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A LOSS MORE SYMBOLIC THAN MATERIAL?

In 1921 US President Harding called a conference between the USA, Britain, Japan, France and Italy to advocate mutual naval arms limitation. Faced with massive post-war debts all parties agreed on limitations. The immediate result of the ensuing 1922 *Washington Five Power Naval Treaty* was that Britain, America and Japan scrapped a number of unfinished capital ships and older dreadnoughts. For Australia, the casualty of the Washington Treaty closest to the heart of the nation was the *Indefatigable* Class battlecruiser HMAS *Australia* - flagship of the Australian fleet, pride of the nation and the first and only capital ship of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN). When she was scuttled off Sydney Heads on 12 April 1924 as part of the British quota *Australia* had been in full commission for less than nine years.

Two schools of opinion surround the loss of the battlecruiser. The first believed that it was a mistake that removed an important Australian naval asset, a sentiment typified in the words of Captain Feakes at her scuttling in 1924: 'Strong men were wet-eyed. Many cursed. It was a tragic blunder.'¹ The second school, prevalent at the time and since, claimed that the vessel was obsolete and of no great loss to the RAN. Most recently the centenary history of the RAN stated that 'the loss was more symbolic than material'² largely predicated on the fact that the 12" ammunition required for the main armament was no longer in production. The questions then are whether *Australia* was obsolete, whether the vessel's retention was possible, and whether it would have had any significant impact on inter-war deterrence.

When *Australia* was scuttled in 1924, the burden of the nation's naval defence fell on four 1906 designed 6" gun light cruisers. The Royal Navy (RN) possessed no armoured cruisers, and based only light cruisers in Asia. Japan and America possessed 8"-10" gun armoured cruisers, many of which were based in the Asia Pacific region. Imperial relations with the two nations fluctuated in the 1920s, and the possibility of conflict could not be entirely ruled out. Positioned at the end of long Imperial sea lines of communication, and dependent on foreign trade, Australia was particularly vulnerable to commerce war in the event of conflict with Japan or America. A RN squadron would take at least a month to arrive in the Pacific from Europe. During this time Australia would be isolated and largely dependent on the RAN to defend its maritime interests. The presence of *Australia* alone in 1914 had deterred the German East Asiatic Squadron, comprised of two armoured cruisers and four light cruisers, from conducting commerce war close to Australia.

Battlecruisers were designed with high speed, long range and heavy guns primarily to hunt down and destroy commerce raiding armoured cruisers and to interdict enemy commerce. Accompanied by a cruiser escort, a battlecruiser was capable of deterring a weaker enemy raiding force, destroying commerce raiding cruisers preying on imperial shipping, and overpowering enemy cruisers escorting convoys, and it required a disproportionate response to counter. In the vastness of the Pacific, prior to the advent of large aircraft carriers and long-range high performance aircraft, a battlecruiser and escorts were relatively safe from air attack. As such, the battlecruiser provided considerable strategic reach for a navy with extensive sea lines to control. Between the wars *Australia* and the light cruisers could have provided a force suitable to deter any military threats against Australian interests in the Pacific, particularly the mandated territories, from Japan or the USA. It would also have provided an overt threat to Japan's mandated territories and America's external territories should economic or military pressure have been brought to bear on the Australian government.

Australia would have required modernisation, involving at the minimum: new turbines and boilers to increase her speed and reduce weight, improved fire control systems, increased armour protection, main armament modification, increased secondary and anti-aircraft armament, and other minor work. In the mid 1920s this would have cost around the same as the construction of a new 8" gun *County* Class heavy cruiser, but provided a more powerful capability. With only minor improvements to her armament, *Australia* could have delivered up to 45% greater weight of fire than a *County* Class cruiser. Even as late as 1942, a modernised *Australia* would have had no less than 19% greater weight of fire than the best-armed Japanese heavy cruisers and up to 69% greater weight of fire than a Japanese light cruiser.

The Five Power Treaty contained several areas of ambiguity that would have allowed the Australian Government to mount an argument to retain the battlecruiser. Firstly, the treaty definition of a capital ship, as one armed with greater than 8" guns, only applied to ships built after the signing of the treaty. The definition for existing ships was simply agreement that they were a capital ship by virtue of an ability to take their place in the line of battle. By 1922 the capital ship standard was 14"-15" guns, with new 16"-18" armed vessels under development. *Australia* was not fit to take its place in the line of battle, and it could validly be argued that 12" armed vessels such as *Australia* should be re-classified as armoured cruisers and therefore exempted from the treaty tonnage limitations. The treaty



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provisions did not preclude retaining old cruisers with larger than 8" guns. The United States Navy retained its 1906 vintage 10" gun *Tennessee* Class armoured cruisers after 1922, with *USS Seattle* remaining in full commission as a heavy cruiser until 1941. This could have provided grounds to argue for the retention of *Australia* along similar lines.

