

Reflections of a Defence Intellectual

Desmond Ball

Intellectuals, as Karl Mannheim explained, tend to have special difficulties separating their work and domestic domains. Thinking does not stop at home in the evenings or at weekends; many of the Coombs Building's researchers do most of their writing in their studies at home. Conversely, the university provides a social and cultural environment for personal activities. Over time, the 'office' becomes as much a part of life as the residential address; together they shape the intellectual product.

I have worked and lived in the Coombs Building in a series of capacities, from PhD student to Professor and Head of Centre. I even had a short stint as a research assistant, in 1967–68, at the end of my Economics degree, when I worked for Sir John Crawford on Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation. I was a PhD student in the Department of International Relations in 1969–72, where I relished the supervision of Hedley Bull, Geoffrey Jukes and Arthur Burns. Hedley was brilliant, but he could also be paternalistic and arrogant. When I went to the United States on my first fieldwork in 1970 he arranged for my stipend to include funds for me to buy a suit and a new pair of shoes for wearing when I conducted interviews. He could be devastating in seminars, puffing on his pipe between acerbic comments. At a conference on Australian defence policy, he intervened in a heated discussion about alternative defence planning methodologies to dismissively opine that the whole subject was a waste of time; there were many more momentous issues in the world warranting academic inquiry than defending Australia. He did not really believe this, and in fact wrote several articles about Australian defence, but he enjoyed sniping.

I also relished the companionship of Nancy Viviani, Robyn Lim, Kevin Foley, Paul Keal, Gunther Patz, David Armstrong and others in a remarkable stable of PhD students at the time. Several of them were appointed to Chairs in the 1980s and 1990s. They were a collegially competitive lot, always watching closely the productivity of their compatriots, but also engaged, more I think than their successors, in seemingly continuous rounds of picnics, barbecues, drinking sessions and parties, often stretching the social conventions. These were, after all, the days of 'sex and drugs and rock-and-roll'. I began a regime of working

odd hours, sometimes sleeping in my office when writing the final drafts. In those days PhD students often had their own rooms, where they would sometimes sleep, after returning from fieldwork or while in between digs, for days or weeks. The floors were not very comfortable, but the showers in the bathrooms near the foyer were pretty good.

I joined the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (SDSC) as a Research Fellow in July 1974. The Centre had been set up by Dr T. [Tom] B. Millar, a former Australian Army officer, in 1966, when he was a Senior Fellow in the Department of International Relations, to ‘advance the study of Australian, regional, and global strategic and defence issues’. It was initially funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation, and was an independent offshoot of International Relations. It was for two decades the only academic centre concerned with strategic and defence studies in Australia. Several others were established in the late 1980s and the 1990s, but SDSC has remained pre-eminent in terms of international reputation and research productivity. Tom later became Professor of Australian Studies and Head of the Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London (1985–90).



Desmond Ball with former US President Jimmy Carter

The Centre had been headed since 1971 by Robert O’Neill, who had also been an Army officer and who was also a Senior Fellow in International Relations. He presided over the Centre’s expansion and rise to international recognition. In

1974 he secured financial support from the Department of Defence for two Research Fellow/Senior Research Fellow posts, and was later able to move the Centre into the University's staffing and budgeting system and obtain 2-3 University-funded posts. Bob moved to London to head the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in 1982. He was recognised internationally for his leadership qualities, adeptness at collegiate and Foundation politics and immense personal integrity as well as his intellectual work. In 1987 he became the Chichele Professor of the History of War at All Souls College at Oxford University, where he stayed until his retirement in 2001.

