

BOMBS, 'REDS UNDER THE BED' AND THE MEDIA

THE MENZIES GOVERNMENT'S MANIPULATION OF PUBLIC OPINION, 1949-1957.

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It is often implied the Menzies Government influenced the views of the Australian public for political advantage. Rarely, however, has this claim been substantiated. The objective of this paper is to add credence to this claim by arguing the Menzies Government actively sought to manipulate public opinion in order to ensure the longevity of the British atomic test trials held in Australia between 1952 and 1957. The need for this manipulation arose from the Government's insistence that the British atomic trials should remain in Australia to guarantee, what it hoped would be, its eventual access to the technology (Cawte 54). Consequently, the Government could neither risk an unfavourable press nor a hostile public, which would jeopardise the atomic test trials. The Menzies Government used the image of the Australian "way of life" as the focus of its manipulation. Suggesting the fabric of Australian society was under threat from the evils of communism, the Government publicly highlighted the need to defend the nation from this foreign threat. It was this need to 'defend the nation' that was used to justify the testing of atomic weapons within Australia's shores, and subsequently the government attempted to inflame an existing fear of communism within the Australian community as a smoke screen to these pursuits. This scheme, however, was a failure as public anxiety surrounding the tests continually rose. This paper will examine the strategies behind the Government's manipulation of the media and, in a chronological fashion, illustrate the intricacies involved in their implementation.

In 1950, amidst a period of post war industrial and scientific development, the Australian Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, approved the British atomic tests trials because this little known technology was seemingly full of possible benefits for Australian society (Menzies, *Forgotten People*; Arnold 24). The potential atomic energy afforded included alleged solutions to unsustainable fuel sources, inland irrigation, and the possibility of changing Australia's physical landscape to manipulate climatic conditions (Cawte 9). Atomic energy during this period was seen as the answer to sustainability problems, which plagued the Australian Government whilst it attempted to plan for increased migration in its policy to "populate or perish" (Borrie).

As is clear from the Australian Morgan Gallup polls, the Australian public did not exude the same enthusiasm towards the testing of atomic weapons as the Government (AMGP sheet 845-54). Although initially caught up in the exhilaration of the first test, this fervour quickly waned as questions arose concerning safety and environmental issues (AMGP sheet 865-74). Recognising the Australian public's growing opposition to the

atomic test trials, Menzies and his Government made a concerted effort to manipulate the Australian media and thus swing public opinion. This strategy of media manipulation was not a government policy in the strictest sense, but rather was a series of improvised measures applied when necessary. These measures were put in place by government departments such as the Prime Minister's Department; Departments for Supply; the Interior; and Defence, along with government agencies such as the Atomic Weapons Test Safety Committee and the Australian Atomic Energy Commission. The government produced media release was channelled to media outlets either through the Australian News and Information Bureau attached to the Department for the Interior, local branches of the Department for Supply, or direct to editors by way of the Minister's secretary after consultation. The government produced piece was then published or broadcast by mainstream media groups. The reason the government did not have a sole outlet for its news distribution was due to the concerns of journalists, who believed the News and Information Bureau was acting as a "propaganda machine" for the government. Therefore, it was thought that the use of a variety of avenues to circulate this material would prevent such criticism (NAA A6456/3 R030/085).

To facilitate this media manipulation the government suggested the newly emerging Australian "way of life" was under threat from the rising menace of communism, and a need existed to protect Australia's borders (Stanner; Louis 39). It was this 'need,' the government asserted, that justified the development of atomic technology as a means to bolster Australia's national security (Louis 41). However, the threat to Australia was somewhat exaggerated. From 1949 to 1960 annual security reports *Aspects of the Military threat to Australia affecting Civil Defence*, written by the Department of Defence and the Joint Intelligence Committee, reveal the threat to Australia in the event of war was minimal. In 1953, for example, the report reveals that global war in the short term, that is prior to 1960, "is considered to be unlikely".¹ If limited war were to break out the most Australia could expect were sporadic acts of sabotage causing nuisance and small scale bombing raids.² In order to continue this façade of imminent danger this information was concealed from parliament with only the Prime Minister, Minister for Defence and select others in Intelligence knowing of its existence. All other Ministers were given altered copies (NAA, "Aspects of Military Defence" 1474/4, A5954).

