

**THE 2020 VERNON PARKER ORATION
AT THE ANNUAL DINNER OF THE
AUSTRALIAN NAVAL INSTITUTE**

IN CANBERRA

ON TUESDAY, 1 JUNE 2021

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Sharks in the Moat

Or 'Preferences, Prayers and Prudence'

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. After a working lifetime in what might be deemed the Nation's security apparatus, for the period 2014 – 2019, because of the job was doing, I was necessarily silent or the very least quite circumspect in canvassing issues concerning Australia's security needs. During all that time however, I was the keenest possible observer of our challenges and responses and that attention I've strongly maintained since I retired as Governor-General in the middle of 2019. Consequently, when I was asked to deliver an oration in the name of Vernon Parker, first President of the Australian Naval Institute, I embraced it somewhat like the line from Banjo Patterson's great ballad, *the Man from Snowy River*, ".....the stock horse snuffs the battle with delight".

I had no doubt about my subject and my emphasis this evening and I assert to you now that I would be saying the same words to any flavour of armed service or strategic gathering. Colourfully, I have chosen as my main title, "Sharks in the Moat" - the moat of course being that vast expanse of the Indo Pacific from our Northwest all the way around to the east/south-east of Australia. Just to foreshadow where I'm aiming for in my further remarks, I thought that an appropriate subtitle would be *'Preferences, Prayers and Prudence'*. I will explain that subtitle as we go along.

That ocean expanse that I remarked upon has for so long been in broad terms, a moat for this nation. During the earliest days of European settlement, it was for those settlers and their immediate descendants an inconvenience, an impediment. It was also a protection against potentially predatory other first world powers and less well-known powers from 'the mysterious East' - the nations

north of us. With the industrialisation of maritime craft, the moat became both a huge advantage and a significant and potentially threatening highway to and from our shores. World War II both brought conflict to our homeland and caused us to focus keenly on maritime defence. The rise in Air Power during that period only exacerbated this need. To finish quickly on this point, our leaders and strategic thinkers moved from contemplating the provision of major land forces to other theatres of war, to the challenges of defending Australia in the approaches to our shores in all of the classic domains – maritime, aerospace and land. This has been for all those decades since World War II the fundamental requirement of governments and those who advise and serve them. To this we add today cyber defence. The moat remains but the challenges multiply. The moat to others is a lake, contested, claimed as a dimension of entitlement and power, with competition that can edge towards conflict. Any conflict in this seascape inevitably impinges strongly on our peaceful national interests – the freedom of access, the passage of trade and the overarching sanctity of human rights.

Through our experience and our very nature as Australians it is obvious to all of us and I hope to many of our overseas friends and neighbours that Australia fervently desires a peaceful existence, coexistence in our region. We have had enough experience of war to prefer amicable and productive relationships with all other nations all around the world and especially in our region. We have been both industrious and lucky and while we are interested in all our neighbours, that and our friendship and, where welcome our help, is as far as it goes. I mentioned a moment ago ‘prayers’ - prayers are good but here I acquaint them to that level of goodwill, energetic good offices and discourse known as diplomacy: when points of view between neighbouring nations are welcomed and necessary, our

diplomats and political leaders and sometimes our senior military folk, are active in that sort of dialogue – to explain our position, to avert misunderstandings, to seek clarifications and to suggest mutual ways forward. Australians are pretty good at this form of prayer - obviously from time-to-time diplomacy hasn't been enough but it certainly has been attempted and must continue even when relationships become quite strained. So, here I claim that we are obviously a nation that desires peace, prefers amity to hostility and is ever ready to offer the prayer of diplomacy in place of friction. But prudent nations, with experience of war, uninvited and inescapable, through that prudence look to their preparedness. Australia's history over the last more than 100 years has episodes where our lack of appropriate preparedness has been to our significant disadvantage. It is a hard learned lesson, sometimes washed away by time.

