Review by **Michael Rainsborough**, King's College London

Geoffrey Blainey's classic 1966 work, *The Tyranny of Distance*, takes geography as the principal determining factor in Australia's history.[1] The relative isolation of Australia's settler population, Blainey argued, was pivotal in the formation of the national character and the country's politics. It is the perceived influence of distance upon the conduct of Australian foreign policy in the Cold War period during the long tenure of Sir Robert Menzies' premiership between 1949 and 1966, and the academic interpretations subsequently placed upon it, that constitutes the historical material with which Andrea Benvenuti and David Martin Jones' article "Myth and Misrepresentation in Australian Foreign Policy," published in the *Journal of Cold War Studies*, seeks to engage, and ultimately contest.

Current Australian historiography, the authors claim, is informed by a set of simplistic, poorly researched misconceptions. These ascribe to Menzies' foreign policy the malign effects of distance – psychological, emotional and political – from Australia's Asian neighbours. The tyranny of distance in this respect ensured that the Menzies period, so its critics maintain, was "permeated by suspicion and condescension" towards Asia (57). The cultural and political basis of this insensitivity resided in "conservative Anglo-centrism" that among other negative impacts induced a servile colonialist mentality that deferred to British and United States interests and engendered a casual indifference to Asia that led to a misguided and militaristic containment policy and a consequent failure to engage constructively with the region either politically or economically (57).

---

[1] Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1966).

The authors seek to demonstrate that these assertions, far from being accurate, represent the basis of a "tenacious political myth" that has become enshrined in academic and media orthodoxy (57). The myth is purveyed by a left-leaning *commentariat* that, as George Orwell would have it, attempts to control the past with the intention of legitimizing political positions in the present. Menzies-era policies are thereby traduced in order to justify the ideological transformation in foreign and domestic policies wrought by a series of later Australian Labor Party governments. Most notably this orthodoxy reinforces the view that the premiership of Gough Whitlam, who in 1972 led the first Labor government after World War II, provided the "watershed" event that, so the story goes, broke the discredited foreign policy mold of Menzies and ushered in a more balanced, multilateral, and mature policy aimed at severing outdated imperial ties with Britain and enmeshing Australia more firmly within Asia.

To assess the strength of the article's contentions, the authors are required to provide convincing evidence for two essential questions: first, is contemporary Australian international relations guilty of promoting a one-dimensional view of the Menzies era? Second, can it be demonstrated that such a view, if it can be said to exist, represents a seriously distorted understanding of the past at variance with a more dispassionate reading of the historical evidence?

On the first question, Benvenuti and Jones cite a succession of contemporary academic commentators from the 1990s who accept and expand the "left-Labor perspective" (58). Meg Gurry, for example, employs the rhetoric of distance to argue that Menzies' "psychological and emotional distance that separated his Australia from its neighbours was irreducible" (58). She avers that "Australia developed an unpopular identity in the region which kept it psychologically and diplomatically isolated from its neighbours" (59). Frank Bongiorno asserts that "there was an imaginative and emotional deficiency in Menzies' engagement with Asia" (59). Gregory Pemberton maintains Menzies "focused Australian foreign policy… on imperial rather than regional concerns" and "militarised Australia's relations with Asia" (58-59). By the time Menzies left office, according to Pemberton, the "bankruptcy of his approach to decolonisation was clear" (58). Only with the end of Liberal rule in 1972, Bruce Grant and Gareth Evans declare, was Australia able to shrug off "old attitudes of dependence" and discover "a unique place for itself in a region which it had always before considered alien and even hostile" (58).[2]

---

[2] Meg Gurry, "Identifying Australia's Region: From Evatt to Evans," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (1995), p. 21; Meg Gurry, "Leadership and Bilateral Relations: Menzies and Nehru, Australia and India, 1949-1964," *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (Winter 1992-93), pp. 511-512; Frank Bongiorno, "The Price of Nostalgia: Menzies, the 'Liberal Tradition' and Australian Foregin Policy," *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (2005), p. 410; Gregory Pemberton, "An Imperial Imagination: Explaining the Post-1945 Foreign Policy of Robert Gordon Menzies," in Frank Cain (ed.), *Menzies in War and Peace* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1997), p. 159; Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant, *Australia's Foreign Relations in the World of the 1990s* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1995), p. 26.

