13. From Bean-Counter to War Leader: National Security and Australian Public Leadership

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Introduction

This chapter aims to do two things.¹ First, it explores how national security issues have recently shaped the styles and practices of public leadership in Australia. Second, very briefly, it looks at how, and how well, public leadership on these issues has been exercised. It will thus try to approach the interaction between public leadership and national security from both ends — how each affects the other. The essay will focus on political leadership: that is, on how national security issues shape the leadership of our politicians and how they lead on national security issues. There is much to be said about other kinds of public leadership in the national security field, of course. Taking a broader sense of ‘public leadership’ to include leadership on public issues but not necessarily in the public eye, Australia has a rich tradition of national security leadership encompassing civilian figures like Sir Fredrick Shedden (see Horner 2000) and Sir Arthur Tange (see Edwards 2006). There are also important military figures like Sir John Wilton, who profoundly shaped Australian policy and approaches, to say nothing of military leadership in the narrower sense — command — in which we have had our fair share of remarkable personalities, and one figure, Monash, of truly exceptional stature (see Serle 1982). But this study has a contemporary focus and I believe that, at present, in the light of recent history, political leadership offers the most interesting area for consideration of the nature of public leadership on national security questions.²

I will focus primarily on the role of the Prime Minister, and specifically on the leadership that the Prime Minister provides in what are seen to be times of national security crisis. Briefly, I will be suggesting that in times of perceived crisis, prime ministers have the opportunity to project a kind of leadership that differs significantly from more normal patterns of political leadership in a country like Australia. Although, as we shall see, other leaders may try to hop aboard, this opportunity seems most to be available to the Prime Minister because it involves a transcendence of, or regression from, the collaborative and consultative styles of political leadership embodied in collective cabinet models of government, in favour of a more direct and individual model of leadership focused on the person of the Prime Minister. I will argue that this model of national security leadership has recently exercised a sharply increased influence on the way

national security issues have been considered in Australia and that it has also influenced the way the Prime Minister has projected his political leadership more broadly. At the same time, the quality of political leadership on national security issues – and perhaps more broadly – has declined. Finally, I will suggest that there may be a link between these two: the more leaders strive to project a certain image of the ‘national security leader’, the worse leadership they are likely to be providing.

Inevitably I will give most attention to the national security leadership of John Howard. I hope that I might contribute to assessments of Howard’s achievements in the field of national security and to evaluations of his style as a political leader. It may be that there is scope to go further and draw more general theoretical conclusions about the nature of national-security leadership, but my expertise in the field is not equal to that task. Instead I will offer more modest suggestions about the implications of the issues addressed here for other leaders, especially Kevin Rudd.

A word on definitions: ‘National Security’ is a notoriously loaded and contested concept (see for example, Buzan, Weaver, and de Wilde 1998) and, as we shall see, the manipulation of its meanings is central to our topic. We can roughly delineate what we mean by it here along two axes. First, a security issue is regarded as a *national* security issue when it is seen to threaten not just the lives or welfare of individuals but of the national community as a whole. Hence, ordinary murder and motor accidents are not seen to be national security issues because, although in aggregate they cause death and injury on a large scale, they are factored into the way society operates and we do not feel that society as a whole is threatened by them. Conversely, by identifying terrorism or global warming as national security issues we are saying that they do threaten society as a whole. Second, while threats to national security can be seen in many forms, including such impersonal factors as climate change or a meteor strike, most discussion of national security seems to focus back onto violence deliberately inflicted by other people. More inclusive conceptions of national security have obvious conceptual appeal but, at the visceral level at which national security debates tend to operate, they never quite seem to draw attention away from the narrower concepts that centre on concerns about what other *people* might do to us. In particular, national security threats tend to be seen as coming from other people who are, or are seen to be, outside the national community. Hence, in the US, it apparently seems natural to see Al Qaeda as a threat to national security but not the Oklahoma Bomber.

