

## **Australian Naval Defence and the 1887 Colonial Conference: Context, Policy and Reaction**

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As Britain entered the 1870s her position as the world's pre-eminent power was under threat in the face of increased economic, industrial and military competition from other nations such as the United States and the newly-unified Germany. One reaction to these new threats was to draw closer to the Empire, and thinkers such as Charles Dilke in his book *Greater Britain* (1868), and J. A. Froude in his essay 'England and her Colonies' (1870), lauded the virtues of imperial unity amongst the white settlements. By then the white colonies had developed rapidly in population and wealth, and as such were seen increasingly as a resource that could be used to strengthen Britain and the Empire.

During the 1860s, debate had taken place regarding the economics of colonial defence, as taxpayers in Britain were prepared to shoulder the costs of home defence, but not the increasingly expensive burden of defending the colonies through internal policing and frontier wars<sup>1</sup>. Thought therefore drifted towards encouraging the colonies to pay for their own local defence, and British troops were slowly withdrawn from the colonies with the establishment of local militias. However, the navy remained a British expense.

The 1870s saw the first discussions taking place in regard to the creation of an integrated system of defence for Great Britain, its overseas territories, and the commercial and strategic links between them. The navy would play a crucial role in such a system by protecting the vital trade routes that connected the Empire. However, it was not a topic that exercised general public opinion at the time, therefore neither the Liberals under Gladstone, nor the Conservatives under Disraeli and Salisbury, gave it much attention as domestic matters were what formed the key electoral battleground, and 'both parties

wished to minimise the cost of empire and its impact on the evolving parliamentary system in Britain.'<sup>2</sup>

It was therefore left to professionals in the services or the civil service to develop ideas regarding imperial defence, which were then discussed in service and other journals with the intention of influencing ministers and service chiefs. Captain John Colomb of the Royal navy was one such advocate, whose pamphleteering from 1867 was a constant message urging the creation of an integrated system of defence. Figures such as Colomb, Colonel Sir William Jervois, and the Conservative peer Lord Carnarvon, provided the arguments for public discussion, and their efforts stimulated a 'growing willingness of departments of state - the Admiralty, the War Office, the Colonial Office and, to a much lesser degree the Treasury - to talk to each other and agree the crucial elements of imperial defence'<sup>3</sup>.

From 1878 onwards the question of imperial defence would gain an increasing level of interest and importance in Britain and the Empire. As it did, the issue of Australia's naval defence would become a prominent feature of this debate.

### **The Emerging Question of Australian Naval Defence, 1878-1887**

It was not until the threat of war with Russia in 1878 that concrete action was taken regarding imperial defence, with the creation of the Colonial Defence Committee in 1878. This was followed up in 1879 with the commissioning of a two-and-a-half year study, fronted by the prominent Conservative peer and imperialist Lord Carnarvon, of long-ranged planning for colonial defence, which would 'inquire into the defence of British possessions and commerce abroad'. The commission came to the conclusion that:

'With regard to the second and larger question of the naval defence of Australia generally as an integral portion of the British Empire, and of Australian commerce on the high seas, the time, in our opinion, has arrived when the Colonies may reasonably be expected to take upon themselves some share of that defence - a burden hitherto exclusively borne by the mother-country... we see no reason why the Australian Colonies should not make a moderate contribution in money towards the cost of that squadron which is maintained by the mother-country for the protection of interests common to the Colonies and herself.'<sup>4</sup>

Though it had already generally been accepted by the Australian Colonies that they would 'themselves provide, at their own cost, the local forces, forts, batteries, and other appliances requisite for the protection of their principle ports'<sup>5</sup>, this is the first time that it was proposed that they should contribute to the costs of the Australian squadron as well. The squadron was provided by Britain for 'the protection of interests common to the Colonies and herself', and was open to be sent whenever and wherever the Admiralty wanted, including outside of Australian waters. However, having little naval heritage themselves, the Australian Colonies failed to understand that against potential European enemies, it was possible that the squadron could better serve their defence in the Mediterranean Sea for example, than being confined to Australian waters for port defences. As a result, the commission suspected that were the Colonies asked, they would demand 'that any contribution from the Australian Colonies should be coupled with restrictions upon the free movement of the squadron'<sup>6</sup>, which the commission was unwilling to concede. For since the late 1870s, the question had already been discussed as to 'whether the protection of colonial ports generally is to be undertaken either wholly or in part by vessels of the Royal Navy stationed locally for that purpose'<sup>7</sup>, and it had been agreed in principle that 'the fleet is required for cruising, and cannot be kept in harbour to guard its own supplies'<sup>8</sup>.