This was particularly evident by the conduct of the Minister for the Interior, Wilfred Hughes. As fear in the community rose surrounding the perceived threat to Australia, the state Premiers wrote to the Minister asking what measures should be implemented to protect the public from attack, such as the building of public bomb shelters and added transport infrastructure to cope with mass evacuations. Hughes subsequently wrote to the Minister for Defence, Philip McBride, but received no response. Eventually Hughes received the edited copy of the report, but found it insufficient. He wrote to McBride stating,

¹ Joint Intelligence Committee (Melbourne) Appreciations – Aspects of the Military threat to Australia affecting Civil Defence, Report No. 15/1953, 6 Oct, 1953, TS666/57/24, A1838 (A1838/269), National Archives of Australia (NAA).

² Joint Intelligence Committee (Melbourne) Appreciations – Aspects of the Military threat to Australia affecting Civil Defence, Report No. 15/1953, 6 Oct, 1953, TS666/57/24, A1838 (A1838/269), NAA.

I must confess that as far as the Minister for the Interior is concerned he is wandering around in a London fog composed of probabilities and possibilities ...which seem to lead him nowhere except into a brick wall. Maybe I am a bit thick in the skull, but quite honestly I think we should have a conference in order to try and elucidate the matter. (NAA, "Letter to McBride from Hughes" 1474/4 A5954)

It is evident from Hughes' attitude that only a privileged few in Menzies cabinet knew the wider ramifications of what was taking place concerning communism, the Australian public and the media. Hence, it is evident that a sustained state of perpetual anxiety played an integral role in the longevity of the tests.

Despite the government's continuing enthusiasm for the tests, the outbreak of the Korean War took priority amidst rising public anxiety. The public's response to the war was a reaffirmed fear of communism due to the early anticipation that China would become militarily involved, theoretically beginning the 'downward deluge' of communism (Andrews 154). As reflected in the opinion polls, one in three Australians believed the Korean conflict would lead to global war in which nuclear weapons may have been used (AMGP sheets 700-11, 711-20, 732-43, 855-64). Therefore, on 16 September 1950, when British Prime Minister Clement Attlee wrote to Menzies requesting his 'agreement in principle' to the testing of an atomic bomb on Australian soil, Menzies recognised a "window of opportunity" (NAA, "Cablegram from Attlee to Menzies" R96/13, A6456/3). War in Australia's 'near north' made the prospect of having the world's deadliest weapon within arms reach was nothing less than auspicious. With this in mind, Menzies four days later in a series of radio broadcasts implied that Australia was under threat. In his most notable speech "A Defence call to the nation", Menzies inferred that due to the outbreak of war in Korea everyone needed to "rise to the occasion and protect Australia's shores" (NLA "A Defence Call to the Nation", MS 4936). In this broadcast and similar ones made during the period Menzies patriotically appealed to society's sense of tradition and the need to protect the Australian "way of life". Through pleas draped in nationalistic unity, Menzies slowly began to familiarise the public with the atomic bomb and the jargon which encapsulated it, making it an accepted part of everyday life.

The government underscored the peaceful side of atomic energy in the months following.³ It engaged the support of notable and reputable scientists, such as Professor Mark Oliphant, to publicly highlight the benefits of the technology (SMH, "Atom could meet our power need" 19 July, 1951 3). As a result, the public soon began to support and believe atomic energy was the future in technology, a technology that was described as an integral part of Australia's "coming of age" and "way of life" (White 530). Essentially, this positive atmosphere of familiarity and awareness ensured the benefits of atomic energy would overshadow any suggested problems in the public's eye surrounding the atomic

³ For examples of some of these articles see, 'Expert sees end of coalmines: Extension of atomic power', *SMH*, 25 August, 1. 'Atomic energy as healer', *SMH*, 20 February, 1950, 3.

tests.⁴ This encouraging tone added credibility to alleged unsolicited press leaks reporting Australia as being the next atomic test site.⁵ These reports were now being published weekly from 1951 onwards, and acted as a shock absorber guaranteeing acceptance from the public when the official announcement of the British atomic test trials came on 19 February, 1952 (Symonds 62). Thus, any fear or anxiety surrounding atomic energy and weapons tests quickly faded to “warm embracement” (Cooper 83).

