PUTTING AUSTRALIA BACK IN THE PACIFIC

W
hen we talk about Australia's Pacific connections, one of the things we mean — though not the only one — is Australian foreign policy. And, of all the things that governments do, foreign policy is what they most like to keep to themselves and away from public view. So anything we can do to show that people care about Australia's foreign policy and think it ought to be changed can only be good.

The Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence is about to hold an inquiry into Australia's relations with the South Pacific. This is a question which is urgent in a way in which it hasn't been for a long time. It is urgent for particular reasons, and I want to state them:

First, let us consider what has happened in the South Pacific in the last two years. France is more isolated than ever in the South Pacific. No one except the French likes French colonies and French bomb tests. As the state of emergency which was declared in Kanaky last year showed, the struggle of the Kanak people for independence has intensified. And that newspaper photo of the Rainbow Warrior half-submerged in Auckland Harbour has become a symbol of state-sponsored terrorism by France in defence of its nuclear tests. Le Monde said recently that "A single year — 1985 — will ... have done as much for France's misfortunes on the other side of the world as the previous 100".

Then there is David Lange and the New Zealand Labour government. When they first came into office in 1984, smart people said the ship visits policy couldn't last; a way would be found around it — a form of words which would satisfy public opinion and keep the Americans happy at the same time. But, instead of that, we have had a series of events which have irritated and astounded the Americans: a complete ban on visits by nuclear vessels, a New Zealand Defence Review which is open to public submissions so that ordinary citizens can have their say about how their country should be defended, and a bill to make New Zealand nuclear-free.

The result has been to shake the ANZUS Treaty to its foundations. In April, when Mr. Hawke was in Washington to agree with President Reagan, Reagan said he hoped New Zealand would soon return to its traditional role as a responsible member of the ANZUS Alliance, in other words, to its pro-nuclear role. Like the French, the Americans had a bad year in the South Pacific in 1985.

To make matters worse for the US, Kiribati had the gall to sign a fisheries access agreement with a Soviet fishing company in October 1985. While it might be all right for the US to trade with the Soviet Union, the government of one of the poorest countries in the Pacific Islands wasn't supposed to, even though fishing access fees represent one of its few sources of export income. Why wasn't it supposed to? Because allowing the Russians in didn't suit the strategic interests of the US.

In its own colony in the Micronesian islands, the US has recently been putting the final touches on a new relationship which will keep Micronesia firmly under American control and prevent unwelcome developments like the Kiribati fishing deal. In Belay the Americans claim that the recent plebiscite gives them the right to bring nuclear weapons into the ports of that country, even though it has still a nuclear-free constitution.

In Fiji, the Americans have been trying to make sure that they have one rock-solid ally among the South Pacific island states; and, for the first time, the Americans are supplying an island state with direct military aid. But in answer to that, and to the conservatism of the Fijian government, a Fiji Labour Party was formed in the middle of last year and is now regarded as a significant factor in Fiji politics. The Fiji Labour Party is closely aligned with the Fiji Anti-Nuclear Group.

Rapid changes

What I am saying is that things are changing rapidly in the South Pacific. Change will be forced on Australia whatever happens. But what is most important is that there are now opportunities for genuine redirection in Australia's policy towards the South Pacific.

The same holds true elsewhere in the region where the last two years have also brought upheaval in some countries.

When 10,000 village people crossed from West Papua into Papua New Guinea in the early months of 1984, they provided a vivid illustration of what life is actually like under Indonesian occupation, and they also created an acute foreign policy problem for PNG. Mr. Hayden, who has been so vocal on human rights in Central America, has said almost nothing about human rights in West Papua. So the real question is still: what is Australia going to do about the
Then, in February this year, we saw the unfinished revolution in the Philippines. At the point where Aquino replaced Marcos, the issue of Australia's role in the Philippines was thrown into sharp relief: just who were we supporting up there? Could we really pretend that our military aid did not help to make it possible for the Philippines Armed Forces to batten down on ordinary people? And Mr. Hayden raised the possibility that, under ANZUS, Australian troops might be called upon to help put down communist rebels in the Philippines.

What, then, is the common thread in the role which Australia plays in the South Pacific, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines? Do we play much the same role everywhere in the region? And, if so, what is it?