Like Britain, the Australian Colonies were also beginning to feel insecure due to European colonial ambitions. In the 1870s the French set up a penal colony in New

Caledonia and there were rumours that they intended to invade Vanatu. In the 1880s the Germans began to assert themselves in New Guinea, thus threatening the coast of Queensland, and fears of Russian invasion were exacerbated in 1882 when a Russian fleet visited Melbourne.

In search of added security, the Australian Colonies held an Intercolonial Conference in Sydney in January 1881. Here, the Premier of South Australia proposed that the colonies should contribute one-half the expense of any additional naval forces, though "he was, singularly enough the only man in the Colonies at the time who took that view"<sup>9</sup>. It was agreed that 'the naval defence of these Colonies, considering the large imperial interests involved "should continue to be the exclusive charge of the Imperial Government, and that the strength of the Australian squadron should be increased"<sup>10</sup>. As a result of this stance from the Australian Governments, the Royal Commission recommended that a formal proposal of its conclusions should not be made to the Colonies at the time. However, it saw 'reason to hope that, considering their fast-increasing prosperity, the larger Colonies will, before long, be prepared, even in times of peace, to accept the principle of a contribution towards the cost of the Australian squadron, and that the other Colonies will follow their example'<sup>11</sup>.

The 1880s saw increased public interest in imperial defence and a desire for closer union, as anxieties became fuelled through the media. On 15 September 1884, the sensationalist editor W. T. Stead published an article on the front page of the *Pall Mall Gazette* entitled 'What is the Truth about the Navy?', where he called into question the effective strength of the Royal Navy<sup>12</sup>. Fears of war were also again provoked by another Russian crisis in 1885.

In the Queen's Speech on the prorogation of Parliament in 1886, Queen Victoria stated:

"I have observed with much satisfaction the interest which, in an increasing degree, is evinced by the people of this country in the welfare of their Colonial and Indian fellow subjects; I am led to the conviction that there is on all sides a growing desire to draw closer in every practicable way the bonds which unite the various portions of the Empire..."<sup>13</sup>

The issue found endorsement amongst the Imperial Federation League, and in the first number of the League's journal it was stated that 'Imperial Defence is not only a prime factor in Imperial Federation, it is the main burden which Imperial Federation takes upon itself'<sup>14</sup>. The historian Howard D'Egville credits a lecture delivered by John Colomb, one of the League's co-founders, entitled "Imperial Federation, Naval and Military", as having 'had a very distinct influence in turning the current of official thought towards the larger aspects of British Defence'<sup>15</sup>.

On September 9th 1885 an Admiralty memorandum was sent to Rear-Admiral Tryon, commander of the Australian squadron, instructing him to 'encourage an extension of the Imperial navy'<sup>16</sup>. However, the Admiralty scheme was rejected by the Colonies, as it proposed that the entire expense, including capital costs and annual maintenance, should be paid entirely out of Colonial funds.

The debate gained newspaper coverage in Britain, with the editor of *The Times* arguing that Australia 'is in urgent want of more effective means of defence', and urging that:

'If Australia will throw in her lot with this country, and will take her just share in the burden of naval defence, she will receive in return more than full equivalent. To have a distinct navy of her own, furnished with modern appliances and keeping pace with modern science, is scarcely possible for her. With the help of this country she can obtain all she needs, and we learn with pleasure that she is now seeking to avail herself of that help on her own interest and in ours... union is strength, and that, for a country situated as Australia is, there can be no strength found adequate to her needs on any other terms.'<sup>17</sup>

Sir Dillon Bell the Agent-General of New Zealand, argued that 'the Colonies had said they wanted an "Australian Fleet" (in the sense of a fleet assigned to local service),

and that they ought therefore to be prepared to pay towards the prime cost as well as the maintenance'<sup>18</sup>. The Conservative politician Sir Clement Kinloch Cooke, also wrote:

'what Australia really wants is a navy - ships that she can call her own, the possession of which will diminish, if not destroy, the danger that must arise to her coasting trade owing to the immediate presence of foreign Powers in the event of a European war... Invite the colonies to provide the money, which they are well able to do, and with Australian gold build ironclads and cruisers in our own dockyards, and, while thus providing for the naval defence of our Pacific possessions, we shall at the same time be lessening the pauperism that prevails in England and giving work to thousands of the unemployed...