Time of course is the essential, frangible factor in preparedness. Had we foreseen 7 December 1941 back in say, 1937 or 1938, would our history of participation in World War II have been quite different? In our region we have seen a somewhat fuzzy arms build-up in quantitative terms, dating back into the early years of the millennium. It has now been accompanied over the last seven or eight years with a further major step up, particularly by the People's Republic of China, in qualitative terms. That and the aforementioned worrying estrangements between major powers in the region have focused our attention on the ability of the Australian Defence Force to successfully meet the roles expected of it by the Australian people and to survive. No Australian should have any doubt about the courage, cohesion, professionalism and intent of our men and women of the three services. It is apparent to me, to all of you at this oration tonight and importantly to many other leaders and

commentators that we need to look quite urgently at the sort of systems, platforms and capabilities available to our Navy, Army and Air Force at the moment and in the near term. A word on my meaning of 'survive'. To survive is a fundamental wish and responsibility of any part of an armed force. Not to survive entails an inability to further function in defence of a nation and its interests. The survival I mean in no way entails a failure to defend but rather to defend in a way in which survival is possible. The best commanders, the best political leaders are not risk averse but are casualty averse. That age-old military principle of 'economy of force' sounds dry but tells the story.

At the national level, we are all clear that the fundamental obligation of Governments and Armed Forces is to protect the homeland. We have been aware for some time now that part of that protection is in the cyber domain - from major cyber infrastructure, networks and operations both civil and military to the utility and security of the phones in your pockets. This has been an ongoing challenge for quite some time now and successive governments and their agencies have been hard at it in Australia, in company with a number of other friends and neighbours. As a challenge, indeed a constant threat, it sits in the background but should be parcelled up as a consideration which will only be exacerbated if a conventional conflict ever transpires.

In particular though, part of our need in preparation for future dire circumstances, is those commodities so very important to our everyday lives but which are not under our hand here in Australia – just one example, petroleum products. There are of course a number of other commodities which we need to function as a national community but I won't attempt a long list now. Suffice it to say that

these commodities overwhelmingly travel across the seas to Australian ports.

Essentially, we must establish onshore reserves and stockpiles of these commodities. We have become used to a 'just-in-time' method of importing many of our needs. We have contemplated for example holding POL stocks in other friendly countries but for prudent preparedness we shouldn't take the chance that some constriction on the sea lines of communication or indeed on the 'supplier cum storekeeper' might deny us crucial commodities and basically bring the nation to its knees. Perhaps just to expand that this phenomenon can also apply to the supply or resupply of war materiel. The creation of national reserves and stockpiles won't create a victory or resolve a conflict but will be a first and fundamental step in national survivability.

Having spoken about whole of nation preparedness, admittedly about only some aspects, I now move on to military preparedness. To me there is an overriding imperative that as well as preparing and equipping our people to fulfil military roles in the maritime, land and aerospace domains, we need immediately to layer on to that concept the notion of survivability. Perhaps this is a counter to some of our sadder experiences in the Boer War and World War I where it was felt that if men could only preserve their determination and discipline, to jump out of their trench and walk under strict control to the enemy's trench line, into machine gun fire, shellfire and barbed wire, then some of them might make it and then victory would be ours. So, it might be said (and not exclusively by and about Australians) that we are fixated on force preservation. When one takes this predisposition into consideration of the sorts of modern capabilities that exist and are in operation now in parts of our region,

then this demands from us all the keenest examination of how we react.

This leads me on to how we derive and articulate and advocate the way forward. The pertinent factors, the competing priorities, the emerging challenges are mind-boggling in their complexity and cost. We have to get this so right that we cannot engage in the usual robust and time-consuming democratic talk-shop. In this regard we need strategic leaders to gain the confidence of political leadership without the usual sense of crying in the wilderness. They can of course be within or without the government and its agencies but they must be credible and persuasive – some may be in this room tonight! What will they tell us?

I'm pretty sure that one of the things these thought leaders will tell us is that information is the key, not only to effective fighting but to survivability. They will recommend that improved surveillance, intelligence and target acquisition systems will allow commanders to apply our relatively meagre forces in a precise way or indeed to avoid blundering into a catastrophic mismatch of forces. They will not be happy for example about present or potential acquisition-chain obstacles to obtaining long-range/high capability UAVs as the jewels in our surveillance crown. They will also stress the value of 'stealth' inherent in very modern platforms or by stealth enabled by superior information.

They will remind us that there is no magic wand that will quickly produce shiny new state-of-the-art platforms for the Navy or the Air Force that incorporate capabilities to defeat all of the present capabilities deployed in our region. Some may be in the pipeline but won't emerge for quite some time.

They will tell us that we must rely to a great degree on extant, legacy platforms which wherever possible should be retrofitted with the best systems for information, survivability and lethality. Given that I've been banging on about survivability, here I go introducing lethality. Simply, the best way to survive an encounter with an adversary is to be more lethal. So, returning to our legacy platforms, we need to ensure that they are not burdened with yesterday's fighting systems in tomorrow's conflict.

