

Text of review provided to *Australian Book Review*; published as 'Dangerous Allies', *Australian Book Review*, no. 362, June-July 2014

## **COWED COUNTRY**

Malcolm Fraser with Cain Roberts, *Dangerous Allies*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2014

9780522862852 (hb) 360 pp

*Dr Alison Broinowski, formerly an Australian diplomat, is a member of the Coalition for an Iraq War Inquiry and the author of Howard's War (2013) and Allied and Addicted (2017).*

We used to hear the old diggers' shaky voices asking what the point of the war was, and warning the young not to go to any more. Of course Australian troops went again, but the point of World War 2, at least, was clear. Successive generations of young Australians then fought in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, against people who did not threaten us. Why? Because those were America's wars, and therefore Australia's. Cowed countries do what great powers demand, while in return great powers do what suits their own interests. But Australia must be alone among nations in actually pushing, conniving, and volunteering to fight in its allies' wars, and even to host their bases, believing in spite of evidence to the contrary that they can and will defend us.

Even before Federation, some had forebodings about what Australia was letting itself in for. H.B. Higgins, anticipating the 60 000 dead diggers, wondered if Australia would be expected 'to contribute valuable lives and money in aid of wars which may not interest us directly.' (24) Malcolm Fraser, who quotes him, puts up some equally pithy wall-poster statements of his own in this book. Some examples delineate his theme: 'Why should we expect a great power to treat a dependent nation, even if an ally, as an equal?' (30). 'The United States achieved true independence and true sovereignty whereas our sovereignty was heavily circumscribed' (24). 'We need the United States for defence, but we only need defence because of the United States' (6). The United States, he tells Bob Carr (*Diary of a Foreign Minister*, 2014) is 'good at losing wars'.

No serving Australian politician in either of the major parties dares to declare the American emperor's nakedness as forthrightly as Mr Fraser does. Gareth Evans in a preface cautions that some will find the book's conclusion 'problematic'. Other Australians, recalling Mr Fraser's staunch support of the Commonwealth and ANZUS, his proposed boycott of the Moscow Olympic Games in retaliation for the USSR invading Afghanistan, and his grab for power in 1975, marvel at the change in him. But others again, sifting the historical record more finely, remember him staring down the Americans to get a deal for military equipment, opposing apartheid, and supporting

multiculturalism. Mr Fraser, who was Minister for the Army and then for Defence during the Vietnam War, and our most Cold War warrior of prime ministers, has in recent years taken up the cause of refugees, argued against the nuclear industry, opposed Australia's invasion of Iraq, and now advocates strategic independence for Australia. His membership of the Liberal Party has become unsustainable, and he is unscathed by the personal attacks of the conservative media. Concentrating in this book on statesmen, and quoting many foreign leaders he met, his warmest praise is for H.V. Evatt and Gareth Evans, and his harshest criticism is for John Howard.

Mr Fraser slips occasionally into ascribing to all Australians the views he held during the Cold War, or even claiming that all Western people shared them. In fact, Australian support of the United States has not been unanimous at any time, nor has that of the West. In the 1960s, he claims 'Australia generally' (140) accepted the view 'common in the West' (142) that communism was monolithic. Only in 1976 on his first visit to China did it occur to Mr Fraser that nationalism was a more significant force than communism in many countries. But Australian participants in the Vietnam Moratorium already understood that, and the 'domino principle' had been derided among informed Australians since the mid-1960s. Former diplomat Gregory Clark in 1967, and two former Secretaries of Foreign Affairs, Sir Alan Watt in 1967, and Alan Renouf in 1979, wrote books in which they deplored Australia's fear of China and lack of foreign policy independence. Indeed, it was Prime Minister Fraser who deposed Renouf and sent him to Washington, where he wrote *The Frightened Country*. Renouf, even then, was outraged at the invigilation of Australian telecommunications by the United States.

Whether or not this book succeeds in bringing about a long overdue revolution in Australian defence and foreign policy will depend on how Australians respond to Mr Fraser's four fundamental propositions: that since the Cold War a single superpower has become dominant; its unchecked power has changed American polity and values in ways which now diverge from those of Australia; change and maturity in Asian countries has diminished their threat to Australia; and Australia failed to take opportunities in the 1980s and 1990s to seek a more positive presence in the region. But why only then? We missed many other opportunities: in the late 1940s, when Australia under Menzies opted for loyalty to our Western allies rather than engage with the fledgling Non-Aligned Movement; in 1954-6, when we failed to insist that elections be held to unite Vietnam; and again in 1965, when Menzies contrived a request to send troops there. In 2003, Australia could have opted out of Iraq, as Canada did, and we need not have stayed on in Afghanistan.

Mr Fraser presents three options: for Australian foreign and defence policies to continue to be subjected to the United States; to have it both ways, choosing to fight only in wars that concern us;

or to dispense with strategic dependence altogether. The challenges of choosing the third, he argues optimistically, can be met, including closing Pine Gap and the US bases in Darwin, which threaten others, make Australia a target, and implicate us in drone attacks. Australia need not abrogate ANZUS, he says, merely return to its literal meaning; nor should we leave the 'five eyes' intelligence agreement. Even if the United States retaliated by excluding us from both, he doubts that the loss to Australia would be great. A consequence of strategic independence would be increased military expenditure, which he agrees with both Canberra and Washington is necessary.

For many citizens and most political parties to opt for strategic independence, they will have to shed the invasion-fixation and the emotional dependency that, as Mr Fraser shows, have been acculturated in Australians for more than a century. Whether we want to be expensively armed against unspecified threats and for unknown purposes, while we can't afford proper social services, infrastructure, housing, and energy, will also be part of the public debate he challenges us to have. Readers who admire Mr Fraser for passionately and courageously arguing his case may still wish that instead of advocating more weaponry to threaten our neighbours, he would pursue to its logical conclusion his argument that 'a foreign army cannot impose a system of government by force' (138).

Australia in 2007 signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, under which regional nations, including since 2010 Russia and the United States, refrain from the threat or use of force and from interference in each others' affairs. By applying these principles, and implementing our own Asian Century White Paper, Australia could build more positive relations with our neighbours, and so reduce the need for defence. Instead, successive Australian governments have starved DFAT of funding and sought an increased American military presence, culminating in the offer of bases in Darwin, which they apparently hope the US would defend. Mr Fraser's call to close them will meet its first test when the 'ANZAC Centenary' Defence White Paper appears in 2015.