Hand the ships over to the Federal Australian Council to use as they may determine for the common safety of our colonial shores; but let their movements in a matter where Imperial and Colonial interests are combined be subject to telegraphic instruction from England...'<sup>19</sup>

This was the stumbling block, as the Admiralty was reluctant to commit to keeping ships permanently in Australian waters, yet the Colonies were unwilling to contribute to the capital cost of the new vessels unless this was the case. It was the British who compromised, and on 24 December 1885 in a letter to the Governors of the Australian Colonies, Tryon offered that 'the vessels provided at the cost of the colonies should be retained within the limits of the Australian seas'. After further correspondence, a scheme was suggested whereby the Colonies would bear the cost of maintaining the new fleet, and five per cent of the cost of construction.

At the Imperial Federation League Conference of August 1886, the need for a more integrated system of imperial defence was further emphasised by Colomb, who in the course of his paper read at the conference, said "Federation for common defence is, I believe, essentially necessary for Imperial safety", and he urged the calling of a Conference representative of the Parliaments of the Empire, "to examine the facts of our position and to fix the principles which are to guide our arrangements for defence"<sup>20</sup>. On 11 August, a delegation of the League was sent to the Prime Minister Lord Salisbury and the Secretary of State for the Colonies Edward Stanhope, urging them to call a conference

or appoint a Royal Commission, representative of the United Kingdom and the self-governing colonies, to consider practical means of improving imperial defence and intercommunication. The Prime minister, impressed by their arguments, promised to assemble a Conference 'at no distant date'<sup>21</sup>. On 25 November a circular dispatch was sent out to the self-governing colonies, inviting them to take part in a conference set for the following year amid the golden jubilee celebrations, with imperial defence and imperial communications as the two main subjects to be discussed.

Sir Henry Holland, who took over as Colonial Secretary from Stanhope, asserted that 'all other matters must wait until the safety of the Empire is secured'<sup>22</sup>, and *The Times* also agreed that the defence of the Australasian Colonies was a pressing issue that needed addressing:

'When Sydney harbour is safe against sudden attacks, when New Zealand is not at the mercy of a single hostile ironclad, when each Colony is able to assist itself and its neighbours in an emergency... we shall pass on with renewed confidence to the consideration of other questions. A few more similar efforts of co-operation and we shall have got the substance, if not the form, of Federation.'<sup>23</sup>

### **The 1887 Colonial Conference**

In his opening speech at the Conference, Lord Salisbury emphasised to the delegates that "the real and most important business upon which you will be engaged" would be "the union for purposes of mutual defence". Salisbury went on to criticise the notion that the only risks of attack to which the Colonies were liable were such as might arise from "imperial action and policy", for 'there had taken place of recent years a great growth in the naval power of European countries, and though these countries might not be contemplating aggression, it was impossible to ignore the fact that the "facilities" for such action had been enormously increased by the development of steam and electric

communication<sup>24</sup>. In his conclusion, Salisbury was quick to dismiss any idea that "this proposal is a mere contrivance on our part to lighten our burden, or that it results from any indolence or selfishness of ours":

"What we desire is that all parts of the Empire should be equally prosperous, equally glorious; and for that we desire that all should take their fair and legitimate part in a task of which all ought to be proud."<sup>25</sup>

In turning to the subjects for discussion, the President of the Conference Sir Henry Holland, said that for his own part he would not consider the Conference to have failed if it did "nothing more than place military and naval defence on a sound footing"<sup>26</sup>. He then reviewed the developments of the previous ten years, stating that "prior to 1878 little had been done to modernise the external defences of the Empire", and the matter was only seriously considered 'when apprehensions of war [with Russia] awoke this country and the colonies to the unguarded state of outlying parts of the Empire'<sup>27</sup>.

