

PERSPECTIVES

**AUSTRALASIAN ANXIETIES: HOW WINSTON
CHURCHILL SHAPED AUSTRALIA'S
RELATIONS WITH BRITAIN, JAPAN AND THE
UNITED STATES FOR SIX DECADES**

GRAHAM FREUDENBERG AM

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**Australasian anxieties:
How Winston Churchill shaped Australia's relations with
Britain, Japan and the United States for six decades**

Graham Freudenberg

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Although Sir Martin Gilbert's splendid *Churchill and America* gave me the idea for *Churchill and Australia*, I didn't set out with any agenda or to prove anything, to attack or defend. As the novelist E. M. Forster said: 'How do I know what I think until I see what I write?' I must confess that a thousand speeches started out just like that.

'Australasian Anxieties' is the title Churchill gave to the chapter in his war memoirs dealing with the situation in the Pacific after Pearl Harbour. It became clearer to me how tendentious this account was, particularly after reading David Reynolds' magisterial *In command of history: Churchill fighting and writing the Second World War*. I had long been struck by the readiness of Australian writers, not least the official war historians, to accept Churchill's strictures on Australia at their face value, especially in their political aspects. I don't believe Churchill ever tried to understand Australian politics, so similar yet so different from their British model.

In the big things, and above all, the thing that matters most – the destruction of Hitler – mine is not a revisionist book. But I do offer a corrective view of key aspects of Churchill's relations with Australia in the Second World War. I believe that one of the reasons why his one-sided accounts on a range of matters from Tobruk to Burma have been more or less accepted for so long is his skill in distinguishing between the Australian soldier and the Australian politician. His unstinted praise for the one and his denigration of the other were equally gratifying to the Australian public.

Another reason why Churchill's accounts were almost beyond criticism was his rock-like reputation as the saviour of Britain, and all that has meant to civilisation. I basically accept that; but I do ask: Would the official historians like Gavin Long, Lionel Wigmore or Paul Hasluck have been so tender about some of Churchill's judgments and decisions, if they had known about the opinion of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir Alan Brooke, writing in his diary in 1944:

The wonderful thing is that three-quarters of the world imagine that Winston Churchill is one of the Great Strategists of History, a second Marlborough, and the other quarter have no conception what a public menace he is, and has been throughout the war. Without him, England was lost for a certainty; with him, England has been on the verge of disaster time and time again.¹

Similarly, the writers might have been less accepting, if they had known that Churchill's greatest Australian champion – Bob Menzies – had written in London in April 1941:

W.C. speaks at length as the Master Strategist. 'Tobruk must be held as a bridgehead from which to hit the enemy.' 'With what?' says I. The [British] Cabinet is deplorable – dumb men, most of whom disagree with Winston but none of whom dares say so. The Chiefs of Staff are without exception Yes men. Winston is a dictator, he cannot be overruled. The people have set him up as something little less than a God and his power is therefore terrific.²

Churchill looms so large in the Australian story because he was by far the greatest imperial figure for much of the unfolding of, and at the tremendous climax of, Australia's imperial chapter – a stronger and longer chapter than most of us care to acknowledge today. He personified the clash between Australia's imperial and national identity and interests from Anzac to Anzus. His ambivalence about Australia reflected its own ambivalence about itself and its place in the Empire.

Churchill entered the inner councils of Empire at the very moment the Australian anxieties were changing focus. He got his first ministerial job as Undersecretary for the Colonies in 1905, the same year that Japan won its epochal victory over the Russian Empire sealed by the naval battle of Tsushima. Until then, our specific anxieties had been directed towards the presumed Pacific ambitions of Britain's rival empires – the Russians, the French and the Germans. The rise of Japanese power in the Pacific meant – inevitably – that Australian anxieties would find expression in racial terms in an era when ideas of race superiority permeated Western thought and discourse. 'White Australia' itself became a source of anxiety about the Empire's ability and Britain's willingness to defend it. The Sydney *Bulletin* was fairly typical, when it editorialised:

If Australia isn't ready to fight for its White Australia Policy and if Britain doesn't care to take up the question, which as the greatest nigger power on earth it can hardly do with any enthusiasm, there is an end to White Australia, with its glories and its dreams and its unique opportunities.³

