

## Security and Democracy — A Fifty-Year Retrospective

*Don Aitkin*

I'm probably wrong, but I have no memory of any widespread use of the word 'security' half a century ago. My family's Depression stories told me that 'security' was something that you needed when you were old, but exactly what it meant I didn't know. 'Security doors' came later, as did 'security men', at universities and elsewhere. Shares in companies, and bonds, were 'securities', but only a small proportion of the population had any of them. 'Democracy' was more widely employed, but not especially about ourselves. It was a cant word, meaning a member nation of 'the free world', a cant phrase. People who lived in the other, putatively non-free, world, however, belonged to countries that would often call themselves a 'People's Democracy'. Ten or twenty years would pass before universities taught courses with names like 'Theories of Democracy', and it became plainer that 'democracy' could mean almost anything, and had done. Today there may be greater use of both words in our much better educated society, but as descriptors they are still rather empty of meaning. What follows is a kind of retrospective that considers both, and suggests a path for the next fifty years that might improve the quality of each.

*What was security like when we had it?*

It is late October 1956, and I am preparing for my third-year exams at the University of New England. The radio news tells me that the Soviet Union has invaded Hungary. This sounds pretty serious, and I look somewhat apprehensively at my greatcoat, slouch hat and Lee Enfield .303, attached to or stacked behind the door of my room in 'Beta', my university residence. A few days later I learn that Britain, France and Israel have attacked Egypt, in order to secure the Suez Canal. 'It's on again,' we of New England Company of the SUR (Sydney University Regiment) say to each other, with nervous bravado. A student of History, I puzzle at the thought that for the third time in fifty years, Australian troops will be in the Middle East, and that I am likely to be among them. Will the Bomb be dropped again, I wonder. Where? On whom? One of my mates says it will be safer in the front line than at home. That doesn't cheer me up, and it probably didn't cheer him either. The world is in a mess, and I haven't the faintest idea what can be done about it.

As it happened, my exams passed without further incident. Our Prime Minister did not say (as he had done when I was two) that it was his melancholy duty to tell us that since Britain was at war, Australia was at war too; the rebellious Hungarians waited in vain for the West to come to their aid. We in the SUR certainly didn't help them. Our next army camp was quite unconcerned with how to deal with a Russian invasion and, bit by bit, I became used to the idea that these events occurred elsewhere, and were not part of the development of Australia. Indeed, within a couple of years I passed out of the SUR altogether; we referred to it affectionately as 'Russia's Secret Weapon', not because it was any kind of a fifth column, but because we felt that real soldiers would have to be more competent than us. I went off to graduate study, Oxford, the USA and an academic career.

Ten years or so pass, and in 1968 the Russians invade Czechoslovakia, a re-run of 1956. Now I am a member of the Australasian Political Studies Association, and the invasion occurs more or less during our annual conference. I think we passed a resolution about it, but can't remember quite what it was. The world was in a mess, and I still had no idea what could be done about it. But I now knew something about passing resolutions.

Throughout this time the possibility of a nuclear holocaust (yes, we used that term) was ever-present. Anxiety about it probably didn't ever entirely disappear, though it diminished in the 1980s. When people tell me today that the world has never been more uncertain and more worrying I tend to think back to that time, but I usually don't deny their claim. There is no arguing about another person's anxiety. Many conflicts did take place but they did not involve a head-to-head confrontation between the two super-powers, and that good fortune allowed Australia to get on with the business of developing its own version of the Good Society. The Australian nation-building of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was remarkable in its reach and its effects. It was based on three great drivers: initial wealth, used wisely; immigration; and education. All were important, and their interaction was even more important. No wise person, or group of wise people, was responsible for marshalling these policy assets, but they have transformed our nation and our society, overwhelmingly for the better.

Human beings cannot do anything perfectly, and even our society's great advances have come with costs of various kinds. One of them is our somewhat complacent view that we are part of an international group, one that might be called 'the goodies', which is always opposing another group that might be called 'the baddies'. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the baddies were the Soviet Union and its 'satellites' or 'stooges', which included at various times the conquered countries of Central and Eastern Europe, 'Red' China, North Korea, 'North' Vietnam, and various national entities suspected of a 'Leftist' persuasion in South East Asia, Central and South America, and Africa. I may have been the only person to think in these terms, and if that were true I would put it down to an unremitting diet of Westerns between the ages of 5 and 15. Today, and I am not the only person who can construe the world thus, the baddies are variously 'terrorists' (or, as some of our leaders say, 'terris'), 'rogue and failing states', and of course 'al-Qaeda'. My guess is that many of our fellow citizens have some such view of Australia in the world.