Holland highlighted the two most important subjects under discussion as being "the local defence of ports and other Imperial coaling stations", and the "desirability of strengthening the fleet in Australian waters by the addition of a local force", following on from the discussions with Admiral Tryon. The subject of naval defence came to occupy ten days out of the twenty, and the majority of this time was taken up in trying to establish a "basis" from which contributions from the Colonies towards the Empire's common defence could be procured.

From early on in the conference, the Australian Colonies were marked out from the rest of the Empire and the self-governing Colonies due to their own efforts to fortify themselves. It seemed that there was little knowledge in Britain of these efforts as Edward Stanhope, now Secretary of War, stated:

'I had no idea, and I do not believe that the people of this country had any idea, of the very large sums of money that have been spent in the Australian

Colonies for the purposes of defence, or of the thoroughly efficient manner in which they are endeavouring in so many cases to preserve themselves against hostile attack.'<sup>28</sup>

However, rather than being rewarded for their diligence, their efforts actually resulted in more generous treatment being afforded to other Colonies. This was because whereas the other Colonies had shown an unwillingness to pay towards defence costs, the Australian Colonies had been willing to contribute financially, and therefore it was easier for the British Government not to press the more reluctant Colonies. For example, Halifax was the headquarters of the North American Squadron, and as a result it was defended under the sole charge of the British Government, however Sydney was the headquarters of the Australasian Squadron but was defended at the sole charge of the New South Wales Government. Though both arguably constituted cases of imperial interest, they were not treated as such, as the Australian Colonies had “recognised” the responsibility of defending their own ports. Also, in the case of Halifax, its relatively close distance to Britain made it more important from a home defence point of view. It could therefore be argued that though Halifax's circumstances came under the pretext of imperial interest, the major reason for its funding was because its defence had a direct affect on Britain's, whereas Australia, situated on the other side of the world, did not. Their geographic isolation from Britain and the major stations of the Royal Navy had prompted the Australian Colonies to take their defence into their own hands, and explains their desire for a larger, permanent, Australasian fleet.

In regards to a financial contribution to the Admiralty, there was disagreement amongst the delegates as to what basis this should be divided amongst the six Australian Colonies and New Zealand. The Royal Commission had not defined this but suggested that 'speaking generally, it would seem that each Colony should pay a sum proportioned to its commerce and population'<sup>29</sup>. During the negotiations with Admiral Tryon, a population

basis was proposed but there was some dispute as to whether or not this had been accepted. Sir Samuel Griffith, the Premier of Queensland, favoured a system based on the commerce of the individual Colonies and proposed that the apportionment should be entrusted to the British Board of Trade, which was agreed by most of the other Australasian delegates. However, Sir Saul Samuel of New South Wales objected as "the commerce and trade of some of the other Colonies is not so large as that of New South Wales"<sup>30</sup>. In the end, the population basis was accepted, 'the relative similarity of economic conditions throughout the Australasian Colonies reducing the force of the objections which generally may be raised against this basis of apportionment'<sup>31</sup>. With this agreed amongst the Colonies, it left the question as to the basis of apportionment between Australasia and Britain.

The British Government were determined to secure a scheme which "would serve as a basis and model for any future arrangement in the case of other Colonies"<sup>32</sup>, and were therefore willing to compromise on the original proposal offered by Tryon. They were prepared to relieve the Colonies of the additional cost that would be incurred in war, and they agreed to accept the liability of replacing any vessels that might be lost through accident. It was then agreed that for five cruisers and two torpedo boats, the Colonies would 'pay for maintenance a sum not exceeding £91,000 per annum, and for depreciation a percentage of five percent on the initial cost, which, with other incidental charges, is estimated to amount to a further sum not exceeding £35,000 per annum'<sup>33</sup>. The negotiations, in the words of the British delegate Lord George Hamilton, had reached "a very satisfactory conclusion"<sup>34</sup>.