Although Menzies won the 1951 election, his popularity diminished shortly after due to rising inflation (Lowe 102). This raised concerns within the Federal Executive of the Liberal Party and a report was ordered to analyse the decline in the government’s popularity. The Committee reported early in 1952 that:

Confusion and uncertainty are now dangerous factors in the general political picture. [Additionally, there is] a lack of central planning and direction of Government propaganda. It goes without saying that a friendly Press is more desirable than a hostile Press and little is gained by going out deliberately to alienate the newspapers. The Press should be regarded...as an avenue for publicity. The best way the Government and the Party can use the Press is to make news for the Press. [It is suggested that] arrangements be made to ensure that the Government’s story is told.⁶

This report reveals the Federal Executive was very conscious of the media and the danger it believed it posed to the stability of the Menzies’ Government.

Despite government restrictions over the media, the press continued to cause problems for the government.⁷ In early March 1953, the Minister of Supply, Howard Beale, was taking issue with the British and Australian press concerning the atomic tests, accusing them of “inaccurate press speculations, which are misleading the Australian people” (NAA “Note from Beale to O’Connor” RO58/001, A6456). But the government was prepared for the reoccurrence of press speculation following the experiences of *Operation Hurricane*, the first of Britain’s five tests. In a letter to Menzies, the Prime Minister’s secretary specifically clarified four prearranged ‘leaks’ agreed to by both countries for the second round of tests, and how and when they should be released to the Australian press through the Minister of Supply.⁸ By leaking this inaccurate information

⁴ “Atomic Arms race gains sinister momentum” *SMH* 4 August, 1951, 2. This article is one of only a few written during this period which attempted to balance the public’s understanding as to the dangers surrounding the tests.

⁵ “British A-bomb test in Australia ‘likely’”. *SMH* 2 August, 1951, 1. See also “How Atomic power may replace coal”, *SMH*, 3 August, 1951, 2. “New hint of Atom test in Australia”, *SMH*, 9 September, 1951, 1.

⁶ “Political Appreciation, March 1952. The Present Situation Analysed”. MS 4936, Series 15, Folder 35. Point 40-41 NLA. (Underline emphasis in original document).

⁷ Distribution of ‘D’ notices by Secretary, Defence – Press and Broadcasting Committee. Item 10/301/131, A816, NAA. Includes various letters of compliance from local and national newspapers. However, some newspapers did oppose the restrictions, File note to the Secretary of the Department of Defence, 2nd September, 1952. Item, 1594/2, A5954/69, NAA. This document states proprietors deeply opposed the restrictions due to fear of competition from abroad. See also, “Plea for Press to attend atom test”, *Daily Telegraph*, 15 May, 1952. See also, Cablegram No. L8056, McKenna from Brown, 17 June, 1953. Item R215/023, A6456/3, NAA. Cablegram discusses ongoing problems of inconsistencies between UK and Australian press and the understanding of the ‘D’ Notices.

⁸ Letter to Menzies from A. S. Brown, 27 March, 1953. Item R065/004, A6456/3, NAA. See also, Letter to Alan McKnight from J. E. S. Stevens, 27 April, 1953. Item R065/004, A6456/3, NAA. Letter discusses leaks and

to the news services, Menzies directly attempted to put journalists off any newsworthy scents, and in effect mislead the Australian public. These calculated press 'leaks' did not satisfy journalists nor did they curb curiosities; rather, they produced a game of 'cat and mouse' between the Australian Government and local press, with the Australian public in the middle.

