

THE AUSTRALIAN NAVY AND THE 1909 IMPERIAL CONFERENCE ON DEFENCE

A century ago, Australia's Navy, such as it was, seemed in poor shape. The Commonwealth's economy might have depended absolutely on ocean-going trade, but with the seas protected by the Royal Navy there had been little political interest in supporting the local navy. The Commonwealth Naval Forces (CNF) numbered only 48 officers and 147 men and possessed only an outdated light cruiser (built in 1884), nine equally elderly torpedo and gun boats, and the even older turret ship *Cerberus* (1870). Few, if any, of these vessels were capable of effective operations. For the CNF's Director, Captain William Creswell, there was nevertheless some hope of progress. Years of patient lobbying had at last borne fruit and, after some additional urging, the new Australian prime minister, Andrew Fisher, had agreed to the acquisition of a destroyer flotilla that would eventually expand to 23 vessels.¹

To Fisher, the destroyers were to have two major functions. First, they would support any British capital ships operating in the Pacific, thereby allowing them to make the passage from home waters without being tied down by smaller, and hence less seaworthy, craft. Second, they would provide an effective means of coastal defence, thereby further encouraging local naval development. On 5 February 1909 a cable was sent to Australia's representative in London instructing him to call for tenders for the first three vessels. But, not for the first time, Australian defence planning was about to be impacted by events on the other side of the world.

For more than 100 years the Royal Navy had been mistress of the world ocean, but on 16 March 1909, Sir Reginald McKenna, First Lord of the Admiralty, rose in the British Parliament to describe the acceleration of the German battleship construction program. The Germans, he thundered, had expanded their naval armaments industry and, unless Britain increased its own procurement of capital ships, the Royal Navy would lose numerical superiority by 1912. Alarm spread throughout the Empire. Within a week, New Zealand had offered up the funds to build a battleship. Canada and South Africa telegraphed separate offers of support. Preoccupied with its own naval plans, the Australian Federal Government was more hesitant, but New South Wales and Victoria were goaded by the press into offering the cost of a battleship between them. Amid a profusion of competing schemes, Britain invited the premiers of the self-governing dominions to a special conference where the whole question of imperial defence could be discussed afresh.

While the naval scare was an important incentive behind the 1909 Imperial Conference, it was not the only factor involved. In 1908, the Committee of Imperial Defence had begun discussions on British policy after the expected expiry of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1915. Following the signing of the Alliance in 1902 the Royal Navy had withdrawn five battleships from the China Station as an economy measure, but Japan had since earned a reputation as an expansionist nation. The committee

therefore conceded the principle that a force of armoured ships must be returned to the Pacific. The question remained how best this might be accomplished without alarming the Japanese or bankrupting the British treasury.



'An Australian Dreadnought, the Proposed Gift of the Commonwealth', The Leader, 3 April 1909 (RAN)

Here Admiral of the Fleet Sir John Fisher, the British Admiralty's outspoken First Sea Lord, entered the picture. He seized on the Australian and New Zealand offers to contribute the cost of a capital ship and at the end of June 1909 urged that they should be built as battlecruisers. Fast, well armed, but lightly armoured vessels, battlecruisers were in Fisher's mind ideally suited to oceanic trade protection missions. More ambitiously, Fisher argued that the Australian gift should form the nucleus of a credible local navy. He further hoped that the other dominions might be enticed into making similar contributions to imperial defence. The model he proposed for these fleets was what he termed the 'Fleet Unit'; an advanced tactical formation consisting of a battlecruiser and its accompanying light cruisers; the former acting as the citadel and the latter its high-speed scouts or 'satellites'. When combined with a local defence flotilla of destroyers and submarines, and suitable logistic support vessels, the package represented an ideal force structure for an emerging nation; small enough to be manageable in times of peace but, in war, capable of effective action in conjunction with the Royal Navy. The adoption of such a scheme might even allow Britain to leave the Pacific's naval defence to the dominions: 'We manage the job in Europe. They'll manage it against the Yankees, Japs, and Chinese, as occasion requires out there.'²

Prime Minister Fisher was not a supporter of the dreadnought offer, declaring it not naval policy, but merely 'a spectacular display', and one that would do nothing to encourage the interest of Australia's youth.³ Fisher's hold on power was tenuous however, and assisted by the confusion over the naval issue, Alfred Deakin replaced him in June 1909. Deakin had previously served as Prime Minister and had long been in correspondence with

Admiral Fisher. His ideas for an Australian navy had thus far been based on the acquisition of a flotilla of torpedo boats and submarines, with the officers and men fully interchangeable with Imperial seamen. Yet this implied that Australians would serve in RN ships merely for the term of an ordinary commission on the Australian Station. The long-term impracticality of such an approach had done little to endear Deakin to the Admiralty.