Despite this, there was disgruntlement amongst some of the Australasian delegates over the fact that no recognized "basis" of contribution had been agreed. Sir Henry

Holland responded to this in a paper of "remarks" on the opening discussion, which was officially circulated before the session closed:

‘There has never been any attempt to find a financial basis, and the arrangement cannot well be placed in this light... the present proposals of the Admiralty were made with a view to meet the Colonial requirements, as far as possible, without throwing a burden on the taxpayers at home, which they would certainly resist. But what financial basis is possible? In any such calculation the home taxpayer would claim credit for a peace naval expenditure already exceeding an average of £13,000,000 per annum, and the total peace contribution now asked from the Australasian Colonies, £122,597 per annum, would appear trifling in comparison.’<sup>35</sup>

Holland then argued that of the total Australasian commerce, nearly four-tenths was inter-colonial, and over one-tenth was foreign, leaving only one-half for trade in which Britain was interested, while the amount of trade per head of population was in the Colonies nearly double the British average<sup>36</sup>:

“On all accounts, therefore, it appeared to us to be desirable to make a simple and definite offer to the Colonies, rather than seek for an adjustment on a basis which would either be fallacious, or would tend to arouse the susceptibilities of the heavily burdened tax-payers at home. It may be true, as has been stated, that the proposed arrangement rests on no numerical basis, but, from what I have said, it will be evident that the scheme cannot be regarded as illiberal, whether considered in the light of relative interests or relative burdens.”<sup>37</sup>

Just as had been stated in the earlier negotiations, the Colonies demanded that the ships remain 'under the limits of the Australasian station'<sup>38</sup>, and could be taken away "only with the consent of the Colonial Governments"<sup>39</sup>. However, there seems to be some confusion from both sides over this clause. In response, Lord George Hamilton remarked:

"The fact is that in war or any emergency, whatever arrangements are made in time of peace are overruled. I think this provides for any ordinary emergency."<sup>40</sup>

However, the Australians seemed under the impression that the ships were to remain in Australasian waters whatever the situation:

"The Admiralty undertook that, as the fleet would be paid for by the Australian Colonies, it would be devoted solely to their protection, no matter what causes might arise in other parts of the empire that might render its presence desirable."<sup>41</sup>

This side of the agreement caused particular discontent with the British. Sir Henry Holland emphasised to the Australian delegates the benefits that they derived from the navy generally and its world-wide coaling stations, to which they contributed nothing, and complained:

"The whole question seemed to be handled as if Australasia were in a ring-fence, and provided that the force maintained within that fence was adequate, all the conditions of defence were fulfilled."

British objections arose from the fact that they were desperate to establish a precedent of Colonial contributions towards naval costs. However, as they found from the Sydney Conference of 1881, and during the subsequent negotiations with Admiral Tryon, the Australian Colonies would only agree to contribute financially if the ships were 'retained within the limits of the Australian seas'. The Admiralty were opposed to the principle of keeping any ships permanently on a particular station, but they sacrificed this objection in order to gain the acceptance of the Colonies and establish the precedent they desired. Therefore the British could not complain that the Australian Colonies were acting as if they were in a "ring-fence", as that had always been the mentality of the Colonies, and the British had accepted this.

One of the Cape delegates, Mr J. H. Hofmeyr, held the view that "so long as no system of federation or government in which [the Colonies] are represented has been hit upon or developed, so long they cannot be expected to be duty bound to defend themselves against the European enemies of England"<sup>42</sup>. However he saw a need in the future for the Colonies to contribute towards the Empire's naval defence, and so proposed the following system:

"The feasibility of promoting a closer union between the various parts of the British Empire by means of an Imperial Tariff or Customs to be levied, independently of the duties payable under existing tariffs, on goods entering the Empire from abroad, the revenue derived from such tariff to be devoted to the general Defence of the Empire."<sup>43</sup>

Because such a system would have required an alteration of Britain's Free Trade policy, Alfred Deakin of Victoria pointed out that the question was "one really for the English people, not for the Colonies"<sup>44</sup>. However Hofmeyr at least tried to provide a system from which a "basis" of contribution could be derived that was transferable across the Empire. It also 'probably had a bearing on the subsequent development of a policy for closer union of the Empire in other directions'<sup>45</sup> such as future schemes offered by Joseph Chamberlain.

