

HAS BRITAIN LET US DOWN?

A Reconsideration

by **David Day**

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Early in 1992, the British tabloid press launched a barrage of insults against our Prime Minister for daring to declare that Britain's behaviour towards Australia during the Second World War might have been less than perfect. As the fall of Singapore was being commemorated, Paul Keating had the audacity to suggest that Britain was the country which decided not to defend the Malayan peninsula, not to worry about Singapore and not to give us our troops back to keep ourselves free from Japanese domination.

Ironically, when I made the self-same suggestions during an Australian Historical Association conference in 1988, an historian in the audience asked at the completion of what I had thought to be a new and challenging paper — 'what's new about that?' 'Everyone knows that Britain let Australia down.' And I suppose he was right to some extent.

Folk wisdom, particularly Irish-Australian folk wisdom, has long told the multi-chapter tale of British perfidiousness in which the events of the Second World War merely rate one chapter, following on from chapters on the original convict colonisation, the economic exploitation of Australia, the events at Gallipoli and, of course, the tragic litany of events in Ireland itself. So the idea of British exploitation of Australia, of British betrayal, is not a new one.

Moreover, as my 1988 critic observed, people at the time — that is, in 1942 — were not reluctant to criticise Britain for the fall of Singapore and its consequent effect on Australian security. In fact, so virulent was this criticism that the Archbishop of Brisbane, the Most Reverend J. Wand, was moved to publish a strong defence of Britain's behaviour.

Titled, 'Has Britain Let Us Down?', and reprinted several times during 1942 by Oxford University Press, the good archbishop's booklet made a stout defence of Britain's war effort during which he blasted

any criticism as being akin to 'Fifth Column activity'. According to Wand, it was Churchill who had first suggested sending most of the AIF home to Australia to meet the Japanese threat. And the fault for the fall of Singapore, suggested Wand, should be laid at Australia's door, rather than Britain's. It was Australia which had demanded that the embattled troops of Singapore not be evacuated when there still time to do so. And it was the Australian sector of the Singapore defences that fell first to the Japanese and led to the subsequent fall of the entire garrison.

Wand concludes his defence of Britain's war effort with an attack on those Australians who 'would willingly stab Britain in the back' and calls for his fellow loyalists to make clear that Australia will remain, 'come weal or come woe, as for ever a British people'.

How does the historian make sense of these apparently diametrically opposed views on the war? Well, as you are well aware, many historians rushed into newsprint with judgements on the Prime Minister's statements early in 1992, both for and against. Some of Keating's opponents repeated the good Archbishop's arguments almost word for word. As is the nature of such arguments, there was much heat and fire and very little light. Many of the judgements were wrong, not only in their interpretations of the events but in the so-called facts they sought to use in support of them.

It would be impossible in the space available to detail the case regarding Britain's treatment of Australia. I would, however, refer those interested in the details to my two books on the subject — *Great Betrayal* and *Reluctant Nation* — both of which are being released in paperback, ironically by the archbishop's publisher, Oxford University Press.

Put briefly, the archbishop was correct to claim that it was Churchill rather than Curtin who initiated the return of the Australian troops from the Middle East. However, that is less than half the story. For Churchill never intended that the Australian troops should return to Australia, only to the eastern theatre. Their destination changed with each victory by the Japanese, and each time the destination shifted further rather than closer to Australia. At various times, Churchill intended that the Australians go to Singapore, Sumatra, Burma or India — almost anywhere but Australia.

It was Australian Prime Minister John Curtin who insisted that the Australians return home rather than be diverted to the hopeless defence of Burma. It was this insistence by Curtin that ensured the troops would be available for the all-important, at least to Australia, battles in New Guinea. At the same time, it was Curtin, uncertain in his nationalist feelings, who allowed some of these troops to be diverted to Ceylon, which was really just as indefensible as Burma.

Churchill's supposed concern for the defence of Australia was further belied by his strenuous refusal throughout most of 1942 to return the last of Australia's three Middle Eastern divisions — the 9th Division which won glory for itself at El Alamein. And when Churchill finally conceded at the end of 1942, the troops were forced to return in a convoy without adequate naval protection and at grave risk to their safety across the wide reaches of the Indian Ocean and within striking distance of Japanese naval and air forces at Singapore.

Even more important than the denial of her troops, Australia was deprived by Britain of the modern aircraft, tanks and other weapons of war that would have ensured Australia remaining inviolate. When war came to the Pacific in December 1941, Australia was left as unprepared as it is possible to imagine. There were no tanks, no fighter aircraft worthy of the name and no heavy bombers. Had a Japanese invasion force landed in Australia in early 1942, a swift victory would have been assured to the forces of Emperor Hirohito.

Who was responsible for this lamentable state of affairs? The first thing to be said is that not all the blame can be laid at the door of Downing Street. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Australia was content to believe in the British assurances about the invincibility of Britain's Singapore naval base and its ability to prevent any Japanese invasion force reaching Australia.