I received one of the first two Defence-funded posts, beginning a relationship with Defence that we both often found uncomfortable over the ensuing years. The other post, for work on regional security issues, went to Peter Hastings, the pungent and waggish and quarrelsome journalist, who worked on political and security issues concerning Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. He enjoyed regular access to the office of the then Director of the Joint Intelligence Organisation (JIO), as well as conviviality and good wine. He married Jolika Tie, who had been our research assistant, in 1981. Two other key members of the Centre at this time, when a critical mass was being put together, were J.O. [Jol] Langtry and Billie Dalrymple. Jol, another lover of good wine, was the Centre's executive officer from August 1976 to December 1988. He was a former Army officer who had worked in JIO and Army combat development areas, whose ability to think of novel strategic and operational concepts was inspirational. Billie was the Centre's secretary from 1977 to 1989. As Bob said when she retired, Billie was the crux of a hive of activity, working unstintingly, 'with her own special flair and style, smoothing down ruffled feathers when others became agitated, cheering those under pressure and dealing with the outside world with charm and panache'.

The largest proportion of the Centre's work in the second half of the 1970s and in the 1980s concerned the defence of Australia. The Centre was at the forefront of the conceptual revolution in Australian defence policy from 'dependence on great and powerful friends' to 'greater self-reliance' and from 'forward defence' to 'defence of Australia' which occurred during this period. It contributed to the development of new ideas concerning command and control of the Australian Defence Force (ADF), such as the establishment of 'functional' command arrangements; reorganisation of the Defence portfolio, such as establishment of the Defence Council, recommended by Tom Millar; greater utilisation of the civilian infrastructure, especially in defence of Australia contingencies; greater appreciation of the challenges of lower level contingencies in northern Australia; and particular force structure issues.

Members of the Centre were credited with an influential role in the Government's decision in 1981 to acquire the F/A-18 as the RAAF's tactical fighter aircraft. Costing \$4 billion, this was the largest capital program in Australia's history, and has turned out to have been the right choice. The core people involved in this work on Australian defence were Bob, Jol and myself, together with Ross Babbage, initially as a PhD student in the mid-1970s and later (1986–90) as Senior Research Fellow and Deputy Head of the Centre, but we relied greatly on a stream of Defence-funded Visiting Fellows, including mid-career ADF officers, for their operational and planning expertise.

Many of the ideas, especially those relating to northern defence, were incorporated in Paul Dibb's *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities* produced for Defence Minister Kim Beazley in 1985-86, and described by Mr Beazley as 'the most important appraisal of Australia's defence capabilities since the end of World War Two'. Paul had joined the Centre as an SRF and Deputy Head in 1984.

The field trips around northern Australia during the 1980s, using Coastwatch or RAAF aircraft, 4-wheel drive vehicles and river barges, mapping the local civil infrastructure and vital national installations, proffering novel operational concepts for northern defence, and seeing these being tested in large-scale defence exercises, were exhilarating affairs. My daughter Katherine, born in 1984, was named in part after the township 320 km south of Darwin, which we had identified as the focal point for the defence of the Top End, and where the first squadron of the new F/A-18 fighters would soon be based. One of the particular northern infrastructure projects for which we became leading proponents was construction of an Alice Springs to Darwin railway connection, and it was very pleasing to be invited to Darwin in October 2003 to see the first train come up the line.

The second large area of work in the Centre, which brought us to international attention, concerned the strategic nuclear balance between the United States and the Soviet Union. My own work focussed on the operational aspects of strategic nuclear targeting and the controllability of nuclear war, and showed that the mechanisms needed for controlling a nuclear exchange degraded rapidly after only several tens of detonations or a day or so of operations, leading inexorably to full-scale nuclear war. These were heady days, involving sojourns to underground missile silos, the warning centre under Cheyenne Mountain near Colorado Springs, the Pentagon, the United States intelligence agencies and the White House. I sat only feet away from the 1.2 Megaton nuclear warheads atop the Minuteman ICBMs at Whiteman Air Force Base, each about a thousand times more powerful than the bomb which destroyed Hiroshima in 1945. I was

in West Berlin on 9 November 1989, when the Berlin wall was demolished, watching the panicked Soviet intelligence officers based in the Soviet Consulate desperately reacting to the loss of some of their covert technical equipment.

