

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE IMPERIAL CONFERENCE OF 1909 AND THE FLEET UNIT CONCEPT

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Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher has many monuments to his credit, but the one that we are commemorating at this conference requires the observer to look around more widely than any other. The Fleet Unit concept, as it was conceived and executed, provided the model for a progressive and successful cloning of naval services that has continued almost to this day. While the maritime areas of the globe are no longer divided up into the various Stations of the Royal Navy, the latter still has a worldwide legacy in the existence of no less than ten major navies (Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, India, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Africa and Sri Lanka) and more than a dozen smaller services whose origins are directly or indirectly founded upon it.

But the nature of the cloning process had significant consequences, few of which were understood at the time and which are now only becoming clear with the benefit of research and analysis.

The subject which has received most attention – both from serious historians and from external observers - in terms of the relationship between the Royal Navy and the services of the Commonwealth - has been the extent to which the ethos of the RN was a false model for younger nations such as Australia and Canada, with their more open cultures and less rigid class systems and whether it was an equally false model for the navies of South and South East Asia, with their own very different cultural, religious and racial issues. This is a legitimate question but it has to be answered on several levels.

There is certainly evidence to indicate that some Royal Navy procedures and attitudes were inappropriate and occasionally destructive in their application, particularly in the very early years of the new services. Perhaps most important, the cloning in some ways hindered the national development of both the full understanding and the full local infrastructure of what was required to sustain a navy. I have elsewhere termed this the 'fleet, not a navy' syndrome in that the provision of so much external support by Britain, even if it was paid for, meant that the smaller nations did not have to invest in these areas to the degree which would have been otherwise required for the level of combat capability that they sought to sustain.¹ The symbiotic relationship - and it was symbiotic because it also helped the British in extending production lines and creating work for British industry - was so effective that it also served to delay the natural growth of the supporting infrastructure, both in government and industry, which the individual national navies required once the Imperial bonds were weakened. I believe that it is arguable that the history of the Royal Australian Navy in the hundred years since has been one of trying to evolve into the full identity and the complete form of a national navy. To a

¹ James Goldrick 'A fleet not a navy: some thoughts on the themes' David Stevens & John Reeve (Eds) *Southern Trident: Strategy, history and the rise of Australian naval power* Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2001, p. 292.

greater or lesser extent, achieving that evolution has been the challenge for all the navies of the Commonwealth.

The absence of local infrastructure also meant an absence of understanding in governments, industries and electorates of the totality of naval needs. It may also have inhibited the development of national consciousness in naval matters, particularly in relation to military strategy, by creating a perception that was naval – or even maritime – was also inherently British and imperialist and therefore suspect to emergent nationalism. But I should add that the absence of naval understanding was not simply a matter of local governments believing that their professional advisers were uncritical mouthpieces of the Admiralty in Whitehall. The syndrome also manifested itself in a failure to examine strategic questions from first principles because it was sometimes more convenient – probably because it was cheaper – to accept a British lead and the British line. The Australian Chief of Naval Staff in the mid-1930s found that his Minister and the principal departmental adviser themselves looked to and opted for the Admiralty policy when that differed from that of the local naval staff², creating significant difficulties for the RAN.

Nevertheless, for many years the parent-child navy relationship was a good bargain, manifested most obviously in Australia not only in the original Fleet Unit, but in the efforts to establish a Fleet Air Arm in the late 1940s and a submarine force in the early 1960s. Canada and India in particular had similar experiences with some of their force elements. Capabilities of these types could not have been developed within the same timeframe or within the same budgets if they had not had the direct support of the British. In other words, the smaller Commonwealth navies for many years were able to deploy much more combat capability, much more quickly and at much higher levels of efficiency than would otherwise have been possible for countries of their size. There was also a certain element of sheer good will involved. When seeking to receive the best possible refit in a British royal dockyard of their cut-price second hand cruiser in the late 1950s, it was no coincidence that the Pakistan Navy should dispatch a former ADC of Lord Louis Mountbatten, who was then the First Sea Lord, to be the commissioning commanding officer. And no coincidence that the newly renamed BABUR should emerge in much better order than the original budget might otherwise have allowed.³

