Institute of Political Science (AIPS) President Arthur Lowndes to ask Millar to provide that groundbreaking paper at the 1964 summer school. In that paper, Millar says he was 'singularly ill-informed on defence questions', but there was no doubt in my mind that he was better informed than any other academic in Australia at the time; we had had various informal conversations about military matters, and I was greatly impressed by the acuteness of what he had to say.

The paper itself was a triumph. When it was over, and the cheering and clapping in the Albert Hall were at their height, I remember turning to the person next to me, and saying gleefully, 'It worked!' He or she did not know what had worked, but nodded kindly and said, 'Yes, it must have'.

That paper by Millar led, in a way, to the establishment of the Centre two years later. As Director of the Research School of Pacific Studies (RSPacS), Sir John Crawford was delighted that we had a staff member who could not only talk sensibly and constructively about defence, but who could also excite public interest and maintain it at a high level. When Crawford and I began to talk about the possibility of a Centre, it was a plus point that we already had someone around whom it could be built.

Now let me say something about the climate of opinion in which the idea of the Centre originated. If I may put it in personal terms, when I came back to Australia towards the end of 1962 after 10 years in England, I was appalled at the lack of contact between academics and officials in such fields as defence and foreign affairs, and by the surly and often bloody-minded approach of the governing politicians towards the opinions of those academics who did express themselves in public. It was true, as Millar has pointed out, that much of such comment was from a left-wing standpoint; but that did not excuse the malignity of the political reactions. In England I had become accustomed to public affairs being discussed vehemently but courteously; I had taken part in radio discussions at Chatham House in which people had hit hard but had preserved their tolerance; I had been an active participant in the debate over Suez and had got some hard knocks in exchange, but had lost no contacts as a result. What I found here was a situation in which some academics and the government were making hysterical noises about that paper tiger, the South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), as if it mattered; in which the university had been convulsed over whether it should award an honorary degree to the King of Thailand; and in which historian C.P. Fitzgerald was still being persecuted, as he had been when I left the country in 1952, over his belief that Australia should recognise communist China.

There seemed to me to be a need for two particular areas of study. On the one hand, there was the strategic situation that affected Australia (one which, contrary to the opinions of many others in Canberra, I believed encompassed the global strategic confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, and not just the state of things in South-East Asia). On the other hand, there was the problem of communism as a worldwide phenomenon: how different was it from country to country, in what ways could it be regarded as a threat to Australia, how did it affect our alliances and connections,

and what we should do about it. I hoped we could build something around Harry Rigby to extend this kind of study but, by the time I got back from the study leave that Millar mentions in his chapter, Rigby had been, legitimately, snapped up by the Political Science Department in the Research School of Social Sciences, where he pursued a distinguished career.

I do not want to claim too much prescience for these two notions; they both grew out of the situation at the time. Australia had worked itself into a state of mind in which any presence of communism could precipitate a military intervention as in Korea and Malaysia, and later against Indonesia and in Vietnam. The military establishment, having operated continuously abroad since 1939, was committed to 'forward defence', both out of custom and because of any knee-jerk response by politicians to whatever they were told by British and American intelligence was an imminent communist threat. The problems were compounded by the often childish and bitter reactions of the left wing in Australia to any American policy in Asia.

As Millar has mentioned in his chapter, a means that I hoped would relieve tensions between academics and officials was the 'Third Monday Club', which, if memory serves me, we began some time in 1963. I had spent a semester at Columbia University in New York before coming back to Australia, and had been much impressed by a program called the Columbia Seminars, which consisted of monthly dinner meetings at which academics, officials, journalists and businessmen met to consider some subject of public importance. Debate was free, confidentiality was preserved, the standard of membership was high, and the whole operation seemed to foster better understanding between the kinds of people involved.

If I were to reproduce the Columbia Seminars in Canberra in respect of external policy, it was necessary to have firm bases on both the academic and official sides. Here I was fortunate in having the continuing support of Crawford on the one hand and External Affairs Secretary Sir Arthur Tange on the other. Crawford was an academic before he was a public servant, and never forgot it, while Tange was an academic *manqué*. After discussions with both of them, it became clear that having journalists at the meetings would be too risky, given the general governmental suspicion of them, and that businessmen were not to be found in Canberra — not of any consequence, at all events.

What we finished with was an equal number of academics from The Australian National University (ANU) and of officials (drawn from External Affairs (as it was then), Treasury, Trade, Defence, and Immigration). The officials were from the top levels. We were not going to talk solely about defence, but also about economic and political approaches to the outside world.

The Third Monday Club kept going for 10 years, which meant that it persisted throughout the Vietnam War, a traumatic period during which it might have disintegrated. It is a tribute to the changing membership that it kept going, and that none of its full and frank discussions were ever reported in the newspapers. I am sure it did much to reconcile officials to the idea of academic integrity.

I have talked about the Third Monday Club at some length because I think it was relevant to the success of the Centre when that was established. By that time the ANU and governmental people involved had got to know each other (sometimes on very friendly terms) and were at ease in each other's company, which was a help when we came to set up something that Australia had not seen before — an academic body that would try to be objective about the uses to which our Defence money was put, and the kind of world in which those uses might, or might not, be applied.