I had become Head of the Centre in March 1984, but I was spending lengthy periods overseas, at the Centre for International Affairs at Harvard University, the RAND Corporation in Los Angeles and the IISS in London, as well as various places in Washington, D.C., and was soon having to contemplate moving to the United States. In March 1987 I was awarded a personal Chair, one of six 'special professorships' created in the Institute of Advanced Studies 'in recognition of a high international reputation for distinguished academic work'. I had really wanted to stay at the ANU, both because I much preferred living in Canberra to any major city in the United States, particularly now I was married and having children, and because of the opportunity to devote a lifetime to academic research in the Research School that the personal Chair offered.

I was honoured that, in addition to my academic referees, former United States President Jimmy Carter and former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara graciously agreed to provide references on my behalf, even though I had been one of the harshest critics of their strategic nuclear policies of 'controlled' nuclear war-fighting. Defence Minister Beazley said that my 'work on global strategic issues is acknowledged internationally as outstanding', and that: 'It has been an interesting experience as Defence Minister to hold discussions at the highest levels in the capitals of our allies and to have him cited to me as an authority (to be supported or opposed) on an array of defence matters'. He said that appointing me to a personal Chair 'would do the nation a substantial service'.

The third broad area of Centre research concerned regional security. We had a succession of 2-3 year appointments on various aspects of regional security, some of them funded by Defence and others by the University. They included Lee Ngok, Don McMillan and Denny Roy who worked on China, Paul Keal and Peter Polomka on Japan, Greg Fry and David Hegarty on the Southwest Pacific, Sandy Gordon on India and Alan Dupont on Indonesia. Their names are associated with standard reference works in their respective areas. Several of them found longer term homes in the Coombs Building.

Some of our work was intensely controversial, as befitting pathbreaking scholarship on major national and international issues. Some senior Defence and intelligence officials regarded my own work on United States installations in Australia, such as Pine Gap, with great suspicion. While I argued that it was

necessary in a democracy for the public to know the purposes and implications of these facilities, a proposition now taken for granted, Sir Arthur Tange complained that I was dangerous and irresponsible, opening up matters which 'successive American and Australian Governments have deemed it a national interest' to keep secret. It was reported in 1980 that our offices had been searched and bugged, our diaries photographed and our telephones tapped by ASIO. Surveillance of this sort probably happened on other occasions in the 1980s and 1990s.

On the other hand, we were also accused by political activists of various sorts of being agents of the 'military-industrial complex'. We had demonstrations against many of our conferences, sometimes directed at the participation of particular Ministers or overseas speakers and sometimes at our subject matter. On two occasions, hundreds of protesters tried to physically break up the proceedings, once in the Coombs Theatre in November 1989 when the subject was *New Technology: Implications for Regional and Australian Security* and the other in the Law Theatre in November 1991 on *Australia and Space*. They were misplaced affairs, given the broad and fundamental nature of the conference agendas and the reputations of the overseas participants as leading critical thinkers, and really quite insipid compared with protests against the Vietnam War or nuclear weapons that I had been involved in organising.

The working environment in the 1970s and 1980s was more relaxed and sociable. There was more time for informal discourse between colleagues from different parts of the School, and indeed the University, perhaps lubricated by good wine on the lawns of the old Staff Centre (Old Canberra House). The contemporary research projects and publications tended, as a result, to be broader and more multi-disciplinary. Books published by Centre members in the 1980s included chapters by Rhys Jones in *Prehistory*, John Chappell in *Biogeography*, Andy Mack and Trevor Findlay in the *Peace Research Centre*, Hal Hill in *Economics*, Richard Higgott in *International Relations*, and Jamie Mackie and Ron May in *Political and Social Change*. The discussions with Rhys led to one of my favourite edited books, *Aborigines in the Defence of Australia*, in which he and Betty Meehan wrote a chapter on 'The Arnhem Salient'.

By the end of the 1980s the Centre was being consistently ranked among the top 15 or 20 strategic studies centres in the world. In 1990, the Review of the Institute of Advanced Studies, chaired by Sir Ninian Stephen, cited SDSC as an illustration of 'how well parts of the Institute's research have met the goals of those who created the ANU'. The Vice-Chancellor, Professor Laurie Nichol said it 'is one of this University's major success stories'. The Governor

General, the Honourable Bill Hayden, said in 1991 that the SDSC's influence extended 'well beyond academic cloisters' and that 'this kind of interaction between scholars, policy makers and the broader community was in fact the inspiration behind the establishment of the Institute of Advanced Studies in 1946'. Defence Minister Beazley called the Centre a 'national asset'.

