

Chapter 2: The Refinement of Australian policy, May-August 1950

Probably much to the surprise of Spender and Burton, the Dutch did reply positively on 5 May. The key points in the letter (and attached *aide memoire*) were that the Netherlands had decided that it wanted to retain WNG, and that the establishment of the Netherlands-Indonesian Commission did not justify the conclusion that compromise was therefore inevitable. In a minute to Burton, Spender commented:

The reply is of great importance to us. For the first time we have a clear statement of Netherlands policy, [*sic*] our note to them has borne fruit. The reasonable nature of the note delivered by Teppema will be maintained by us.¹

The clarity of the Netherlands reply was enlightening, and it must have been a relief to hear that the Indonesians would not be granted access to WNG in the near future. However, this new stance also created problems. It did not guarantee Indonesia's exclusion from the island because, if deadlock between the Dutch and Indonesians did occur, the question was likely (if events were allowed to run their natural course) to go before the UN where the outcome was unpredictable. Moreover, the Dutch might weaken later. Finally, the articulation of positive Dutch aims had weakened the case for Australian interference; the success of Burton's tactic of regaining the moral high ground had been dependent upon a negative or non-committal answer.

The remainder of Spender's minute, which detailed the matters that he believed now needed consideration, addressed these concerns. On the UN, he focussed on the need to devise tactics that would prevent the matter going before the Security Council. Regarding the difficulties of political and legal legitimacy posed for Australian control by the Dutch riposte, and by the chance of Dutch vacillation, Spender reverted to his original 8 February plan of again looking towards some form of Dutch presence in WNG, whilst always guarding "Australia's vital interests". In practical terms, his minute suggested exploring a range of governmental alternatives for WNG that would hinge on Dutch involvement, whilst being careful to avoid "variants in ultimate solutions that might prejudice Australia's vital interests." It is also clear he still thought the option of creating a precedent for Australia's entry into the dispute as a party principal – by delivering the note to the Indonesians – was worth further consideration.

¹ Minute by Spender, 7 May 1950, on note by Burton to Spender, 5 May 1950, in A1838/283, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1, NAA. There is evidence that Spender was correct in viewing the Dutch response as a "fruit" of Australian activity. Two *aide memoire* related to WNG were handed from the Dutch to the Americans on 4 May, one of which was, in part, geared towards distancing themselves from the Australian attitude. The other stated that "The Netherlands Cabinet, having once more thoroughly examined this [WNG] problem, has reached the conclusion that Western New Guinea should remain under Netherlands authority", and requested US support for this position. (See 756C.00/5-450, Box

Consistent with these notions, Spender tried to test Dutch resolve, and manipulate them into taking an even stronger stand. On 10 May he sent a letter to Teppema telling him that although Australia was in general agreement with the Netherlands note of 5 May, the problem of what would happen if the issue came before the Security Council had not been dealt with. It was, Spender continued, because this seemed likely, and that without a third claimant to WNG the Council would feel obliged to cede the territory to Indonesia, that Australia would present a note to the Indonesians and press its claims before the UN.² This was, of course, said ‘tongue in cheek’, for Spender’s minute had shown that no definite decision on the note had been made, and that he was determined WNG would not go before the Security Council. Rather, he wanted to probe Dutch fortitude concerning immediate negotiations with the Indonesians, and provoke a development of earlier expressions of intransigence.

The first point of the Netherlands’ rejoinder would not have been a source of great comfort:

Your note of May 10 is based on the assumption that the consultation which is to be affected between the Governments of the Netherlands and Indonesia will not lead to a positive result and that consequently this problem will be referred to the Security Council. The Netherlands Government cannot at the outset assume this and considers the solution of this issue a matter between the two Union partners.³

It is easy to imagine Spender becoming agitated at this point, but he would have felt more at ease with the final paragraph of the Dutch *demarche*. In fact, he could hardly have hoped for better, for the tone of this passage was entirely uncompromising:

The Australian Government apparently assumes that a change in the status of New Guinea will be contemplated and eventually will be affected either voluntarily by the Netherlands or in virtue of a decision by the Security Council in which case the claims of third parties would then be considered on their merits. As against this the Netherlands Government can give the assurance that it does not contemplate the cession of Sovereignty over New Guinea. My Government would most strongly oppose any international effort calculated to press it for the adoption of a course which the Netherlands Government would not deem to be in accordance with the interests of the territory concerned and of the Netherlands itself.

Two days later Spender chose not to send (at least for the time being) the note to the Indonesians,⁴ for the Dutch *communiqué* had strengthened the hopes stimulated by their letter of 5 May. Certainly, assessments of the Dutch position had been a central external

3747, RG 59, DF 1950-54, A2). The timing of this Cabinet decision strongly suggests that the Australian *demarche* had some influence.

² Spender to Teppema, 10 May 1950, in A1838/283, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1, NAA.

³ Teppema to Spender, 17 May 1950, in A1838/283, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1, NAA.