Some other consequences of the ‘cloning’ of the Dominion navies, however well meant they might have been professionally, were less than desirable. What has yet to be resolved, however, is the extent to which the naval cultures which were created within each country appeared to be alien because they were *British* in origin, or whether that alienation was the result of being *naval* in countries which did not have an inherently maritime outlook. For example, reliance upon RN training systems and immersion in RN operations opened the professional and personal horizons of the young officers in many ways. Yet, inevitably, their ‘world’s best practice’ professional standards in mariner and

² James Goldrick ‘The naval professional: Admiral Sir Francis Hyde KCB, CVO, CBE, RAN, David Stevens & John Reeve (Eds) *The navy and the Nation: The influence of the Navy on modern Australia* Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 005, pp. 344-346.

³ Letter, Admiral the Earl Mountbatten to Rear-Admiral M.S. Choudri, 2 January 1957. Mountbatten Papers. See the author’s *No Easy Answers: The Development of the Navies of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka 1945-1996*, Lancer, New Delhi, 1997, pp. 54-56.

warrior skills were developed at least partially at the expense of their connections with their own countries as the officers of the young navies were taken away from their homelands – and their home waters - for many years.⁴

The difficulty was that the perception of an impressed British identity meant that the attitudes and values held by the officers of the new navies were sometimes mistaken by external observers – some of whom who should have known better - as being the values of Britain and the old world⁵, rather than – as they often were – values that were intrinsically naval. This should not have been surprising, particularly as some of the young officers concerned failed to make the distinction themselves and were occasionally ‘captured’ by the ethos of Britain to a degree that made it difficult for them to operate comfortably in their national environments, but it also tended to make it very difficult for them to argue a naval case amongst national defence policy makers. This was particularly so when they were arguing the importance of national interests as opposed to rigid concepts of territorial defence.

Yet the personnel of the RCN and RAN and the other Commonwealth navies – even such ‘anglicised’ officers - were always readily and immediately identifiable to the RN as being representatives of their nations and this was equally the case from the outset with the ships of the navies concerned, however substantial the proportion of RN or ex-RN personnel in their crews. Indeed, in an era in which mass emigration was taking place from the United Kingdom to the Dominions, it was hardly surprising that the ‘new chums’ from Britain should quickly and consciously identify with their chosen service and nation. The battle cruiser HMAS *Australia*’s commissioning in 1913 was informally concluded with a junior rating calling (successfully) for ‘Three cheers for Wallaby land’.⁶ Such conscious efforts at asserting national identity were sustained throughout the 1914-1918 war, the official historian describing the deployed RAN units under RN control as ‘primarily Australian and persistently Australian’⁷ and continued afterwards, sometimes to the point of breaching accepted protocols, as in the case of the Canadian Captain Victor Brodeur’s 1936 insistence on flying the pendant of senior national officer present afloat, as the senior RCN officer, in the presence of the British C-in-C North America and West Indies Station.⁸

It is thus not surprising that more recent and sophisticated assessments of the problems encountered by the various services, during what the author thinks of as their periods of adolescence, should suggest that there were other causes to those difficulties that imposed

⁴ See a Canadian analysis of this question by Robert Glover ‘The RCN: Royal Colonial or Royal Canadian Navy’ Michael L. Hadley, Rob Huebert & Fred W. Crickard (Eds) *A Nation’s Navy: In Quest of Canadian Naval Identity* McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal and Kingston, 1996, pp. 71-90.

⁵ See, for example, the comments made by T.B. Millar in *Australia’s Defence* Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1965, p. 168.

⁶ Kathryn Spurling ‘A strategy for the lower deck of the Royal Australian Navy’ David Stevens & John Reeve (Eds) *Southern Trident: Strategy, history and the rise of Australian naval power* Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2001, p. 274.