Whether it be fear of Russia, of France, of Germany or Japan, or the generalised threat from the North, say China with its teeming population but its government collapsing, there was one anxiety common to all – the anxiety that the imperial protector might be unable or unwilling to bring its protection to bear. This was the Great Australian Anxiety. It was to provide the foundations of Australian defence and foreign policy for more than a century. It was based – and remains based – on fundamental facts of geography, demography and history. I do not use the word 'anxiety' in any derogatory sense. As a framework for policy, it can be likened to Britain's ruling doctrine for four hundred years: that no single great power should dominate western Europe – the doctrine at the heart of Churchill's warnings about Hitler in the 1930s. It was no coincidence that Churchill's campaign before and after Munich came when he was completing his volumes on his great ancestor the Duke of Marlborough and his wars against Louis XIV of France. In the great debate on Munich on 5 October 1938, Churchill said:

What I find unendurable is the sense of our country falling under the power, into the orbit and influence of Nazi Germany, and of our existence being dependent upon their goodwill and pleasure.

This was the voice of 400 years of English anxieties.

Churchill never attempted to see things from Australia's point of view. As the historian of the Singapore Naval Base, James Neidpath puts it:

He was prepared to take great risks with their security because he trusted an optimistic forecast of Japanese intentions, and because he never really put himself in the Australian position.⁴

However, Churchill was never as dismissive about Australian anxieties as the Whitehall official and defence experts around him. Going back to the early times, when the newly federated Australian Government was grappling with the task of creating a military force from scratch, the senior official at the Colonial Office wrote: 'I suppose, so long as our Fleet is supreme the Australians can continue to play a game of soldiers under any rules they like.' When Alfred Deakin, our second Prime Minister, raised for the umpteenth time since the 1880s his concerns about the Anglo-French arrangements for the New Hebrides, the same official wrote to Churchill:

The Australians, who have never had to face any diplomatic difficulty, seem to think that we can treat France as if she were a Tonga or a Samoa. Dealing with France needs courteous people able to work with the French and I doubt if any Australian will fulfil these requirements.⁵

English Establishment attitudes moved forward glacially. When the Australian Attorney-General spoke in Westminster Hall in 1935, the London *Times* was able to comment:

Mr Menzies is Australian-born, but he speaks precisely in the manner of a cultivated Englishman.

Churchill's approach for over forty years never strayed far from the position he had stated to his life-long friend and sometime colleague Leo Amery on the eve of his clashes with Deakin at the 1907 Imperial Conference in London:

Churchill's own idea seemed to be that the colonial Prime Ministers should be given a good time and sent away banqueted but empty-handed...I found Churchill [Amery wrote in his diary] strongly opposed to any idea of consulting the colonies on foreign affairs, seeing no point in doing so until they were military powers whose alliance could be of any real value to us.⁶

Yet Australia's moves to create its own navy led to the first great clash between Churchill's imperial imperatives and Australian anxieties. From the time he became First Lord of the Admiralty ('head of the British shipping department', as the *Bulletin* described his job) Churchill embraced, with his usual uncompromising vehemence, the doctrine of concentration of the Royal Navy in the Atlantic and denigrated an Australian Naval Force as a costly diversion. He sought to allay Australian anxieties about Japan, more or less consigning Australia to the goodwill of the Japanese Government and the protection of its navy.

This led to outrage in Australia and charges of breach of faith by Australian ministers and opposition figures. Speaking in the House of Commons in March 1914, Churchill said:

If Japan chose to indulge in ambitions of Empire or colonization in the southern Pacific...there are no means by which Australia and New Zealand can expect to maintain themselves singlehanded. If the power of Great Britain were shattered on the seas, the only course of the five millions of white men in the Pacific would be to seek the protection of the United States.⁷

Churchill's prophecy, made on the eve of the First World War, was fulfilled in the Second World War. So were Australia's worst anxieties. Churchill's reaction to Australia's acceptance of his 1914 advice provide the themes for the second half of my book. John Curtin, for one, remembered it. Twenty-eight years later, when Churchill reacted – I maintain, over-reacted – to Curtin's 'we look to the United States' New Year's message, he reminded the Secretary of the Australian Defence Department, Fred Sheddon: 'I am in good company. I only said what Churchill said in 1914.'⁸

Across the gap of 67 tumultuous years, it is hard to realise why Churchill got so worked up. In what was intended primarily as a message to the people of Australia, Curtin wrote in the Melbourne *Herald* of 27 December 1941:

The Australian Government regards the Pacific struggle as primarily one in which the United States and Australia must have the fullest say in the direction of the Democracies' fighting plan. Without any inhibitions of any kind, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America.

We know the problem that the United Kingdom faces. We know the constant threat of invasion. We know the dangers of dispersal of strength; but we know, too, that Australia can go and Britain can still hold on. We are, therefore, determined that Australia shall not go, and we shall exert all our energies towards the shaping of a plan, with the United States as its keystone, which will give to our country some confidence of being able to hold out until the tide of battle swings against the enemy.

