

Australia and the Vietnam War: Analyses, Actions and Attitudes

What were the main ideological currents in the anti-Vietnam War movement in Australia, and how did it affect Australian attitudes to the conflict?

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There are many parallels between the explanations of Australian involvement in Vietnam and more recent arguments about Australia's participation in the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. Conservatives argued that Communists in Vietnam were a direct threat to Australian security. The Islamist Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and Iraq under the secular nationalist dictator Saddam Hussein supposedly endangered people living in Australia. In each case the argument was untrue. Most critics of these military expeditions explained them in populist terms: the conservatives were ignoring the Australian national interest in order to brown-nose US leaders. It was only some far left currents in the anti-war movements which challenged the concept of the national interest itself.

By assessing the debates over why Australia was involved in Vietnam and the tactics of the anti-war movement we can cast light on the usefulness of the national interest framework for discussing politics then and today. This is particularly true if we place them in the context of the dramatic shift in public attitudes towards the War, between the mid 1960s and the early 1970s, and the developments which explain it, the withdrawal of Australian forces and the defeat of the United States.

The first of these developments was the continued tenacity of the Vietnamese in resisting French and then US imperialism. Over decades and despite setbacks, they did not end their struggle for national liberation. This, along with the revolt of US soldiers both in Vietnam and at home, meant that the United States and its allies could not win the War. The anti-war movements in Australia, the USA and other countries was the third important factor. These movements were most effective in winning arguments and changing attitudes when they mobilised masses of people in direct action against the policies of their own governments.¹

The sections below outline the explanations of Australian involvement in Vietnam offered by various political currents and the different tactics advocated by those opposed

1 Amongst the best accounts of the War are Joe Allen, *Vietnam: The (Last) War the U.S. Lost* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2008); David Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt: GI Resistance During the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2006); Gabriel Kolko, *Vietnam: Anatomy of War 1940–1975* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1987); and Jonathan Neale, *The American War: Vietnam 1960–1975* (London: Bookmarks, 2001). Specifically on Australian involvement see John Murphy, *Harvest of Fear: A History of Australia's Vietnam War* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993); Gregory Pemberton, *All the Way: Australia's Road to Vietnam* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1987); and Michael Sexton, *War for the Asking: Australia's Vietnam Secrets* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1981).

to the War.² The final section assesses the accuracy and contemporary relevance of these explanations.

The justification for war

The Government of Sir Robert Menzies and its conservative successors offered several different, though not necessarily contradictory, justifications for sending first Australian ‘instructors’ and then, in May 1965, combat troops to Vietnam. Its superficial rhetoric was about defending democracy in the country, which it was supposedly doing by supporting a succession of dictatorial and corrupt Vietnamese regimes. The Government’s most systematic and serious public explanations of its actions were that it was in Australia’s national interest to involve the United States in Southeast Asia and that Australian participation in the Vietnam conflict would encourage this.

Zelman Cowan, a senior academic apologist for Government policy and later a Liberal-appointed Governor-General, made the argument very plain: ‘The commitment of Australian forces to Vietnam ... does more than anything else we can do to ensure a continued American presence in an area which is vital to our security.’ Two mechanisms were allegedly involved. One – the ‘domino theory’ – drew on Australian racism and conservative anti-Communism. As one conservative politician put it,

The takeover of South Vietnam would be a direct military threat to Australia and all the countries of South and South-East Asia. It must be seen as part of a thrust by Communist China between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

The other mechanism was less direct. It amounted to an insurance policy. Australia’s commitment to Vietnam was seen as a down payment for US help if Australia were ever attacked.

Labor’s zig-zags

Arthur Calwell was the leader of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) from 1960 until early 1967. He and the Party opposed both conscription, announced in November 1964, and the dispatch of troops to Vietnam the following year. Electoral competition with Menzies, the emergence of a modest anti-war movement and the conflict with Gough Whitlam over the Party leadership led him to toughen his initial stance. In May 1966 the Parliamentary Labor Party endorsed Calwell’s commitment that a Labor Government would withdraw conscripts from Vietnam ‘without delay’ and regular forces ‘as soon as possible’. Calwell also encouraged demonstrations and, up to a point, the movement on the streets.

