

Silent conspirators: fascism and Fraser

Alison Broinowski

A splendid cover story by Rachel Nolan, '[Men of a Certain Age](#)' in *The Monthly* (May 2014), is illustrated with a set of creepy caricatures. All nine pale-faced figures wear dark suits, white shirts and shiny black shoes, with occasional decorations. Most are balding, some have shifty eyes and some nasty teeth and all of them are men. They are 'the Abbott club', of whom the Prime Minister, with IHS barely visible in his lapel, is the youngest. The artist [Neil Moore](#), who has recently returned to Australia after two decades in Italy, clearly knows fascist tendencies when he sees them.

Having in the past followed Umberto Eco and Lawrence Britt on [what makes a fascist state](#), I found it all coming back when I read [Paul Cannon's timely update](#). Cannon detects about half of Britt's 14 characteristics of fascism in Australia, singling out our governments' shortcomings in human rights, threat-perceptions, sexism, national security obsessions, government/corporate interactions, and suppression of organised labour. He finds some evidence of the characteristics of disproportionate defence funding and glamorisation of military service, manipulation of public opinion through media, censorship, and religious tenets.

Surprisingly, Cannon does not detect the further characteristics of excessive patriotism, disdain for intellectuals and the arts, rampant cronyism or corruption. In fact, when I first encountered Britt's list in 2006-07, I found I could [tick all but one](#) of them for Australia under Howard. Now, all 14 are present in Abbott's Australia if we accept the final one: that elections are subject to media manipulation and that recent voting results themselves may even have been manipulated.



Umberto Eco, 2006 (source: Flickr Commons; photo: Erinc Salor)

Australia may represent a special historical case. All fascist regimes and organisations have used the power of nationalism and national security as a motivator, as Australia has increasingly done. But no other country I can think of has so actively used this power to support *another nation's* militarism and to suppress perception, comment and understanding of events affecting our own foreign and defence policies.

Even a non-conspiracy theorist can see that a three-monkeys conspiracy has operated for decades. No public consultation has ever occurred when Australia has gone to war, signed treaties or bought armaments. Men (as they are) in Canberra have for years worked discreetly on keeping the United States 'involved in the region', that is, committed to the defence of Australia. They have offered up more and more troops, money, territory and sovereignty in the name of what they call 'regional stability'. No inquiries or reports have been furnished to taxpayers on the results of these efforts. None have been produced on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Neither of the major parties is interested in holding a public review of the war powers of the prime minister. Neither will acknowledge the

declining power of the United States, let alone America's unwillingness and inability to defend Australia. Such things are unmentionable.

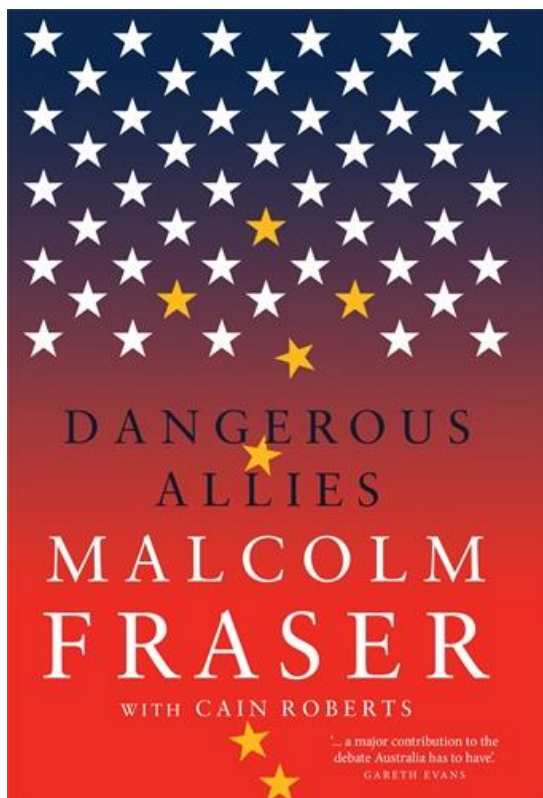
A similar near-silence now greets a radical manifesto calling for change in Australia's foreign and defence policy history. In [Dangerous Allies](#) (2014) Malcolm Fraser calls for Australia to dispense with strategic dependence on the United States, to close the shared bases within five years and to double our defence expenditure. He deplores Australia's recent military excursions, and our growing complicity in surveillance, missile capacity, drone strikes and the containment of China.

Fraser's book seems not to have inspired the public response he hoped for. Why not? Among the possibilities:

- Australians have never taken responsibility for foreign and defence policy and are [not practiced at debating it](#).
- Australians have been acculturated to believe that the ANZUS treaty guarantees the United States will defend us and to mistrust Asian countries generally and China particularly.
- Australians have found anti-war protest since 2003 to be futile.
- The media have given Fraser's book little publicity.
- Some Australians, recalling Fraser as a committed Cold War warrior and his role in the dismissal of Whitlam, mistrust his changed opinions.
- Some disagree with Fraser's continuing reliance on militarism as a means of confronting our regional neighbours.



Malcolm Fraser, 2008 (photo: Jeremy Thompson)



Hugh White's views about the decline of the United States and the need for power to be equitably shared in our region (['Power Shift', Quarterly Essay 39, 2010](#)) come the closest to Fraser's. He, too, was unable to generate the wide public discussion he wanted. When the subject of the US alliance is raised, instead of responding with parliamentary debate and public inquiry, both major parties and most of the think tanks kill it by playing dead.

They played dead in late 2013 when Edward Snowden revealed the extent of American surveillance of its own and other nations' citizens, Australia's complicity in collecting telecommunications data and sharing it with 'Five Eyes' alliance partners, and Australia's interception of Indonesian phone messages. They played dead again in December 2011 when President Obama

announced the 'pivot' to Asia in Canberra and Prime Minister Gillard revealed that US troops would begin 'rotations' through bases (that are not called bases) in Northern Australia. They played dead again in 2003 when government MPs physically prevented opposing views being expressed to President Bush inside the Australian Parliament.

Australian leaders talk glibly about sovereignty, transparency and the rule of law, but their actions demonstrate that, as these concepts apply to Australian foreign and defence policy, they are meaningless. The more secretive these policy decision-making processes, the less they can be trusted and the greater the risk of fascistic tendencies.

Malcolm Fraser's book seeks to bring about change in Australia that has been put off for more than a century. But the 2015 Defence White Paper may already be at the printer's: without a revolution in Australian opinion it is unlikely to be radically revised.

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