National security and models of leadership

To understand the way national security leadership has functioned in Australia recently, we need to draw a contrast with other, more typical modes of political leadership in modern democratic societies. On most issues, these societies appear

to seek political leaders who are cautious, prudent, analytical and accommodating: good at examining evidence, weighing all sides of an argument, persuading others of their view, and reaching sensible compromises with those they cannot persuade. In the Australian context this model of political leadership is exemplified by Bob Hawke and, for the first four years of his time as PM, by John Howard; in the UK by Tony Blair in his domestic guise; and in the US by Bill Clinton. Even leaders with a less accommodating manner — think of Reagan, Thatcher, and Keating — still owed much to this model of political leadership. It is apparently well adapted to the actual demands of running modern liberal market democracies in a globalised world. It is the model of their own leadership that political leaders seek to project when they address most domestic and many international issues — indeed, almost any issue except national security.

But surviving alongside this collective, domesticated model of leadership is a very different one; an atavistic concept that seems to owe more to society's tribal past than the urbane present, and which seems to come into play when national security issues move to the centre of the public agenda. This 'national security model' of leadership in many ways inverts the characteristic virtues of the domesticated, managerial model. Boldness is preferred to prudence; analysis is devalued in favour of intuition; inspiration is preferred to persuasion; accommodation and compromise are sacrificed to steadfastness and determination; and a sense of proportion is devalued and displaced by a willingness to persevere 'whatever the cost may be'. The overriding virtue in this national security model of leadership is a characteristic which is often called 'strength', but is often better seen as a kind of a determined, single-minded stubbornness.³ Other leadership virtues — caution, agility, wisdom, inclusiveness, persuasiveness — are discounted. The outstanding exemplar of this national security leadership style is the Churchill of World War II. Careful historical analysis might sow doubts that Churchill was really like that as a war leader, but this image of Churchill remains perhaps the most potent model of national security leadership in the world today.

This model of leadership is reflected in the way that issues are discussed, and decisions made. Issues are presented as being simple, rather than complex. The essential features of the situation are considered to be beyond doubt or debate, and often cast in terms of often tendentious) historical metaphors like 'Pearl Harbour' or 'Munich'. There are no realistic alternative courses of action to the one selected by the leader. The issue under consideration is the most important the society now faces, and other priorities must make way for it. Costs in money, international standing, political freedoms, and even lives are not to be considered. Bureaucratic policy-development processes are discarded in favour of quick decisions made by the leader himself and a willingness to ignore advice and defy different opinions becomes virtues in their own right.⁴ Dissent is considered tantamount to disloyalty to the country.

It is easy enough to see how this style of leadership has been at work in Australia, the UK, and the US in recent years, exemplified by George W. Bush, Tony Blair, and John Winston Howard. Since 9/11, these leaders have adopted a series of policies under the banner of the 'war on terror' that have had little or no coherent relationship with the threat of terrorist attacks per se, from granting additional powers to police and security services to invading Iraq. In each case it has been notable that normal standards of transparent, evidence-based, contestable public policy consideration and debate have been discarded in favour of unexamined, and frequently mistaken, assertions by national leaders about the nature of a threat and the appropriateness of a response.

It may be that we can see in this national security model of leadership a reversion to what we might think of as a more tribal concept in which the roles of political leader and military leader were merged — the ruler as war leader. In actual combat, this model of war leadership makes sense; because of the pressure for instant and decisive action to achieve immediate and overriding objectives do not favour more analytic and consultative models. But leading a complex modern society, even in a major war, is very different from leading an infantry company in combat. There may be times — in total national emergencies like those faced by Churchill in 1940 or by Curtin in late 1941 — when even for modern societies the war leader model works best. But such circumstances are extremely rare.

How and why, then, have some modern democratic leaders like Howard found themselves adopting this leadership model, in the absence of the kind of extreme security threats which might justify them in doing so? I think the answer is simply this: leaders such as Howard, Blair and Bush⁵ have actively sought to interpret events and fashion policy agendas which have allowed them to project themselves as war leaders to their constituents. They have wanted to be seen as war leaders, and they have willingly promoted an interpretation of the policy challenges they faced as a war in order to allow them to do that. The rhetorical mechanisms at work here are pretty simple: by magnifying our enemy, we magnify ourselves; by identifying our struggle with the great struggles of the past, we identify ourselves with the great leaders of the past. The willingness of leaders to do this tells us something about them, but the political success they have enjoyed as a result tells us something also about ourselves as citizens. Leadership is, after all, transactional — it has to be not just given but received. It is hard to escape the conclusion that Howard, Bush, and Blair have projected themselves as war leaders because that is what they think voters think and, for a while, it seemed they did. It is, therefore, hard to escape the suspicion that within the modern citizen there lurks some kind of nostalgia for the strong, simple, primarily xenophobic leadership of a more primitive and immediately violent age.