The Australian Prime Minister, Stanley Melbourne Bruce, established in 1923 the attitude that would be followed by his successors for eighteen years, almost until the sorry fall of Singapore itself. While attending an Imperial conference in London, Bruce had asked the obvious question — how much reliance could Australia place upon the British defence guarantee in the event of a simultaneous threat in Europe? How could the ships of the Royal Navy steam to Singapore if they faced a concurrent challenge in the Mediterranean or the North Sea?

Like his successors, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Leo Amery, trotted out a reassuring commitment of British fidelity to the quizzical Australian. Although Bruce seemed to sense that Amery had his fingers crossed when making the commitment, he expressed his satisfaction nonetheless. Although claiming to be 'not quite as clear as I should like to be as to how the protection of Singapore is to be assured, I am clear on this point, that apparently it can be done'. Such vague generalities underpinned Australian defence throughout the 1920s and 1930s, tying her firmly to the system of imperial defence and precluding a prudent concentration on the local defence of the Australian continent.

Of course, in the context of the 1920s and early 1930s, the British guarantee would have seemed iron-clad. There was no credible threat to British power and the infectious talk of peace and disarmament seemed to preclude any serious threat developing.

Such an optimistic outlook was not justified in 1939. And yet the same British assurances were trotted out for Dominion consumption and just as eagerly gobbled up by gullible Australians. This time the British promise was made by the new First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, for the express purpose of extracting from Australia a commitment of troops for Britain's imperial purposes. The terms of his promise committed Britain to abandon the Mediterranean and dispatch a fleet to the Far East in the event of a large-scale invasion of Australia. When his Cabinet colleagues jibbed at such a commitment, Churchill pointed out that it was, in fact, vaguer than previous British commitments and was made with the sole aim of reassuring the Dominions 'so that they would consent to the dispatch of their forces'.

Churchill was planning a war along the lines of the First World War and was anxious to accumulate the maximum amount of manpower to fill the trenches of France. This pressing need would have encouraged him to be 'economical with the truth' in his dealings with the Dominions. He would also have taken comfort from the French fleet, which provided an important addition to British naval power, and by the continued neutrality of Italy. Churchill also seemed to have believed that Australia was beyond the power of Japan to invade.

So far, so good. Australian army and naval forces, together with air force trainees, streamed out of Australia to buttress Britain's effort against Germany while the local defence of Australia took second place to British needs. Even the battle of Britain in 1940 failed to deflect the Australian government from its discredited course. France was knocked out of the war, Italy had stormed in and Japan was skulking around the edges as it sought an opportune moment to seize European colonies in Asia and the Pacific.

It was in these alarming circumstances that the Australian Prime Minister, the young Robert Menzies, flew off to London in early 1941 to get a renewed guarantee from Winston Churchill who had since been thrust into Downing Street. Once again, Churchill was most forthcoming with promises of future assistance in the event of a Japanese invasion of Australia while withholding any practical assistance that might have deterred such an invasion. More Australian forces flowed out of Australia to shore up Britain's embattled positions around the world.

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the invasion of Malaya, the new Labor government of John Curtin tried to pressure Churchill into making good on Britain's promises. It was then that the fine print was pointed out — that any abandonment of the Mediterranean and dispatch of naval forces to Singapore would depend upon an invasion in force of Australia. But, of course, that would in all likelihood be too late to avert an Australian capitulation.

So Singapore was allowed to fall and Australia forced to endure the most dangerous months of its relatively short existence. On Australia Day 1942, as Australians watched the Japanese prepare to launch their final assault on Singapore Island, a British Cabinet Minister grabbed a thick blue crayon to scribble a note to his colleague across the table in Downing Street. 'Send more ships to Singapore' might have been his message; or perhaps, a note to inquire about Australia's defences; or a suggestion to release the 9th Division from the Middle East. But no. Instead of these wild fancies, this Minister scrawled in exasperation: 'Australia is the most dangerous obstacle facing this govt'.

Those few words encapsulate the brutal reality of Anglo-Australian relations during the Second World War. Australia was a dangerous diversion to a British government concentrating its resources on higher priorities than the distant and embattled dominion. Despite the assurances of Churchill and his predecessors, the Mediterranean remained a higher priority than the Far East. And for good reasons, at least as far as British national interests were concerned.

British control of the Mediterranean was the key to continued British influence in the countries of southern Europe right round through Turkey to the oil-rich states of the Middle East. These were prizes that could not be lightly passed by for the sake of defending a quarrelsome Dominion. Anyway, as Churchill apparently assured Australia's foreign minister, Dr Evatt, Britain would have recaptured a conquered Australia from Japan once the war with Germany was won.

Faced with the choice of allocating scarce resources between the Mediterranean and the Far East, it was perhaps inevitable that Britain would choose the former and thereby renege on her historic defence commitment to Australia. It was not that Britain did not care about Australia's fate; it was simply that she did not care enough. So the answer to the rhetorical question posed by the Brisbane Archbishop half a century ago — Has Britain let us down? — is a most decided yes. And the lesson for Australia is the self-evident one — not to trust her defence to anyone but herself.