

PETER COCHRANE
**BEST WE
FORGET**

THE WAR FOR WHITE
AUSTRALIA, 1914–18



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‘Willy Nilly’

‘Whatever the result of a contest between Japan and America, there is nothing more certain than the brown and yellow races must come south in the course of time, and we may well pray that their migration may be postponed until such time as a great population in this continent and New Zealand shall give us some chance to resist the coming attack.’

Sydney Morning Herald, 28 January 1911

When Joseph Cook suggested in September 1909 that one day it might be necessary to send an Australian expeditionary army to support Britain in some other part of the world, the Labor leader, Andrew Fisher, jumped on the remark and pressed Cook into an indignant retreat. For good measure, Hughes followed up with one of his scathing broadsides. But a year later, Senator George Pearce said much the same thing as he commended Labor’s defence bill to the parliament and the comment passed with hardly a flutter: ‘By reason of the fact that we are part of the Empire,’ he said, ‘we may be called upon, *willy nilly*, to bear the consequences of our Imperial connection.’

In twelve months, a great deal had changed. Japan had confirmed its expansionist ambitions and its dominance in East Asia with ongoing colonial creep in Manchuria and the annexation of Korea. At the same time, the British surrender of naval

supremacy in the Pacific was complemented by the German menace to Britain's all-important security at home, while the proposal for a Pacific fleet remained at best an idea awaiting fulfilment. Both sides of the Commonwealth parliament shared the apprehension.

On Deakin's side, the barrister Paddy Glynn agreed with Sir William Lyne that 'there was scarcely a British cruiser between Vancouver and Cape Horn, or Cape Horn and the West Indies, [and] there was not a single British battleship in the Pacific within the region of Australian influence.' And for Labor, the new order of peril was much the same, as Hughes noted when he rose to endorse Pearce's defence bill. He spoke of a time when a 'more equable distribution' of the British navy secured the outer fringes of empire, a time long gone, for that equable situation 'has been so disturbed that there is now concentrated in Home waters nine-tenths of the great British fleet'.¹

The inescapable dilemma of unavoidable dependence and uncertain reliability was working its way into Labor's calculations. Whatever measures the government might embark upon in the sphere of national defence, one fundamental truth held firm: white Australia's existence hinged on Britain's survival, and in the event of an emergency—a great war arising from the German challenge, for example—then, 'willy nilly', Australia would have to bear the consequences of the imperial connection, as Pearce expressed it.

'Willy nilly' is an adverb meaning whether one likes it or not. It would appear that well before the Imperial Conference of 1911, when Labor would secretly commit the nation to the coming European war, the logic of the imperial quid pro quo was in play.

Abandonment anxiety was in the air and the scent was picked up in the press, sparking a round of crisis fever in articles and

editorials surveying the new circumstances in Europe and the Pacific over the Australian spring and summer of 1910–11. When the new Japanese consul-general arrived in Sydney in October, reporters abandoned due courtesy and pressed him on the likelihood of a Japanese invasion.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* ran regular reviews on defence-related matters, noting that 'there is nothing more certain than the brown and yellow races must come south in the course of time.' The editorial page welcomed the idea of a permanent presence for the American fleet in the Pacific, marking a sudden indifference to the protocols attending British sensitivities.

Previously, in 1909, Deakin had followed up on his Great White Fleet success with a proposal for a 'Pacific pact', whereby the United States might become an active presence in the Pacific and the white nations of the sphere extend the Monroe Doctrine to the western part of the ocean. The proposal came to nothing, but by 1911 Andrew Fisher had his own variation on this theme, arguing for a closer union between the British Dominions and the United States upon the waters of the Pacific—in the interests of peace and progress, as he put it. Like his predecessor, Fisher was casting about, trying to find a solution to a problem that was, for the time being, unsolvable.

