

Strategic Cousins: Australian and Canadian Expeditionary Forces and the British and American Empires

John Blaxland

Reviewed by Neil James

ADF officers serving on exchange in Canada feel at home very quickly because of the strong spatial, historical and cultural parallels between the two large, federal, Westminster-style dominions of a common crown. While the same is true in broad terms of the liberal-democratic and internationalist world views held by Canadians and Australians, antipodean observers are invariably struck, by some strong differences in consequent strategic perceptions. This is particularly so in the attitudes of those Canadians with no recent family or personal experience of the Canadian defence force.

ADA officials get periodically gloomy about the poor standard of informed public debate on defence matters in Australia, and the longstanding under-investment in defence this causes. They are often comforted, however, by the regular liaison the Association maintains with its Canadian counterpart body. Although the effect is wholly unintended by our Canadian strategic cousins, the tales of woe coming out of Ottawa regularly remind Australians that there is always someone facing bigger problems with public apathy, governmental complacency, insufficient investment and equipment obsolescence.

Australia shares many similarities and indeed common cultural sources with Canada but also some intriguing differences in the practice of international relations and consequently military strategy. Based on his PhD thesis, John Blaxland's *Strategic Cousins* is a masterful drawing out of the common experiences and nuanced differences faced by Canada and Australia in their strategic relations with the United Kingdom and the United States since the late nineteenth century.

One of Blaxland's overall themes is that Australia and Canada could have achieved more together in influencing their senior strategic partners, both in the imperial defence and US alliance contexts (and in the UN), if they had effectively pooled their efforts more often. This argument is persuasive in itself but as he concedes, was often hamstrung by Canada's traditional pre-occupation with Atlantic rather than Pacific issues, and by the neurotically-introverted, isolationist, Quebecois millstone perpetually limiting Canadian freedom of action in strategic affairs.

But, he observes, in the so-called 'global war on terrorism' Canada and Australia again have much in common in terms of strategic priorities and operational postures. Probably more so than at any time since the early days of the British Empire. As a result, Blaxland argues quite compellingly that the two defence forces have much to gain from working more closely together.

Blaxland is also very good at comparing how the natural move to true joint-Service command and control, and integrated capability development, was delayed in both countries by bureaucratic machinations and

political ignorance or opportunism. Both defence forces ended up approaching 'jointery' from opposite directions.

As *Strategic Cousins* records, Canada's path has been much harder. First, because its NATO commitments largely meant Canadian maritime, land and air elements rarely worked together in detail on a standing basis. Second, Canadian governments eager to talk up differences of diplomatic posture (but not underlying strategic reality) with their US neighbour, placed an excessive emphasis on peacekeeping and this severely enervated the warfighting skills, deterrent ability and ultimately the strategic value of the Canadian Defence Force. Finally, there was the disastrous, ideologically-motivated, forced unification of the RCN, Army and RCAF for twenty years from the mid 1960s. This resulted in lowest-common denominator outcomes and facades that brought the superficial financial savings and political grandstanding sought, but only at great and enduring cost in losses of operational capability and Canada's strategic (and ultimately diplomatic) relevance.

Since the late 1980s Canada has been groping back towards the synergistic Australian position of three specialist Services working together as much as possible but not where it is counter-productive. Blaxland rightly notes too that the ADF has had to fight hard to achieve this, against the improper interference in military professional matters by Australia's overly powerful civilian departmental bureaucracy.

Strategic Cousins is a well-researched, well-written and well-argued comparative study that draws out many broad lessons as to how junior coalition partners need to manage their strategic interaction with great and powerful allies. I have only three small niggles. The maps are nowhere near clear enough and the few photographs not nearly enough to illustrate a comparative study. Some of the many academic-style charts perhaps needed more effort to make them readily intelligible to the general reader. Finally the terms *collective security* and *collective defence* are occasionally used as if they were somehow interchangeable. Well footnoted throughout, and with a 6-page glossary, 30-page bibliography and comprehensive 20-page index, *Strategic Cousins* is valuable background reading for any serious student of the history of Australian defence strategy.

Books on comparative military strategy, and military history, almost invariably sell better in Australia than in Canada. For a book with a potential readership in Australia at least as big and probably much bigger than in Canada, this book has been lamentably marketed down under by its Canadian publisher. Coupled with its very steep Australian price, especially for a softback, this book will unfortunately miss the circulation it deserves outside limited academic and professional circles. ♦

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