⁴ See Spender’s minute of 21 May 1950, on cablegram 197 from Hood, 19 May 1950, in A1838/283, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1, NAA. No record was made at the time of this resolution.

determinant of Australian policy, so it is unlikely that the re-statement of the UK and US stance, which had come a few days earlier, had a significant influence.⁵

As the Dutch evinced signs of resistance, the Indonesians attempted to show the Australian Government the gravity with which they would view any interference by Canberra on Irian. In a cablegram from Jakarta, Hood explained that L. N. Palar, head of the Indonesian delegation to the UN, had visited him on behalf of Hatta.⁶ Palar had made it clear that Indonesia was determined that WNG be included in the Republic, and that the other Southeast Asian states believed the Dutch should give up the territory. On top of this, he said that the Dutch themselves had agreed that if they abandoned WNG, it would automatically go to the Indonesians. These views were well known in Canberra, but it was Palar's final comments that raised eyebrows:

if any other status were given to New Guinea, there would be irresistible political infiltration from Indonesia which would inevitably spread to Australian New Guinea. He was not enquiring about the present Australian attitude, but asked very earnestly that these considerations should be weighed for the sake of friendship that would in all other respects have a sound basis.

At the same time, President Sukarno had made a nation-wide broadcast, in which he said: "remember! West Irian must be returned to our fold! West Irian can be returned to our fold if we are united, West Irian will certainly be returned to our fold if we are united!"⁷

Spender was unsure how these new developments should affect Australia's tactical policy on WNG, yet he was eager to display his Government's disapproval of such bellicosity. Burton thus promptly cabled Hood, commenting that

Your last paragraph is most disturbing. We cannot find any previous report of this attitude being adopted. This and Sukarno's public statement make it necessary for the Minister to state the viewpoint of the Government. It may be desirable to rest our case on a statement such as this rather than present a Note. However, at this stage the Minister is refraining from making a statement except to say you are being asked to return for consultation.⁸

⁵ For British and American remarks, see James Marjoribanks (Official Secretary, UK High Commission, Canberra) to Burton, 13 May 1950, and W. A. Wynes (Assistant Secretary, DEA) to Burton, 16 May 1950, in A1838/283, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1, NAA. In addition to these representations, the Australian High Commissioner in New Delhi had warned that Jawaharlal Nehru (the Indian Prime Minister) was due to visit Indonesia, and that he might encourage them to reject an Australian advance if it were made while he was there. This may have had an influence on the decision not to send the note, but it can only have been a factor of secondary importance if it was one at all; if Nehru's visit was the main reason for the shelving of the note, the Australians would have sent it immediately after his departure.

⁶ Cablegram 197 from Hood, 19 May 1950, in A1838/283, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1, NAA.

⁷ Emphasis original. See extract of Speech in Cablegram 204 from Hood, 22 May 1950, in A1838/283, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1, NAA.

⁸ Cablegram 179 from Burton to Hood, 22 May 1950, in A1838/283, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1, NAA. Burton's comment with regard to the note – because it suggests serious consideration was still being given to its despatch – apparently discredits the idea that the attitude of the Dutch was the major factor in its postponement, and supports the notion that Nehru's visit was the cause. A number of things may be said in response to this. The first is that consideration of backing the Dutch had involved keeping open the option of pursuing an independent policy and therefore sending the note; Burton may have been saying that a statement, even if it was decided that long-term Dutch administration was not possible, might be

Following on, Spender sent a message to Alan Watt, the Acting Secretary of External Affairs,⁹ asking him whether a statement to Parliament was necessary and, if so, what should be contained in it.¹⁰ Watt recommended a cautious approach. He noted that the recall of Hood had made known the Australian view by implication and believed that “this action is still the most effective way of expressing Australia’s view without stating it in detail in some irrevocable form.”¹¹ Watt also went beyond the immediate requests that Spender had made, and commented on wider issues *vis-à-vis* the dispute. He pointed out that the US, whose support was vital to Australia in the Pacific, had made clear its position – a position also supported by the British – and he then counselled “the most careful consideration of further Australian policy on this matter by Cabinet itself after Hood returns.” In his opinion, the determination of the Dutch to retain sovereignty, and the fact that they could expect support from influential quarters, was “an important new factor” that had arisen since Hood was originally instructed to present the note to the Indonesians.

The thrust of Watt’s memorandum, then, was that nothing radical should be done without close thought, because certain costs were involved. It is important to notice, though, that the implied recommendation of turning to more circumspect methods was predicated on indications of Dutch fortitude rather than the opposition of the US, the UK, and Indonesia. In other words, it would hardly be worth engendering ill-feeling if the Dutch could be used to achieve Australian purposes.