Nevertheless, Calwell’s framework for judging foreign policy was not very different from that of Menzies. ‘All our words, all our policies, all our actions must,’ the Labor leader asserted in May 1965, ‘be judged ultimately by this one crucial test: What best promotes our national security, what best guarantees our national survival?’ For the right and centre of the Labor Party, the US alliance met this test. The conflict between the Government and Opposition over Vietnam amounted to a sometimes coded debate (even to the participants) over the most effective means of maintaining a stable world order dominated

2 Detailed references for material in this article can be found in Rick Kuhn, “The Australian Left, Nationalism and the Vietnam War”, <http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/interventions/leftvietnam.htm>. Accessed 4 February 2009.

by the USA, under which Australia could flourish. Nationalism therefore informed the judgements of both.

According to Calwell, the problem was that the US Government and, following it, Menzies had overestimated the possibility of a military solution to the Vietnam 'problem'. This miscalculation was damaging the national interest.

The conservatives were more disposed to confrontation and coercion in foreign and industrial relations policy. The ALP advocated cooptation. Communism could be combated more effectively by improving the lives of the South Vietnamese people. The United Nations should help resolve the dispute. But Calwell's alternative strategy for defeating or neutralising Communism in South Vietnam, which Whitlam and the Australian Council of Trade Unions shared, was utopian.

The prospects of the USA, let alone Australia, embarking on a massive aid program to improve Vietnamese living standards while Communists controlled the North and had significant support in the South were minimal. With both the USA and USSR able to veto decisions, the UN was a nullity in cases in which there was any element of superpower conflict.

Gough Whitlam did not think that the USA would necessarily lose the war in Vietnam and thought pressure on the US government could encourage it to seek a peace agreement with the Communists in Vietnam. This and Labor's poor performance in the November 1966 elections led him to shift the Party's position on Vietnam to the right after he took over as leader in 1967.

The ALP's Federal Conference that year expressed general opposition to the continuation of the war and Australian involvement in it. But there was no call for the immediate withdrawal of Australian conscripts. Australian participation, it stated, should end only after an ALP Government had failed to persuade 'our allies' to stop bombing North Vietnam, negotiate with the National Liberation Front (NLF) and to 'transform operations in South Vietnam into holding operations'. Much of the Party's left was complicit in this position.

When it became electorally advantageous, Labor again took a stronger position on Australian participation in the war. The successes of North Vietnamese and NLF forces during the Tet Offensive in February 1968 demonstrated the fragility of the situation in South Vietnam. The mood in Australia and the United States began to shift. In July, the Federal Labor Conference formally hardened up ALP policy, against Whitlam's position that the withdrawal of Australian forces should occur after a united Vietnam had taken responsibility for affairs in Phuoc Tuy Province which they garrisoned.

But Whitlam's conscience was apparently spurred by an opinion poll result in August that, for the first time, showed a majority opposed Australian involvement in the War. He promised in October that the troops would be brought home by June 1970, if Labor won the 1969 elections. Only in 1971 did the Party decide it would repeal the National Service Act, which provided for conscription.

Whitlam was always more insistent than Calwell on the importance of close relations with the USA. He wrote that 'It is not the American Alliance itself which has reduced Australia to a status of diplomatic and defence dependence. It is the Government's interpretation of the Alliance.'

Jim Cairns

Left Labor MHR Jim Cairns was the most prominent opponent of Australia's role in Vietnam. He made it clear that the conservative parties, Liberal, Country and Democratic Labor, used anti-Communism as a weapon against Labor and that Chinese expansionism and Communist aspirations for world domination were not the basis of resistance to the United States and its clients in Vietnam. Support for Communism in Vietnam grew out of the role first of the Viet Minh and then the NLF in resisting foreign domination and corrupt regimes, that is, in leading an essentially nationalist movement. There was no military solution to the Vietnam War. Australia should be offering aid and support for economic progress.

