Losses and Gains

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Joan Beaumont et al.
MINISTERS, MANDARINS AND DIPLOMATS: AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN POLICY MAKING, 1941–1969
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IMPORTANT POLITICAL ISSUES sometimes cut across traditional party lines, making it harder for us to confront and debate them. The ‘children overboard’ affair, for example, raised important questions about the relationship between public servants and their ministers. Some of these questions were blurred in the subsequent debate, however, for a simple reason. Since the 1970s, governments from both sides of politics have had, in effect, a common policy of restricting the independence of the public service, especially of heads of departments, in the name of accountability and responsiveness. Ministers now have departmental secretaries who can be dismissed for no stronger reason than that they have lost the minister’s confidence. The powerful mandarins who, it used to be said, ruled Australia from the lunch tables of the Commonwealth Club in Canberra are a distant memory. Political influence now affects appointments down to middle managers, in ways that those mandarins would have thought totally improper.

Those who think that John Howard is trying to re-create the Australia of Robert Menzies in the 1950s have missed a profoundly important point. The way Howard runs his government is vastly different from the way Menzies ran his. Whether that makes for better ‘governance’ (to use a vogueish word at which Menzies would have raised an expressive eyebrow) is a matter worthy of real debate, but for the moment that debate is confined to a few political scientists and Canberra ‘insiders’. It pops up from time to time — when a departmental secretary is sacked, or in the ‘children overboard’ affair — then dies away again.

To take that debate further will require, among other things, a broad understanding of how governments actually operated in the past, as well as how they operate today. We are only beginning to understand how policy was made between the 1940s and the 1970s, when senior public servants had more influence and independence than at any time before or since. Policy decisions emerged from the interaction of ministers and public servants, in which personality sometimes mattered as much as the proclaimed policies of the governing party or the principles of the Westminster system.

This book is an important contribution towards that understanding. It examines the milieu in which Australia’s foreign policy was formed, between 1941 and 1969, principally by looking at the interaction of successive foreign ministers with the public servants in what was then known as the Department of External Affairs. (Later it was renamed Foreign Affairs; later again, it was merged with the Department of Trade to form the present-day Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.) These public servants included both those serving in Canberra and those in diplomatic missions abroad.

The authors — Joan Beaumont, Christopher Waters, David Lowe, with Garry Woodard — are three historians and a former diplomat who has turned historian in his retirement. They have included a good deal of fresh research, while also crystallising views that have been outlined or implied in earlier publications. Unusually for a multi-authored book, they have coordinated their contributions remarkably smoothly.

The core of the book lies in five essays on the interaction between minister and department under five ministers, who happen to be among the most significant and, in many cases, controversial politicians of their day: H.V. Evatt, Percy Spender, Richard Casey, Garfield Barwick and Paul Hasluck. In this context, the comparisons and contrasts between them cut across party lines. For example, the ministers on either side of the great divide of the postwar era, the 1949 election, were Evatt and Spender. Products of Fort Street High School and the Sydney University Law School, both were academically brilliant, forensically aggressive, politically ambitious and constantly activist. Both, at their best, were able to harness the talents of their departmental officials and use them effectively towards the ambitious goals that they had set. The high points of their respective careers — negotiating the United Nations Charter for Evatt, the ANZUS treaty and the Colombo Plan for Spender — would not have been possible without that ability. Both, at their worst, allowed their egos to distort proper procedures. Spender, who often treated officials abominably, appointed himself leader of Australian delegations to conferences and missions abroad, even if he could seldom, if ever, attend, leaving the effective leader seriously weakened. Spender behaved as if he were still the minister after he had left politics to become the ambassador in Washington.
The vivid contrast that emerges — one that may strike readers as new and remarkable — is that between Barwick and Hasluck. In many eyes, especially but not only those of Labor loyalists, Barwick’s reputation has been irretrievably damaged by his performance as chief justice, both with respect to tax-avoidance schemes and in his support for Sir John Kerr during the 1975 constitutional crisis. What emerges from this account is a portrait of a minister who, from the perspective of his diplomats, was as good as they could have wished. Garry Woodard credits him with attributes matched only by Gareth Evans three decades later: ‘accessibility; ready access to the prime minister … forcefulness in Cabinet and the party room; courage; persistence … a robust independence [with respect to powerful allies]; a genuine interest in Asia … and a willingness to shake up and … persuade public opinion and colleagues of the wisdom of his policies.’ Woodard has previously described the performance of Barwick and his department during Indonesia’s Confrontation of Malaysia as ‘best practice’ in diplomacy. Here he applies the accolade to a wider range of policies. As a former member of the department during this time, he is not a purely disinterested observer, but he makes a powerful case.

As much as the diplomats relished working with Barwick, they squirmed under his successor, Hasluck. Joan Beaumont’s account does much to explain one of the paradoxes of Australian foreign policy. By intellectual capacity and diplomatic experience, Hasluck should have been a great foreign minister. Instead, his term leaves, in Beaumont’s words, ‘an overwhelming impression of lost opportunity’. The diplomats expected that their minister, who had been in the department under Evatt, would be ‘one of us’. Instead, they found a minister obsessed by procedures, prerogatives and pedantry, but curiously reluctant to give a lead on policy. He seemed intent not on working with his department, but against it.

There is much else of value in the book. Beaumont’s essay on the diplomatic cadet scheme, External Affairs’ peculiar (in both senses of the word) recruitment system, has some gems, not least on attitudes to women. The good-looking ones, the men agreed, would only get married, while the ‘non-glamorous’ were ‘over-awed and bad in committees’.

Ministers, Mandarins and Diplomats should stimulate further debate on the role of the public service. Not everyone will agree with the authors’ interpretation of the policy views of the officials. It might have been useful to include a chapter on Menzies, who took the External Affairs portfolio for two years between Casey and Barwick. But we should ponder the impression this book leaves, that Australia’s foreign policy successes usually resulted from the effective combination of a competent and determined minister and his officials, while the failures often came when ministers overruled or disregarded their professional advisers. Unfortunately, it will be decades before historians of Australian policy towards, say, East Timor in 1999 or Iraq in 2003 can fully assess the quality, and the independence, of the advice given to John Howard and Alexander Downer by the successors to the diplomats discussed in this work.