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# David Horner's *Inside The War Cabinet*

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### Introduction

The battles of the First Australian Imperial Force (AIF) on the shores of Gallipoli during World War One mark the birth of a national identity for Australians. Twenty-seven years later, during the Second World War, the decisions of the Curtin Government mark the point where the child nation becomes an adult, challenges the decisions of the parent British Government and determines the path towards its own fate—with full understanding of the consequences of failure. David Horner's book *Inside the War Cabinet* draws on new material from the Australian Archives to reveal issues confronting Australian wartime leaders in the Second World War. Horner is an accomplished Australian military historian having published some 17 books on Australian military history, defence and strategy. The book's publication was timed to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War and in part is an unapologetic attempt by the sponsor, the Australian Archives, to demonstrate the value of its own services.

### Strategic leadership in times of crisis

Horner does not set out to provide a comprehensive history of the Second World War. His focus is the activities of the peak advisory bodies to the Prime Minister, the Australian War Cabinet and the Advisory War Council.<sup>1</sup> Horner shines a torch on specific events to illuminate the personalities, biases, considerations and conflicts that contributed to the nation's strategic 'decision-making at a time of maximum peril'.<sup>2</sup> Horner uses the handwritten notes of the War Cabinet's secretaries that were released to the public for the first time in December 1993. These provide another layer of information to complement the official War Cabinet minutes. This material places the reader in a seat beside the War Cabinet and Advisory War Council participants and allows us to observe them at work. Unfortunately, the book reveals less of what is happening concurrently under the Cabinet table or outside the doors. At times Horner fails to capture other events and information occurring at the periphery of the torchlight, but which had a significant influence on the decision makers.

Horner's objective is to reveal that national strategic decision making involves individuals arriving at crucial judgements based on their interpretation of imperfect information, assessment of priorities concerning the national interest, ideological bias and relationship or trust of other actors. Two key chapters highlight his thesis. Chapter Five addresses the formation of the Women's Australian Auxiliary Air Force (WAAAF). The then bold decision to employ women in the military forces has enduring consequences that reach us today. The second key chapter involves international actors and decisions that shaped Australia's future relations with the major Western powers. Chapter Ten examines the decision to return the 1st Australian Corps from the Middle East to Australia in a period where Prime Minister Curtin made what he considered the 'biggest and most important decision ... since Japan entered the war'.<sup>3</sup>

### Women in the Royal Australian Air Force

In the 1930s improved health, educational and employment opportunities empowered a growing percentage of women to look outside the home and family for a full-time career.<sup>4</sup> At the outbreak

of war many women desired an active part in the national war effort. Having experienced family loss in World War One and with the prospect of their male family members being called to serve in battle again, women were determined to make a personal contribution.<sup>5</sup> However, the attitudes that prevailed in the First World War, that service in the Armed Forces was strictly a male responsibility, had not changed in the interwar period.

Horner describes the pivotal role performed by the RAAF Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Burnett in the formation of the WAAAF. Burnett, a Royal Air Force officer, arrived in Australia from Britain in February 1940. His arrival coincided with the imperative for the RAAF to expand rapidly to achieve the Empire Air Training System (EATS) target of 26,000 Australian aircrew for service in the RAF by 31 March 1941. Burnett identified the employment of women in military occupations as a means to improve Australia's war effort.<sup>6</sup>

Burnett presented an agendum paper to the War Cabinet on 11 June 1940 that argued the 'problem of providing ground staff in certain categories for home defence units and EATS was a great concern'.<sup>7</sup> Burnett proposed the employment of women in signal trades and in hospital duties would release men for flying duties. Horner alludes to some of the difficulties Burnett's proposal faced, but largely concentrates on the attitudes of members of the government and opposition. However, he does not reveal the full dimensions of opposition posed by legislative barriers, cultural ideologies, trade union officials, employers and the military itself and therefore simplifies the leadership complexities, particularly for the politicians.

In the early war period, legislation restricted the role of women in the workplace. There were limitations on the employment of women at night and on the hours they could work per week.<sup>8</sup> Official definitions of gender were disseminated through government propaganda in the media. 'Women remained in a real and ideological sense, at home'.<sup>9</sup> The trade union movement was greatly concerned that the employment of cheap female labour could seriously threaten male jobs and wage standards in the long term.<sup>10</sup> Many in the Cabinet were opposed to equal pay for women because of the likely adverse inflationary effects, probable 'flow-on' demands from the mass of lower-paid female workers employed in women's industries, and the certainty of strong opposition from employers to such a significant change from the traditional wage-fixation formula. Employers were concerned that it might not be possible to revert to the status quo belief that 'women's work' was inherently of lower value than that performed by men.<sup>11</sup> In the military there was entrenched opposition by some men to employment of women in the Services. There was active debate on whether women should be acknowledged as officers, be given separate accommodation and whether they should eat in the officers mess.<sup>12</sup>

Recognising the political sensitivity of the issue, the War Cabinet referred the matter to the Advisory War Council who twice deferred making any decision. Burnett continued to personally pursue an outcome in the face of philosophical and practical opposition. Subsequently, seven months after the proposal was first raised, approval to employ women in limited military roles was granted. Horner gives credit to Burnett in overcoming tremendous opposition through 'sheer weight of argument'.<sup>13</sup> Burnett's crucial role is undeniable—he carefully contributed to an emotionally charged issue that eventually altered the fabric of Australian society. Burnett succeeded through the application of irrefutable logic and by keeping his objectives closely aligned with the dominating strategic requirement—national survival. Curtin and his ministers had little choice but to progressively cut through the layers of opposition and pave the path that would lead towards more equitable employment of women in the workforce.