The political appeal of war leadership, and the temptations this provides to politicians, is hardly new. Even highly managerial leaders like Bob Hawke could occasionally benefit from it. In 1990-91 Bob Hawke's standing was boosted by his role in leading Australia in the Iraq-Kuwait crisis, and in the early 1980s Thatcher's leadership in Britain was boosted, and even rescued, by the Falklands. Barry Buzan and others have written extensively on the way in which political leaders and systems use the emotive and political potency of 'security' to garner power and authority — a process they call 'securitisation' (Buzan, Weaver, and de Wilde 1998). But I think that over the past few years — since 9/11, in fact — national security issues and national security models of leadership have been used to frame and project political leadership to a much greater degree, and for much longer periods, than we have seen in comparable societies for a long time.

Of course, there would be nothing surprising in this if it were true that since 9/11 we have been facing a threat to national security greater than any we have seen for a very long time. A central premise of the projection of war leadership over the past six years has been the assertion that terrorism poses a mortal threat to our nation, our society, the global order and our way of life: as big a threat, it is often said, as did the challenges from Fascism and Communism in the twentieth century. So it is central to my argument here that I do not believe that to be the case. This is not the place to present an extended argument on that, so let me simply offer my hunch that in a decade's time we will look back and wonder how a statement so obviously false could have been believed by so many people for so long with such conviction. Terrorism is a serious problem and the risk of nuclear terrorism is especially grave. But to compare the consequences of even a nuclear terrorist attack with World War II suggests a major collective lapse of historical perspective and common sense.

'We live in a time of war'

If that is right, then the way that national security has intruded into our concepts and practices of political leadership seems to require serious attention. The fact that Howard, like Bush and Blair, so comprehensively projected himself as a war leader, and was — at least for a while — so successful in doing so, in the absence of a genuine war, seems to tell us something interesting and perhaps disheartening, about the nature of political leadership in Australia. It is especially striking in Australia's case because we have little or no tradition of war leadership. Britain, of course, has Churchill himself, as well as long traditions stretching back through Wellington to Henry V. The US has Washington, Lincoln, Grant, Teddy Roosevelt and Eisenhower. But for Australia, World War I threw up no enduring figure of war leadership and World War II produced, after Menzies' failure in the role, only the curious, complex, and ambivalent figure of John Curtin. So Howard was, in a sense, trying something new in the annals of Australian political leadership.

It would be interesting to catalogue in some detail exactly how this has been done over the years since 9/11. Here there is only space to identify the main themes through which Howard projected himself as a war leader. It started with the characterisation of the response to the original attacks as a 'war', from which a great deal else has flowed: the magnification of the threat to existential proportions; the characterisation of the adversary as inhumanly evil; the repeated affirmation that we will never surrender to terrorists; the call to the nation for a contribution to the common defence by each citizen, uniting the nation in a mighty collective effort to safeguard all we hold precious. Perhaps most tellingly, when the question of his retirement came on the agenda around his 64th birthday, Howard declared that he was determined to remain to lead Australia through this immensely challenging period. As late as March 2007, Howard was still saying, 'We live in a time of war'.

We can probably trace the origins of Howard's model of war leadership back before 9/11 to the East Timor Crisis of 1999. I think it can be argued that his role in that crisis transformed Howard's view of himself, and encouraged him to think that he could recast his identity as leader away from the rather drab bean-counting persona that had stuck with him since his time as Treasurer to something more glamorous and compelling. But it was not until the war on terror after 9/11 that the opportunity arose to reprise that role and embed it in his core leadership style. After 9/11 it can be argued that Howard's whole approach to leadership was reformed on the 'war leader' model.