In an effort to continue the Government's pressure on public perception, Menzies used his radio series "Man to Man" to quell public anxiety surrounding the second test, *Operation Totem*.⁹ In his broadcast entitled "Australia Today", the Prime Minister in a personalised and intimate address captivated his audience when he put forth:

There is tremendous public interest in Atomic Bombs... Unfortunately there are scare stories, wild allegations, and, between you and me, a good deal of nonsense... But we must face the facts. And they are that the threat to the world's peace does not come from the Americans or the British, but from aggressive Communist-Imperialism. In this dreadful state of affairs, superiority in atomic weapons is vital. To that superiority Australia must contribute as best she can. (NLA, Draft of "Man to Man-Australia Today" MS4936)¹⁰

Appealing here to a familiarised sentiment, Menzies addressed his audience in an almost neighbourly fashion. He connected with his listeners and emphasized the testing of atomic weapons on Australian soil was necessary in the fight against global communism. Moreover, it was Australia's duty to play its part in protecting the Empire.

Quickly after the detonation of *Totem 1*, the dissipating mushroom cloud containing high levels of radioactive particles was seen by residents in Oodnadatta, in northern South Australia (Symonds 177). In an attempt to stop the progress of press speculation and an inevitable instigation of public hysteria the Government furtively decided that:

should there be any reactions arising from reports of the cloud having been seen, the Meteorological Service should announce that normal clouds were within the quoted region and the observed cloud was probably a rain cloud. (Symonds 177)

Ultimately, the press did not discover the Government's activities to allay media reports. However, what this does elucidate was the Government's preparedness at having false explanations ready if mistakes occurred.

Rising criticism from the public concerning the atomic tests continued to grow in the years following 1953 (AMPG sheets 941-49, 1056-69, 1162-1170). Issues such as intensifying global pressure calling for talks on atomic disarmament and the US *Operation*

previous correspondence relating to leaks. For an example of some of the published leaks see, 'New Woomera Rocket Tests', *Daily Telegraph*, 29 May, 1953, 1. 'New Hush Hush weapon in UK claimed', *Sydney Sun*, 21 August, 1953, 23. 'Atomic Missiles at Range Tests', *Sydney Daily Mirror*, 23 September, 1953. *SMH*, 'Rocket plan reported', 30 November, 1953, 3. See also, Clarence Hardy, *Atomic Rise and Fall: The Australian Atomic Energy Commission, 1953-1987* (Peakhurst, 1999) p.69.

⁹ "Man to Man" broadcasts delivered by the Prime Minister were aired weekly during 1953 and 1954.

¹⁰ Draft of "Man to Man-Australia Today" Broadcast. No. 11. 21st October, 1953, MS 4936, Series 6, Box 257, Folder 42, NLA.

Bravo disaster at Bikini Atoll increased resistance to the tests taking place on Australian soil.¹¹ For the Government, these incidents reflected the prospect that Australia may lose its exclusive partnership with Britain. Consequently, the urgency to capitalise on what may have been its only access to atomic technology was intense.¹² The Australian public, however, was growing weary of Menzies' rhetoric suggesting there was no threat "to life, limb or property".¹³ It is evident from the public opinion polls that the Australian public's hostility towards the testing of atomic weapons was now on par with global attitudes as worldwide resistance surfaced (Symonds 434, AMGP sheets 1217-28).

An international peace campaign emerged during 1954 and 1955, rallying great public support whilst voicing its alarm at the ongoing atomic test trials. The Government ignored the movement, stating it was "an obvious instrument of Communism" (NAA, "Press reaction to Atomic Trials – 1956" R087/107, A6456). The press, however, was quick to sense the growing public pressure, and began to publish articles highlighting the political and environmental dangers the atomic tests posed. More specifically, the *Truth/Mirror* chain of papers directly began to oppose any further tests in Australia, claiming, "if one Australian [is] maimed through any miscalculation in these tests the Australian people will hurl you and all your guilty colleagues into oblivion" (NAA "Press reaction to Atomic Trials – 1956" R087/107, A6456; Arnold 130-1).

But Menzies and his Ministers continued to tout their unrelenting message of imminent threat. At a speech given by Menzies at the Hotel Windsor in Melbourne during the latter part of 1954, the Prime Minister stated gravely: "If there is to be the threat of force against us, there must be the firm promise of force in our defence. In the present world, Christianity is under attack; Jesus did not fear physical attack, do we?"¹⁴ The Government continued to amplify this impending communist threat in an effort to substitute a sense of growing domestic stability with a sense of tension. This continual manipulation flew in the face of the evidence that demonstrated Australia was not on any country's radar as a preferred target in the likelihood of war.