Why did Churchill react to this eminently sensible statement with an anger which was to influence, distort even, his attitudes to Curtin and Australia for the rest of the war? The fact that he was in Washington when he learnt of it, and pre-occupied with gaining from Roosevelt the strongest possible re-affirmation of the 'Beat Hitler First' strategy is crucial. I write in *Churchill and Australia*:

Curtin's offence was compromised by its timing. Churchill saw it as an impertinent intervention by a colonial politician who did not truly represent his own country. In his eyes, everything was wrong about the message: a gift to German and Japanese propaganda; a challenge to his political position in Britain; yet another Australian attempt to seat itself in the British War Cabinet, and now a bid for a place at the Anglo-American high table; an unwarranted assertion of Australian independence; a weakening of the unity of the Empire; an ill-timed exposure of the bankruptcy of three decades of British Far Eastern strategy; an affront to his honour as the man who had given his

pledged word about the rescue of the kith and kin; an insult to the efforts which even now he was making on their behalf; a competitive bid for American aid; a threat to the 'Beat Hitler First' strategy; and an infringement of his monopoly with Roosevelt as the voice of the Empire.⁹

Churchill's overheated reaction made Australia's turning to America seem much more abrupt and complete than it was in reality. In particular, it was Churchill who fostered the notion that Curtin's plea involved a switch of Australian loyalties. Did Roosevelt really say, as claimed by Maie Casey, the feisty wife of the Australian Minister in Washington, R. G. Casey, that it 'smacked of panic and disloyalty'? If he did, who other than Churchill could have put such an idea in his head? Who other than Churchill in Washington would have made Roosevelt even aware of the existence of a message written for the Melbourne *Herald* Saturday magazine as an explanation and reassurance to the Australian people? Over the next twelve months, in all the disputes about the return of the AIF, Churchill hardly ever lost an opportunity for a dig, or a sneer, about Australia's newfound reliance on the United States. The madness of his attempt to divert the 7th Division to Rangoon, the doomed capital of Burma, two days after the Fall of Singapore began with his telling Curtin that because Australia had chosen 'to set such store' on America, it was bound to agree to the diversion if Roosevelt wanted it; he then drummed up a cable from Roosevelt asserting that if the 7th Division was sent to Rangoon 'it would get into the fight at once and would, I believe, have the strength to save what now seems to be a very dangerous situation.' When Curtin refused, Churchill continued to bad-mouth Australia in his complaints to the President. Meanwhile, he gave Curtin fair warning:

I am quite sure that if you do not allow your troops, who are actually passing [through the Bay of Bengal] to stop the gap, and if in consequence the above evils [the loss of Burma and the isolation of China] affecting the whole course of the war follow, a very grave effect will be produced upon the President and the Washington circles on whom you are so largely dependent.¹⁰

Australia was being given a very sharp lesson in the price of loyalty – or, as Churchill perceived it, the price of disloyalty.

I argue that the turning to the United States was a much more gradual – reluctant even – process than we now conventionally think. But it was Churchill himself who first sowed the idea that the transfer of strategic dependence from Britain to the United States involved a transfer of loyalty. I was struck by Curtin's persistence in upholding the Empire connection and his commitment to restoring the Empire after the war – he used the words 'recovering our lost property'. In London in 1944, he said that Australians regarded themselves as 'the trustees for the British way of life in the South Pacific'; and that

‘just because Australia was located within an American sphere of strategic responsibility, that did not involve any reallocation of relationships’. Australia, said Curtin ‘is a British people, Australia is a British land and seven million Australians are seven million Britishers’.¹¹

That was Curtin speaking, not Menzies. In the book, I mount a defence of Menzies and what is usually deemed to be his most egregious statement of loyalty to Britain and the Empire: his formula for declaring war in September 1939: ‘Great Britain has declared war on Germany and as a result Australia is also at war.’ As I now see it, as things stood in September 1939, Australians could unite around their loyalty to Britain much more readily than around any presumed hostility towards Hitler. Menzies’ legal formula was the best way to take Australia more or less united into the war. A reading of the debate in the House of Representatives on 6 September 1939 indicates to me that Curtin accepted the *fait accompli* Menzies had presented with relief. It avoided what might have otherwise been a divisive debate in the Labor Caucus.