One critical factor in Howard's national-security leadership after 9/11 was the apparent collapse of processes of advice from the bureaucracy concerning key assessments and decisions being made. Much has been made of the failure of Australia's intelligence agencies to provide better advice on the state of Iraq's WMD programs, but far more important is the failure of the Government's foreign and strategic policy-advising institutions to provide advice on whether, even assuming Iraq had WMD, invasion of the country was a good idea. Some may suspect that this failure reflected the erosion of policy-advising capacities in key Commonwealth departments, but there is no doubt that such advice — and good quality advice — would have been available if ministers had wanted it. The fact that it was not suggests to me that ministers — and especially the Prime Minister — conveyed a clear impression that such advice was not needed or wanted.⁶

How calculated was Howard's adoption of the war leader's persona? Some will be tempted to see his approach to the war on terror as a cynical exploitation of popular fears after the shock of 9/11 to bolster his own electoral standing. But I am not sure it was that simple. Clearly he was following where others led: almost all the elements of his projection as war leader were appropriated from Bush and Blair. Like Bush and Blair, he was following, or at least sailing in

convoy with, wider intellectual fashions. At first, at least, many people inside and outside government — especially in the US — argued forcefully that the West was at war and needed a war leader. I think in Howard's case, as in many others, he was happy enough to accept what so many were saying, without bothering much to work out if it was true, because it suited him. We cannot say that Howard deliberately concocted the war on terror as a political artefact, but we can perhaps surmise that he self-consciously exploited it to project an image of his leadership which had evident popular appeal, and that he did so without reflecting on the real national interests at stake and how they might be affected.

For Howard, moreover, war leadership dovetailed with a broader political agenda. The past, and management of the way people view the past, was always central to Howard's political strategy. In this respect he differs from Blair, and even from Bush. Projecting himself as a war leader gave Howard firmer ownership of Australia's core national stories, because those stories revolve so much around our military exploits. Howard is hardly the first leader to try this: the appropriation of the ANZAC story for political purposes can be said to have entered its current phase with Paul Keating's repatriation of the Australian Unknown Soldier. But under Howard the political management of history became a central concern, and the projection of himself as war leader did much to promote his appropriation of Australia's military past for contemporary political benefit.

Finally, and notwithstanding the focus on John Howard in the preceding paragraphs, it is important to note that he was not the only political leader who sought to project himself as a war leader in the years since 9/11. State premiers were often enthusiastic to identify themselves with national security issues which arguably went beyond the traditional state concerns with law and order. One of Morris Iemma's first actions after assuming the Premiership of NSW was to announce a highly questionable scheme for the evacuation of Sydney's CBD in the event of a terrorist attack, and state premiers were quick to call for new tougher measures against terrorism after the London bombings of 7 July 2005. At the Commonwealth level, other ministers also echoed the Prime Minister's focus on national security. In May 2002, for example, Peter Costello devoted almost half of his Budget Speech to national security questions before turning to the economy — an emphasis unprecedented since World War II.

Proof of the pudding

From a policy maker's perspective, leadership is most naturally judged instrumentally: does it produce good outcomes? We, therefore, need to ask how well national security policy has been done under Howard's war leadership. There are four brief observations we might make.

First, so far as we can tell the most effective policy responses to the threat posed by terrorism since 9/11 were essentially bureaucratic. The high-profile leadership

decisions about major military deployments and additional police powers have probably done little if anything to reduce the likelihood of a terrorist attack and may have been counterproductive. More effective measures such as increased funding and numbers for intelligence agencies and police forces have been relatively low-key. The natural conclusion to draw is that the high-profile ‘tough decisions’ that would-be war leaders feel called upon to make may have little to do with meeting real threats and much more to do with projecting an impression of the leader’s determination and strength than with achieving an effective response to the threat.

Second, some of the policies that have been presented as central to political leadership in the war on terror have in fact been empty. Howard, for example, like Bush and Blair, often made much of his policy of refusing to give in to or negotiate with terrorists. This kind of talk conveys an agreeably Churchillian aroma, but it means nothing. There has been no occasion since 9/11 in which negotiating with terrorists has seriously been an option and there is no likelihood that it will be. Such statements have been pure posturing.

Third, some of the policies and approaches that have been adopted have been evidently counterproductive — and these are especially the higher-profile policies and rhetoric that have been adopted to give substance to the national security leadership model. The characterisation of terrorism as a threat to our way of life and the international order has almost certainly helped encourage terrorism by exaggerating the damage that can be done to society by these random acts of pointless violence which, in reality, achieve nothing except what we do to ourselves through our own exaggerated responses to them. Potential terrorists believe our leaders when they say that terrorism poses an existential threat and are encouraged by it. Some of the expansions of police and surveillance powers have arguably helped to build a sense of alienation between Islamic communities and others, which also helps the terrorist recruiters. And the decision to invade Iraq was, to put it mildly, a misconceived response to the threat we face from terrorists. Indeed the strange failures of decision making that led into Iraq provide a caution about the dangers that arise when war leadership models are adopted by those who face much more modest problems. When the full story is written it may appear that one of the potent factors leading to the American decision to invade was the need to meet public expectations of decisive action which had been fanned by the rhetoric of war leadership. It may be not so much that Bush, followed by Blair and Howard, talked up the war on terror in order to invade Iraq as it was that they found they had to invade Iraq in order to justify the posture of war leadership they had adopted after 9/11.