Benvenuti and Jones succeed in drawing attention to this curious lack of pluralism in current Australian scholarship. From the 1960s to 1980s it was possible to discern numerous analytical perspectives of Australian foreign policy, which ranged from the deeply conservative, represented by those like Patrick O'Brien,[3] to the radical left, typified by Max Teichmann, Ralph Pettman and Bruce Grant.[4] In between these extremities there also existed a broad spectrum of opinion. This middle ground extended from those broadly sympathetic to the Liberal governments of the age through to the right-wing of the Labor party. Although they differed substantially in emphasis, this group encompassed a prudential view of Australia's external relations firmly rooted in a sense of national (as opposed to a regional) identity. Those associated with this stream of thinking were scholars of considerable international standing: Coral Bell, Peter Boyce, Hedley Bull, Harry Gelber, Owen Harries, T.B. Millar, J.D.B. Miller and Robert O'Neill.[5]

By the late 1980s, pluralism had all but disappeared from Australian foreign policy discourse, replaced, as Benvenuti and Jones imply, by a stifling conformity of opinion generally linked to the Labor left that advanced increasingly utopian ideas of regionalism. Having substantially proved their case on the first question, then, how do Benvenuti and Jones fair on the second? The authors set about their task by challenging the four main areas of criticism leveled by the orthodoxy: that Menzies lacked any awareness of an Asian region; that he was skeptical, if not hostile, to an emergent nonaligned movement in Asia; that he over-militarized Australian foreign policy in a manner that antagonized Asian states; and that his blinkered outlook led to a failure to engage Asia economically.

In each case Benventi and Jones calmly demolish the claims made against Menzies, not with muscular opinion, but with something else curiously absent from orthodox

---

[3] Patrick O'Brien, "Constitutional Conflict in Australia," *Conflict Studies*, No. 116 (Institute for the Study of Conflict, 1980).

[4] See for example J.P. Chiddick and Max Teichmann, *Australia and the World: A Political Handbook* (London: Macmillan, 1977); Ralph Pettman, "The Radical Critique and Australian Foreign Policy," in P.J. Boyce and J.R. Angel (eds.), *Independence and Alliance: Australia in World Affairs, 1976-80* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1983); Bruce Grant, *The Crisis of Loyalty: A Study of Australian Foreign Policy* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1972). It should be noted that Max Teichmann, university lecturer and frequent public commentator, although starting out on the radical left, became a vehement critic of the Australian left in the course of the 1990s until his death in November 2008. See Christopher Pearson, "He Chose the Left as His Target," *The Australian*, December 6, 2008.

[5] See for example, Coral Bell, *Dependent Ally: A Study in Australian Foreign Policy* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1985); P.J. Boyce, *Dictionary of Australian Politics* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1980); Hedley Bull, *Australia's Foreign Policy in the Seventies* (Townsville, North Queensland, Australian Institute of International Affairs, 1968); Harry Gelber, *The Australian American Alliance: Costs and Benefits* (London: Penguine, 1968); Owen Harries, "Australia's Foreign Policy under Whitlam," *Orbis*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Summer 1975); T.B. Millar, *Australia in Peace and War: External Relations 1788-1977* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1978); J.D.B. Miller, *Australian and Foreign Policy* (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1963).

commentary, namely, an empirical demonstration based on careful engagement with the historical archive. The authors possess an impressive appreciation of primary source materials, including Australian, American and British state papers, along with other contemporaneous sources. In the process they reveal that many of the current-day criticisms of Menzies are little more than vacuous *ex-cathedra* statements, based not on research but on lazy supposition reinforced by repetition and conceptual fiat.

Thus, the principal accusation of Menzies' critics that his regional policy "carried no sense of a *shared membership of a common region*"[6] is exposed as incorrect because the newly decolonized states of Southeast Asia were weak, fractious, and mistrustful of each other (61). "In the 1950s," the authors observe, "developing Asian elites themselves had little consciousness of belonging to a common regional entity" (63). To censure Menzies for a "lack of empathy toward an abstraction" is unreasonable when that abstraction had little grounds for plausibility in the first place (61).