The press coverage ranged from sober analysis to scaremongering. One column carried a Washington report, apparently composed by a senior officer in America's War Department, which claimed that the country's west coast was poorly defended and the Japanese could 'in thirty days land 200,000 men, seize and fortify the passes through the Rockies and get a foothold' from which it would take years and 'billions of monies to dislodge them'. The report was refuted by a counter-analysis detailing how

such an invasion would be repulsed—but an invasion it was. In another column, the *Herald* warned of war for trade and territory between America and Japan. It acknowledged the value of the Anglo–Japanese alliance to Britain, and the unease it fostered in Australia: ‘Friendly as we are with Japan, there is something unnatural in our present Oriental linking.’²

The *Herald* was well established as the city daily most anxious about the menace of Japan. But as David Sissons explains in his foundational study of race fear in the Commonwealth, these were years of ‘considerable apprehension’ and ‘fear of Japan among the public at large’. The signs were more evident by the year—Tsushima, the British departing the Pacific, the conversion of the Labor Party from anti-militarism to ‘democratic militarism’, the dreadnought scare, Kitchener’s confirmation of Australia’s peril, the annexation of Korea, and regular critical talk among opinion leaders in the press and politics.³

Sissons also notes the unprecedented cluster of invasion scare literature (plays, serials and short stories) in the years 1908–11. And there were other signs too—frequent allegations of Japanese spying in Australia, the ‘Doomsday’ talk of leading politicians such as Ewing and Pearce, the bipartisan acceptance (at long last) of the urgent necessity for compulsory military training, the slippage in the direction of the imperial quid pro quo, declarations of concern from scholars of international affairs, and even the occasional presence of anti-Japanese sentiment in commercial advertisements. All this was summoning what Alfred Deakin called ‘a remarkable change in the attitude of our people towards defence’.

If the national mindset did not amount to hysteria, it certainly amounted to a collective apprehension among the attentive public, and critics such as the Japanese consul-general and Bruce Smith,

the maverick conservative in the House of Representatives, did not fail to denounce it.⁴

Managing the Troublesome Australians

One of the concerns behind the talk of Japanese invasion (or British betrayal) and the surge of anxious musings about the Pacific scene was the well-founded rumour that Anglo-Japanese talks were again underway with a view to renewal of the treaty—or was it a renunciation? Either way seemed to pose problems for Australia. Early renewal would confirm the long-term leverage of the Japanese in London. Renunciation would free the Japanese of obligation to the empire. Free them to turn, perhaps, to Germany.

The alliance was not due for renewal until 1915 but the British government was committed to locking it in for a further ten years, through to 1921. By January 1911 defence officials in London were hard at work to secure this outcome. They were conscious, too, of the forthcoming Imperial Conference, set for May. How to deal with this subject at the conference, and how to manage the troublesome Australians?

The secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence wrote to the Foreign Office about his concerns in January 1911. He warned that the weight of the empire's defence needs in the Pacific would fall more heavily on the Dominions if the alliance with Japan did not proceed. He thought the question of how to deal with the Australians a tricky matter: 'Frankly I dread any sort of discussion with our brethren in Australasia on these delicate and secret topics...But—on the other hand—the last thing wanted is a howl from Australia or Canada, if and when the British government decide to renew the alliance.'⁵

The British prime minister, Herbert Asquith, and the Foreign Office agreed. The alliance was too important to be muddled or aggravated by Dominion critics, as Sir Arthur Nicolson made clear:

The maintenance of the Alliance is of such vital Imperial interest that its prolongation or otherwise should not be dependent on the view of the Dominions, and it is therefore one solely and exclusively for the Imperial Government to decide, without any reference to the Colonies. One of them may of course raise the question and if so, it might be desirable to explain the value of the Alliance...but the discussion should end there if possible. Meanwhile the decision in which the Prime Minister concurs, is that H. M. Government will not bring the matter before the Conference or discuss it there if it can be avoided.⁶

The British foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, supposed that some degree of consultation with the Dominion delegates at the forthcoming Imperial Conference was unavoidable and best done privately. He thought the Canadian prime minister, Wilfrid Laurier, understood what was at stake, but

One or two of the others, and certainly the Australians, require a good deal of education...The logical conclusion of denouncing the Alliance would be that Australia and New Zealand should undertake the burden of naval supremacy in [the] China seas. This they are neither willing nor able to do.⁷

In preparation for the business of persuasion, senior British ministers and the top brass, navy and military, determined carefully to calibrate the danger which Japan presented to Australia for the benefit of the Australian representatives. Several key position

papers were prepared containing strategic assessments both real and hypothetical.