Finally, while Howard was posing as a war leader in the war on terror, some more serious security issues — ones that really might pose a fundamental risk to our well being — were allowed to languish without serious policy attention.

One could mention, for example, global warming, avian influenza and the immense questions posed about Asia's stability by the rise of China and what it means for the future of American primacy. What this list suggests, is that when we face serious security issues the last thing we need is the atavistically appealing, but often-dysfunctional, leadership provided under the war leadership model. We need quite the opposite, in fact: attention to evidence, careful consideration of alternatives, balance, inclusiveness and a real grasp of our long-term trends and interests. And, where needed, a willingness to take unpopular decisions that serve those long-term interests.

Conclusion: beyond Howard

This analysis carries interesting implications for the way the present Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, and his successors might approach the task of national security leadership. It suggests, first, that they should resist the temptation to see national security crises as opportunities to recast their leadership in a more heroic mould and instead aim to bring to the making and presentation of decisions in the national security field the same kinds of rigour, discipline and due diligence that should characterise good public policy and good democratic leadership in any other field of government. After the first six months of the Rudd Government, the signs are not especially encouraging. The new Government's first 'strategic crisis' was the shooting of Jose Ramos Horta in East Timor in February 2008. The first reaction was immediately to send additional Australian soldiers and police to East Timor without waiting to learn what had actually occurred and without any clear idea of what the additional forces might do. This response suggested an overwhelming desire to be seen to do something decisive, and not to be seen to be reluctant to deploy forces — in short, a desire to be seen to follow Howard's example. A better response would have been to make a point of assessing the situation a little more carefully, and to send forces only if there was a clear requirement for them.

This early experience suggests, secondly, that a new government needs to start building a different, more robust and effective model of national security leadership early, before crises emerge. The essence of that model is quite simple: that national security issues, including national security crises, need to be approached with the same model of leadership as any other major policy question. The standards of good public policy and effective political leadership are the same. And indeed, we look at the great democratic war leaders of history, we can see this at work. Lincoln, perhaps the greatest of them, never oversimplified or glorified the issues, never ceased to explore the options, and went out of his way to avoid glamorising his own role as leader. Rudd's challenge is to build a new model of national security leadership which genuinely supports our national security.

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ENDNOTES

¹ I should perhaps point out at the start that I am not a political scientist, but rather a student of strategic policy. My credentials to contribute to debates on leadership are therefore limited to my knowledge of and reflections about how leadership has been exercised in the policy area which I study. I trust that readers with more expertise will make allowances accordingly.

² There is one important exception to this proposition. In the years after the East Timor intervention of 1999 a military officer — Peter Cosgrove — became identified as a national leader in a way perhaps unprecedented in Australian history. How and why this happened, and how it related to the developments in national-security leadership I will explore in this essay, would be a fruitful focus for further work. A starting point would be Cosgrove's own memoir (2006).

³ It can be argued that both Bush and Howard won re-election in 2004 despite the evident failure of their policies in Iraq because of their ability to portray their willingness to stick out the problems there as evidence of firm resolve.

⁴ Apparently this was the unfortunate implication drawn from George Bush's reading in 2002 of Eliot Cohen's excellent book on war leadership, which has much to say of interest in the current context.

⁵ The literature on the leadership of these three leaders in the war on terror is vast, but the patterns we are studying here are best seen in their own speeches. Perhaps the clearest and starkest, because the best drafted, examples are to be found in a series of speeches Tony Blair gave in 2006. See for example his Speech to a joint sitting of the Australian Parliament: *Global Alliance for Global Values*.

⁶ There is some anecdotal evidence that from the start of the war on terror attempts to convey reservations about the directions of US policy from officials to ministers met strong resistance.