Our role in the South Pacific and PNG is to keep the region safe for American strategic interests, especially now that New Zealand is always ready to assist the US. Australia will win brownie points in Washington. And Australia will play its part in a number of ways: by providing staging facilities for USAF aircraft, receiving USN visits, supporting the American bases. As far as the South Pacific is concerned, we win credit for ourselves by keeping things quiet and stable for the Americans in the Pacific Islands. In the Philippines Australia is far less influential, so there we have the secondary role of backing up American policy by doing much the same things as the Americans do except on a smaller scale.

Great Protector

Since the days of the British Empire, Australia has looked overseas for a "great protector"; and Australia's attitude has been to win the favour of the great protector. The idea that by being helpful we can win credit in Washington and therefore protection from the great protector in the event of war forms the basis of Australian defence and foreign policy. This can be seen clearly in the Strategic Basis Papers which were leaked to the National Times in 1984: by being always ready to assist the US, Australia will win brownie points in Washington. And Australia will play its part in a number of ways: by providing staging facilities for USAF aircraft, receiving USN visits, supporting the American bases. As far as the South Pacific is concerned, we win credit for ourselves by keeping things quiet and stable for the Americans in the Pacific Islands. In the Philippines Australia is far less influential, so there we have the secondary role of backing up American policy by doing much the same things as the Americans do except on a smaller scale.

Australian thinking about the Pacific is dominated by the conflict between the superpowers. In attitude, we are still colonials. We derive our ideas about foreign policy from one of the superpower capitals. We measure what we do in the Pacific, not by the yardstick of what is best for the region, but according to the requirements of the new Cold War. Like the Americans, we quickly reinterpret North-South issues of independence and developments as being essentially East-West issues of strategy and
security. When Kiribati want a tiny amount of independent economic development, we worry for our own security and what the Americans might think. For all the talk about the International Year of Peace, the Australian government supports a nuclear alliance. It identifies itself with America’s worldwide ambitions, and is prepared to see nuclear weapons used to defend those ambitions: and Australia brings the same bloc or superpower mentality to its policy towards the Pacific. Only a non-aligned Australia could begin to act in the best interests of the region.

Of course, it is a bit more complicated than that. Australia has always seen itself as the interpreter of the Pacific Islands to the Americans. Australian Foreign Affairs officials think of themselves as understanding the Pacific in a unique way. So Australia does do things the US would never do. One example is the limited nuclear-free zone which Australia, together with most of the Forum countries, is creating in the South Pacific. America would prefer not to have a nuclear-free zone at all because it closes off too many defence options for the future. But the Australian government recognises that anti-nuclear feeling in the South Pacific is simply too strong to resist: far better, therefore, to construct a nuclear-free zone which does not affect American strategic interests and, in the process, take some of the sting out of the anti-nuclear movement in the region and in Australia itself.

In promoting a moderate nuclear-free zone the Hawke government is trying to channel anti-nuclear sentiment in the South Pacific away from radical measures of the kind taken by New Zealand. The zone will be safe for the US, even if not ideal. Last year, Australia urged the US to bring its influence to bear on France and persuade the French to stop testing. Why? Because French testing is a powerful symbol for peace movements in the region. As New Zealand shows, opposition to nuclear weapons logically becomes opposition to ANZUS, which is a nuclear alliance. It is a short step from “I am against nuclear weapons” to “I am against ANZUS, which is a nuclear alliance and makes Australia a nuclear target”.

On the issues of French testing and the nuclear-free zone, Australia is playing the role of a friendly critic of the US, trying to make the US aware of its own best interests in the long term. Australia seeks to be the intelligent interpreter of Western interests in the region. And the Hawke government seeks to satisfy anti-nuclear feeling in the Pacific before it endangers the broad American alliance with the region. What is needed is an Australia that puts Pacific interests before Western interests.

So far, I’ve dealt with political connections between Australia and the Pacific foreign policy. But as we all know, those connections are also economic. Australia dominates the South Pacific economically, through trade, aid and investment.

Economic connections

In trade with the island countries of the South Pacific Forum, trade is more than ever in Australia’s favour. We export a great deal, we import very little, and so the island countries depend on us to make up the difference in aid. There is an agreement called SPARTECA which allows a lot of island products into Australia duty-free, but the products which matter most to island countries are all excluded from the list, or else subject to severe quotas; sugar, textiles and footwear. As Wadan Narsey has said, there are creative ways in which Australia could increase trade with the Pacific without increasing the exploitation of labour in island countries. We could say: we will let in your garments as long as you can show us that garment workers are effectively unionised. If Australia had a true labor government, that is what we would be doing.