Why was it important to establish such a Centre? I think Millar has covered that effectively in his chapter. Defence was still a sanctum sanctorum. The forces had been kept under effective civilian control for a long time, but it had been, in effect, the result of an implied agreement between civilians and the military that the public need not be informed of what was going on, and that the air of public debate should be filled instead with windy rhetoric about China. We did not know then it was windy rhetoric; there was indeed some evidence that, by implication, suggested there might be something in it. But the upshot was that defence itself was discussed only perfunctorily in parliament, and that the major issue of nuclear warfare was hardly discussed at all. There were people in Australia — nuclear physicist Ernest Titterton and chemical engineer Philip Baxter foremost amongst them — who wanted us to produce nuclear weapons; the issue was rarely discussed in public, and there was an urgent need that it should be. The question of forward defence was so bound up

with that of the American alliance that a rational examination of it was hardly possible. In all, there was a great need for an institution that would give these questions a proper scrutiny.

Now let me say how much SDSC owed to Crawford. Crawford was a complex man (as I tried to show in the book that Lloyd Evans and I edited about him)<sup>1</sup> who (as Millar noted at the SDSC's 25th anniversary conference) 'never quite left the public service, psychologically'. But he did believe in open discussion, and he did have a personal interest in defence policy. In ways that he hinted at, but which I never pinned down, he had been associated with defence and intelligence questions when he was a permanent head. I think, though I cannot swear to this, that it had made him sceptical of intelligence assessments, and he was convinced that in this field, as in assessments of economic policy, there should be independent voices. His support in establishing SDSC was invaluable. Before he became director of RSPacS, he had established a relationship with the Ford Foundation, and it was on Ford money that the Centre was initially set up. By the time Bob O'Neill came to request general university funding for the Centre, the Ford Foundation money was running out, but it was clear by then that SDSC had filled a need and was an academic success. Besides, there was no one equal to O'Neill with a grant application.

Next let me pay a tribute to the successive heads of the Centre. When Millar began, he had very little to go on, apart from the experiences of the other similar bodies that he had visited overseas. I had some knowledge of two of these — the Institute of War and Peace Studies at Columbia University (where I had had many talks with Bill Fox) and the Institute for Strategic Studies (ISS) in London (where I was friends with Alastair Buchan) — and I could see that neither pattern would exactly fit the needs of the Canberra situation. It was a remarkable achievement on Millar's part to make his conception of the Centre agreeable to university opinion in Canberra: here was something new, untried, vaguely open to the charge of militarism, and lacking in precedent.

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1 L.T. Evans & J.C.B. Miller (eds), *Policy and Practice: Essays in Honour of Sir John Crawford* (Canberra: ANU, 1987).

Looking back, I can say that it greatly benefited the Centre that its first two heads had professional military experience. If either Millar or O'Neill had been solely academic in background, the credibility of SDSC, especially in military quarters, would have been much slighter. As it was, these men could not be ignored. General Sir John Wilton told me that when O'Neill went into academic life, Australia lost a future chief of the general staff; but did it matter? Instead of aspiring to what is sometimes an honorific position, O'Neill proved to be a wise, creative and forceful head of SDSC, someone who guided it into the waters that it commands now; and his subsequent career showed how right the decision had been to ask him to head the Centre.

When we moved to Des Ball as head, SDSC, as it were, took up a position of independence within ANU. Before that, it had been an advantage that the head was also a member of the Department of International Relations. In particular, during O'Neill's long period as head, it was worthwhile to combine the forces of the two entities, and for the head of International Relations — usually me — to lobby intensively for increases in resources for SDSC. I could also be brought out, like an ancient howitzer, to throw a shot at the Department of Defence if it was proving difficult. But those days are past — except, I hope, in less formal but no less intensive forms. The Centre now stands proudly on its own feet.

Let me also mention the influence of Hedley Bull upon the development of SDSC. Bull was joint head with me of International Relations from 1967 to 1977. As such, he had a great deal to do with the Centre. He supported it wholeheartedly — though there were moments when he and O'Neill were in dispute over the respective spheres of SDSC and International Relations. What Bull brought especially to the Centre — and what Millar, O'Neill and Ball have all brought in their separate ways — was making it a significant part of the worldwide network of institutions concerned with strategic studies. His reputation in this field was substantial. As the author of *The Control of the Arms Race* in 1961,<sup>2</sup> and as one of the founders of ISS, he was known in the United States, Britain and Europe. If he said the Centre was worthwhile, people believed him; and that is what he said.

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2 Hedley Bull, *The Control of the Arms Race: Disarmament and Arms Control in the Missile Age* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1961).