Given that one of our stealthiest and most deadly capabilities remains as our submarine component of the Navy and knowing that our new Attack class boats are still quite a few years away, there seems little doubt that our thought leaders will tell us of the need to keep the Collins class submarines in service and upgrade them so they may continue be superior. In this regard, I have watched with interest the proliferation of UUVs and, in my somewhat crass soldier's manner, I rub my hands together because it seems that to obtain this additional capability will respond quite well to a cheque-book rather than some convoluted acquisition process. Let's not beat around the bush! To me, this is a classic force multiplier capability which exploits our professional mastery of undersea warfare and helps preserve the precious submarine force in being. While mentioning things subsurface, it seems to me also that modern sea-mines are a potentially high payoff capability that again responds to a cheque-book rather than an elaborate process. This is another acquisition that would seem to be most attractive on the sliding scale of lethality combined with survivability.

I haven't forgotten surface warfare but let me remark on the aerospace domain in the Indo Pacific and the role of our Air Force. The thought leaders would no doubt remind us that the Air Force has

already got combat systems that, apart from sheer numbers, are world-class. Even the legacy Super Hornets have great relevant capability, enjoy whole of fleet upgrades and sit as part of a wider inventory of the same US aircraft. Our 'Muses' would also applaud the UAV/UCAV initiatives supported by the Air Force, such as the Loyal Wing Man project. I expect though, they would tell us that the dilemma for Air Force is the proliferation of roles for them if Australia was also involved in conflict remote from our shores. How to effect credible air defence of both the homeland and places further afield?

The real dilemma for our thought leaders is the capability of our surface fleet in the RAN. In company with all other elements of the ADF, it is magnificently professional, well led and well-trained and operates excellent ships. But is it ready for and survivable in a modern surface conflict where some of the combatants have cutting-edge weaponry such as huge numbers of hyper velocity missiles with impressive terminal guidance, used in swarm attacks? The answer would have to be, 'not at this stage!' It seems to this humble soldier, that the United States Navy is pondering this issue for themselves. Equally though, I have great confidence that the United States will come up with tactics and equipment to react and defeat this sort of capability. But it is important to make this point: if the US wants its ally, Australia to cooperate in this sort of environment, then we would no doubt want to be in the front of the queue for any such new defensive capability. That said, under other circumstances, our major surface combatants have a great air defence capability and this will continue and only get better.

One point I will interject on this musing by our thought leaders, it seems silly to me for people to envisage that our air warfare destroyers would ever be tasked to sit quietly in home waters

protecting our capital cities and other strategic targets from air/missile attack. Plainly, such protection should be passed to the Army, which you will notice has only vestigial air defence assets in its inventory. It seems highly necessary that Army takes on a major role in homeland air defence close to these population centres and vital infrastructure and to do so should be equipped with some of the excellent modern air defence capabilities - again there doesn't seem much point in an elephantine process of force development assessment and procurement. The Air Warfare Destroyers would be so much better employed as was originally intended.

If indeed the Army acquired very modern high capability air defence weapon systems, then a couple of other aspects might be to our advantage. First, obviously a capability might be moved to places in the region where forward operating bases might be necessary and thus need to be defended. Secondly, land-based surface to air missiles might well have a re-entry/terminal phase engagement capacity and even an anti-satellite role. I have no wish to set the bar too high but fundamentally we don't want any of our few and precious major surface combatants as a sort of missile guard afloat in an otherwise irrelevant patch of sea.

I'll let our 'thought leaders' off the hook for now and revert to some personal observations. We prize our alliance with the United States. It has been a boon to us in so many ways. Some layers of the alliance are priceless. I for one would be most downcast if the alliance in any way seemed to lose its worth or alternatively seemed to come at too high a price. But a price there is. If we are to modernise because of any anxiety that we have fallen off the pace in regional terms, in the areas of relative impact and relative survivability and this need, this anxiety drives a need for timely action, then we need help. We need

access to capabilities that either stand-alone or may be retrofitted to existing platforms or incorporated into existing systems in order to return us to that 'regional relevance' position which we previously occupied. The US would by and large be our market and supplier – we need this support without quibble or obstacle, as both a paying customer and a close and dependable ally. I might observe that history demonstrates we show up every time and we want them to show up in this special way, this time and further into the future.

In conclusion, let me remark just this. Any Government of Australia has two horrible fears: first, that it will have to commit the Nation and its young men and women in uniform to war; secondly, that in doing so, it is sending them into harm's way with inferior equipment.