If you are in a small, poor country, trade offers you the chance of independence. Aid, which is what Australia prefers to give, creates dependence. That is why the Americans and the French shower their Pacific colonies with aid.

Since 1976, when the Russians offered to build a fishing base in Tonga, and gave Malcolm Fraser a terrible scare, Australia has taken over the role which New Zealand used to have of supplying aid to the South Pacific countries outside Papua New Guinea. Mr. Fraser always saw aid to the South Pacific as a contribution to the defence of the Western alliance, and the amount Australia gave depended largely upon what the Russians were doing. In 1980, Australia had announced that it would be giving $84 million for the next three years. But, after the Russians invaded Afghanistan, the amount went up to $120 million. We now give about $58
million a year, and what we expect in return is a welcome for Australian investment.

We expect the kind of deal which the Fiji government has just done with Australia's Channel 9, giving Channel 9 a TV monopoly in that country for many years. We expect island countries to become more and more integrated into the entire Western economic system. That is the definition of progress which we like Islanders to have, because it suits Australian business people.

Military connections

The connections are political, they are economic. They are also military. Australia is part of a vast machine for the waging of nuclear war. It is a machine which consists not just of bases, ships, aircraft and troops. If the most important parts of this machine would somehow be seen all at once, they would emerge as a web of listening devices and electronic trip-wires spread across the Pacific from the west coast of the US to East Asia and Australia, each strand of the web linked with the rest. Australia is allied to military forces which are being rapidly nuclearised with awesome and destabilising weapons systems like those of the Trident submarine and the Tomahawk missile; and our participation in all of this is justified by Mr. Hayden as contributing to "stable deterrence", a doctrine which says that, given the right circumstances, we should lend our help to the killing of tens of millions of people.

The American historian George Kennan can imagine no issue at stake between the US and the Soviet Union which could be worth a nuclear war: "no hope, no fear, nothing to which we aspire, nothing we would like to avoid — which could conceivably be worth a nuclear war". In the same way, Australia and the Pacific Island states have no issue in their relations with other countries which could conceivably be worth the use of nuclear weapons on their behalf. Yet, just such nuclear defence is that the broad American alliance with the region offers. It promises not defence but annihilation. It makes us targets. Joy Belazo has told me that people in the Philippines were made aware of just how much the American bases at Subic and Clark make her country a target during the recent Libyan crisis, when the American bases went on a special alert. Would Belau, population 14,000, be safer with or without the protection of the American armed forces?

Cultural and personal

Australia's connections to the Pacific, finally, are cultural and personal. What Australia does in the Pacific is, in part, a reflection of what kind of society we think we are. To give an example: the visit of the Torres Strait Islands dance group to Hawaii in late 1982. The question we have to ask is: which Australia is going to make links with the people of the Pacific? Is it going to be the Australia of old-fashioned Queensland racism? Fortunately, that kind of Australia is at last on the wane. But is it going to be the old white Australia of privilege and private school education?: not racist at all, but certainly concerned mainly with forging links with privileged Islanders, with Island elites, who tend to share a similar view of the world. What about the other Australia of Aboriginal people, of migrants, of women, of working people?

What is needed is for the other kind of Australia to make links with the people of the Pacific. That is what the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific movement is about: that is what the Australia's Pacific Connections Conference is about. In a sense, we are all Pacific peoples, whether we are the descendants of those who first came here, or the descendants of those who came much later from overseas. We have a common interest in freeing the whole region from the domination of the superpowers and the colonial powers, and from the ways of thinking about the world which they encourage. We have a common goal in preventing Australia from becoming the superpower of the South Pacific, and in an Australia which defines itself differently — an Australia with full land rights for Aboriginal people would be an Australia which also effectively backed the anti-colonial struggle of the Kanak people.

The conference, then, was not just about what the situation is in relations between Australia and the Pacific; not just about Australia's Pacific connections as they now are. Its more important aim has been to show what those connections could be, and how we can go about changing them.

Stewart Firth teaches sociology at Macquarie University.