Domestic considerations left Deakin unable to attend the Imperial Conference, so he sent instead Colonel Justin Foxton, Minister without Portfolio, accompanied by Creswell as his naval advisor. Arriving in London in July 1909 they brought with them Deakin's offer of 'an Australian "Dreadnought", or such addition to [the Empire's] naval strength as determined after consultation in London'.⁴ They were quite unprepared for the subsequent discussion.



Colonel the Hon. JFG Foxton, CMG, and Captain WR Creswell, CMG, CNF (National Library 24231804 & RAN)

The Royal Navy advised McKenna on 10 August that they could no longer guarantee sea supremacy in the Pacific. In just a few years the Japanese Alliance would have terminated, both 'the Japanese and German fleets would be very formidable', and the position of Australia, isolated and remote from British naval strength, 'might be one of some danger'.⁵ Admiral Fisher added that the naval force currently planned by Australia, consisting only of small craft, could lead nowhere. A navy, he continued, had to be founded on a permanent basis and offer a life-long career if it meant to attract and retain quality personnel. In sum, Australia should aim to create and fully man a self-contained fleet unit. This force provided the right proportion of officers to ratings and a coherent grouping of large-, medium- and small-sized ships. Joined with two smaller fleet units on the East Indies and China Stations, it would form an Imperial Pacific Fleet. Even on its own, however, the proposed Australian fleet was a formidable prospect, capable of independent action on the trade routes and sufficiently powerful to deal with most hostile squadrons.

This initiative owed little to existing Australian planning, and the Commonwealth's delegation was uncertain of its response. Creswell had wanted a local navy to be self-reliant and had previously urged progressive development. He pointed out the advantages of Australia building what he called the foundations of naval strength — naval schools, dockyards, gun factories — rather than spending money on a capital ship. Local needs, Foxton added, dictated a larger number of smaller vessels; the protection of trade

would be impossible along the entire 12,000 miles to Britain; and Australia could not afford such ships.

McKenna reminded them both of Deakin's earlier proposal to establish a flotilla of submarines and destroyers. The Admiralty estimated that this would have cost at least £346,000 per annum. If added to Australia's offer of a capital ship and its annual maintenance, the total was closer to £500,000. By contrast the annual operating cost of a fleet unit would only be £600,000 to £700,000, and the Admiralty offered to fund the difference. The handing over of control of the entire Australia Station, and the transfer to the Commonwealth of all imperial dockyard and shore establishments in Sydney, made the bargain even more attractive and addressed many of Creswell's concerns. Foxton, now convinced, agreed to communicate the proposals to Deakin and obtained the prime minister's sanction to work out the scheduling details.

In Australia, the Admiralty's scheme found wide approval. Notwithstanding the lack of local input, most factions found it attractive and in harmony with their long-held ideas. Cabinet gave provisional endorsement on 27 September 1909 and work on the force proceeded rapidly with only minor changes to the selection of warships first suggested by Admiral Fisher.

Returned to power in April 1910, Prime Minister Fisher decided to refuse the British offer of financial assistance and fund the new vessels wholly from within the Commonwealth budget. A new *Naval Defence Act 1910*, passed on 25 November, provided the clear legislative authority necessary for the reinvigorated navy. Its key provisions included the creation of a new Board of Administration; the establishment of colleges and instructional institutions; the division of the Naval Forces into the Permanent Naval Forces and the Citizen Naval Forces; and provisions relating to service conditions, such as pay, allowances, and discipline. All such naval administration was to be based upon RN models.

Just four years after the 1909 Imperial Conference the battlecruiser HMAS *Australia* steamed into Sydney Harbour at the head of Australia's own Fleet Unit. Off Fort Denison was the British cruiser HMS *Cambrian* and on board was Admiral Sir George King-Hall, the last British Commander-in-Chief. As he hauled down his flag command of the Australia Station passed to the new Royal Australian Navy (RAN). Within a year the RAN was at war and, in a succession of efficient operations, removed any threat to Australian sea communications in the Indian and Pacific Oceans; more than fulfilling the trust that had been placed in it. By any accounting it was a remarkable achievement.

- 1 Fisher proposed acquiring 19 River class destroyers, and four, presumably larger, 'ocean' destroyers.
- 2 Letter Fisher to Esher, 13 September 1909, cited in AJ Marder (ed), *Fear God and Dread Nought: Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher*, vol II, Jonathan Cape, London, 1956, p. 266.
- 3 'Mr Fisher's Policy Speech', *The British-Australasian*, 6 May 1909, p. 11.
- 4 Admiralty Memorandum, 20 July 1909, reproduced in N Lambert, *Australia's Naval Inheritance*, Papers in Australian Maritime Affairs No. 6, SPC-A, Canberra, 1998, p. 175.
- 5 Admiralty conference, 10 August 1909, The National Archives (UK): ADM 116/1100, 520.