The historian John Mordike has examined the papers circulated among delegates ahead of the conference and the minuted conversations associated with their preparation. His work demonstrates a sharp eye for the strategies of persuasion at the centre of empire. Moreover, the record enabled him to follow the progress of key texts, in draft form, as the emphases were refined to effect. Mordike is also alive to the anxieties that the Australian delegates brought to London, along with their determination to have these anxieties assuaged. His findings are set out in *Army for a Nation: A History of Australian Military Developments, 1880–1914*, published in 1992, and *'We Should Do This Thing Quietly': Japan and the Great Deception in Australian Defence Policy, 1911–14*, published in 2002.⁸

What is striking about the discussion at committee level is the political nature of the strategic assessment—how cautiously to express the security provided by the British navy, and what to say about Japan with a view to hastening Australian compliance with Britain's preparations for war. A Committee of Imperial Defence memorandum suggested the conference provided the opportunity to ascertain whether the Dominions 'would now be prepared to undertake certain definite responsibilities in connection with the defence of the Empire as a whole'. And, if so, nominate 'the nature and strength of the force they might make available for such a purpose'.

Another committee paper, specifically requested by the Fisher Labor government, contained a review of Australia's strategic position. The title was arresting, to say the least: 'Australia and New Zealand: Strategic Situation in the Event of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance Being Determined'. In final form, it ran entirely contrary

to an earlier draft by focussing not on the security of British naval cover but on its severe limits, and not on the unlikelihood of a Japanese invasion but on the possibility, in certain circumstances, of it, notably in the event that the alliance ended. Should the alliance be terminated or denounced, it was argued, this would have 'far-reaching effects on the position of Australia and New Zealand, and necessitate a reconsideration of the scale of probable attack on these Dominions'.⁹

The paper went on to argue that 'the possibility of Japan being ranged against us, either alone or in combination with some other naval Power, could not be prudently disregarded.' Nor could these southern Dominions disregard the possibility of a British fleet to the rescue being delayed by a hostile enemy in Europe, in which case 'it would no doubt be possible for Japan to convey overseas to Australia and New Zealand a military force of considerable size.'¹⁰

The advice from the chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir William Nicholson, was not to overstate this possibility lest the Australians choose to focus on home defence at the expense of a contribution to the anticipated war abroad. The advice was taken on board and the report back-pedalled a little, advising that a 'large-scale' invasion of Australia or New Zealand was 'highly improbable' unless permanent command of the sea was somehow achieved by 'the fleets of Japan and her allies'. Thus a 'raid' as opposed to invasion was the more likely of the adverse possibilities. The committee sounded its warning:

In view of the fact that Japan has at her disposal an army of over 1,000,000 men available for service overseas, it is conceivable that she might take advantage of the temporary possession of the local command of the sea to dispatch a

raiding force against Australia or New Zealand with the view to creating a diversion and effecting the maximum amount of damage within a brief space of time.

This moderated analysis, still with its reference to ‘1,000,000’ Japanese soldiers, was leading to a predictable conclusion. Australia and New Zealand must continue to build their naval and military forces, with haste:

The whole strategic situation in the Far East, in the event of the possible termination of the Anglo–Japanese alliance, *whenever that event takes place*, will depend largely upon the extent to which Australia and New Zealand find it possible to develop their respective contributions to the naval forces of the Empire.¹¹

In addition to naval preparation, ‘the most effective deterrent to raids would be an adequate and efficient military force so organized as to be capable of dealing with such raiding attacks with the least possible delay.’

In the first week of the Imperial Conference the delegates, having studied the key documents, attended a meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence, a private session under ‘a veil of confidence’, at which they were treated to an address by the foreign secretary. Sir Edward Grey’s speech was a comprehensive statement of British foreign policy and a momentous occasion for the Dominions for he conceded, at long last, the right to consultation in matters concerning the defence of the empire—a voice at the centre, a seat at the inner counsels, what Deakin had so often sought and been denied. Circumstances had changed, Grey confirmed:

The creation of separate Fleets has made it essential that the Foreign Policy of the Empire should be a common policy. If it is to be a common policy, it is obviously one on which the Dominions must be taken into consultation, which they must know, which they must understand, and which they must approve; and it is the hope and belief that the Foreign Policy of this country does command the assent and approval, and is so reasonable that it must command the assent and approval of the Dominions, that we wish to have a consultation, and I wish to explain, as fully as I can, the present situation of Foreign Affairs.¹²

Grey reviewed the situation in Europe, the rise of the German 'Napoleonic' policy, the threat to British naval supremacy and its implications for the Dominions; but he did not dwell on the German threat to British security.

