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**NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT: AN EMERGING
ISSUE IN AUSTRALIAN POLITICS**

by

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Organised activity around peace and war issues has had a continuous existence in Australia at least since the turn of the century, but with the exception of the anti-conscription campaign of the First World War and the opposition to the Vietnam conflict it has not had an appreciable impact on public opinion or government policy. While the nuclear issue has intermittently surfaced in public debate, notably in response to atmospheric nuclear tests in the 1950s and early 1960s and more recently in opposition to French nuclear testing in the Pacific, it is only with the emergence of plans for the large-scale commercial development of Australia's uranium deposits that the nuclear debate, in regard to both the civilian and military applications of nuclear fission, has significantly intruded into the political process.

The uranium controversy no doubt drew unprecedented attention in Australia to the twin problems of horizontal and vertical proliferation, but it is only with the rapidly deteriorating climate for arms control in the late 1970s and the advent of the Reagan Administration that widespread unease began to manifest itself in Australia as in Europe and other parts of the world. Numerous declarations by various Administration officials implying that nuclear war might be limited, winnable or survivable heightened public fears and provoked a new level of awareness about trends in strategic thinking and planning.

Rise of the Australian Disarmament Movement

As anti-nuclear rallies intensified in Europe, largely in response to the projected NATO deployment of Cruise and Pershing missiles, the Australian peace movement rapidly gained momentum. People of all ages and political persuasions became increasingly sensitive to the threat of nuclear destruction, echoing the sentiments expressed in numerous articles, books, meetings and conferences. A national conference, symbolically held in Alice Springs in April 1981, attended by delegates from more than 70 organisations, highlighted the nuclear dimension of the ANZUS relationship and set the stage for many of the demands which the peace movement would articulate with increasing sharpness in subsequent years. Its principal focus was not only the "aggressive nuclearism" of the superpowers and Reagan's emphasis on "peace through strength", but the failure of the lesser powers (Australia included) to confront the new brinkmanship with action.

A critical moment in the organisational growth of the movement was the formation of the umbrella organisation, People for Nuclear Disarmament (PND), which had its inaugural meeting in Melbourne in October 1981. In his keynote address, Patrick White issued a call that helped to galvanise the widely shared desire for common action:

If we can't look to our leaders, where can we put our faith? We, the people of the world, may hold the key to the situation ... trade unions, families, artists and intellectuals, and the most important in Australia the Aborigines ... we are in it together, all classes, all colours.

Within a matter of months more than 50 organisations had affiliated to PND in Victoria, including trade unions, professional organisations, conservation, student, church and women's groups. Within three years the PND movement had spread to all other states.

The increasingly effective attempts of the disarmament campaign to carry its message to different sections of the community, many of which had been previously untouched by, or even resistant to, its arguments and concerns, was no doubt evidence of the changing public mood. A peace directory published in 1985 containing some 350 entries ranging in size from a few to several thousand members provided some indication of the depth and diversity of the movement and of the ferment which over a five-year period had generated hundreds of new groups and organisations, most of them residentially based in suburbs and country towns. The composition of these groups was predominantly "middle-class, middle-aged and middle of the road", which is not to say that activists with a long association with the Labour Left or with causes, to which the mass media usually attach the "radical" label, did not play an influential role in the dissemination of ideas and policy formulation.

A movement as large, diverse and loosely structured as the disarmament movement inevitably encompassed a wide range of ideological preferences and tactical perspectives. Sharply divergent views existed as to the wisdom of opposing the ANZUS alliance, the priority to be attached to various local, national and international campaigns, and the usefulness of the electoral arena in projecting and mobilising support for the movement's aims and policies. Yet side by side with these and other differences, there developed within a short space of time a surprising nationwide consensus as to the principal demands to which organisational energy and resources should be directed: opposition to the introduction of nuclear weapons into Australia,

removal of all nuclear related military installations, cancellation of port-of-call and landing rights arrangements granted to nuclear armed or nuclear powered vessels and aircraft, support for the establishment of nuclear free zones in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and an end to the mining and export of Australian uranium.