Secondly, Commonwealth naval vessels were paid for, manned and maintained at Commonwealth expense. They were under the control of the Commonwealth at all times, unless transferred to RN control in wartime by agreement of the Commonwealth. Section 51 of the *Defence Act 1903* gave the Commonwealth power in all respects for the defence of Australia, without any legal need for agreement by Britain in making defence policy. Accordingly, Britain could not include *Australia* in its quota for the purposes of the Washington Treaty without the agreement of the Australian Government. Had the Australian Government not agreed to the inclusion of *Australia* in the quota, it could have voiced its opposition in the Imperial discussions, and refused to countersign the treaty. Australia would then have been able to put a strong case that, while bound by the strictures of the treaty with regard to tonnage limitations on the British empire, it was not required to sacrifice its own ship as part of that total.

Thirdly, the Australian Commonwealth did not receive the legal power to enter into extra-territorial treaties that might be against the interests of Britain until the Statute of Westminster in 1931. However, the Constitutional Conventions provided that treaties entered into on Australia's behalf by Britain could not be self-executing, and had to be entered into Australian domestic law by the Commonwealth Parliament.³ In short, if the Australian Parliament did not agree with a treaty imposed by Britain, it could refuse to enact the treaty in Australian law, and would thus not be bound by the treaty.

The argument that ceasing production of 12" ammunition was sufficient reason for the disposal of *Australia* (under the provisions of the Five Power Treaty) is difficult to support. By 1912 13.5"-15" guns were superseding the 12" gun in new RN capital ships. From 1922 the treaty removed from service all other RN capital ships carrying the 12"/45 Mk X gun. Existing stocks of barrels and ammunition could have been transferred to the RAN, thereby providing many years of support. Research indicates there were at least 95 barrels and 40,000 rounds of 12" ammunition available in the early 1920s. Moreover, the Brazilian dreadnoughts, which remained in active service until 1953, carried the same 12"/45 gun, while the Spanish dreadnoughts, whose 12"/50 guns remained in active service as shore batteries until the 1990s, used the same ammunition.

Although there were no technical or logistic impediments to retaining *Australia*, there were cogent reasons for the Australian Government to dispose of the ship. The world slipped into a sharp recession in 1920-21. Australia suffered due to its reliance on foreign trade, although to a lesser extent than Britain, America and Japan. The Nationalist Party, facing a general election, was under pressure from the ALP, backed by a powerful militant working-class movement, to divert additional funding into social benefits schemes such as soldier housing and other

repatriation benefits. The Australian Government was paying off war-related loans of £262.5m, or 68% of GDP, including a debt to the United Kingdom of £43.4m. Maintaining *Australia* in operational status took the largest slice of the RAN's budget and personnel. Even before the Washington Conference *Australia* had been laid up in reserve to reduce expenses. Accordingly, there was little support in early 1922 to retain the vessel. Defence was no longer a key portfolio and funding was being progressively reduced. The disposal of the battlecruiser allowed for a major reduction in defence expenditure, providing funds for redirection to more pressing social benefits schemes. Prime Minister Hughes understood that the naval limitations did not represent a permanent solution to Japanese expansion, but that they would buy peace in the Pacific for ten years.⁴ In this heated economic and social climate, many governments refocused public expenditure from arms to economic rehabilitation.

Despite opinions to the contrary, *Australia* was not obsolete in 1924. Notwithstanding the vessel's known weaknesses, it was still fit for the purpose for which it was designed, specifically the destruction of enemy armoured cruisers. Indeed, the restrictions placed on new cruiser construction in the Five Power Treaty ensured that *Australia* would have remained effective for some time, by limiting the armament of new cruisers to 8" guns. The disposal of *Australia* under the terms of the Washington Five Power Treaty was by no means a given. There were a number of loopholes that could have allowed the Australian Government sufficient room to bargain for retention of the vessel, had it so desired. The Australian Government made a conscious decision to allow the ship to be listed for disposal to free up funds for dispersal on higher Government spending priorities. However, it did accept a risk that neither Japan nor America would conduct operations against Australia and the Empire in the aftermath of the treaty, for with the battlecruiser gone the light cruisers of the RAN would be vulnerable to Japanese and American armoured cruisers.

The Australian Government had realised soon after the 1923 Imperial Conference that it was vulnerable to fluctuations in Imperial defence policy, due to its position on the periphery of the Empire. Nonetheless, it chose not to unilaterally retain and rebuild *Australia* to counter possible threats to its sea lines of communication. The Australian Government could have provided itself with a greater deterrent capability and a wider range of maritime security and diplomatic options had it argued for the retention of *Australia* as an armoured cruiser under the Five Power Treaty provisions.

This is a summary of a forthcoming SPC-A Paper

¹ Feakes, H. *White Ensign, Southern Cross: A history of the Navy in Australia*. Ure Smith, Sydney, 1951, p. 214.

² *The Australian Centenary History of Defence - Volume III : The Royal Australian Navy*. D. Stevens (Ed), Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2001, p.65.

³ Twomey, A. *Federal Parliament's changing role in treaty making and external affairs*. Research Paper 15 1999-2000, Parliament of Australia, 2000, p. 8.

⁴ McCarthy, J. *Australia and Imperial Defence, 1918-39: A study in air and sea power*. University of Queensland Press, 1976, p. 12.