The foreign secretary was making his way, for the benefit of the Australians in particular, to the case for the renewal of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. He affirmed that the Japanese had been 'good allies'. They had never 'strained that alliance', nor had they 'asked for anything of any kind which was not well within the terms of the alliance'. He spoke forcefully of the urgent necessity for the alliance to be affirmed and extended.¹³

The strategic case for the alliance, Grey told the delegates, was simple enough. If it were abandoned, Britain could not match Japanese naval power in the Pacific. A massive burden of self-defence would fall upon the Dominions and so, he argued: 'In the interests of strategy, in the interest of naval policy expenditure, and in the interests of stability, it is essential that the Japanese alliance should be extended.'

Grey assured the delegates that their immigration policy was safe, that the Japanese government could be trusted, that Japan

would not press its people upon any nation that did not want them. And he raised the possibility of a terrible alternative—that in the event the alliance faltered, for whatever reason, Japan ‘at once would look, and be bound to look, at what other arrangements she could make with other Powers to secure her position’. The spectre of a German–Japanese alliance was abroad, yet again. No other contingency was more likely, from a Dominion perspective, to free the Japanese to do their worst in the Pacific, while leg-roping the British to home defence.

Under the ‘veil of confidence’ at an inner counsel of empire, the Australians had been consulted and their support canvassed, and they readily gave it. Fisher and Pearce were as one. They agreed that a renewal of the alliance was the best way forward. There was really no other way to go, the ‘Oriental linking’ both unnatural *and* inescapable.

But there was one great compensation to come out of the meeting: the secretary of state for foreign affairs had made the unprecedented promise of consultation in the future. He had asked for Australia’s support for the alliance, giving at least the appearance that responsibility for foreign policy could be shared—though, regardless of the Dominion position, the British were clearly hell-bent on renewing the alliance. And, regardless of their acquiescence, the Labor leadership would continue to distrust the alliance, while noting that British consultation with Japan had clear and present priority over consultation with the Dominions.

Grey concluded his presentation by opening the meeting to discussion. The Dominion delegates asked no questions about the European situation, and the Australian delegates turned immediately to the subject of Japan. George Pearce was habitually concerned with Japanese infiltration of Australia’s north and the

‘barrier’ islands of the Pacific. Only a year previously, he had accused the Japanese of having spies tour the northern parts of Australia, an accusation for which he could produce no evidence when challenged by the Japanese consul in Sydney. Now he wanted to know if the Foreign Office ‘had any information as to what is being done in New Caledonia with regard to Japanese immigration’.

Grey could only reply to the question with a question: did Pearce have any information on this subject? Yes, said Pearce. The Japanese had formerly sent ‘coolie class’ workers to New Caledonia to work in the mines but now, ‘systematically’, they were sending ‘large numbers of engineers who have served in the army, and are of a superior class’. The ‘superior class’ of Japanese had always been the real problem, as Deakin had affirmed as far back as 1901. Now, according to Pearce, up to three thousand of them were embedded in this major island group. Fisher backed up his defence minister. He assured those present that the Japanese were placing their people in the smaller islands of the Pacific, too.

The British prime minister queried Pearce’s use of the term ‘systematic’. Pearce did not resile. He replied that the coolies were being displaced ‘systematically by a superior class of Japanese, men who had served in the Japanese army, many of whom are civil engineers and men of higher education’.

Asquith: ‘You think that these civil engineers come there for some other purpose than mining?’

Pearce: ‘Yes.’¹⁴

The Secret Pact

Just as the British had prepared well in advance of the conference for the management of the Australians in naval matters, so they

had also prepared for the management of the Australians in the military sphere. Securing a commitment to an expeditionary force for service to the empire abroad had been a primary goal since the foundation of the Commonwealth: from the earliest debates over the original defence bill to the subsequent 'arm-wrestle' with Hutton and, thereafter, the tensions around this issue in defence administration, the Commonwealth parliament and successive cabinets, all the way to the investigative tour by Lord Kitchener. And then...