Undoubtedly it has been the Palm Sunday rallies which have most effectively captured the public imagination and placed disarmament on the Australian political agenda. They were initiated in April 1982 with attendances around Australia steadily growing each year from about 100,000 in 1982 to somewhere between 300,000 and 350,000 in 1985. Mention must also be made of the more direct protests which sought to draw public attention to particular aspects of Australia's nuclear involvement by recourse either to symbolic gestures or civil disobedience or a mixture of the two. As with the trend in Europe, the early 1980s witnessed a marked increase in the number and public visibility of such protests.

By the mid-1980s Australia was experiencing the same nuclear allergy that had struck much of the Western world. What was its effect on public opinion? This is rather difficult to gauge because of the complexity of the issues involved and the absence of reliable, comparable and comprehensive opinion surveys. An Age poll conducted in 1982 to test general attitudes to nuclear weapons found that the overwhelming majority of Australians (72 per cent) were of the view that "the use of nuclear weapons can never be justified under any circumstances". This view was more prevalent among women (76 per cent) than men (68 per cent), and Labor voters (78 per cent) and Democrat voters (73 percent) than Liberal voters (66 per cent). The widespread hostility to nuclear weapons did not, however, automatically reflect itself in opposition to Australia's nuclear ties. This is hardly surprising given the long-standing cultural and ideological affinity with the United States.

Although the available evidence does *not point to any easily* quantifiable trend in public attitudes either to the alliance as a whole or to its more specific manifestations (eg bases, ship visits), it would seem that a large majority of Australians still supported the alliance, though with declining enthusiasm or conviction. An Age poll published in June 1981 found that 27 per cent thought the alliance would reduce the risk of an attack on Australia

within the next ten years, whereas 32 per cent thought it would increase the risk of such an attack (38 per cent thought the alliance would make no difference either way). Equally instructive was the finding that only 38 per cent thought an attack on Australia quite likely (31 per cent) or very likely (7 per cent), while 57 per cent thought such an attack quite unlikely (35 per cent) or very unlikely (22 per cent).

On the question of visits by American warships carrying nuclear weapons a Morgan Gallup poll conducted in June 1982 found that 47.4 per cent were in support of such visits and 43.9 per cent against. An Age poll published in October 1982 indicated that 58 per cent favoured such visits and 39 per cent opposed them, although in the 18-24 age group a clear majority (54 per cent) were in opposition. A Morgan Gallup poll of September 1984 showed 46 per cent opposition compared with 44 per cent support, and an Age poll in March 1985 showed 44 per cent against compared with 49 per cent in favour. As for visits by nuclear powered vessels, Morgan Gallup polls conducted regularly over an eight-year period showed a declining level of public support (from 62 per cent in 1976 to 44 per cent in 1984) and a corresponding increase in opposition (from 19 per cent in 1976 to 46 per cent in 1984).

Government Response

Political ferment around disarmament issues may not have fully crystallised until the mid-1980s but, as previously indicated, the uranium controversy in the mid-1970s had already contributed to a much higher level of public awareness. Community interest was clearly on the rise by the time of the United Nations First Special Session on Disarmament in 1978. The Fraser Government used this occasion to establish its disarmament credentials. In his address to the Special Session, Fraser stressed that nuclear proliferation was a matter of universal concern, that nuclear weapon states had a special responsibility in helping to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, and that international cooperation and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy had to be placed under effective safeguards. All this was said as much for domestic as for international consumption, no doubt with a view to allaying some of the anxieties generated by the proposed commercial development of Australia's uranium industry.

In his statement to the UN General Assembly in October 1978, Andrew Peacock, Minister for Foreign Affairs, once again drew attention to the SALT process, the need for a comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty and for the strengthening of the international non-proliferation regime. Here then was the trilogy of concerns that was to underpin the official Australian position to nuclear disarmament and arms control for many years to come. The Hawke Government may have pursued the policy with more vigour, brought to it several theoretical and practical refinements and endowed it with greater institutional resources, but the central ideas had been formulated during the Fraser years.

