

ANZAC Day and the need for an Independent Foreign Policy for Australia

By Stephen Darley – Broadcast on the Social Justice Radio Program *A Peace of the Action*



So this week we commemorate ANZAC day. Those who are supportive say they are not glorifying war, but marking and remembering the sacrifice of the brave soldiers who died there. The peace movement shouldn't attack the role of the soldiers, neither then nor as regards Vietnam nor in Iraq and Afghanistan now. Few of them knew what they were getting into, and they may well be our best allies in finishing the wars now raging.

But that doesn't mean we shouldn't question ANZAC Day itself, and what it stands for. Those who sent those young men to die or be crippled at Suvla Bay, and the Mekong Delta, and Basra and Helmand are a different matter altogether. In many ways, they hide behind the dead and maimed soldiers, saying that to attack them is to attack the soldiers. It's clever, but it's still bullshit.

Let's start with Gallipoli. Why were the armies there? - to invade Turkey, then the core of the Ottoman Empire. Why? - because it was an ally of Germany and Austria-Hungary, who were the enemies of the British Empire. The Ottomans were not a shadow of a threat to Australia, nor in fact were the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires. Yes, they were autocratic, undemocratic and oppressive states, as was the Ottoman Empire – but the major ally of Britain and France was Tsarist Russia, a more oppressive and anti-democratic state than any of these. And Britain and France were only (arguably) democratic at home – their colonies were a different matter, as my own home country of Ireland, and many others in Africa and Asia would testify.

So the bottom line is, Australians fought and died at Gallipoli and the Western front, not in any glorious cause, not in the interests of Australia, but to defend the British Empire. Why did we think we had to? Well, many Australians didn't, as was proved by the massive and successful anti-conscription campaign later in the war. But our ruling elites and many others did because they felt we needed the protection of a big brother, against a variety of perceived threats to us, and out of loyalty and a sense of connection to Britain. "Perceived" threats are a key issue – remember this was during a full-blown racist foreign and immigration policy era – the White Australia policy was at its height.

Ironically the only time there has been a real threat of attack on Australia, during WW2 from the Japanese, big brother couldn't help us – so we went looking for another big brother, and found the US ready and willing – for their own reasons. Many Australian historians would argue we could have defeated any likely Japanese threat to Australia on our own, but that was clearly a dangerous path to take. Nevertheless Australia jumped lock stock and barrel into a new dependent alliance, which dragged us into another very bloody war (Korea) within a few years - and again, against people (the North Koreans and then the Chinese) who were only presented as a threat to Australia as a consequence of the outright lie of a monolithic global communist bloc.

The chimera of invasion or other veiled threats from non-white people to our north persisted in Australian foreign policy for decades, and still has more resonance than we would like to think today – despite the fact that the only state with the military capacity to actually invade Australia is our great and glorious ally, the US itself – and they don't need to. And the only reason nuclear-armed states would have to attack Australia is that alliance itself – and the bases it created on Australian soil, Pine Gap the foremost.

Small impulses of change in the next 50 years were always limited in time and scope – and the Howard government moved closer to partisan US foreign policy than any administration since 'all-the-way-with-LBJ' Harold Holt. Now the ALP, perhaps remembering the fearful criticism Mark Latham aroused for his supposed "anti-Americanism", seems determined to demonstrate a Rudd Government will keep the US alliance strong, stay in Afghanistan, and continue to fight the "war on terror", even more so as compensation for the withdrawal from Iraq.

Ann Kent an Australian Research Fellow at the Centre for International and Public Law, Australian National University, wrote in a 2005 Senate submission on our relations with China that:

"Australia has always had difficulty achieving an independent and balanced foreign policy. The tendency to depend on great and powerful friends, whether in defence or foreign policy, has long been an entrenched part of our political culture. Indeed, that we should locate our national identity in the Anzac spirit, which saw the death of countless Australian soldiers on Anzac Cove in a high-risk, British-led operation, is a telling symbol of that dependence. Our whole-hearted support for the United States in the Cold War, and our involvement in the Vietnam War are other indicators. Such dependence was also responsible for Australia's mistaken policy in the 1960s opposing China's bid to obtain a seat in the United Nations... More recently, the government's participation in the war on Iraq, despite the opposition of the majority of the Australian people, similarly stemmed from the government's inability to conceive of our own self-interest as separate from that of our allies."

She went on to point out that in our anxiety not to offend either big brother USA or major trading partner China, Australia lurches from one extreme of appeasement to another, rather than practicing a more independent policy that maintains a balance between the two.

Are things changing with the Rudd government, and their claim to want Australia to become a respected middle power diplomatic force? Not according to an observer at UN conferences, who recently wrote:

"I attend many international meetings and frequently observe the Australian delegation taking their orders from the US delegation. Whenever blocks, sticky questions, differences of opinions over language or bracketed text come up, one or more of the Australian delegates walks over to the US table and asks for instructions. They also meet them in corridors, behind the meeting rooms and near the toilets to exchange bits of paper and get their text instructions."

Interventions from the Australian delegation are eerily similar to the preceding intervention from the US delegate and barring the very, very odd exception, Australians are not known to disagree publicly with them. This is also obvious to other delegations who are astonished that Australian officials can't seem to think for themselves and seem to gang up with the US to erode consensus time and again. The issue is complicated by the US's starring role as an international pariah of foreign policy."

This sounds not unlike the behaviour at the recent Bali Climate Change conference. It seems the more things change, the more things stay the same. We still need an independent foreign policy – and we don't have one.