⁷ A.W. Jose *The Royal Australian Navy 1914-1918* Volume IX *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918* Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1928, p. 335.

⁸ David Zimmerman ‘The Social Background of the Wartime Navy: Some Statistical Data’ *A Nation’s Navy, Op. Cit.*, p. 257.

social structures and outlooks alone. A recent review of the ‘mutinies’ in the RCN in 1949 has pointed to the relatively small number of ‘RN grown’ personnel involved and shown that earlier assessments placed excessive emphasis on the RN-RCN linkages at the expense of issues related directly to the Canadian situation.⁹ The fact is that a comprehensive analysis of this aspect must be integrated with surveys of social change and development outside the navies and the military if it is to be placed properly into the context of what were profound alterations of the social systems of entire nations.¹⁰ One acute observer of the Australian scene in 1938 noted that ‘everybody’ talked ‘of home’ – even if they had never seen the United Kingdom themselves.¹¹ The men of the Commonwealth navies were not always alone in any attitudes they may have had to the mother country.

The real drawbacks in the arrangement were more complex. This can be illustrated by the problems of officer development. In strictly professional terms, the repeated exposure to and judgement by RN standards was largely beneficial – the RAN in particular adhered for many years to the policy that an officer would not be promoted unless he had served in the RN in his current rank, been matched against his RN contemporaries and recommended for promotion according to RN standards.¹² Given the internecine disputes amongst senior officers that occurred in both the Australian Army and the RAAF in the 1930s and 1940s, the RAN’s avoidance of them at this time must have some connection with this ability to judge and promote to external standards. It is notable, as demonstrated by recent research, that the RCN suffered greatly from the individual rivalries of Canadian flag officers during World War II, a time when the Canadians were only advancing their own, despite the tiny size of the promotion pool, to meet the nationalist dictates of the Mackenzie King government.¹³ It is also notable that such jealousies and personal rivalries did emerge in the RAN in the 1950s, again in a situation when the Navy was required to look to its own, all too small cadre of senior officers, for its leadership.¹⁴

⁹ Richard H. Gimblett ‘The Post-War “Incidents” in the Royal Canadian Navy 1949’ Christopher M. Bell & Bruce A. Elleman (Eds) *Naval Mutinies of the Twentieth Century: An International Perspective*, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 258-259.

¹⁰ Some of these issues are raised in ‘Roundtable: Reviews of Christopher McKee *Sober Men and True: Sailor Lives in the Royal Navy, 1900-1945* with a Response by Christopher McKee, *International Journal of Maritime History*, 177-228.

¹¹ Arnold L. Haskell *Waltzing Matilda: A Background to Australia* Adam & Charles Black, London, 1942, p. 68.

¹² See James Goldrick ‘The naval professional: Admiral Sir Francis Hyde KCB, CVO, CBE, RAN’ David Stevens & John Reeve (Eds) *The Navy and the Nation: The Influence of the Navy on modern Australia* Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005, p. 336.

¹³ See Richard O. Mayne *Betrayed: Scandal, Politics and Canadian Naval Leadership* University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver, 2006.

¹⁴ As an example, the outgoing CNS, Vice Admiral Sir Roy Dowling, disliked Rear Admiral Harries and was unwilling to put him to Cabinet as a candidate for his successor as CNS, opting only for then Rear Admiral Burrell. Only after pressure was put on him by his Minister after soundings had been taken informally within the Navy as to the merits of both candidates was Harries’ name also included. In the event, Burrell was selected due to the intervention of Richard Casey who had been unimpressed by Harries’ diplomatic skills in Washington during the Second World War. Source: Conversations 1993-94 with the Honourable Fred Osborne CMG, DSC*, the then Minister for Air and the ‘sounding taker’ as a Navy veteran on behalf of his colleague the Minister for the Navy.