## Return of the 1st Australian Corps

In late 1941 three of the four AIF divisions were engaged in the Middle East. Japan's entry into the war in December 1941 and the subsequent fall of Singapore in February 1942 dramatically changed Australia's strategic situation. The nation's focus shifted from contributing to a geographically remote war, to a battle for national survival. Horner asserts that the decision by Prime Minister Curtin in February 1942 to defy a request from the British Prime Minister ... and from the US President ... that the troops of the 1st Australian Corps be diverted to Burma, and to demand that they return to Australia was one of the most important decisions of the war by Australian leaders. Horner recognises that it had far-reaching consequences for the shape of the war in the Far East, for Allied relations and for the conduct of operations from Australia later in 1942.<sup>14</sup>

Viewed 62 years later, the decision by Curtin appears relatively straightforward—the Australian nation was at risk of invasion and needed its best soldiers to return home and defend the country. However, the traditional allegiances and differing strategic views on how best to prosecute the war, even within Australia, led to a variety of passionately held views. The burden of this decision was so great, it contributed to Curtin being hospitalised.

Horner carefully examines some of the interleaving issues that Curtin had to consider. Lieutenant General Sir Verdon Sturdee, the Chief of the General Staff and the only Australian on the Chiefs of Staff Committee submitted to Curtin a military appreciation that recommended 'all the Australian forces under orders to transfer from the Middle East to the Far East should be diverted to Australia'.<sup>15</sup> Sturdee also offered the politically explosive assessment that should the 1st Australian Corps not be diverted to Australia, the government may need to give up the north of Australia.<sup>16</sup> Sturdee reinforced the urgency with which he assessed the situation by threatening to resign if the AIF was not returned to Australia.<sup>17</sup> Opposition MPs argued that the Corps should remain overseas on a number of grounds including: the effect on US opinion (to whom the security of the Netherlands East Indies was important) and the potential to panic the Australian public by revealing the gravity of the situation. Curtin's decision was not without domestic political considerations, particularly retaining Labor in government. The ALP had come to power in October 1941 through the defection of two independents who abandoned the United Australia Party Government in part because of their desire for a more active and forceful defence policy. Beaumont suggests Curtin could not afford the domestic political disaster of having his Army Chief of Staff resign. By opposing Churchill, Curtin could show that he and the Labor Party were putting Australia first.<sup>18</sup>

There are enduring lessons for Australia's strategic leaders from the events of this period. In military alliances, the bulk of power resides with those nations that control the flow of information, particularly situational awareness information. This situation is exacerbated when national governments rely on advice from in-theatre allied commanders, whose objectives are not necessarily aligned to those of the Australian Government. In this environment, strong and open personal relationships between leaders is fundamental to good decision making.

## Conclusion

*Inside the War Cabinet* is an enjoyable and easy book to read. However, it offers few significant new insights into the decision-making considerations of the nation's strategic leaders during a critical period in Australia's history. By focusing largely on discussions in the War Cabinet and Advisory War Council, Horner filters important contributing influences that shaped the decisions of these leaders. In part, this situation may be a consequence of the very source from which the book draws

it material—the handwritten notes of the Cabinet and Council secretaries. These men may well have subconsciously or deliberately avoided taking notes on matters that were self-evident at the time, but which now provide the context and background that is necessary for us to understand the paradigms in which our leaders lived and how it shaped their decisions.

## Endnotes

1. The War Cabinet was formed by Prime Minister Menzies on 15 September 1939. It consisted of the Prime Minister (and Treasurer), the Minister for Supply, the Minister for Defence, the Minister for Information and the Attorney General. Later, the Service Chiefs of Staff were invited in an advisory capacity. Shedden was appointed as the Secretary of the War Cabinet. The Advisory War Council was formed later and consisted of the War Cabinet participants and some members of the Opposition. It was a consultative body designed to cross political boundaries.
2. D.M. Horner, *Inside the War Cabinet*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1996, p. Cover Slip.
3. Horner, p. 100.
4. D. Tramoundanis, 'The WAAAF at War', in *The Home Front—Mainland Australia and the Southwest Pacific Area 1939–1945*, ed. J. Mordike, Commonwealth of Australia, 1996, p. 94.
5. Tramoundanis, p. 93.
6. Horner, p. 40.
7. Horner, p. 40.
8. Tramoundanis, p. 95.
9. K. Darian-Smith, 'War and Australian Society', in *Australia's War 1939–45*, ed. J. Beaumont, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1996, p. 61.
10. B. Simons, 'The Wartime Women's Employment Board', *Workers Online*, issue 14, 21 May 1999, <<http://workers.labor.net.au/14/>>, accessed 4 March 04.
11. Simons, p. 2.
12. Tramoundanis, p. 102.
13. Horner, p. 46.
14. Horner, p. 97.
15. Horner, p. 101.
16. D.M. Horner, 'Lieutenant-General Sir Vernon Sturdee: The Chief of the General Staff as Commander', in *The Commanders*, ed. D.M. Horner, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1984, p. 155.
17. Horner, *Inside the War Cabinet*, p. 101.
18. J. Beaumont, 'Australia's War: Asia and the Pacific', in *Australia's War 1939–45*, ed. J. Beaumont, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1996, p. 34.

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