### **Reaction to the Naval Agreement**

To most observers, the Conference appeared a success and demonstrated a new level of cooperation and unity between Britain and the Empire. The naval agreement between Britain and the Australian Colonies in particular represented the concrete manifestation of this success:

"Though the official reports of the meetings of the Colonial Conference are confined to a formal record of the proceedings, it is no secret that the Conference has so far proved a conspicuous success and has already achieved substantial results.

... The Colonies have been invited to join the Mother Country in a species of naval partnership, and they have readily responded to the invitation."<sup>46</sup>

As well as being lauded as an example of imperial cooperation, the naval agreement was also seen as a practical success that would 'make a substantial addition to the effective strength of the fleet'<sup>47</sup>. Sir Henry Holland stated "the mere knowledge" of the squadron's presence "will definitely reduce the risks of attempted aggression in Australasian waters"<sup>48</sup>.

In the *Australasian Naval and Military Gazette*, it was reported that the developments of the Conference had captured the interest and endorsement from people across England, not just the politicians and journalists in London:

'the holding of such a conference was the natural outcome of the great change that had taken place in English opinion with regard to the colonies. Wherever they went in England now they found the greatest possible interest taken in colonial affairs. They no longer heard advocated a policy of indifference in regard to the colonies, and no one was heard to talk with any degree of complacency about their possible separation from the mother country. As far as he was able to gather, the feeling seemed universal to all that was possible to strengthen the ties which band the two together. ... This partnership between the Imperial Government and the colonies showed to the whole world that the mother country and her possessions were so thoroughly united that they could come to an understanding to work together in a common way for a common object.'<sup>49</sup>

However, behind the public facade, the Conference was not as united or harmonious as the politicians made out. For example, in the case of the New Hebrides, Alfred Deakin, fearing that Britain would cede the islands to France, desired a more vigorous imperial policy to protect Australian interests there<sup>50</sup>. In response, Salisbury wrote a private letter to Holland, where he declared the Australians:

'the most unreasonable people I have ever heard or dreamt of. They want us to incur all the bloodshed and the danger, and the stupendous cost of a war with France, of which almost the exclusive burden will fall on us, for a group of islands which to us are as useless as the South Pole - and to which they are only attached by a debating-club sentiment.'<sup>51</sup>

Salisbury's comments show that despite any positive agreements achieved through the Conference for the benefit and development of mutual interests, there still existed a 'them and us' mentality amongst politicians. Each delegate at the Conference was concerned with local questions, and looked at the way problems affected their particular colony rather than the Empire as a whole. This explains the mentality of the Australian delegates in their insistence that the fleet remained in Australasian waters. Denis Judd also

argues that the desire to contribute sprang from 'self-interest rather than of imperial patriotism':

'The Australasian colonies were sparsely populated European settlements on the fringe of the Asian land-mass, and were conscious of their isolation. The rising power of Japan, and the threatening presence of Russia in the Far East, heightened the sense of isolation and insecurity. There is no doubt that the colonies were buying a measure of security with their annual payments to the Royal Navy's upkeep.'<sup>52</sup>

In a letter to *The Times* dated July 21st, Lord Brassey contended that 'valuable as the reinforcement would be... it can scarcely be accepted as an adequate provision for the protection of the vast British interests which have been created in this distant quarter of the globe', therefore 'additional ships should be provided by a judicious redistribution of ships on foreign stations'. He argued that Australia's 'growth of population and trade has not been followed by a proportionate strengthening of our Navy in these waters', and he too referred to the significance of Russia, where 'the recent additions to the Russian fleet in the Pacific have naturally created a feeling of anxiety in Australia', citing a recent comparison of both fleets in the *Melbourne Argus* which "is by no means pleasant reading". He stated that it had become the 'clear duty' of the British to strengthen the fleet, but also 'in a political point of view the presence of a larger force on the Australian station may be urged as a means of strengthening the hands of those who desire to preserve the connexion with the mother country'<sup>53</sup>.