When speaking to the inaugural session of the Committee on Disarmament in Geneva in January 1979, Peacock once again pressed for a complete cessation of nuclear weapons testing in all environments and urged immediate attention to be given to the technical and operational aspects of an international seismic detection network. By 1980 Australia was beginning to express public disappointment with the lack of progress in these negotiations, foreshadowing the somewhat sharper reaction that was to become a recurring theme of foreign policy pronouncements, especially during Labor's term of office.

Although domestic considerations dominated the March 1983 election campaign, it was widely assumed that the Labor Party would, if elected, place a much higher priority on arms control and disarmament objectives than had hitherto been the case. Such expectations were in part encouraged by Hayden's public statements while Leader of the Opposition, several provisions in the ALP's federal platform, the depth of anti-nuclear sentiment within the Labor Party, and the upsurge of the disarmament campaign in much of the Western world, not least in Australia. On the other hand, Hayden's humiliating retreat on the nuclear ships issue in June 1982, the ALP's abandonment of a firm anti-uranium policy at its Federal Conference the following month, and Hawke's successful bid for the leadership of the Party on the eve of the 1983 election, to mention only a few of the more obvious signs, should have dispelled any illusion that the new Labor Government was about to initiate a radical reassessment of Australia's traditional approach to security.

Labor in government was certainly keen to project a new image by adopting a higher profile on disarmament issues and undertaking a series of initiatives as evidence of good faith. Within a year of attaining office, Labor ministers

could point to a long list of practical steps which they tirelessly enumerated to every available audience. The list usually included: the appointment of an Ambassador for Disarmament; successful sponsorship of a UN resolution for a comprehensive test ban treaty; Australian participation in UN efforts to investigate reports of alleged usage of chemical and biological weapons; support for an international convention to outlaw the use of chemical weapons and destroy existing stockpiles; opposition to any extension of the arms race into outer space; establishment of a Peace Research Centre at the Australian National University; a leading role in the establishment of a South Pacific nuclear-weapons-free-zone; and active collaboration with other countries seeking a successful review of the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1985.

To reinforce the Government's disarmament credentials Hayden announced half way through the 1984 election campaign that American and Soviet delegations would come to Australia early in the new year to hold high level discussions on disarmament and arms control. But the impression that Australia might somehow act as a bridge between the two superpowers was soon dispelled. Not only State Department officials but the American President himself made the position abundantly clear:

I think it is fair to say that we don't see a mediating role for the Australians in this issue. We are going simply to explain the American position and American interest.

The American and Soviet Governments were sending their experts, not so much to study any Australian proposals but rather to brief the Australian Government about their own negotiating positions, presumably as part of the superpower contest for psychological and diplomatic advantage in the lead-up to a new round of arms control negotiations.

The Hawke Government's approach to nuclear disarmament may best be characterised as a three-pronged strategy involving support for deterrence and opposition to nuclear strategies considered inimical to it; pressure on the nuclear weapon states to stabilise and if possible reverse the arms race; use of the influence or leverage afforded by Australia's close association with the United States although never to the point of endangering, let alone severing, any of the strategic arrangements that form part of that association. In a speech given by Senator Susan Ryan with Hayden's imprimatur, such concepts as "flexible response", "limited nuclear war", "nuclear superiority", "counterforce", "controlled escalation" were dismissed

as "nonsensical" because "once a nuclear exchange starts it (would) not be limited, controlled or flexible. It (would) rapidly become full-scale nuclear war". Here then was an excruciatingly difficult dilemma for the Labor Government: how to pursue a disarmament policy when one of its central premises appeared diametrically opposed to the current direction of US strategic planning.

In a bid to resolve that dilemma, the Government sought to instill a new sense of purpose and urgency in its advocacy of multilateral disarmament. To this end, the Foreign Minister and his Ambassador for Disarmament would at every opportunity press the case for a comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty. The conclusion of such a treaty, it was argued, would make development of new nuclear weapons and the improvement of existing ones more difficult. The restraining effects on vertical proliferation, it was argued, would give "a major psychological boost to international efforts to control and turn around the arms race at all levels".