Nevertheless, the real issue was that the career profile of the RN became increasingly difficult to impose upon the smaller navies as officers became more senior. The latter navies did not have the range and steady progression of senior appointments, particularly at flag rank, to 'grow' the officers needed to lead their service. Officers could find themselves serving as Deputy Chief of Naval Staff or Chief of Naval Personnel in the rank of Captain – their RN equivalents would be Vice Admirals or even Admirals with at least ten years' more service to their credit. The RN, although it did its best, had only a limited ability to share senior appointments with the Dominions to assist in the development of those headed for the top.

The fact remained, and it was not properly addressed until many years later, that the smaller navies required their officers to diversify their professional skill base into policy and administrative matters rather earlier than did the RN. Captain (later Admiral Sir) Herbert Richmond summed up the challenge in 1918 when he wrote of the Canadian situation, 'It is hardly fair to expect officers untrained in Staff work and possibly... with a very limited experience of administration outside of ship-work to compete with the political and other difficulties extant... it would require an officer of the very greatest ability to occupy the post of Director of the Naval Service and he would have to be supported by a Staff of highly trained officers competent to represent their requirements unequivocally and to realise to the full what these requirements were.'¹⁵

The question would be the extent to which those services might have to accept – or at least risk - a reduction in seagoing and warfighting skills to achieve such earlier diversification. And when a national candidate was required, the lack of alternatives could sometimes mean that officers were too long in the top job – Vice Admiral Nelles of Canada clearly was, at exactly a decade, before his firing from the post of Chief of Naval Staff in 1944¹⁶. John Collins certainly felt that seven years (1948-1955) at the head of the RAN was more than enough for himself and, for the South African Navy, however talented the officer, there must have been some drawbacks in the twenty year tenure of Admiral Biermann (1952-1972).

There was another problem, even more difficult to quantify, within the original model for naval development, whereby the RN provided senior officers to lead the new Services. These officers did, as often as not, arrive with an aura of prestige and authority which allowed them to interact more effectively with local political establishments than many nationals. The three successive British Chiefs of Naval Staff in Australia between 1937 and 1948 all seem to have been successful in this way¹⁷ and one squadron commander of the 1930s, Rear Admiral E.R.G.R. Evans, capitalized on his own Antarctic and Great War heroics to become nothing short of a national celebrity, doing much for the RAN's image in the process at the otherwise very difficult time of the Great Depression. But,

¹⁵ Michael L. Hadley & Roger Sarty *Tin-Pots and Pirate Ships, Op. Cit.*, pp. 296-297.

¹⁶ Marc Milner *North Atlantic Run: The Royal Canadian Navy and the Battle for the Convoys* Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 1984, pp. 6-7 and 264.

¹⁷ See Admiral Sir Ragnar Colvin (CNS 1937-41) *Memoirs* Wintershill Publications, Durley, 1992, pp. 118-121.

apart from the challenges that these officers faced in adapting to local conditions and the steep learning curves which were often involved, their expertise and their prestige was largely lost to the navy they had led when they completed their postings. For most of the last century, there were few naval grey eminences within the retired communities of the Dominions and thus less chance of informed and responsible public comment on naval matters. By comparison, national armies possessed substantial reservoirs of potential support amongst community leaderships after both the First and Second World Wars. The relative scale of naval and military endeavours made this issue inevitable, but not to the degree that ensued.