Paul Dibb succeeded me as Head in July 1991 and became its longest serving Head. I had become frustrated with administration, which was probably less arduous than in more recent times, but for which I was clearly unsuited. I was also anxious to spend less time wearing a suit and tie and more time fulfilling the research commission of my personal Chair. In addition to authorship of the *Dibb Review*, Paul had served as head of the National Assessments Staff (NAS) in the JIO, the forerunner of the Office of National Assessments (ONA), Director of the JIO, and Deputy Secretary of the Department of Defence responsible for strategic policy and intelligence. He had also had two previous tenures in the Coombs Building. He was a Research Fellow in the Department of Political Science in RSSH in 1967–69, and a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of International Relations in 1981–84 and then SDSC in 1984–86, where he had written the prescient study of *The Soviet Union: The Incomplete Superpower* and served as Deputy Head and oft-times Acting Head. Sir Arthur Tange said in support of his appointment that he had 'rare versatility' and that on defence policy issues 'there is none inside or outside the Defence Community better equipped at present to understand the issues in contention and the policy choices'. I might add that Sir Arthur could not resist using his reference for Paul to make some caustic remarks about myself, saying that I had evinced 'some imbalance in the choice of subjects for study', particularly concerning United States installations in Australia, and expressing relief that I would no longer be heading the Centre.

Paul's accession to the headship coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. He had to manage a wholesale transformation in the Centre's research agenda. The post-Cold War issues were more disparate and diffuse. A new core academic staff was assembled, consisting, in addition to Paul and myself, of Coral Bell, David Horner, Alan Dupont and, since 2001, Ron Huisken and Clive Williams. Coral Bell became a Visiting Fellow in SDSC in 1990. Truly indefatigable, she had been Professor of International Relations at the University of Sussex in 1972–77 and had returned to Australia to spend the next eleven years as a Senior Research Fellow in International Relations, pursuing her passion for comprehending and explaining the fundamental power dynamics of the international system. In the decade and a half with SDSC she has produced more than half a dozen insightful books and monographs, most recently *A World Out of Balance:*

American Ascendancy and International Politics in the 21st Century (2003). David Horner, a former Army officer with wide command and staff experience, is Australia's leading military historian. He joined the Centre as its executive officer in September 1990, transferred to a Fellow in 1994, and Defence-funded post of Professor of Australian Defence History in 1999. David had won the J G Crawford Prize for the best PhD in the University in 1982. Ron Huisken had been a Visiting Fellow in the Centre in 1976–77, and returned as a Senior Fellow after more than two decades in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Department of Defence, where he was responsible for arms control issues and the Australia-United States defence relationship.

About half of the Centre's work became devoted to Asia-Pacific security matters. Paul produced the classic studies of the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region and the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) in Asia, as well as the United States-Australia alliance. We developed many of the original practical proposals for regional security cooperation, a lot of which were quickly adopted by the new ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The Centre was one of the 10 regional strategic studies centres which in 1992–93 founded the Council on Security Cooperation in Asia Pacific (CSCAP), the premier 'second track' organisation in this part of the world, which now has 22 Member Committees in 22 countries (with the Australian Committee served by a secretariat in SDSC), and which through its Steering Committee meetings, Study Groups and General Conferences provides an institutionalised mechanism for continuous activity for promoting regional security cooperation.