The nationalist explanation of Australian involvement in Vietnam offered by Cairns amounted to the identification of a cultural cringe at the level of foreign policy. The Liberals were just too deferential to the United States. He did not connect this with his own view that the Australian economy was increasingly dominated by a few large and especially foreign companies. This dissociation facilitated his ambiguous attitude to the US Alliance. On the one hand he was critical of Australia's over-dependence on the USA. On the other hand, he assumed the countries had common interests and admired the USA's democratic traditions.

Cairns' far from radical analysis of Australia's place in the world and the war in Vietnam was matched by his political stance. Not only did he comply with Labor's official policies on the War, he also drafted the amendment which watered down the Party's position on Vietnam at the 1967 conference. Later he argued that 'Australian influence should primarily be used to end the war, and it could be significant in ending the war... Withdrawal of forces should come if it appears that Australian efforts to end the war were no longer likely to be effective.' As the most prominent figure in the Moratorium Campaign in 1970 and 1971, Cairns demanded that the Australian forces be brought home. It was not this demand, but rather his encouragement of mass political activity that distinguished his position from Whitlam's, during the early 1970s.

Only in Victoria, where the influence of the Labor left-wing was greatest, was there whole-hearted support from the ALP for the Moratorium Campaign, even after Whitlam had decided that rapid withdrawal was an electoral winner. As a consequence, the movement was largest in that state. Only to the left of Cairns did radicals explicitly reject the US alliance. Most saw Government policy as a betrayal of the national interest and as a consequence of direct pressure from the US interests.

The respectable left

In order to secure its immediate goal of Australian independence, the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) sought an alliance with the Labor Party, or at least its left wing, and broad support from workers, farmers, small and even middle sized businesses. The enemy was a small group of monopolists, 'the sixty families who owned Australia', and their government, which was betraying the nation. This led the Communist Party to advocate very moderate positions in the anti-war movement, even if it sometimes made more radical arguments in its own publications.

Its stance was tailored to accommodate allies in the ALP and, in the tradition of the peace movement of the 1950s, amongst 'progressive' intellectuals and ministers of religion. There was a significant element inside the Labor left (probably including some secret

CPA members) which took its lead from the Communist Party and they worked together in the largest peace organisations in Sydney, the Association for International Co-operation and Disarmament and in Melbourne, the Congress for International Co-operation and Disarmament.

So there was an element of feedback reinforcing Communist moderation. Particularly after Labor's policy was watered down in 1967, rather than emphasising the demands for an immediate end to conscription and withdrawal of Australian troops the Party's position was summed up in the slogan 'Stop the Bombing, Negotiate!' until the political climate shifted dramatically to the left in 1968. And while the CPA rejected the US Alliance, for the sake of unity it tended to play this down as an issue in and for the antiwar movement, the biggest opportunity to win an audience for its ideas in decades.

Australian Communists recognised that Australia engaged in imperialist policies of its own. This was hard to miss, especially in New Guinea. But their references to Australia as a 'junior partner' of US imperialism did not mean the government pursued an independent, i.e. national policy. Sir Garfield Barwick, in 1964 Minister for External Affairs, for example was lowering 'Australia's stature to that of a stooge for the US gendarmes' by facilitating shipments of barbed wire to South Vietnam.

Labor left and Communist criticisms implied that the Government and monopolies themselves did not know how to look after capitalist interests. This expressed the Party's commitment to an anti-monopoly alliance that might include small capitalists. An element in the Party's Stalinist heritage, this 'popular front' tactic, in contrast to the approach of Marx and Lenin, sacrificed workers' defence of their own class interests to achieve alliances with political currents, like the ALP, which served the interests of other classes. For example, *Tribune*, the CPA's weekly newspaper, played down the ALP's dilution of its position on Vietnam in 1967 and stressed that both the Labor and Communist Parties demanded a halt to the bombing of North Vietnam.

The CPA welcomed the successes of the Tet offensive in February 1968 and issued a call for immediate withdrawal of *Australian* forces and an end of the US Alliance. But the Party continued to demand an end to US bombing of North Vietnam and peace negotiations, rather than the immediate withdrawal of *all* foreign forces from Vietnam and continued to praise, with vague reservations, the ALP's 1967 policy.