The relationship between the Royal Navy and its new foundations could not, of course, have been and never was wholly one-sided. We do not understand the extent to which the Commonwealth navies influenced the Royal Navy, but they must have done so to some degree. There was always a certain reluctance in the UK to recognise the value of novelties which were ‘not invented here’ and, if recognised, to admit their origin. A few years after the Royal Navy has finally adopted the rank of substantive Commodore and thirty years after the RAN did so, it is interesting to recall the snippiness with which the RCN was viewed when it took that step in the 1950s. And the truth is that many developments in which the smaller navies led the RN were actually drawn from the United States Navy – the British Pacific Fleet’s rude awakening to so many American superiorities in 1944-45 had already been experienced by the Australian Squadron in 1942-43 and by the Canadians from earlier in the war. Indeed, the fact that several of the Commonwealth navies exploited American technology in particular so successfully, while retaining the fundamental organisation, doctrine and training of the Royal Navy must have helped the latter develop a more critical attitude to its own equipment. That this was needed, at least to some extent, is best demonstrated by the scathing comment made by the then Flag Officer Second in Command Far East Fleet in 1966 to the captain of the first American built guided missile destroyer in the RAN that he ‘could not understand why they (the RAN) had bought that American rubbish.’¹⁸ That purchase was not a decision that the RAN ever regretted, nor was the later buy of the PERRY class guided missile frigates.

It may also be that the constant Commonwealth presence in RN ships at sea played its part in evolving social attitudes and breaking down the too rigid class structures of the British service, adding their mite to the many other factors acting on this problem. A future RAN Chief of Naval Staff had the experience of being told in 1938 on completing his exchange appointment as a Lieutenant Commander in an RN heavy cruiser that he was ‘too familiar with the sailors’. His comment was ‘Perhaps I should have mended my ways, but I had no intention of doing that. In my view, the ship would have been more efficient if officers and ratings had been in closer touch.’¹⁹ The Commonwealth presence in the years after 1945 may have also helped break down racial prejudices in all the navies – in particular, the shared training programs of junior officers from all over the world under RN tutelage from the 1940s onward helped greatly with what one veteran

¹⁸ Rear Admiral Guy Griffiths AO, DSO, DSC, RAN (ret) “DDGs in Vietnam: HMAS HOBART: 7 March – 27 September 1967” T.R. Frame et al. (Eds) *Reflections on the RAN Op. Cit.* p. 331.

¹⁹ Vice Admiral Sir Henry Burrell *Mermaids do Exist* Macmillan, Melbourne, 1986, p. 65.

has described as their ‘cultural evolution’²⁰ and the ease with which integration of the young officers was achieved in the cabin flats of the naval college and the mess decks and gunrooms of the training ships must stand as a tribute to the Royal Navy of the era.

All in all, the jury is still out and historians have much more to do. Yet any survey of the last hundred years, particularly one conducted with an eye to the experience of the navies of other nations not in the British Commonwealth, must lead one to the conclusion that the creation of the various national navies has been extraordinarily successful. For the efforts of a century have resulted not only in the formation of a dozen substantial navies and more than a score of smaller services, but a remarkable degree of shared professionalism, manifested not only in doctrine and procedures. The Canadian Rear-Admiral Fred Crickard has described this as ‘a transnational *operational ethic* transcending national norms.’²¹ Those efforts have also produced a similarity of outlook in how navies should be employed that has at least partially succeeded in transcending cultural and racial barriers and which has survived into the twenty first century. They certainly resulted, as demonstrated in two world wars and many other conflicts, in producing navies which were much more effective in military terms than such small services have had any right to be.

Some of the side effects of these relationships, both good and bad, remain significant, if little understood factors in the development of naval capability and of maritime strategy in many countries of the Commonwealth. They still need to be considered and understood, just as the Royal Navy still has its own thinking to do and adjustments to make in both its structure and its identity. The challenge for the future for all the Commonwealth navies will be to ensure that what is relevant and best in the legacy of Fisher and the 1909 Imperial Conference is retained without compromising national requirements.

²⁰ Michael White (Ed.) *We were Cadet Midshipmen: RANC Entrants 50 Years On* Grinkle Press, Queanbeyan, 2006, p. 98.

²¹ Rear-Admiral F.W. Crickard ‘Alliance Navies and National Interests: The RAN and the RCN’ Greg Cox (Ed) *Issues in Maritime Strategy: Presentations of the Royal Australian Navy Maritime Studies Program – 1994* RAN, Canberra, 1994, p. 132.