Ironically, when they were both Prime Minister second time round, it was Menzies who faced Churchill’s last charge of disloyalty. Churchill resented ANZUS, because, by excluding Britain, the Treaty represented the ultimate transfer of loyalty to the United States. Of course, insofar as ANZUS originated as a sop to get Australia and New Zealand to accept a ‘soft’ peace treaty with Japan, it represented the ultimate fulfilment of Churchill’s prophecy of March 1914. Menzies protested that there was no switch of loyalties, until, in the atmosphere of the Cold War, the political advantages of making the American alliance a loyalty issue became irresistible. The Labor Party’s counter-claims to be the founder of the alliance meant, for example, that its opposition to the war in Vietnam had to be couched in terms of loyalty to the alliance. In the case of Iraq, it became a question of loyalty to the U. S. administration, reaching its extreme expression when John Howard publicly congratulated George W. Bush, not on his re-election as President, but on the Republican victory in the mid-term Congressional elections in 2002, and in Howard’s comments on Barack Obama in 2007.

However, in these thoughts about loyalty to great allies lies what I would like to think will be the real contribution of this book. It is avowedly a story of Empire and the tensions of Australian loyalties and anxieties within that Empire. It describes a world completely different from today’s, not least in its assumptions about white supremacy and the permanence of protective power. But it is also a story about the limitations of Empire and the limits of imperial power and the protection it is assumed to provide – and the limitations of the men who purport to exercise that power. Churchill and Britain did accept that loyalty to the Empire imposed obligations to Australia beyond the formal connections and institutions of Empire. The United States has no comparable obligations or loyalties to Australia. It has always been too glib to say that Australia passed from the protection of one empire to the protection of another; and

such thinking really inhibits the development of Australian self-reliance. The need now – and the opportunity now – is for a cool and confident reappraisal of our defence and diplomatic capabilities, certainly with the American alliance as a fundamental element, but within the framework of the great quadrilateral of our key relationships – China, Japan and Indonesia as well as the United States. The election of President Obama shows, spectacularly and hopefully, how much the world and the United States have changed from the world of this book – the world which I deeply believe Churchill, more than any single human being, saved from the criminality of Hitler and Nazism. In the final analysis, Australia's part in that titanic struggle shows that to be effective and honourable, looking to others first requires looking to ourselves.

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- ¹ Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke, *War diaries 1939-45*, edited by Alex Danchev and Daniel Todman. London, Orion Books, 2002, p 590.
- ² Sir Robert Menzies, *Dark and hurrying days: Menzies' 1941 diary*, edited by A. W. Martin and Patsy Hardy. Canberra, National Library of Australia, 1993, p 112.
- ³ *Sydney Bulletin*, 31 October 1912, quoted in Gordon Greenwood and Charles Grimshaw (eds.), *Documents on Australian international affairs 1901-1918*. Melbourne, Thomas Nelson with the Australian Institute of International Affairs, 1977, p 212.
- ⁴ James Neidpath, *The Singapore Naval Base and the defence of Britain's eastern empire, 1919-41*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981, p 179.
- ⁵ Bertram Cox quoted in J. A. La Nauze, *Alfred Deakin: a biography*. Carlton, Melbourne University Press, 1965, Vol. 2, p 489.
- ⁶ Leo Amery quoted by Randolph S. Churchill, *Winston S. Churchill. Vol. 2. Young statesman 1901-1914*. London, Heinemann, 1967, p 211.
- ⁷ Speech in House of Commons, 17 March 1914, quoted in Graham Freudenberg, *Churchill and Australia*. Sydney, Pan Macmillan, 2008, p.47.
- ⁸ See David Horner, *Defence supremo: Sir Frederick Shedden and the making of Australian defence policy*. St Leonards, Allen & Unwin, 2000, p 131-2.
- ⁹ Freudenberg, *Churchill and Australia*, pp 343-4.
- ¹⁰ W. J. Hudson and H. J. W. Stokes (eds.), *Documents on Australian foreign policy 1937-49*. Volume 5, July 1941-June 1942. Document No 352. Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1982.
- ¹¹ Freudenberg, *Churchill and Australia*, pp 487-8.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Graham Freudenberg spent forty years as a confidant and speechwriter for two Australian Prime Ministers and three state Premiers. This has given him keen insights into the relationship between political leadership and the development of Australia's foreign and defence policies. Throughout the decade of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War, he articulated the response of the Australian Labor Party in terms of the US-Australian alliance. Graham is the author, most recently, of *Churchill and Australia* (2008). His other publications include a 2009 revision of *A certain grandeur: Gough Whitlam in politics*, which examines for the first time the Whitlam Government's handling of the East Timor issue.

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