In the 1940s, however, there was the possibility of our developing another, different, individual and 'Australian' view of the world, one in which we showed some sympathy for newly independent countries, and for colonial societies that would like to be independent. We showed that sympathy towards Indonesia, and to a degree towards India and Pakistan. We were beginning to be prepared to show it towards the new communist regime of China, which had by early 1949 attained control over virtually all the mainland of China. But the victory of the Liberal and Country Parties at the federal elections of 1949 in Australia brought the question of Australia's future foreign and defence policy to the fore. Sympathy for a former colony, and for all newly independent nations, was fairly quickly replaced by the feeling that the world was a dangerous place, and we had better have some strong friends. And what better friends than the ones who had supported us (and whom we had supported) during the recent world war? The Royal Navy may no longer have been up to the job, but the US Navy's Pacific Fleet certainly looked able.

This is not a denunciation of the Menzies Government. The world was a dangerous place, and our leaders saw us as needing 'great and powerful friends'. The Soviet Union had tested its own atomic bomb in 1949, and both the USSR and the USA had exploded hydrogen bombs by the mid 1950s. The British, with our government's active agreement and support, had carried out nuclear tests in Australia between 1952 and 1963. The development of intercontinental ballistic missiles during the 1950s meant that in the 1960s both super-powers had the capacity to send nuclear warheads more or less anywhere. The Cuban missile crisis in 1963 brought such a confrontation very close, and there were other, false, alarms that appear to have been the product of faulty warning systems. Although I would have liked Australia to follow the Swedish model of armed neutrality, and to stay out of the goodies vs baddies stand-off, I wrote in this way only briefly, and found little support. Where it occurred it was mostly private, and some of it came from within the armed forces, where such debates went on all the time. In consequence, we went into Vietnam on the side of the Americans, almost as though we were paying an instalment of our long-term defensive insurance policy. We keep on doing it, most recently in Iraq.

We like to think of Australia as peaceful, but we seem uncommonly aggressive in the number of conflicts in which our governments have involved us. Troops from the Australian colonies were involved in the Sudan War and the Boer War, with the Australian armed forces taking part in the First and Second World Wars, the Malayan Emergency, Confrontation with Indonesia, Vietnam, the Gulf War, Afghanistan and most recently Iraq. Some would include the Boxer Rebellion in China. That's a fair list. Our sister Dominion, Canada, has managed to avoid some of them, most notably Vietnam and Iraq. Our involvement in 'minor' events (East Timor, UN peace-keeping, police involvement, the Solomons etc) seems generally supported by most Australians. Wars, like Vietnam and Iraq, are another matter. The Great War was not universally supported, and until the Japanese entered the Second World War there was some opposition to Australian involvement in that conflict as well. The major parties have in the last century agreed on our taking part in wars, though they disagreed on many aspects of our involvement. That agreement, based in part on a bipartisan acceptance that our alliance with the United States of America is the central element in our foreign policy, makes it difficult for Australians as citizens to propose alternative policies that could be widely accepted. When they do put them forward, both the policies and the proposers tend to be dismissed.

*And what sort of democracy?*

That outcome points to the kind of democracy we have and have had. We Australians like to think that we live in a democracy, and indeed our political leaders constantly tell us so. Those who live in the USA also like to think that they live in a democracy, and they too are constantly told so. But the two democracies are different in many ways. Insofar as I can judge, Americans stress 'freedom' and 'liberty' as the essential components of democracy, while Australians prize elections and voting, the right to keep the bastards honest and to kick them out if needs be. Neither country functions as an Athenian democracy, with a large and continually concerned citizenry. Strong and disciplined political parties have dominated Australian politics for the last century, and we think that is the natural state of affairs and what politics is about. The USA also has political parties, but they are not like ours, either ideologically or in structure, and the proportion that votes can fall well below fifty per cent; in the USA politics is very much about what the President is doing.