The Moratorium movement was a product of the growing appeal of the demand for the immediate withdrawal of troops, after the Tet offensive. The Labor Party had belatedly reverted to supporting this policy in 1969, removing Communist qualms about making it a demand of the anti-war movement. But the CPA and its Labor left allies continued to restrain the movement's slogans and tactics. In Brisbane they *physically* prevented a leading militant from speaking. The Communist Party opposed US imperialism, but neither the CPA nor the Labor left were keen on the Moratorium adopting 'anti-imperialist' slogans.

Even the more radical aims of the third Moratorium mobilisation of 30 June 1971 did not raise the issue of imperialism by making links between the structure of Australian (or US) society and foreign policy or the US Alliance. An article in the University of Queensland student newspaper in 1971 expressed the concerns of the radical (Maoist, libertarian and Trotskyist) left about the Moratorium's narrow focus. Australian foreign policy could only be understood, it maintained, in terms of the nature of Australian society and imperialism. A higher profile for these issues, including the US alliance in the anti-war

movement might also have encouraged more critical thinking about the ALP in advance of the euphoria over Labor's 1972 victory.

The ALP and CPA recruited out of the anti-war movement, notably in the period from 1968. But there was also an intimate relationship between the movement and the emergence of student radicalism and the new left. Labor's failure to win the 1966 election was a turning point in the campaign against the Vietnam War and the development of the Australian left.

The radical left

From 1965, interest in more confrontationist political tactics had started to emerge. Labor's defeat led to a radicalisation of sections of the movement, especially students, who no longer accepted that issues could or should be resolved by elections or in parliament. They condemned the ALP's watered down policy on the war and the CPA's moderation. Greater working class combativity during this period also showed that militant struggles were possible and could achieve results. The Maoism of the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) (CPA[ML]), in particular, but also Trotskyism and libertarianism provided more radical critiques of Australian capitalism and justifications for more extreme tactics.

The example of young people turning contemporary China upside down, 'Third World' revolutions and the verbal radicalism of the Chinese regime (rather than the vicious practice of Mao's dictatorship) and its Australian supporters in the Melbourne-based, pro-Peking CPA (ML) were very influential on radical students, notably members of the Monash University Labor Club from 1966–67. The CPA (ML)'s political tactics and verbal aggressiveness drew on the Chinese version of the 'Third Period' analysis of the Communist International in the early 1930s. Unlike the CPA, it denounced the ALP, including its left, as equivalent to the conservative parties. It argued that the CPA and Soviet Union had also betrayed socialism.

The 'Maoists', like the CPA, believed that the main political cleavage in Australia was between 'the people' and a tiny group of monopolists. But they were fierce in their denunciations of US imperialism and the Government's betrayal of Australian independence. Where the CPA tended to argue, from the 1940s through to the 1980s, that Australia was *in the process* of losing its independence, the CPA (ML) regarded this as a *fait accompli*. Australia was involved in Vietnam because the Australian Government was subordinate to the US Government and US corporations.

Student militants of the Monash Labor Club shifted public debate and attitudes to the left through their radical demands and tactics. Other student groups in Australia had already expressed support and raised medical aid funds for the NLF, when in 1967 the Labor Club at Monash started to collect money that could be used for *military* purposes. Activists were subject to violence from right wing students and disciplinary procedures by the Monash administration. They organised confrontationist demonstrations against the US Consulate and, with other militants, successfully pushed for a sit down during the first Melbourne Moratorium demonstration in May 1970.

An unsystematic anti-authoritarianism was characteristic of the student movement. It was usually combined with romanticism about revolutionary struggles in the 'Third World'. And its explanations of Australia's involvement in Vietnam, shared with the CPA and CPA(ML), were an unconscious heritage of Stalinism. Brisbane was the only city in

which a major element in the movement eventually developed a distinct anarchist coloration. Undifferentiated anarchist rejection of authority did not generate any original insights into Australia's place in the world or its involvement in Vietnam. But Australian Trotskyism, represented by only a handful of people in the mid 1960s, did.