Centre members also explicated a broader conception of security to encompass economic, environmental and other so-called 'non-traditional' threats in addition to the traditional military focus. Alan Dupont's path-breaking book, *East Asia Imperilled: Transnational Challenges to Security*, analysed over-population, deforestation and pollution, global warming, unregulated population movements, transnational crime, virulent new strains of infectious diseases and a host of other issues which could potentially destabilise East Asia. There was increasing appreciation of the importance of 'human security' as opposed to State security as reflected in some of my own work on security issues in the Thailand-Burma borderlands. Travelling in these borderlands has been fascinating, whether meeting in jungle hide-outs in with leaders of the ethnic and pro-democracy groups fighting the Burmese military dictatorship, in poorly demarcated border areas often patrolled by Burmese Army units, or talking with Thai para-military personnel and villagers about the local security concerns. On one occasion in 2003 I was going by long-tail boat up the Salween River between Thailand and Burma with one of the resistance leaders, accompanied part way by a hitch-hiking Thai Army Ranger, while another boat carried

weapons and supplies to a guerrilla base up-river and a Burmese Army battalion moved up the riverside to their camp opposite Mae Sariang district.

The Centre took some hard knocks in the 1990s, although its international reputation was not dented. It suffered from the vicissitudes of dependence on external funding from external sources, and especially the Department of Defence, which at its height at the beginning of the decade amounted to more than half of the Centre's budget. More painfully felt were cuts in the Centre's University funding and a shift in School priorities which decimated much of its work on Australian defence. It was severely damaged by the move off-campus to Acton House in 1992. This occurred partly at our instigation, as we had PhD students and Visiting Fellows spread around several buildings and were desperate to bring everyone together. In practice we found sub-standard premises and intellectual isolation. In October 1999 we moved to the Law Building, which at least had the great benefit of bringing us back onto the campus and fairly close to the Coombs Building. There was a palpable air of exuberance when we returned to Coombs in September 2004. It was a real home-coming. We were excited about the prospect of daily encounters with colleagues who we had too rarely seen; the closer interaction has already brought cooperative research initiatives and joint publications between SDSC staff and other Coombs members.

The return to Coombs coincided with other major Centre developments, producing a sense of regeneration. We have accorded a high priority to educating and training a new generation of strategic thinkers, which has involved greatly expanding our PhD program and developing a new Masters program, directed most ably by Robert Ayson, who himself did an MA in the Centre in 1988–89. Paul Dibb reached retirement age in October 2004 and became an Emeritus Professor. Hugh White was appointed Head in November 2004. He had previously been Deputy Director (Civilian) of the Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO) and Deputy Secretary of the Department of Defence (Strategy and Intelligence). He was the primary author of the Government's Defence White Paper published in 2000, and he had been the founding Director of the Defence-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) in 2001–04. He had been attracted to SDSC by our international reputation but also by the intellectual freedom enjoyed in academia and the depth and breadth of expertise about our region that avails in the Research School.

Strategic and defence studies are not popular areas of academic activity. To some critics, the study of war is macabre. Some of our former colleagues in the Coombs Building used to refer to members of SDSC as 'bomb-fondlers', not

always in jest. Work on defence planning is regarded as antithetical to the universalism of scholarship. Policy-relevant work is regarded by some as serving the interests of defence and foreign affairs bureaucracies and military establishments, and supporting State power more generally. We have been called 'prostitutes', in academic papers, by colleagues elsewhere in the University. Some critics have argued that the Centre should be moved from the University to the Department of Defence.

However, we could not do our job in the Department of Defence. Compared to the Coombs Building, we could expect more luxurious facilities and fabulous resources. But we are at heart 'defence intellectuals'. I would simply find it unbearable to work in Defence or under any direct or indirect official instruction. The majority of my colleagues in the Centre have spent large parts of their careers in the higher echelons of Defence or the intelligence agencies, but they come to SDSC because of the freedom to think and write independently, critically and objectively, untrammelled by prevailing government policies or bureaucratic interests. Strategic and defence issues are among the most vital issues of public policy; defence capabilities are also enormously expensive. They warrant intensive and rigorous scrutiny and informed public debate at least as much as health, economic, welfare, environmental or other national issues. The Centre remains the leading academic centre in Australia capable of proving this systematic scrutiny and informing debate. But we learnt the hard way that the extent to which we really excel is very dependent on our direct participation in the intellectual life of the Coombs Building.

This text taken from *The Coombs: A House of Memories*,
Edited by Brij V. Lal and Allison Ley, published 2014 by ANU eView,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.