

When Australian politicians aspired to independence

By Robert Barwick

In his final ever interview, with the ABC's George Megalogenis in 2015, the late Malcolm Fraser highlighted how his first trip as prime minister in 1976 was to China, with which his predecessor Gough Whitlam had opened relations four years earlier in 1972.

"My first visit overseas was designed to say to Asia, and to China, this is the region that is most important to us", Fraser explained, adding pointedly: "It was also designed to send the same message to Washington and to London." He recounted a story about receiving a cable from the UK telling him how Australia should vote on a United Nations motion, to which he replied that he would think about the issue and inform them how Australia would vote once he decided. "We were just a colony that would do what they said", he remembered. "And to have that mentality alive in 1976—I thought it needed diminishing, getting rid of."

At the time of this interview in 2015, Fraser had just published his book *Dangerous Allies*, which called for an end to Australia's ANZUS Alliance with the United States, and identified that the greatest threat to our national security was our strategic subservience to London and Washington, which, with the exception of World War II, had dragged us into illegal and futile foreign wars for more than a century. These views were unprecedented for someone who had held the highest elected office in Australia, but it's clear from his interview that they were the culmination of an independent streak he possessed already in 1976.

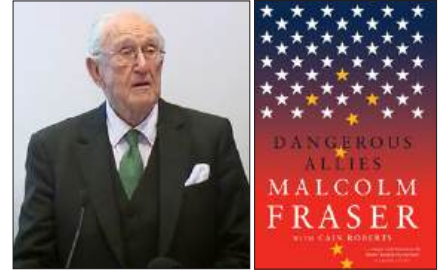
It is unthinkable that a politician from either of the major parties would express such views today, or even act towards the USA or UK as Fraser did in 1976. Australia has well and truly swung back to the slavish subservience to the USA and UK that Fraser tried to get rid of, as evidenced in the repeated mantra of politicians justifying the AUKUS (Australia-United Kingdom-United States) partnership. "AUKUS is about the future", Prime Minister Anthony Albanese intoned in a 22 February 2023 address to the National Press Club on the \$368 billion deal to which, as Opposition Leader in 2021, he had been given less than 24 hours to agree. "It further formalises the common values and the shared interests that our three nations have." (Emphasis added.)

There's a generational difference between Albanese's views and Fraser's views in 1976, but the shift didn't occur by accident. Former Labor PM Paul Keating is on Fraser's side of the generation gap, and is a fierce critic of not just AUKUS, but Albanese's language of "common values", for sending the message to our region of the world that Australia is afraid of Asia and needs (white-ruled) Britain and America for security. In 2016, Keating blamed the shift on the advent of the annual Australian American Leadership Dialogue (AALD) for politicians in 1992, which he described as "a sort of cult thing" that has elevated the US alliance to a "reverential, sacramental quality".

Keating knows whereof he speaks, having had run-ins with the United States when he was PM. In the 12 August 2024 *Australian Financial Review*, history professor and *AFR* International Editor James Curran revealed how Keating's office clashed with the George H.W. Bush White House in 1992, over Keating's support for Japan's right to protect its agricultural markets against the US push for free trade agreements. It was more than a disagreement—the correspondence showed deep distrust of Keating in the Bush Administration, which had been close to his predecessor



Above: Paul Keating hosting George H.W. Bush on his visit to Australia in 1992, when Bush was angry at Keating's position on Japanese trade. Right: Malcolm Fraser launching *Dangerous Allies* in 2014. Photos: Screenshots



Bob Hawke (who has since been exposed as a US informer going back to at least the early 1970s, when Bush Sr was CIA Director).

On 28 September 1992 White House deputy chief of staff Robert Zoellick faxed a threatening message to Australia's Ambassador to Washington: "Please make sure your colleagues in Canberra know we read their words with interest ... and long memories! It's interesting to contrast Keating's style with that of PMs [John] Major [UK] and [Brian] Mulroney [Canada] when it comes to friendship and making clear to us what they think of the USA."

In response, Paul Keating's chief of staff Don Russell wrote the following scathing reply to Zoellick. "I must say I was surprised by the tone of the note, its defensiveness and the clear message it conveys about how White House staffers see the United States' relationship with what it regards as client countries. You no doubt have a very clear idea of how you expect English-speaking prime ministers to behave." (Emphasis added.)

Russell added: "You didn't mind his style when he was pivotal to Australia's early commitment in the [1990] Gulf [War]. I distinctly remember Mulroney being dragged to the event with obvious misgivings. Perhaps unlike Major or Mulroney, [Keating] is a thinking ally and one who can do useful things for the United States and for ourselves without being remote controlled."

Months after this letter, when Bill Clinton replaced Bush as US President, Keating appointed Don Russell as Australia's Ambassador to Washington.

Again, it's unthinkable that a politician from either of the major parties would act and speak like this towards the USA or UK today. The AALD Keating identified as responsible for the shift, as well as other channels of US-UK foreign interference such as the US- and British government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), have locked major party politicians into an outlook of strategic subservience probably not seen since Australia's WWI PM Andrew Fisher declared support for Britain "to the last man and the last shilling", and Vietnam War-era PM Harold Holt in 1966 declaring "all the way with LBJ". Disturbing evidence of this comes from a longtime colleague of the current PM, in response to this correspondent asking how Albanese's position on Palestine changed since he led pro-Palestine protests as recently as 2014. "His views haven't changed", the colleague explained. "But now he is leader and PM, he has to demonstrate his loyalty to the United States."