In Sydney, a few Trotskyists had some influence. Consequently, an understanding of Australian participation in the war, explicitly counterposed to Stalinist populism, had some currency much earlier than in other cities. The Trotskyists were critical of Labor's nationalism and racism (long-term commitment to the White Australia Policy and support for imperialist foreign policies, justified by racist arguments) and the Communist Party's nationalist propaganda. As a consequence they could recognise that the Australian Government pursued the interests of locally based capital and was not simply a puppet of the USA. Their rejection of both nationalism and the idea that socialists should be concerned about Australian independence was unique on the left.

It was less their distinct analysis of Australia's involvement in the War that initially won Trotskyists wider support than their preparedness to argue for demands and tactics which were, until late 1969, generally more militant than those supported by the ALP or CPA. Their militancy was a consequence of their rejection of nationalism which, in the case of the CPA, justified making concessions to the conservative wing of the anti-war movement. Bob Gould played an important role in the Vietnam Action Committee (VAC) in Sydney and Hall Greenland was prominent in the VAC and at Sydney University. The VAC pioneered civil disobedience at anti-war protests, starting with an October 1965 demonstration. In the years before the Moratoriums, it consistently called for the withdrawal of Australian and other foreign troops from Vietnam, unlike the ALP or CPA.

The Socialist Youth Alliance emerged at the end of 1969 and was the first Trotskyist organisation to develop a significant public profile, particularly through its newspaper *Direct Action*. It shared some questionable but basic assumptions with the populist and Stalinist left about the political incapacity of the Australian ruling class. However, while the CPA regarded Australian nationalism as progressive, *Direct Action* identified its conservative dynamic and drew attention to the chequered history of the ALP's, including the Labor left's, policies on Vietnam.

Nevertheless, despite their differences over nationalism, in the Moratorium campaigns the tactical position of the Socialist Youth Alliance (SYA) and its successor the Socialist Workers League (SWL) was similar in some respects to that of the Communist Party. Even more than the CPA, the SYA/SWL placed a dogmatic emphasis on the importance of limited slogans to attract broad support for mass demonstrations which it regarded as *the* key to success. This was a step backwards from the approach of Trotskyists in the VAC.

Assessing the arguments

The most popular conservative justification for Australia's involvement in Vietnam, that Australia was directly threatened by developments there, appealed to racism (fear of the 'Yellow Peril') and anti-Communism (worry about the 'Red Hordes'). These were neatly combined in paranoia about Chinese expansionism and toppling dominoes, aided by the force of gravity propelling them down the map towards Darwin. In the context of the continuing Cold War, such arguments also had an appeal in the right of the ALP. But they had virtually no factual basis.

Cairns provided a good account of the essentially nationalist motivations of the forces in Vietnam opposed to the USA and the regime in Saigon. Objectively, the levels of threat to Australian territory were minimal: none of the countries in the region had an interest in armed conflict with Australia and, even if they had, their military capacity was small compared with Australia's own. The Minister for the Army noted in his diary in mid 1965 that 'The threat to the Australian mainland remains remote till at least 1970'.

The Minister for External Affairs, Paul Hasluck, in 1965 recognised some of the real interests the USA and Australia had in raising the stakes in Vietnam:

The United States could not withdraw [from South Vietnam] without necessarily considering the world-wide impact of such a withdrawal on the broader strategies of world politics.

We can understand Australian foreign policy by looking at the structural position of the Australian capitalist class. By virtue of its economic power and the structure of the state, not only could the capitalist class define the national interest as its own, but in an important sense the national interest *was* the interest of the capitalist class. The main mechanism involved is the way the capitalist economy is structured to produce profits, rather than satisfy human needs. If public policy fails to maintain profit rates, investment falls away, growth stops or goes into reverse, and governments lose elections.³

With this fundamental qualification in mind, it is possible to agree with John Howard's 1994 observation 'that Menzies and his colleagues (and often large sections of the Labor Party) believed it to be in Australia's interests to act in concert with those powerful friends—and that in most cases, that judgement was right.' As the world's largest economic and military power, the USA was in a better position than any other state to secure the global private capitalist order it desired. And this pre-eminence encouraged an (ultimately unjustified) optimism about the viability of this project.

Australia had an interest in creating and sustaining a broadly similar world order to that sought by the United States. So participating in some US military adventures was a sensible policy option from the conservative viewpoint. It also involved a substantial free ride. During the Vietnam War, the proportion of GNP Australia devoted to arms expenditure was around half that of the USA.