Brassey, though he had recently moved to Australia, was concerned with 'British interests', and as such was not motivated by the same concerns for 'local interests' as Australian politicians. Instead he urged the strengthening of the fleet so as 'to preserve the connexion with the mother country'. He was concerned with this for, in Australia at the time, there were people who believed that a severance with Britain was becoming

increasingly likely. This was mooted in an article in the *Brisbane Courier* of July 26, which explained the reasons why severance might occur:

'Our differences with the Home Government in recent years have been due to what in our opinion, was a vacillation and hesitation. A good instance is seen in the way in which part of New Guinea was allowed to fall into German hands... The Australian communities, which have to be passive, though deeply interested, spectators of the conduct of Imperial affairs, are by no means persuaded that those affairs have been wisely managed... It appears to us that much of the irresolution displayed has been due to the pressure of the domestic policy of Great Britain on her Government.'

The article then cites Gladstone's Irish Home Rule policy, which 'infinitely increased' the 'prospect of the danger' of severance, as 'if he succeeds - as he probably will - the whole nature of the Parliament which selects and controls the rulers of the Empire will be changed.':

'It will become in reality a federal Assembly, wrapt up for years to come in the most difficult task of adjusting relations between Ireland and Great Britain... How will such a Parliament control the affairs of the Empire?... the probabilities certainly are that Imperial affairs - that is to say, affairs which concern us - will be far worse managed in the future than they have been in the past... it is at least possible that the affairs of the Empire may be so mismanaged... that we Australians may come to look to severance as the lesser of two evils.'<sup>54</sup>

As a result, the article questioned whether instead of paying contributions to the British navy, it would be wiser for the Australian Colonies to build their own Australian fleet for home defence. For in the case that "separation", though 'very unpopular among the colonists', should be forced upon them, it would be vital to possess their own fleet built, paid for, and manned by Australians. Immediately after the Conference, it had been written in the *Australian Naval and Military Gazette* that 'some people would have preferred a federal fleet, rather than the plan agreed upon', yet this was dismissed as 'a federal fleet would in the course of ten years have become altogether obsolete, and under the plan adopted we should be constantly getting changes in officers and men'<sup>55</sup>.

However, the desire for a national navy became increasingly widespread, particularly after the federation of Australia in 1901, in which defence had been a major motivation<sup>56</sup>. Federation led to the development of a 'national consciousness', which brought a desire to have more influence over foreign relations, and a naval force under direct Australian control was thus necessary to attain this.

Though the immediate reaction in Britain was generally one of approval for the Australian contributions, it was not long before voices were once again criticizing the colonies for not paying enough towards the upkeep of the navy. In a letter to *The Times* dated 24 August 1894, Francis de Labilliere, an Australian lawyer and one of the founders of the Imperial Federation League, stated that the 'short-comings of the colonies in not supporting the British Navy are glaringly set forth':

'The Navy, employed and relied upon for the protection of the whole Empire is provided and maintained entirely at the cost of the people of the United Kingdom, though there are 11 million people of the same race, inhabiting some of the richest countries of the world, under the same Sovereign, and enjoying the same privileges, who contribute practically nothing to that expenditure. Though the colonies contribute only one-ninetieth part of the cost of the naval defence of the Empire, their population is more than a quarter of that of the United Kingdom, and their revenue is nearly half that of the United Kingdom.'<sup>57</sup>

The naval historian P. H. Colomb also wrote to *The Times* with his concerns regarding the naval defence of the Australian Colonies, and their preoccupation with local defence. He argued that they failed to recognize that should 'Imperial defence' fail, local defences would be inconsequential:

'It seems impossible for Australasia to understand that if such attacks were possible the locality for defence is off Vladivostok, Sweaborg, Cronstadt, Brest, Cherbourg, Toulon, and the Dardanelles. And if the defence there should fail, then her local defence, if she spent ten times what she now spends on it, would still be useless.'<sup>58</sup>

This indicates that despite the agreement, there was still discontent in Britain at the permanent deployment of a fleet in Australasian waters, and that many Australians still did not understand or accept that the fleet could best serve their defence by meeting threats elsewhere in the world. It also appears that there were still many people in Australia that considered it the purpose of the fleet to provide floating harbour defences, contrary to the beliefs of the Admiralty, and much to the frustration of British commentators:

