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- Have the opportunity to vote or stand for election of the AID/WATCH Committee of Management

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Amount \$30 \$60 \$100 \$200 Other _____

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THE DFAT FOREIGN POLICY WHITE PAPER

PUBLIC DEBATE KEPT TO THE MARGINS

Australia's ambassadors are meeting behind closed doors in Canberra this week, to discuss the Government's proposed new direction on foreign policy. While paying more than a \$1 million on talking to their ambassadors. There have been two months of by-invitation DFAT 'consultations', and a public 'submission' process for the White Paper on the basis of the most minimal information.

DFAT provided a one-page series of questions for the public, with not very useful statements like 'Australia's foreign policy needs to be grounded in a clear-eyed assessment of our national interests'. There was no background paper to help the public understand the issues, in contrast with the Department of Defence, which produced a 51-page 'Issues Paper' to inform its White Paper process in 2014.¹ If we were still emboldened to comment on Australia's foreign policy, there is precious little for us to work on. Independently accessing information on DFAT strategic policy is nigh impossible. Detail on Australia's aid for instance is now folded into DFAT's 'economic diplomacy', limited to one-line tender documentation.²

And we can get little insight from Freedom of Information requests - DFAT grants less than a fifth of FoI requests in full.³ Official leaks though, can be a reliable source: this avenue is how, for instance, Australians learnt that DFAT was promoting investor-state provisions in the Trans-Pacific Partnership.⁴ To be fair, you could have put a (pre-vetted) question to the Foreign Minister at the online White Paper Facebook event (for 30 minutes on the 29th March).

Yet, if there was a time for a wide public debate on Australia's foreign policy, then it is now. As the world changes around us, Australia has little strategy beyond pursuing its interests and clinging to the US alliance. There is evidence of internal disquiet. The 2014 internal 'Capability Review' of DFAT, conducted by the Australian Public Service Commission, offered a rare insight. DFAT strategy was found to be weak in outcomes, collaboration and common purpose; planning and prioritisation were also weak. While the language was muted, the message is clear - DFAT is rudderless.⁵

The release, under Freedom of Information law, of an internal account of Australia's involvement the Iraq is also highly revealing of the misuses and political manipulations in recent Australian foreign policy.

The Australian Army and the War in Iraq, authored by Dr Albert Palazzo, from the Directorate of Army Research and Analysis, confirms much of what has been said by external critics of Australia's US-centred foreign policy.⁶ The full implications of the account are to be played out: equivalent to the 1971 US Pentagon Papers, the Palazzo Report should produce a full rethink of foreign policy, and prompt a full and open inquiry into what led Australia into the Iraq disaster.

Such an inquiry has been held in the UK, the Chilcott Inquiry, which was set up in 2009 'to identify lessons that could be learned from the Iraq conflict'.⁷ It reported in July 2016, and brought home important lessons for British foreign affairs. Unfortunately the Australian Government, under both Coalition and Labor, has failed to be accountable both to history and to the public on the Iraq invasion, leaving open the possibility that mistakes will be repeated in future Trump-led US-aligned interventions.

The public is fully aware of the risks of a closer alliance with the US - the 2015 Lowy Poll, before the ascent of the US Trump administration, found 57% were concerned the alliance could draw Australia into a Pacific war.⁸ The 2016 poll shows a fall in support for the US alliance - only 51% stated Australia should 'remain close' to Trump America, against 45% stating Australia should 'distance itself'.⁹

In this context there is a clear effort to redeem the US alliance. Since the inauguration of President Trump senior figures have found it necessary to promote the US alliance, for the first time in many years. In February this year a former defense chief Angus Houston appeared at the National Press Club defending ANZUS, asserting the alliance was 'bigger than Trump', and the message was echoed with appearances across numerous new outlets (SMH, Australian, Sky).¹⁰

There is precious little public support on other issues - the vast majority of Australians, for instance, are opposed to the use of overseas aid to promote national interests rather than address human needs. An ANU poll in 2014 showed that only 12% of the population supports the use

of aid to promote Australian commercial or political interests; in contrast, 75% support for overseas aid geared to humanitarian objectives.¹¹

There is a warning here for the Government. The 2016 Lowy Poll tracks a sharp decline since 2007 in the public perception of how well prime ministers ‘have handled our foreign policy’. Fifty-two percent thought Tony Abbott did a ‘poor job’, rivaled only by Julia Gillard, at a distant thirty-seven percent. Twenty-one percent think Malcolm Turnbull is doing a ‘poor job’, comparing with eight percent for Bob Hawke and fourteen percent for John Howard.¹²

The PM’s leadership capacity on foreign relations reflects a wide range of factors, but one of them is clearly the strategic (in)capacity of DFAT. There is a crisis of public faith in Australian foreign policy. But will the White Paper address these issues?