During 1955, press reports speculated on the alleged hydrogen and atomic tests scheduled for detonation in South Australia. These articles revealed information the Government believed should have been highly classified, however, the articles quoted the

¹¹ 'UN call to cut arms. Private talks suggested', *SMH*, 30 November, 1953, 'Atomic talks now a certainty at Bermuda', *Argus*, 5 December, 1953. 'A-bomb ban 'peace step'-Malenkov', *Argus*, 2 January, 1954. 'Reds seek world talks. Disarmament Proposal', *SMH*, 30 January, 1954, 3. 'Mrs. Pandit condemns A-weapons', *Age*, 31 March, 1954. 'Big three ask for talks on arms', *SMH*, 5 April, 1954, 1. 'Call UN to Deal with bomb: Dr Evatt charges government with complacency', *Age*, 4 April, 1954.

Holly M. Baker, *Bravo for the Marshallese: regaining control in a post nuclear, post colonial world* (Belmont, 2004), p.23. 'Mishap during big US atomic test in the Marshall Islands: 264 people accidentally exposed to radioactivity', *SMH*, 13 March, 1954, 3. 'Island vanishes in H-bomb film', *SMH*, 2 April, 1954. 'Us atom blast in Marshall Islands burns Jap. Ship's crew 80 miles away', *SMH*, 17 March, 1954, 1.

¹² Disarmament and Atomic Energy – Press cuttings. Item 852/10/4/2/1, A1838, NAA. Anonymous handwritten marginal notes suggest intensity of situation. See also, Symonds, *A History of British Atomic Tests in Australia*, p.227.

¹³ Letters to the Editor: 'Dangers of Atomic Warfare', *SMH*, (L. Barnes, Nth Sydney) 23 March, 1954, 2. 'Atom bomb ban call: ACTU move', *SMH*, 8 July, 1954, 7. "Atom bombs may change man – for the worse", *SMH*, 3 August, 1954, 3.

¹⁴ Speech given by Menzies at the Hotel Windsor, Melbourne, during WWI commemorations, 1954. MS 4936, Series 6, Box 251, Folder 1. NLA.

British public service as their source.¹⁵ The Minister for Supply, Howard Beale, was incensed. Beale wrote to his counterpart in the UK, Selwyn Lloyd, believing his department may have been the source of the leaked information. Beale angrily wrote:

when a 'leak' like this occurs before the agreed time of announcement, we find ourselves in an intolerable position, as our Press bitterly accuse us of betraying their interests in favour of the British Press, of not knowing our own business, of being evasive and untruthful. I am of the opinion, if these premature announcements continue, they may well do such damage to public opinion here as to make it politically impossible for us to co-operate with you as fully as we would wish in joint projects such as guided missiles and atomic tests. (NAA "Letter from Beale to Lloyd" R087/080, 6324/1/46)

This letter exemplifies the pressure the Australian Government was under with regard to public opinion and the threat it held over the longevity of the atomic tests.

In an attempt to placate public unease and offset press sensationalism the Government commissioned a special series of articles under the authority of the News and Information Bureau and the Department of Defence (NAA "Department of Supply, Atomic Weapons Tests" R058/002 A6456/3; NAA "Department of Defence, Atomic Tests in Australia" R047/011, A6456/3). The articles covered a range of topics from the life of the men at the test site to public safety and the need for atomic tests with reference to national security (NAA "A testing ground for settlement", "A fine place for a village", "The pay-off at Marlinga" R058/002, A6456/3). They erroneously insinuated Australia had full access to the data generated by the tests, suggesting to readers Australia was gaining more scientific information from the atomic trials than it actually was (NAA "Oldest inhabitants of a new town" R058/002, A6456/3). As the Australian and British governments vetted the articles, it is evident the Australian Government purposely manipulated the public to believe its involvement was ensuring the nation's security in a period of ongoing global turbulence.