Six months after Kitchener submitted his report, in August 1910, senior staff in the War Office in London were discussing the forthcoming opportunity at the Imperial Conference to speak frankly to the Dominions about the necessity to plan for war, and the necessity for Dominion contributions to an Imperial military force, organised and trained to fuse with the British army.

The problems discussed were several: Dominion forces were in a 'very imperfect and almost embryonic condition'; they were established as a citizen force, which meant that 'only a proportion of the forces would be available for operations overseas'; and there was also the question of Dominion autonomy—the 'constitutional difficulty' that meant Britain was unable to dictate to the Dominions on defence matters. The colonies might be half slave but the Dominions were more than half free. They were free to decide on the degree of their military commitment, if any commitment at all. Thus, there was a need to prepare, well in advance; a need to have the Dominions commit and 'bind themselves to concerted action in matters over which there is not united jurisdiction'.¹⁵

The War Office hoped to find a way round these problems in the course of the socialising, the wining and dining, the

speechifying and conferring, both in the glare of the open sessions and in the sessions held under a 'veil of confidence'. The paper dealing with this difficult challenge was titled 'The Co-operation of the Military Forces of the Empire'. Its objective was to 'define with some precision the different theatres in which, and to a certain extent the different times at which, we might require [military] assistance from the Dominions'.

They might be more easily persuaded if the commitment were confined to their 'regions of interest' but, as one War Office chief noted, 'the real truth of the matter is, that in order to get full value out of such assistance as the Dominions may elect to give us, their troops should be placed under the orders of the War Office (C.I.G.S.) and made available for service in any part of the world.'¹⁶

The pre-conference discussions at the highest levels recognised the sensitivity of the issue, particularly in Australia, and concluded that extreme caution and careful wording were necessary. In its final formulation, the paper presented at the conference was quite different. The wording was vague, suggesting the Dominions might deploy not too far from their own shores, while a paragraph which mentioned the possibility of war in 'North-Western Europe' (precisely where war was expected) was deleted.

The paper also contained a reworked paragraph on mutual assistance, its not-so-mutual formulation massaged into something more balanced. It acknowledged 'a reciprocity of obligation on the part of the Dominions to render if need be, in proportion to their resources, the same assistance to the United Kingdom as they expect the United Kingdom to render to them'.¹⁷

At the heart of the paper was an appeal to the Dominions to ready for war: an insistence on the necessity to prepare well in

advance for 'combined movements by land and sea, involving the accurate solution to large problems of time and space'. The paper noted the considerable logistical challenge of sending even a 'small expeditionary force from the UK' to deal with, for example, 'a minor campaign against a semi-civilized enemy'. So, 'how much more essential must this care and attention be, before engaging in a struggle with a Great Power or combination of Powers'. And in such a struggle the assistance of the Dominions would most definitely be required. All in all, the imperial bias in the paper was still glaringly evident.

The paper concluded that each Dominion had 'certain natural spheres of action' and emphasised, yet again, the autonomy of the self-governing nations within the empire, the decision in their hands. The sooner that decision was made, the better; the sooner 'the details of organization, command, armament, equipment and training' could be handed over to the Imperial General Staff and 'definite plans of action elaborated'.¹⁸

Late in the conference, on Wednesday, 14 June, George Pearce was to attend a meeting in the War Office. Its proceedings were conducted in secret, chaired by the chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir William Nicholson. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the co-operation of the military forces of the empire. As Pearce was late—he had the wrong starting time—an initial conversation proceeded without him, between Sir Frederick Borden, the Canadian defence minister, and Nicholson.

Borden expressed the view that the paper on 'Mutual Co-operation' was overly biased in favour of British as opposed to Dominion security, and that bias would not be acceptable to the Canadian public. He wanted a shift of emphasis, in addition to carefully worded statements of principle, so the paper would

attend as much to how British troops might assist Canada or Australia in their hour of need as to how Dominion troops might assist British forces. He wanted a balanced expression of mutual obligation throughout. This was particularly important, he said, as the Canadian government was 'under the shadow of an impending general election'. Nicholson agreed that the paper must be further amended, to make it more palatable for the Dominion constituency.