'when the Australian colonies, for example, contribute to the cost of naval defence, they have a tendency to regard certain ships as earmarked for local sentry-go, and to resent their employment as a part of the fleet operating in Australian waters. But it is not the business of a fleet to expose itself to destruction in detail by scattering itself along a coast-line and leaving the enemy in command of the sea. It is concerned with the strategic defence of the coast-line as a whole, and this involves aggressive tactics. It has to seek out and destroy the enemy's fleet, leaving to shore defences the task of repelling such hasty attacks as may be made by a cruiser that eludes its vigilance. Hence, if the Admiralty is adequately to protect Australia in case of war, it must not be expected to fritter away its resources by stationing ships in front of ports while the enemy's fleet is left free to intercept at sea all the commerce intended for these ports.'<sup>59</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The genesis of Australian naval defence lay in the aftermath of the 1878 Russian crisis. The threat of war prompted the creation of the Carnarvon Commission, which identified weaknesses in the defences of the Empire and recommended that the Australian Colonies began contributing to their naval defence. The Australian Colonies themselves met at the 1881 Inter-colonial Conference at Sydney and proposed to extend the Australasian fleet, though at the cost of the British Government.

Meanwhile in Britain, the issue of imperial defence gained increased newspaper coverage and public interest. It was driven forward by the Imperial Federation League, who saw the creation of an integrated system of imperial defence as the foundation from

which political and economic federation could develop. Without their petitioning of the Government, it is unsure whether a Colonial Conference would have been held in 1887.

Though the Conference achieved the aim of a naval agreement between the Australian Colonies and Britain, whereby the British gained the financial contribution they wanted, and the Colonies achieved a new and larger fleet, it was not the undisputed collective success that was portrayed in public by the politicians and media.

It was definitely not how the Federalists had hoped it would be; an example of delegates from across the Empire working together for the greater good, and the first step towards imperial federation. Though an agreement had been made which brought Britain and the Australasian Colonies in financial partnership, it was not the greater good of the Empire that had driven this, but money and local interest. The British wanted to lighten their financial burden and establish a precedent that would lead to similar agreements with other Colonies. Whereas the Australian Colonies were not looking to strengthen imperial defence as a whole, or tighten their bonds with the mother country, but to reinforce their own defence at the minimum of costs, thus insisting that the fleet remain in Australasian waters. The British grudgingly accepted this in order to push the deal through. As a result, control of the fleet's distribution came down to the Australasian Colonies.

Though it was stated that "with the consent of the Colonial Governments" the ships could be distributed elsewhere, it is unlikely that, in the case of an emergency which would prompt such a request from the British Government, the Colonies would have unanimously offered this consent and leave themselves unprotected. Therefore the British did not gain the contribution towards imperial defence that it wanted. Instead it was the British who in effect found themselves contributing towards a fleet that would provide for Australia's local defence, something which they demanded the Colonies take care of themselves. Thus, harking back to the Carnarvon Commission, the aim of the Australasian

squadron had changed from the protection of 'interests common to the Colonies and [Britain] herself', to the protection primarily of Australian interests.

The British also failed to gain the precedent that they wished, as apart from Natal, who offered a small contribution as way of thanks for subduing the Boer Republics, no new Colonies followed suit. In fact, the early twentieth century saw some self-governing Colonies such as Canada, try and develop their own navies<sup>60</sup>.

After federation in 1901, Australia started to develop its own national consciousness, and thus it also began to crave the possession of its own fleet. This desire intensified after Britain signed a naval treaty in 1902, leaving her Far Eastern interests, including Australia, under the protection of Japan. At the 1909 Imperial Conference, an agreement was made to establish an independent Australian fleet unit consisting of one battle cruiser and several light cruisers. However, this time it was the British who insisted that in times of war, the ships would be released to the control of the Royal Navy, thus partially nullifying the controversial 'local waters' clause of the 1887 agreement. As a result, during the First World War, ships of the Royal Australian Navy found themselves deployed in East Africa, the Dardanelles, the Suez Canal, the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, the North Atlantic and the North Sea<sup>61</sup>, and 'only the three destroyers on the Queensland coast were left to remind Australians that they ever had a navy of their own.'<sup>62</sup>

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