Australian capitalists had an interest in a growing and profitable global economy. Such a world order could absorb Australian exports and provide both commodities not produced locally and capital flows to cover the typical current account deficits. Both the Labor and conservative parties accepted the organisation of Australia on capitalist lines and sought to promote economic growth within this framework. They therefore expressed the identity of capitalist and national interests. They endorsed the western side of the contest with the Soviet Bloc and criticised efforts by underdeveloped countries to radically alter their form of integration into the private capitalist world.

No doubt Hasluck regarded these two threats to the global order as identical. It is true that if they won power national liberation movements, like the one in Vietnam, which had been persecuted by the USA, might provide military advantages to the Soviet Bloc. But, more importantly and realistically, they could limit the scope for private capitalist profit

3 For a longer account of the national interest see Rick Kuhn, *Class and Struggle in Australia* (Frenchs Forest: Pearson, 2005), "Introduction", 10–13.

making by imposing restrictions on trade and investment. More importantly in the case of impoverished and resource-poor Vietnam, the victory of a mass struggle against oppression in one part of the world could encourage similar resistance to oppression or exploitation elsewhere, even in developed capitalist countries.

The modesty of Australia's economic and military capacity meant that, alone, Australian governments could not hope to mould the international order, as opposed to affairs closer to home in the south-west Pacific. Since Australia could not police the world, the Menzies Government encouraged the USA to do so. This was also one of the Labor Party's goals, though the ALP differed on the best way achieve it.

The south-west Pacific and Southeast Asia were of much greater concern for Australian than US governments. They were better prospective trade partners and destinations for Australian investment; sensitive shipping routes passed through them. In 1964 and 1965 the Menzies Government's worries about the region and US involvement were deepened by Indonesia's 'Confrontation' with Malaysia in northern Borneo.

In his thorough study of the origins of Australia's involvement in Vietnam, Greg Pemberton observed that 'Australia's strategic and economic interests demanded that Western hegemony be maintained in' Southeast Asia. But since World War II the USA had focused its foreign policy attention on Europe and, especially after the Cuban revolution, on Latin America. So there was a logic behind Australian efforts to boost the USA's policing activities in Southeast Asia. While trapped like most Australian policy makers in an ideology of national defence, whose racist and anti-Communist premises had little in common with reality, Norman Harper, a conservative academic, put his finger on this in 1963:

Attempting to pursue an independent policy, Australia has found that the global strength of the United States has set limits within which diplomatic manoeuvring is possible, and consequently that one of the major tasks of Australian diplomacy has been to collaborate with the United States and to influence, perhaps attempt to orient, American policy in our own area that is often of peripheral interest to Washington.

Far from being a puppet of the USA, the Australian Government attempted to use its limited military resources to manoeuvre the United States into increasing its involvement in Vietnam. The details of the decision to send Australian combat troops to Vietnam are now well known. The Menzies Government took this initiative without a request from the US Government or an invitation from the South Vietnamese regime. Once the US had expanded its military presence in Southeast Asia, Australia did not commit many more of its own troops.

Only the Australian Trotskyists, a small section of the left at the time, offered a convincing explanation for the presence of Australian troops in Vietnam. Their rejection of Australian nationalism meant that they could recognise that the US alliance and sending soldiers to Vietnam were not betrayals but expressions of Australian nationalism and Australia's national interests.

This explanation for Australia's involvement in Vietnam sheds light on later Australian military operations, in Iraq (in 1990–91 and 2003–2008), East Timor (1999 and 2006) and Afghanistan (from 2001). Despite the claims of the Liberal Party and/or the ALP these were neither 'humanitarian interventions' nor prompted by threats to the physical security of people in Australia. They were calculated efforts to project the interests of the

Australian capitalist class beyond the country's borders directly or by winning US backing for Australia's regional imperialist agenda in the south-west Pacific and parts of Southeast Asia.⁴

4 The logic of recent Australian foreign policy is discussed in Tom O'Lincoln, "The Neighbour from Hell: Australian imperialism" in Kuhn, *Class and Struggle in Australia*, 177–194.