At that point, Pearce arrived and took his seat. Unlike his Canadian counterpart, he had no qualms with the paper in its present form. He indicated that the proposal would be approved by the Australian prime minister, and that the Fisher government was eager to know more about the 'natural spheres' and ready to embark upon planning for contingencies to avoid any need for hurried improvisation. He wanted an indication of 'what might be required, so our Local Staffs could be directed to give consideration to what the Imperial Staff has said on these points as to all our local spheres'.

Borden agreed, with one proviso. Political conditions in Canada, he said, 'make it undesirable that such matters should be discussed openly'.

'I do not propose that either,' said Pearce.

Borden and Pearce were agreed on the need for secrecy. In fact, as this apparently quite complete record indicates, Pearce then affirmed that the Australians had first posed the question of mutual co-operation to the War Office with confidentiality in mind—well away from the open sessions at the conference. 'We were asking them to tell us what in Australia they considered to be our sphere of action,' he explained, and that was not a subject for public scrutiny.

The meeting ended on that note, and further changes to the wording of the paper were formulated and edited in that night.

The amended paper was discussed at a second meeting in the War Office, on Saturday, 17 June. Pearce came with a prepared statement. He reminded those present that Australia's military forces were maintained for 'local defence' and the defence act allowed for nothing else—but, in the event of any serious war, any number of patriotic Australian men might volunteer. That being so:

It seemed to us that our local General Staff ought to know what is in the minds of the Imperial General Staff as regards what use such forces should be put to so that they could be employed in their various Dominions in arranging schemes for mobilisation or transportation of such troops, and so that they would be guided in preparation of such a scheme by the general idea that the Imperial Staff had as to the use to which such troops could be put.

The Canadian minister was not anxious to press for such detail, but Pearce persisted, insisting the Australians were well on the way to uniformity with imperial standards with respect to equipment and training, and yet 'there is something more than that to be done,' he said. He called for the 'preparation of schemes of mobilisation by local sections of the Imperial General Staff in order to enable that uniformity to be availed of'.

George Pearce had offered to commit Australia to prepare an expeditionary force for imperial undertakings abroad, 'breaking previously untouched ground in Australia's relationship with Britain', as John Mordike notes.

There is no evidence that Sir William Nicholson had any forewarning of this remarkable proposal, and he was not about to

let it slip by. He pressed the Australian defence minister to be sure there was no mistaking his apparent meaning. He checked that Pearce did indeed mean a force for 'overseas action'. Nicholson was pleased to have the offer confirmed.

There was clearly an understanding that secrecy was required, not least because Pearce had contravened the spirit if not the letter of his own defence act. Nicholson led the way: 'It is much better to hold our tongues about it and not say anything according to the old Persian proverb "What two ears only hear, God himself does not know."'

Pearce then said that the Australian general staff would begin work and the plans would be sent to the War Office when completed; but all present were well aware that the nationalist and anti-militarist constituencies in the Dominion parliaments were a concern. Again, Nicholson led the way: 'I think it is much better we should do this thing quietly without any paper on the subject, because I am sure in some of the Dominions it might be better not to say anything about preparations.'

'It gives mischievous people an opportunity to talk,' said Sir Frederick Borden.

'I quite recognise that, and I suppose we have as large a proportion of that kind of people in Australia as there are anywhere else,' said Pearce.

Nicholson suggested that the War Office paper on 'Mutual Co-operation' be withdrawn from the conference papers.

'Suppressed or withdrawn—I would hope so,' said Borden, and Pearce agreed, but with one qualification: the paper was to be withdrawn 'on the understanding that it will be acted on'.

No report of these discussions was published in the proceedings of the Imperial Conference of 1911. However, proof copies of the

transcript of the secret War Office meetings were printed and one, Nicholson's, was eventually placed on file in the War Office. Eighty years later, John Mordike found it while researching War Office preparations for the First World War. There was, he writes, 'no public knowledge' of the secret meetings until his book *An Army for a Nation* was published, in 1992.¹⁹

Why Commit?

The public response in Australia to the conference was guarded but positive. The Anglo-Japanese alliance would at least provide what Hughes called 'breathing space' for Australia to continue to build its naval and military forces. Similarly, Fisher was intent upon making political mileage at home out of the breakthrough in consultation. Hitherto, the Dominions had not been consulted on Britain's treaty negotiations with other big powers. Here was success where Deakin had repeatedly failed. Fisher trumpeted his team's achievement, the delegates having had the opportunity to 'discuss the affairs of the Empire as they affect each and all of us', he told the press.²⁰

But Fisher knew all too well that progress on this front was elusive and uncertain, for the British government's freedom of action remained essentially unqualified, just as the British navy remained essentially absent from the Pacific. The more telling outcome was the secret commitment to prepare for a European war. Why had Australia's minister of defence made this commitment on behalf of the Labor government?

