Address to Politics in the Pub
‘Give ‘em the boot! Time to close the US base in Darwin’
by
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Gaelic Club, 1/64 Devonshire Street, Surry Hills NSW 2010
Thursday 28th June 2018

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and salute their elders past and present. This always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

In the same vein, I also want to salute a departed elder of my own, imposed, European culture – the late Malcolm Fraser, without whose inspiration I could not do what I am doing here - campaigning actively for the US marines to leave Darwin.

This event was originally billed as a ‘debate’ and I did find a worthy opponent from within the US Studies Centre – but he was unable to make it on today’s date and no-one from the centre stepped up to take his place. Whether or not that means that that side of the debate is a little scared to engage, I leave to speculation. Meanwhile, I’m just going to go ahead, as if I was debating the proposition that I wanted to put forward - ‘that US marines have no business being in Darwin’ – on the understanding that there may be some in the audience who feel that they really do have some business being there.

I am with IPAN, the Independent and Peaceful Australia Network, so it seems right to begin by inviting you to consider what defines a nation as ‘independent’. The most succinct definition that I can provide is that an independent nation is one that looks after its own defence within its defined borders. All military activity within those borders comes under the control of the government of the nation in question. It may not be a definition, technically, but I think it is axiomatic.

Now, this means that having the military of any foreign power within the borders of a nation automatically compromises that nation’s independence. It creates a flaw in the nation’s defence system by virtue of the simple fact that the occupying forces are not answerable to the host nation’s government.

Of course there are situations in which it is appropriate and even desirable to have foreign forces on your territory, the most obvious one being when the host nation feels itself under threat from some third power.

Consider the situation in Australia. We face no threat today and faced no threat at the time we first learnt about the possibility of entertaining US marines – which was, ironically, on 11th day of the 11th month of the 11th year of this century. It is an easy date to remember. So when President Obama came over to announce the USA’s
military pivot to the Asia Pacific in the Australian Parliament on the 16th November 2011, I found it hard to believe that our government could have even countenanced such a step.

We were facing no threat then and we are facing no threat now; there was and is comparative peace in our region. Indeed the 2016 Defence White Paper says “there is no more than a remote prospect of a military attack by another country on Australian territory in the foreseeable future”, yet we still compromised our independence by inviting or acquiescing in the stationing of foreign forces on our territory. Forces that would never be under the control of our government. It was slightly absurd and utterly outrageous and I have been angry about it ever since.

So I took it upon myself to try to find out what was behind it. What was the rationale for this extraordinary departure from sensible, strategic action. What reason lay behind this willingness to allow our independence to be thus compromised?

I have conducted correspondence with a succession of Prime Ministers and Ministers for Defence since 2012. I have tried to get answers to questions like ‘Why have we got marines stationed in Darwin? What strategic benefit do they bestow on Australia? What is their business here?’

One question I have asked repeatedly is this: “What assurance does the Australian government have that the US marines stationed in Darwin would not engage in military action on orders from Washington?” No attempt has been made to answer that question, from which one can confidently conclude that there is no such assurance.

You would expect that after taking such a significant step, our government would have ready answers to questions of this nature. Surely it could explain the rationale for such a move. But the answers I have been given have been consistently weak. The letters explain that the US has been the guarantor of peace and stability in our region for 70 years, making it important to strengthen the alliance upon which Australia depends. This correspondence also asserts that the presence of the marines provides opportunities for the ADF to train with its US counterparts, thus improving ‘interoperability’.

Then there is a line that I find quite amusing. They argue that the marines are here to assist in the event of natural disasters – overlooking the obvious fact that the main body of marines is routinely absent during the cyclone season. The primary purpose and training of the marines is for the destruction of human life. If you want humanitarian assistance, is this the body you would turn to?

There is no denying that a Pax Americana has existed in the region for 70 years – but this has been imposed by US military might, rather than through peaceful co-existence. Quite contrary to the government’s position, the pivot to the Asia Pacific, involving a substantial increase in the USA’s military presence in our region, has clearly created instability.
There’s no denying that Australia’s alliance with the US is strong – but that is no reason for constantly taking further actions to ‘enhance’ it or make it even stronger, for example by letting the US use progressively more Australian facilities. It is as if we need to keep paying insurance premiums to the US military – although it resembles a protection racket more than insurance. ‘Interoperability’ I find highly questionable, rather than desirable, since it merely means that the ADF can fit more easily into the US command structure and certainly not the other way round.

But taken alone or in any combination, these considerations are, in my humble opinion, not sufficient to justify what is, in fact, a radical departure from normal practice. And that makes the final point made in the correspondence – that this development is just an extension of existing arrangements – completely spurious. It is much more than a mere extension of existing arrangements! Having the armed personnel of a foreign power routinely stationed on our country’s territory in peace time takes the alliance relationship into entirely new territory. At the time, I, and the colleagues I soon met, could see that this was taking things one step too far.