By 1956, the Government was again facing opposition from the Australian public prior to *Operation Mosaic* and *Operation Buffalo*. Together with additional articles penned by the British Department of Supply for the Australian public, the Government continued to exaggerate communist fears.¹⁶ Archival documents show the re-interpretation of Soviet intercepts, and their restructuring as press releases, was a common practice.¹⁷ The Government created a falsified anxiety within the community by translating these Russian intercepts and weaving them together to create press articles (NAA "Letter to Gilchrist and Vawdrey from W. Peters" 563/1/5 A1838/1). Furthermore, supporting this practice

¹⁵ Letter from Beale to Lloyd, 16 March, 1955. Item R087/080, 6324/1/46, NAA. For examples see, 'Woomera weapons to be mass produced, London Tuesday', *Sydney Daily Mirror*, 4 January, 1955, 9. 'S.A. Test areas for A-Weapons, London January 7th', *Adelaide Advertiser*, 8 January, 1955, 1. 'Tests of British A-Weapons likely this year in Australia, London Friday', *Sydney Daily Tel.* 8 January, 1955, 4.

¹⁶ Letter from UK High Commissioner, Canberra to E. J. Bunting of the PM's Dept, 8 March, 1956. Item R065/057, A6456/3, NAA. And, Cabled press statement from UK Secretary of Supply to Acting PM Sir Arthur Fadden, 10 September, 1956. R087/107, A6456, NAA.

¹⁷ Letter to Gilchrist and Vawdrey of Dept. of External Affairs from W. Peters, 15 March, 1956. Item 563/1/5, A1838/1, NAA. Document includes penciled margin comments from the recipients regarding the process.

was a prolonged government backed media campaign involving members of the Atomic Weapons Test Safety Committee and Government Ministers in the lead up to *Operation Mosaic* and *Operation Buffalo* (NAA “Item (k), ‘Press Reaction to Atomic Trials’” R087/107 A6456). This increased presence in the media did not thwart public anxiety; rather it took a new turn. Between June and August 1956 the Australian continent experienced a number of abnormal meteorological patterns in which snow fell in Perth and Southern Queensland (Pix (8/9/56), “Freak weather caused by A-bombs” 6). These freak weather conditions were attributed in the press to the atomic test trials held during the same period, thus causing great waves in parliament. This situation caused further widespread fear in the community and culminated in greater calls to end the tests.

By January 1957 the Australian public were calling for an end to all atomic tests by means of an international agreement as documented in the opinion polls (AMGP sheets 1217-28). Although both the United States and Soviet Union were continuing to test atomic and thermonuclear weapons of larger yields, worldwide pressure supporting disarmament was growing significantly (Symonds 434). Despite public persistence, the British Government proceeded with *Operation Antler*, which would prove to be its final test in its major trial program in Australia. The Australian Government had hoped the occurrence of the atomic tests trials would have become somewhat of a routine in the public eye as they had done in Britain, thus raising little concern (Royal Commission 503, vol. 2; Arnold, 143). However, as public anxiety surrounding the physical and environmental effects of the tests grew, the government’s failure to promote public confidence became evident.¹⁸ One newspaper even surmised the government’s agenda when it stated that Canberra had been “making political capital out of our fears” (Melb. Sun (17/5/57), “The Bomb has a critical mass” 7).

Throughout the 1950s, the Menzies Government invested heavily in the prospects atomic energy afforded. The dream of a sustainable future in which Australia could flourish and prosper seemed within arm’s reach. Despite these Government fantasies, the Australian public continued to oppose the tests, initially due to environmental issues but later on moral grounds. The atomic tests were in jeopardy without the espousal of the Australian public. Therefore, due to the perceived precarious nature of the Australian public, the Menzies Government believed it necessary to influence opinion to ensure the longevity of the tests. Whilst it is clear the government did attempt to manipulate public opinion, it is also clear the required systematic government propaganda, deemed key to the success of the British atomic tests, did not eventuate. What did occur was a collection of sporadic newspaper articles, broadcasts and press releases, which surfaced as and when public opinion was voiced loudly enough to cause concern.

¹⁸ ‘Control of Bomb Tests Desirable’, *Adelaide Advertiser*, 5 June, 1957, 1. ‘Britain v. US in mock A-bombing contest-Gallup Poll says...Fewer want A-tests. *Melbourne Herald*, 13 June, 1957, 7.

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