Foreign and defence policies are matters which the parties in Australia, whether in government or in opposition, see as being something that ordinary citizens do not know much about and should leave to the politicians themselves. There has been an Australian Institute of International Affairs since 1933, but it has been an 'elite' rather than a popular organisation, and its meetings are neither frequent nor widely attended. Foreign affairs, for Australians, happen elsewhere, a point of view not widely shared by Europeans, Asians or Africans. While it might seem that this is a point of view that links us to Americans, who also live a long way from most trouble spots, the Australian-American alliance has an odd character that is of little daily consequence because we also live a long way from each other. In brief, Australia is a land of secular realists, while the US is a land of utopian moralists; I own that I have borrowed these terms from someone else, but I think there is a lot to them. We understate our nationalism, while Americans overstate theirs. We are relatively subdued flag-wavers, though it is a more common behaviour than it once was. We have no great wish to export our form of political democracy, and have some difficulty still in saying who we are (though much less difficulty in saying who we are not).

There is not much sign that we are 'anti-American', at least in the surveys of opinion that are common. But it is probably true that there will be general Australian relief when President George W. Bush comes to the end of his term. He is something of an embarrassment personally, and his decision to invade Iraq, along with the emptiness of the pretext and the failure to think through what to do once there, and how and when to leave, has done great disservice to Iraq, to his own country and to ours. The 'war on terror' that we are now apparently engaged in can hardly have a proper end such as a peace treaty, but it leaves us in a nervous state, alarmed rather more than alert. Our multi-cultural relative harmony, one of our greatest strengths as we entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is in a mess, and there seems little sign that our government has much sense of what to

do about it. Just as we did in the 1950s, we need to develop a common sense of what Australia is for, and to act over time to produce a good version of the dream.

In the 1950s and 1960s we were, as a Deputy Prime Minister, John McEwen, liked to tell the rest of the world, a 'developing country', by which he meant that we were still putting the infrastructure in place, though no one used that term then. We welcomed immigrants, and didn't ask them to subscribe to any values other than hard work and peacefulness. The assumption was that they would fit in, and if they didn't, their children would. These were virtuous assumptions, and by and large they proved to be accurate. But the world of 2006 is different. The infrastructure is mostly in place. No one talks any longer about our being a developing country, let alone about 'nation-building', a widely used term fifty years ago. We are very much more individualistic as a society than we were in the 1950s. And we are uneasy about diversity, whereas we once rejoiced in it, or at least took it for granted.

In earlier writings I argued that 'democracy' for Australians was akin to a habit, and was not much reflected on by the democrats themselves. Thirty years later I think that judgement is still accurate, though a lot has changed. Political party membership is proportionately only half of what it was thirty years ago and probably only a quarter of what it was in the 1950s. The notion that politics is there to achieve good outcomes for the nation has largely gone. That now seems to be the responsibility of the market, or more widely, of the economy. Our 'representatives' in Parliament are much less representative than they used to be. Well-known figures, like sex discrimination or rural fire service commissioners, are welcomed into political parties to run as candidates in the party's interest. If successful they join MPs many of whom learned about politics through being members of a Minister's private staff. The seats they hold are much less likely to be the seats they lived in before election. Ministers no longer resign because of serious problems in their handling of issues (not that they were prone to do so in the past), and both the Iraq war and the Australian Wheat Board inquiry point to almost unbelievable lapses of memory and of judgment in Ministers for which I find it hard to provide earlier counterparts, unless it was the Rex Connors' reliance on Tirath Khemlani in 1975.

We the citizens, however, are plainly hard to amaze. We still seem to regard voting as important, and support for compulsory voting has remained at much the same high level for fifty years. It is almost as though voting were simply a democratic duty: one does it, and moves on to other, more important things. Both Government and Opposition have been worried about this state of affairs, and have supported programs intended to make us, and our children and grandchildren, better citizens. This has not led either major party, however, to propose abolishing compulsory voting, a change that would force the parties to go out to the people to find supporters, if only to man the polling booths and get people to come to them on election day. Our contemporary situation was neatly summed up by a former schoolmate of mine, who thought we were now better regarded as shareholders in Australia Limited, and as long as the share price remained high and the dividends kept coming in, the CEO (John Howard) could keep his job, whether or not people liked him or agreed with his foreign and defence policies.