It was partly with a view to making Australia's voice heard more effectively and perhaps to undercutting the arguments of the peace movement, which preferred to emphasise the value of unilateral initiatives, that Hayden decided to apply more forthright pressure on the negotiating process. In a statement to the Geneva Conference on Disarmament in August 1984, he underlined with unprecedented forcefulness the nuclear risks incurred by Australia:

The nuclear targeting doctrines of the great powers make it clear that the control, communications and intelligence functions of the kind performed by joint US-Australian facilities we have in our country could be targets as prime as any in the world.

He went on to remind his audience in a message intended primarily for the United States and to a lesser extent the other major powers that his Government's policy "on the presence of the joint facilities and the supply of uranium" had involved political dangers, obviously referring to the scepticism and hostility which the policy had provoked inside the Labor Party and in a significant section of the community. Should multilateral negotiations fail to produce tangible results, public disenchantment in Australia could be expected to intensify, with far-reaching implications for a Labor Government.

In this context Hayden issued the following warning:

If we were to discover that these facilities were in fact part of a link in a first strike capability we may have to review the way these facilities function and our commitment to them.

However, the warning or implicit threat in Hayden's statement was soon nullified by the comments of his own Prime Minister who stressed instead that progress had already been made in arms control negotiations, that the Americans were genuinely committed to nuclear disarmament, and that there was no question of reviewing the presence of the bases. Moreover, the US Administration made it clear that US facilities in Australia could not be used as "bargaining chips" in an attempt to force progress in disarmament talks. Hayden's remarks and general handling of the arms control issue may have displeased and angered some American officials but, given domestic and international political realities, they were unlikely to achieve the desired result. So long as the alliance with the United States remained the pillar of Australian foreign policy, no disarmament strategy, however ingeniously conceived, could stray far from the direction set by the nuclear rationale of the alliance.

Tensions and dilemmas

Yet Labor's rejection of unilateralism was not absolute. For it was neither feasible nor expedient to construct a disarmament policy solely around statements delivered at international meetings setting out Australia's attitude to the multiplicity of issues making up the disarmament and arms control agenda. Given the close strategic connection with the United States, Australian governments would sooner or later be called upon to make new decisions or at the very least respond to new circumstances. The acute dilemmas posed by the conflicting demands of alliance management and nuclear disarmament policy became strikingly evident in the Hawke Government's handling of two sensitive issues: the MX controversy and Reagan's Strategic Defence Initiative.

In January 1985 press reports disclosed that Hawke had agreed in his discussions with the Americans in June 1983, apparently without consulting other ministers, that Australia would proceed with the Fraser Government's commitment to assist the monitoring of the MX missile test. Public reaction, particularly within the ranks of the Labor Party, was both swift and hostile.

The intensity of feeling at all levels of the Party (rank and file, State branches, State governments, Federal Caucus and senior Cabinet ministers) confronted the Prime Minister with the gravest challenge to his authority since achieving office in March 1983. His own Labor Unity faction in Victoria joined the Left, Centre Left and Independent factions in opposing the Government's decision.

The crisis proved particularly embarrassing for the Prime Minister as it erupted on the eve of an overseas visit that would take him a few days later to the United States and a meeting with the American President. As the controversy intensified he was left with no option but to reverse the decision he had personally taken in 1983. Conscious of his political difficulties at home and the damage they might cause to the alliance relationship, the US Administration offered him a face-saving formula by withdrawing its request for the use of Australian airfield facilities to monitor the missile tests in the Tasman Sea.

Several noteworthy conclusions may be drawn from the MX controversy which was as intense as it was short-lived. The decision to terminate Australia's participation, however limited and indirect, in the development of the MX missile was a unilateral initiative. Although it would not impede the development of the weapons system, it was a symbolic expression of Australia's disapproval of one important element in the American strategic modernisation programme. The psychological impact of the initiative was all the greater in that it had come from one of America's closest allies. Moreover, the initiative was taken despite the Prime Minister's strong inclination to accede to the American request.