Happily, no-one in government has suggested that the marines are here for our direct defence and, clearly, that is not the reason they are here (despite the views of some die-hards, nostalgic for WW2).

So I go back to my question and my proposition. What business do US marines have being stationed in Darwin? When you look at it from the other side of the Pacific, from the USA’s standpoint, the picture changes.

They, the marines, are described as a Marine Air Ground Task Force or MAGTF. The role of such a force is that of attack. The marines pride themselves on always being ready to ‘fight tonight’. They train so as to be in a constant state of military readiness. They are not (to echo a point I just made) a defence force. They can attack from the sea or the air, so take notice of the fact that, as part of the force posture agreement between Australia and the USA, US aircraft have access to airport facilities in the north of the country. That agreement, by the way, came into effect in 2015 and endures for 25 years i.e. until 2040. As well as accommodating the marines, it gives the USA access to air and sea ports and allows the pre-positioning of military equipment.

Through the Darwin MAGTF the USA has one more forward position, conveniently close to South East Asia, from which it could, if it chose, launch a small-scale or large military offensive. And make no mistake, if it were to occur, such an offensive would take place on orders from Washington, not Canberra. With respect to Australia, I agree with Malcolm Fraser that no government would have the power to prevent such an eventuality. We would simply hear about it afterwards. This is very much an aspect of the compromised independence of which I speak.

The establishment of the MAGTF in Darwin has allowed the USA to, in their own parlance, project power even further from their own shores than their network of
bases previously permitted. It is clearly part of their plan for ‘full spectrum dominance’.

And what of the regional message that the marines’ presence sends? It makes it absolutely clear to all countries in the region that Australia is indeed ‘joined at the hip’ with the USA. With the marines in Darwin, there is no way that the USA can go to war without Australia being dragged along too, whether or not we find it to be in our national interest.

When you boil it down, the strategic benefits of this arrangement all accrue to the USA, whilst Australia has to face the fact that every enemy of the USA becomes the enemy of Australia which carries with it the possibility that we could face an attack because we harbour US military assets.

For domestic purposes, the marines presence might indicate the USA’s commitment to come to Australia’s assistance in an emergency, but, to re-iterate what is coming to be known as Fraser’s paradox, the main reason we might ever need such assistance is because we have this dangerous alliance!

And do not overlook the nature of the country with which we are joined at the hip. More than 50 years ago, in 1967, Martin Luther King described the USA as the greatest purveyor of violence in the world – and things have got worse, rather than better, since he wrote that. In 1965 a group of French monks wrote “We hold no necessary grudge against the USA, but we say ‘No!’ to a system which nourishes itself by means of war, which orientates itself towards war – and which profits handsomely from war”. The USA is by far the world’s greatest spender on military materiel and the lobbying power of its military industry is immense. There is, I contend, an influential and powerful elite within America that is completely comfortable with the idea of their country engaging in war, because it would stand to make a great deal of money out of it.

It is my own view - one that I understand I share with a majority of the world’s population - the greatest threat to world peace comes from the USA.

And this is the country that has its forces in Australia on a very nearly permanent basis, whatever we might be told about ‘rotations’.

It is impossible to discuss the presence of the US marines without also raising these related matters about the alliance and the nature of the American nation.

But let me make one more point here - in 2003 Australia was hoodwinked into going to war in Iraq. We were suckers. The Iraq invasion was a disaster that is ongoing. The lies that took us into that war came from our good friend and ally, the USA, and our government of the time swallowed them. We have never had an Inquiry into our involvement in that debacle and, within just a short period, we had US troops stationed on our, domestic territory. Go figure. Are we content to be dupes? Have we been duped again? Is this not a pattern we should break out of?
So let me summarise. The presence of the US marines in Darwin:

- Compromises our independence;
- Makes us enemies, where we need have none;
- Makes us a possible target, if the USA engages in warfare;
- Provides little or no strategic benefit to Australia;
- Provides great strategic benefit to the USA, a violent nation that is ready to go to war at any time.

The presence does not make us safer - quite the contrary. It costs us financially as well as strategically and, for the life of me, I cannot understand why we ever allowed such an absurd development to take place.

Australia is an island continent, populated by resourceful people under a single government. We are very safe. We already have all that we need to defend this island.

It is time for me to appeal to our sense of ourselves, to our patriotism, if you like, and say that we are old enough, clever enough, tough enough and ugly enough to stand up and look after ourselves. We do not need the marines in Darwin. We will be better off without them.

It is time for us to look America in the eye and say “Thank-you and goodbye” to the marines – or, to put it slightly more directly, it is time to tell them to leave. In the expression we have adopted for our campaign, it is time give ‘em the boot!

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