#### *Where to now?*

I became a political scientist rather than a historian because I found that it was the present and the recent past that most interested me, though I now define the recent past as the period since the Industrial, American and French Revolutions. For some twenty years I was deeply involved in the research policy business, and found it hard to imagine what 'pure' research might be in the social sciences. For me, the point of all our research was a better society for everyone, even if we disagreed about what that might be and how we might arrive there. While I think that Australia today, in its educational levels, creativity, curiosity, relative toleration and capacity for hard work, is very much better as a society than was its counterpart in the 1950s, there is still much that could be improved. That will always be the case, in my view, since, to say it again, human beings are not able to construct anything perfectly.

I may be an idealist, but I am not a utopian. We need to start with the diverse, multi-ethnic and individualistic society we have, and it has a lot going for it. If the task is to improve its real and felt security, on the one hand, and its democratic forms and processes, on the other, then I offer a way forward. It is not a set of policies, in the manner of our political leaders, whose ambition seems to go no further than managing better, or in a different way, what we already have. Rather, it is a kind of challenge. It begins with the fact that we secular realists need an ethical framework both to guide our own lives and to help shape the society we live in. It has to be based on the individual, partly because a society's patterns of behaviour are to a large degree an extension of the behaviours of individuals. We cannot return to the solidary kind of society we had in the 1950s, when doors were not locked, and parents told children not to draw attention to themselves. Ours is a society of aspiring individuals, materialist, and non-religious yet still puzzled about the meaning of life.

But the news is not all bad. I would argue that there can be a confident 'Western' (but hereafter, Australian) approach to life and living together. It should be built on the discovery that everyone is educable to a high level — that intelligence is a gift to everyone. It follows that what differentiates us is not our native intelligence but the various conditions of life that we experience, the amount of love, encouragement and preparation we are given as children, variables like sex, sibling order, will, determination and so on — each of them affected to some degree by the same love, encouragement and preparation — and of course the wealth and sensitivity of our parents. The discovery of 'multiple intelligences' has been a social science triumph, and its implications now underpin many previous assumptions about democracy, such as the presumed natural equality of human beings, their deserving of equal treatment not just before the law, their equal entitlement to good education, and so on. We need to add as well a growing belief of the last generation or so that women are equal to men, and more generally that human beings are never the possessions of other human beings, wives of husbands, children of parents, and so on. Our society is still sorting all this out. The much-vaunted 'Judaean-Christian tradition', after all, has wives subject to their husbands. Among God's punishments to Eve, for having lured Adam away from the straight and narrow, was that 'he shall rule over thee' (Genesis 3:16, King James Version, *The Bible*).

There is still more to add: we are all creative. Some will find their pleasure in painting, some in music, some in words, some in sport, some in pottery, some in more than one of these activities. Exploring our creative capacities, gaining proper self-esteem in doing so, finding other people with similar interests, cooperating with them and learning from them — and having the wherewithal and the leisure to do so — these are the possibilities for the Good Life that people yearn for. This aspect of the Good Life is available now, and indeed it is what very many Australians do. Estimates vary, but the statistically minded might note that there are about 180 orchestras in Australia, classes in almost every conceivable creative pursuit, the Australian Sports Commission recognises 125 sporting organisations, and the number of people painting is measured in millions.

The ethical framework I propose fits comfortably with all this, and is nothing more than the Golden Rule. This precept is older than Christianity but certainly embraced by it: Matthew 7:12 'Therefore all things whatsoever you would that men should do to you, do you even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets' (King James Version, *The Bible*). It is in any case a commonsense approach to living socially. Many Australian try to live by it now, and I believe that it is the way forward for us collectively as well. Adopting it both individually and collectively would lead to a slow but steady change in very many of our rules, policies and conventions. It would, I think, lead to a reduction of what I call 'band-aid' social welfare expenditure (dealing with symptoms, and a substantial element in our \$55 billion social welfare expenditure), a reduction in the expenditure on criminal justice (police and prisons, now running at over \$7 billion a year), but an increase in expenditure on education, sport, the arts, and creativity generally. Well-educated, creatively interested people are conspicuously absent from prisons, and are contributors to the national welfare system, not (for the most part) suppliants at its door.