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[4] Dorling, P. (2015) “Wikileaks: secret trade deal exposed”, The Saturday Paper, 4 July.
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[6] Full document is attached at SMH, ‘The Secret Iraq Dossier’, at: <http://www.smh.com.au/interactive/2017/iraq-dossier/>
[7] The Iraq Inquiry, the Chilcott Inquiry, at: <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk>
[8] Lowy Poll 2015, at: <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/>
[9] Lowy Poll 2016, at: <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/publications/loyy-institute-poll-2016>
[10] National Press Club Address, Air Chief Marshal Sir Angus Houston AK, AFC And Prof Rory Medcalf, ‘There is a high price for walking away from ANZUS’ 21 February, 2017, transcript at: <http://nsc.anu.edu.au/news-events/news-20170221-2>
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AS AMBASSADORS GATHER, ITS TIME TO RETHINK

It’s time to remember just what the existing foreign policy has delivered. Since the 2003 White Paper, *Advancing the National Interest*, Australia has routinely undermined global norms. We have been at the forefront of breaking global commitments on military intervention, on the climate crisis and on development, to name just three. Highlights from the last thirteen years are sobering.

(i) Backing Illegal US Interventions

Australia has participated in US extra-judicial military interventions. Examples include Australia’s role in participating in and legitimizing the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, which was defined as ‘illegal’ by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in September 2004,¹ and with associated illegal renditions.² The US-Australian surveillance facility at Pine Gap, near Alice Springs, has been linked to more than 7,000 extrajudicial drone killings across non-combatant countries.³ The US justification for such attacks, ‘outside of an active battlefield’, has been widely challenged,⁴ including by the Red Cross.⁵ Despite these concerns, Australia has become ever more closely aligned with the US military, including hosting a new ‘rotational’ base for 2,500 US Marines in Darwin.⁶

(ii) Promoting Corporate Interests

Foreign policy has leveraged corporate power through extended ‘market access’ into poorer countries, along with rules that allow corporations to sue governments for reduced profits.⁷ Examples include bilateral and multilateral trade and investment agreements such as the US Free Trade Agreement (USFTA), Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the Pacific ‘PACER+’ agreement, all designed to sidestep opposition from poorer countries at the World Trade Organisation.⁸

(iii) Undermining Climate Policy

Australia’s record on global climate policy is derisory – it is less a laggard than a wrecker. The World Bank states the climate crisis is reversing development on a global scale. Yet since 2003 Australia has had the one of the lowest emissions reductions targets amongst industrialized countries,⁹ and has tried to ‘offset’ its responsibilities onto poorer countries.¹⁰ At home, Australia digs the hole deeper – promoting ‘clean coal’ while subsidising coal and gas for export. Australia now exports double the emissions it burns at home.¹¹

(iv) Negating Democracy and Self-determination

Australia consistently supports authoritarian allies. It has a ‘friendly and substantive relationship’ with Saudi Arabia,¹² the world’s largest oil exporter and close military ally of the US. It is one of the very few major powers refusing to condemn Israeli state violations of international norms, and has even criticised US abstention on the issue.¹³ Meanwhile, Australia’s regional policies negate human and development rights, from grabbing East Timor’s oil,¹⁴ to ignoring human rights abuses in West Papua.¹⁵

(v) Promoting Financial Rule

At the International Monetary Fund and World Bank Australia promotes finance markets as the cure-all, fueling debt and speculation and stoking the global food crisis. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis Australia the Reserve Bank resisted effective financial regulation, instead arguing for ‘avoiding undue regulatory burden’, emphasising ‘transparency’.¹⁶ Meanwhile, Australia’s export credit agency, the Export Finance and Insurance Corporation (EFIC), continues to create new potential liabilities for low-income countries, mainly on behalf of Australian mining and energy corporations.¹⁷

(vi) Attacking Refugees and Asylum-seekers

Australia’s refugee policies, established since before 2003, directly conflict with and undermine global norms on the right to protection from persecution. Its bipartisan policy of deterrence by detention¹⁸ has been likened to a form of kidnapping and forced exile.¹⁹ The logic of deterrence enables the denial of basic rights and creates extralegal status for semi-permanent encampments.²⁰ Australia’s abuses encourage copy-cat actions, in a global bidding war to dehumanise and brutalise refugees and asylum-seekers.²¹

(vii) Discrediting Overseas Aid

Australian overseas aid now primarily serves the national interest rather than development outcomes, and is no longer linked to UN targets.²² It has been renamed ‘aid investment’, not ‘development assistance’. Aid is no longer distributed by an agency with a development mandate, and has been redirected to support private sector players and narrow security priorities. It is at its lowest level since the 1970s, it greases ‘economic diplomacy’ and is losing public support.

These and other foreign policy failures demonstrate the logic of pursuing naked ‘self-interest’ at DFAT. Instead, Australia should focus on making the world a safer place through collective and non-nuclear security arrangements. Pursuing fair trade arrangements that benefit people, not just corporate interests. Becoming an exemplar of effective climate policy, both in international policy and at home. A beacon for democratisation and self-determination, and enabling development rights, not financial freedoms for speculators. Respecting human rights in all its dealings including the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. And a country that recommits to global targets for development aid by focusing Australian aid on addressing local needs, not Australian interests.

A foreign policy guided by such principles would take Australia closer to achieving the goals of peace and security that it claims should be our uppermost priority. For this, a root and branch rethink of Australian foreign policy is required. We can only speculate whether this is happening in Canberra this week.

Prepared by James Goodman, AID/WATCH Chair.

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