A summary of my thoughts about the establishment and progress of SDSC would go something like this: SDSC arose from a combination of the thinking of such people as Crawford, Millar and myself with the kindly assistance of the Ford Foundation; it has been fortunate in being guided by men of integrity, scholarship and shrewdness; the establishment owed much to the temper of the times, in which questions of strategy and defence had been either heavily professional or a political football; it gained something from overseas examples but developed very much as an indigenous enterprise; and it benefited greatly from successive directors of RSPacS — not only Crawford, but also Oskar Spate and Wang Gungwu and their successors. One can also say that the rise of the Centre occurred at a time when the impact of the social sciences on public policy was greater than in any previous period of Australian history. We now have more intelligent discussion of Australian defence policy in the newspapers — I exempt the odious medium of television — than ever before, and also of economic and social policy. This is a more thinking Australia than throughout the 1950s and 1960s; in that sense, SDSC has been part of a general movement towards more effective and more open discussion of policy than I grew up with.

To say that SDSC has been part of a general movement is in no way to diminish its achievement. It simply means that it caught the wave that applied to it, and rode it triumphantly to the beach. You will not find many other examples of academic bodies that have affected public policy and raised the level of public discussion to the same extent. We have here a remarkable academic development that has not just affected public policy in the sense of putting forward views on Australian defence that challenged established nostrums, but has also, through the research techniques of Ball, helped to undermine the childish and ineffectual secrecy that was so characteristic of Australian governments, partly because of its own protective carapace, and partly because of its being in thrall to British and American intelligence.

Let me now, in conclusion, say something about where strategic studies might be going, here and elsewhere. I have been little more than an observer of their development; seven weeks as an officers' barman in World War II hardly qualified me as a participant, and I never acquired either the background or the language of the strategists. But an onlooker sees some of the game; so I can perhaps venture a few ideas.

Strategic studies shares with certain other cross-disciplinary areas — such as women's studies, media studies, cultural studies, and criminology — the academic problem of not belonging directly to a particular traditional discipline. It also shares the problem (if it is a problem) of being policy-oriented. The first of these is mainly a career problem, the second a political one.

In academic terms, the difficulty inherent in cross-disciplinary studies is that, unless they grow rapidly and spread across the university scene at large, careers within them offer little hope of promotion, and the difficulty of finding careers within the conventional disciplines becomes greater. So far in Australia this difficulty has not been acute. The fact that, for most of its history, SDSC's graduate students were formally enrolled in the Department of International Relations meant that they could get teaching jobs under that heading; and indeed there was so much overlap between the two that this was good for both of them. Ball came up that way. Perhaps, as strategic studies becomes more specialised and moves away from the dominantly political element in international relations, there may be problems — and perhaps not. I am not trying to lay down any law, but am merely speculating.

The policy-orientation issue is inherent in strategic studies as such, since strategy is policy, defence is policy, and very little can be said on either that does not, or does not seem to, criticise or commend particular government policies. Even putting forward an alternative policy is to imply that the existing one may be no good. SDSC seems to me to have met this problem fairly and effectively. Successive heads have seen the need to get to know the right people, to achieve mutual trust with them, to be honest in telling them what is proposed and how it will be effected, and to involve them wherever practicable in the Centre's affairs. At the same time, SDSC has preserved a reputation as a non-partisan, informed and honourable source of comment on policy. This continued under Paul Dibb's leadership.

So far as strategic studies as a subject or discipline is (or are) concerned, I see a continuing future, if only because of changes in technology. We are not going to see many, if any, reductions in the number of sovereign states, and industry will keep on inventing new weapons and new ancillary means to make them effective. The Gulf War of 1990–91 made us all aware of the enormous advances in weaponry over previous wars; it showed us how a state can remain viable, even



under the impact of the new weapons, and how contradictory and yet potentially dangerous can be the weaponry of a relatively small Third World country — especially if it has oil revenues or their equivalent.

I do not believe that the end of the Cold War will lessen the need for strategic studies, though it is true that it was largely the possession of nuclear weapons by the superpowers that provided the impetus for the discipline in the 1950s and 1960s. There will still be substantial military forces at the disposal of the great and major powers; there will be disturbances in the Middle East and the Balkans, often involving outside powers; there is still the possibility of confusion and even conflict in East Asia; and there is the permanent instability of Africa. There will continue to be conundrums such as we see in Fiji and Sri Lanka, where external military intervention may seem to some countries and even local politicians to be a solution to communal discord. There will be plenty to study.

I hope the studies will not become too narrowly specialised or too mathematical. War is one of the most complex and uncertain activities in which human beings engage. It involves science, technology, manpower, professionalism, economics, social change, and often the most intense forms of politics. Its outcome has rarely been predictable. Its avoidance involves diplomacy and luck. To see it as a whole — whether it is happening or being avoided or simply prepared for — requires various kinds of expertise. I hope they will all thrive within SDSC.

Finally, allow me to say how glad I am to have been associated with SDSC, if only in peripheral ways. ANU has had varying fortunes with centres and units; none has been more successful than this. Wisely and smoothly managed by Tom Millar, Bob O'Neill, Des Ball and Paul Dibb; with the benevolent efficiency of Jol Langtry; with a great many contacts abroad; with the cooperation of far-sighted people in government; this has been a model enterprise. Long may it flourish!

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