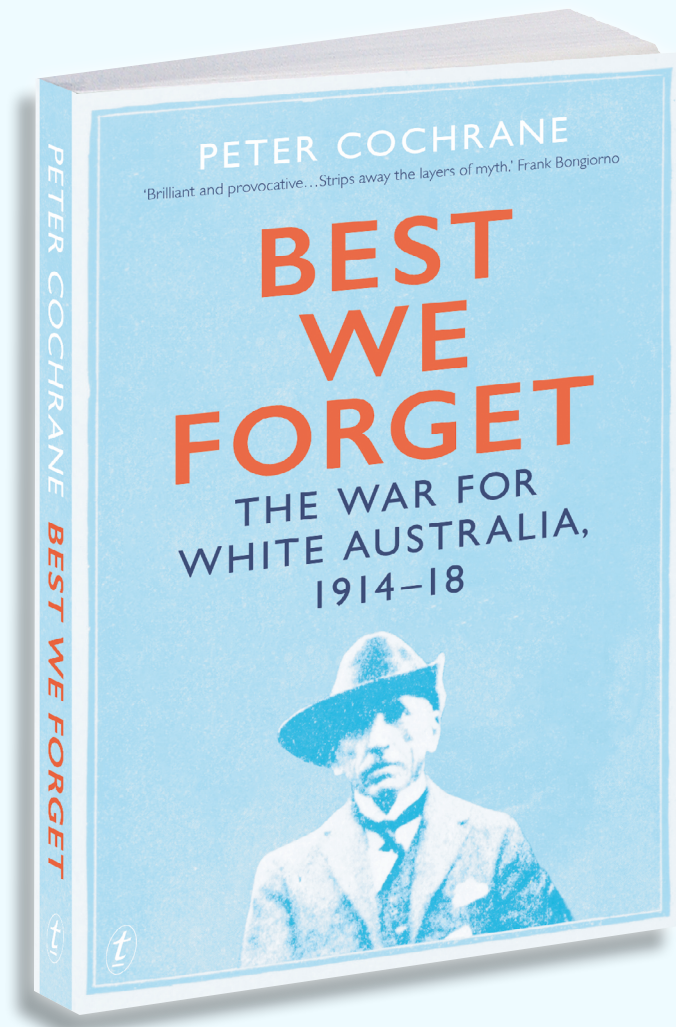
The confidential pact contains a persuasive logic when we consider the fears that were building in Australia prior to the conference and the limited faith—on Australia's part—in the alliance or, to be more precise, in Japan. A number of considerations dovetailed

to underpin the decision: the Australians at the conference were apprised of the long-term alliance that Britain was pursuing; they understood that Japan, ensconced with Britain and ever more tightly and vitally tied into British strategic needs, would have long-term leverage in London. The fear was as much about a diplomatic menace as a military one, and it compelled the Australian government to respond, to bind tighter to the imperial centre.

To commit to war abroad was to acknowledge that Australia would fight—literally fight—for its White Australia policy, anywhere. The government had doubled defence expenditure in quick time and it would double again almost as quickly, but defence was not enough; diplomacy was essential, too—no skin in the game, no say at the table. In years to come this would figure in Billy Hughes's fanatical commitment to conscription for service overseas. And there were further considerations, with both sides committed to the business of persuasion: for Australia, the expeditionary promise would involve the full co-operation of the British while the newly committed nation quietly retained, at least in principle, its sovereign right upon the occasion to choose what to defend and where to fight.

The British position, similarly, had its unstated elements, evident in the course of the conference consultations: play up the Japanese threat and the Australians will expedite their defence preparations, for they will readily pay up and prepare to safeguard white Australia. And when the time comes, with war in Europe, *willy nilly*, they will be there.

At the highest levels of the Australian government, deep-sunk anxieties prompted the nation's sentinels to cling tighter to empire. Byzantine cogitations came down to that simple equation: distrust of Britain, fear of Japan.



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