The Hawke Government faces a somewhat different but equally delicate set of problems in the wake of President Reagan's announcement of the Strategic Defence Initiative in June 1983 and the subsequent invitation extended by his Administration to America's principal allies to participate in the programme. At its 1984 Federal Conference, the Labor Party had adopted a policy which opposed "any military bases, installations, fortification or weapons in outer space" and condemned "the researching, testing or deployment of anti-satellite (ASAT) weapons and space-based anti-ballistic missile (ABM) weapons systems by any nation". Public pronouncements by relevant ministers in the period

following the Reagan announcement were largely consistent with that policy. In August 1985, Hayden gave a forthright and pessimistic assessment of the likely impact of the new technology. He made it clear that strategic defence would place a premium on building as many nuclear weapons as possible to swamp that defence, that mutual deployment of imperfect defence would in a crisis create additional incentives for a first strike, that research would soon spill over into development and deployment thereby jeopardising the benefits of the ABM Treaty.

The public statements may have been uniformly consistent in questioning the wisdom of the SDI, but several aspects of Australia's defence cooperation with the United States, particularly research and development of electromagnetic rail-guns and launchers, considerably undermined the force of these arguments. A subsequent decision to phase out the research "in favour of projects of more immediate defence interest", was an implicit admission of the strategic defence implications of the project.

The potential for Australian involvement in the Star Wars programme was not, in any case, confined to research on the rail-gun. Information received from surveillance satellites and relayed to the United States via the Nurrungar ground station could also be used to design space-based weapons. Although its primary function is often described as providing early warning of an attack, Nurrungar supports DSP satellites that also monitor Soviet missile tests. Data received at the station can therefore be used in the design of new sensors for anti-missile systems. Moreover, an important element of the SDI is the BSTS satellite, the much improved follow-on of the present generation of DSP early warning satellites, which can track and target Soviet missiles during the boost phase so that interceptor components of the ballistic missile defence system can attack and destroy those missiles. Politically and technically it might prove difficult to draw a neat dividing line between data about acceptable deterrence and verification functions and data of interest and value to the Star Wars programme.

Despite their possible relevance to the development of space-based ABM defence systems, other forms of scientific collaboration with the United States, including work on laser research, The Teal Ruby satellite system and the Australian designed Jindalee over-the-horizon radar, were invariably defended

by Government ministers on the grounds that they were directed to improving Australian conventional capability. In November 1984, Hayden declared that Australia would immediately end her association with the United States on the development of a sophisticated weapons system if it were likely to be used in a Star Wars role. Such an undertaking, however, rested on several imponderables. SDI research comprised a vast array of research projects directed normally to conventional military and civil projects. It was not always possible to establish in advance which projects would prove relevant to SDI and which would not. Moreover, many projects were likely to have a multiplicity of functions making any conceptual separation difficult to sustain in practice. Finally, it is doubtful that Australian ministers had full access to all the information needed to make informed judgements about these matters, or that they had, notwithstanding formal assurances to the contrary, the power to determine the uses to which information obtained from bilateral defence cooperation would be put once that information was in the hands of the US defence agencies.

The Hawke Government frequently expressed opposition to strategic defence but did not automatically reject the American invitation. The scope and complexity of existing cooperative arrangements and continuing pressure from the United States, including several high-level visits to Canberra, made a categorical and comprehensive rejection difficult to implement without radical changes to the current framework of bilateral defence cooperation. To this extent political objections to SDI, genuine though they might be, had to accommodate the institutional and technological connection between the defence establishments of the two countries, not to mention the possible involvement of private companies and academic institutions.

The emergence of disarmament as a major issue in Australian politics has made alliance management a more complex and delicate task and imposed at least some limitations on the scope and degree of strategic collaboration between the two countries. This is not to say that the disarmament debate has yet crystallised in the public mind the range of defence and foreign policy options available to Australia or achieved sufficient political muscle to compel a thoroughgoing reassessment of the security relationship with the United States.

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