It is only possible to make the case that Menzies missed an opportunity to ingratiate Australia into a putative Asian region if one embraces, as a number of *jejune* Australian scholars do, the equally flawed and ill-researched idea that an incipient nonaligned bloc existed among the insecure states of Asia in the 1950s. Benvenuti and Jones are particularly devastating in disposing of this point, illustrating that if a "Bandung spirit" ever existed, it was only as a sad piece of Indian self-delusion. Nehru's nonaligned advocacy gained little traction, and indeed garnered much suspicion, among other Asian states and was in any case "frozen into irrelevance on the snow capped peaks of the Himalayas when China attacked India in October 1962" (68).

The analysis proceeds to point out that far from trapping Australia in anachronistic Cold War containment policies and over-militarizing its foreign policy, the country's military commitments such as its forces stationed in Malaysia and Singapore under the Five Power Defence Arrangements were "often small and unobtrusive" (71). Even Australia's deployment of forces to South Vietnam, the real *bête noir* of left-Labor analysts, was outnumbered by the much larger contributions of other Asian states, notably, South Korea, Thailand and the Philippines. How can all this, the authors ask, "be regarded as a misguided policy in a climate of rapidly escalating Cold War tension… especially if we bear in mind that several Asian states actively sought Australian military support?" (70).

The authors, furthermore, argue persuasively that the Menzies administrations possessed a realistic understanding of the economic prospects for the region. As Laurence McIntyre, Head of the Pacific Division at the Department of External Affairs pointed out, Asia "never had an integrated economy" (75). "There is thus no tradition of co-operation on which to build: the foundations have to be laid down" (75). Far from ignoring Asia, Australian governments proceeded to lay down these foundations. The historical record

---

[6] Gurry, "Identifying Australia's Region," pp. 21-22 (original italics).

supports this. Menzies' officials, like external affairs minister Percy Spender, in 1950 declared that "it is Asia and the Pacific that Australia should make its primary effort in the field of foreign relations" (62). The Menzies government gave pragmatic expression to these sentiments by sponsoring initiatives like the Colombo Plan in July 1951 that provided financial and technical assistance to many of the nascent states of the region, and forging greater economic links with Asian countries, most notably Japan.

"Myth and Misrepresentation in Australian Foreign Policy" provides a radical revision of Menzies era foreign policy. But it also represents an interesting counterpoint to contemporary Australian academic commentary, for it adds up to a damning indictment. Current day Australian international relations and diplomatic studies stands accused of incompetence at best, a casual disengagement from the archive, and a basic ignorance of the context of how Cold War politics impinged on the reality of Australia's external policies. At worst, however, these disciplines suffer from deliberate ideological distortion, and an intolerant refusal to test their ruling assumptions against the evidence. Contemporary Australian international relations, thereby, abandons proper scholarly engagement by smuggling highly contestable political positions into the public domain as if they constitute objective academic analysis. In itself, it raises an interesting question as to why it is that non-Australian academics based in Australia, like Benvenuti and Jones, are prepared to question this orthodoxy?

This question falls outside the scope of Benvenuti and Jones' analysis, but by way of conclusion it is worth considering how Australian international relations was captured by this left ideological orthodoxy. Like many inquiries in the social sciences, Australian foreign policy analysis fell victim to a post-Tet professoriat, aghast at Australia's support of United States "imperialism" in South Vietnam. American military failure in Vietnam from the late 1960s onward provided the *deus ex machina* for radical left scholars to condemn the entire basis of Australian external relations since World War II. Working its way through academia during the 1970s and 1980s, this echelon reached its apogee during the premiership of Paul Keating, and his foreign minister, Gareth Evans, in the 1990s, who directed themselves to re-casting Australia as an Asian country.