Moving along this path would lead us, I think, to a better functioning democracy. We have learned that educating people to a high level provides them with some self-confidence about their capacity to think, act and judge. Our politics today is more fragmented and more argumentative than it was fifty years ago, and fewer Australians are inclined to think that things are as they are either because the Prime Minister has said so or because they read it in the newspaper. But I believe we need a return to the view that the political realm is important and that Australians should take part in it as naturally as they take part in the economy. That will come if individuals recognise not only that they need to develop an explicit ethical framework for themselves, but also that the logical extension of that effort is a comparable ethical framework for the society.

I have said little about the economy, and that is of course a major error today, where the economy is thought to have almost magical powers. It is as though the entire object of life is to be wealthier, however wealthy you are. The instant response is dismissal. How could we afford all this? Where will the money come from? This form of the question was used to deflate Dr Evatt, when he was leader of the Labor Party in the 1950s, and is used today any time a politician proposes a new program. We are among the lowest taxed societies in the OECD, along with the USA, Japan and Turkey, so one answer is plain enough. Another is almost as obvious: we had better get used to a relatively static population and relatively static economy. Both look like becoming an important part of the future of Western countries, and Japan has been living with both for a decade or more without apparent harm. Using one's creativity is cheaper by far than going in for material acquisition or 'retail therapy', and seems to lead to happier human beings, as well.

I am not someone who looks forward eagerly to world government; I think we have a long way to go in equalising conditions in nation-states before such an outcome is practical. But an Australian society imbued with an understanding that all of its people are intelligent, capable of great skill and productivity, and interested in exploring their own creativity, would seem to be a good model for other countries. We could assist them in attaining a similar social condition by developing a foreign policy that was based on the same understanding, and by giving aid which had explicit values attached to it. For example, Australia would assist other countries to develop family planning programs that arise from the assumption that women must be in control of their own fertility. It would assist universal education programs, and the development of the arts, music, sport and so on. The faster the world's poorer countries get past the subsistence level and into the productive development of the talents of their people, the better for us all.

Does that mean we would have no defence forces? Not at all. Over time we would spend more, not less on defence, extricating ourselves from an imperial alliance that has had great costs for us, but at the same time building up our armed forces to make it clear not only that we have an improving, peaceful and materially prosperous country but that we will defend it too. Sweden has stayed free of wars in the past century, to the great good of its people and, arguably, of the world, since Sweden is a notable aid donor. My own view is that over time strong Australian armed forces will be less necessary, as the countries in our region gain greater self-confidence and respect for what we are doing and how we are doing it, but that time might be a good many years off. In any case, the picture I am building relies on a lot of 'givens' or constants, and I am old enough to think that insurance is good policy.

Does it all sound airy-fairy? It shouldn't. One of the great weaknesses of our polity is its reluctance to engage in 'what if?' discussions, and its preference always for the pragmatic, the apparently realistic, and the status quo. I accept that what I am proposing will take time, and indeed that it will not be picked up quickly by the major parties. But in a slow fashion it is already occurring, and if it is discussed, and argued about, and adopted by more individuals, then it will have some effect. That is, after all, why we write books, and why each generation has to revisit what the nation is for, and what should be done about it. My coming book is not written in any conscious way for members of the Academy. Rather, it is written for my children and my grandchildren, and for their respective generations. I do detect in the electorate an impatience with what passes for 'politics' in our country, and a wish that we could all move past it. But it is

quite possible that what will happen is something rather different from what I am suggesting. If it is better, I won't mind at all.

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#### Endnote

This essay incorporates ideas developed in my recent *What Was It All For? The Reshaping of Australia* (Allen & Unwin, 2005) and its sequel *Legacy and Challenge. Building a Better Australia*, which should be out in late 2007 or in 2008.

While it was de Tocqueville who referred to the USA as a society of utopian moralists, it was Dr Michael Evans, in an essay in the October 2006 *Quadrant* ('The Essential Alliance') who contrasted that term to an Australian society of secular realists, a neat opposition that I have gratefully used here.

The notion that Australians are habitual rather than reflective democrats was advanced at the end of the first edition of my *Stability and Change in Australian Politics* (ANU Press, 1977).

Those for whom the concept of 'multiple intelligences' is unfamiliar are urged to read Howard Gardner's *Frame of Mind*, originally published in New York in 1983, and now revised and reprinted many times.