It was in the 1990s that Australian international relations lost any sense of a diversity of perspectives, as scholarship became focused on disparaging Liberal achievement between 1949 and 1972. Additionally, this orthodoxy was also dedicated to covering up the manifest failures of Whitlam's own foreign policy conduct. Having criticized Menzies and his successors for not engaging constructively with Asia, Whitlam proceeded to alienate almost all of Australia's near Asian neighbours. Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia became suspicious of Australia's willingness to appease China and the Soviet Union, while Whitlam's consent to, and in some senses, connivance with, Indonesia's genocidal invasion of East Timor in 1975 remains one of the darkest stains on any country's foreign policy record. The litany of failure and under achievement in Whitlam's foreign policy is rarely acknowledged or explored in modern scholarship.

Instead, the orthodoxy perpetuates itself. The reason it is able to do so is largely the consequence of the small size of the Australian international relations fraternity, lacking sufficient critical mass to generate diversity. More generally, Australian society is replete with ideas of "mateship," a cultural expression that promotes loyalty among like-minded friends, but is exclusive and inherently suspicious of outsiders, especially those who may threaten the consensus. This has been fostered not only by a left-leaning international relations and diplomatic history academic establishment but also by the fact that Labor-aligned officials working for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Defence, or the Office of National Assessments often occupy chairs at many leading Australian universities. Alternatively, former Labor leaning diplomats or bureaucrats like Stephen Fitzgerald, Hugh White, or Michael Wesley and Allan Gyngell run influential think-tanks, like the Lowy Institute, and write the set texts on Australian foreign policy.[7]

This somewhat unhealthy relationship between a Labor/Green left academe and former scholar-diplomats flitting between universities and government has entrenched a set of conventional beliefs about Australian foreign policy. The orthodoxy is reinforced by the large grant machinery of the Australian state, particularly the Australian Research Council, where the same academics and bureaucrats examine projects and anonymously review research applications for studies of Australian foreign policy. Few academics seeking to question the prevailing orthodoxy ever receive funding.

A further indication of the closing of the Australian academic mind is the strange ranking of academic journals for research assessment purposes where journals like the *Australian Journal of International Affairs* and the *Australian Journal of Political Science* are ranked A* and A, far above publications like the *Journal of Cold War Studies* or *Foreign Affairs,* which are either not rated at all or are rated the equivalent of writing for a school postgraduate magazine. This is all scarcely credible. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that the vast majority of scholars of the history of foreign affairs and diplomacy would choose to publish in leading journals like the *Journal of Cold War Studies* rather than their Australian counterparts.[8] However, fixing the terms of academic engagement, research funding, and promotion, enables a conformist delusion about the evolution of Australian foreign policy to be maintained.

---

[7] See Allan Gyngell and Michael Wesley, *The Making of Australian Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[8] A simple empirical demonstration validates this claim. On H-Diplo, the Diplomatic and International History Discussion Network, its article review forum between 2009 and 2011 contained 36 reviews of articles from the *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 38 from *Diplomatic History*, 22 from *Cold War History* and 17 from other journals. No articles from any Australian international affairs or history journals were selected for review. H-Diplo's review archive section, extending from 1998 to 2008, likewise, does not contain any reviews of Australian journals.

In their contribution Benvenuti and Jones challenge conventional Australian foreign policy analysis as it has established itself since the 1990s. Their article compels us to ask what is the point in having any kind of disciplinary inquiry if all it seeks is to sustain an orthodoxy? Only mediocrity would wish to avoid engaging with differing viewpoints. If contemporary Australian international relations scholars are unwilling or incapable of rising to the challenge of Benvenuti and Jones' historical revisionism then they do not deserve to be taken seriously. For, the broader truth that this article ultimately illustrates is that the bane of modern Australian international relations and diplomatic history is not the tyranny of distance, but the tyranny of an unthinking consensus.

Michael Rainsborough is Professor of Strategic Theory, Department of War Studies, King's College, University of London. He is a specialist on the strategic actions of violent nonstate actors in in the international system. He has contributed to numerous publications, including, *International Affairs, International Security, Journal of Cold War Studies, Cold War History, Contemporary British History* and the *Journal of Contemporary History*, and the *Australian Journal of International Affairs*.