Spender, who was of course keen to minimize strain where possible, followed Watt’s advice on the immediate issue, and declined to present a public statement straight away. However, after briefing Cabinet in full on developments in connection with WNG since February,¹² he made a strong speech in the House of Representatives on 8 June.¹³ After a short review of the history of the dispute and Australian policy, Spender said that “it is our view that, should discussions between the Netherlands and

the only thing that the Australian Government could now forward in view of the Indonesian attitude. The other side of the coin is that Burton appears to have misinterpreted Spender’s ideas at times. For example, on 23 May, Alan Watt (Acting Secretary, DEA) contradicted Burton’s cable by claiming Hood’s recall had occurred so that Spender would not have to make a statement. Memorandum by Watt and unidentified officer, 23 May 1950, in A1838/283, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1, NAA.

⁹ After the 15-20 May meeting of the British Commonwealth Consultative Committee on economic aid for Southeast Asia, Watt was informed by Spender that Burton had asked for six months leave without pay, to which Spender had replied that he would consequently be replaced. Following a period as Acting Secretary, Watt was officially appointed Secretary of the DEA on 19 June. See A. S. Watt, *Australian Diplomat: The Memoirs of Sir Alan Watt*, Sydney, 1972, pp.161-62.

¹⁰ Teleprinter message from Spender to Watt, 24 May 1950, in A1838/283, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1, NAA.

¹¹ Teleprinter message from Watt to Spender, 24 May 1950, in A1838/283, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1, NAA.

¹² Minutes of Cabinet meeting, 7 June 1950, A4638/XM1, NAA.

¹³ Statement by Spender, 8 June 1950, *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 208, pp. 3972-73.

Indonesia tend towards any arrangement which would alter the status of western New Guinea, the matter is no longer one merely for those two parties themselves.” He followed this with an interpretation of WNG’s strategic significance that contained most of the popular ‘truths’ regarding the island as a whole:

from the aspect of the security of Australia, the territory [of WNG] is naturally integrated with the rest of New Guinea and other adjacent island territories which experience has shown to be strategically vital to our defence. Australians who fought along the Kokoda Trail and elsewhere in the defence of this country and its people will need no reminder of this; nor will those who were, by their efforts saved from the devastation and misery which would have descended upon our country had the Japanese not been halted when within only a few miles of Port Moresby. We cannot alter our geography which for all time makes the mainland of New Guinea of vital importance to our security.¹⁴

There appears to have been two broad reasons why Spender took this forthright step. The first was domestically oriented. Sukarno’s public utterances could not have been ignored without provoking damaging claims that the Government was ‘appeasing’ the Indonesians.¹⁵ As a consequence of Indonesian claims and ongoing Dutch-Indonesian negotiations, the WNG issue had attracted increasing attention in the House during the first half of 1950, and the sentiments expressed by both Liberal-Country and Labor members had been almost unanimously in favour of a vigorous defence of Australia’s ‘vital’ interests in NG.¹⁶

The second reason was based on international considerations. It is likely that Spender’s speech to Cabinet coincided with private discussion between himself and Menzies, and that it was decided some provision – short of a private *demarche* broaching exclusive Dutch-Australian talks and the possibility of Australian control – should be made for Australian intervention in the dispute if necessary. Indeed, there seems to have been a fear that Indonesia’s militant attitude might cause the Dutch to weaken. This move, though it prevented firm support for any particular administrative

¹⁴ *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 208, 8 June 1950, p. 3973.

¹⁵ The UK High Commissioner to Australia, E. J. Williams, wrote that “Mr. Spender’s statement was delivered in response to urgent demands made yesterday by members from both sides of the House that Australia’s position in regard to the Indonesian claims to Dutch New Guinea should be made absolutely clear”. See telegram 419 from Williams to CRO, 8 June 1950, in FO 371/83704, PRO.

¹⁶ A second reason that warns against interpreting Spender’s speech too simplistically is the domestic considerations that partially motivated it. They are also revealing of the antecedents (as discussed in chapter 1) of popular Australian beliefs about NG. In February, the deputy leader of the Opposition, Arthur Calwell, had said: “Any Government that did not immediately indicate to the Javanese that if they intend to walk into Dutch New Guinea we shall walk in there before them, does not deserve to last five minutes....We can no more let the Indonesians into Dutch New Guinea than we can let them into Darwin....If we allow the Indonesians into Dutch New Guinea there will be no hope of our holding the northern portion of Australia and the fate of this country would then be sealed and certain.” (*Parliamentary Debates*, 23 February 1950, Vol. 206, p. 75) Similarly, Liberal backbencher Bruce Graham had, a day before, asserted that if Dutch New Guinea was not controlled by the Dutch or the Australians, “the thin end of the wedge will be inserted into Australian security”, and he added that for “strategic and political reasons it is impossible for us to permit New Guinea to fall under the domination of any country.” (*Parliamentary Debates*, 22 February 1950, Vol. 206, p. 1094)

model in WNG, did not contradict the hopes for a continued Dutch involvement as had been expressed in Spender's earlier minute to Burton; rather, it provided, as envisaged, for sufficient flexibility to take emergency action in defence of Australian interests.

Reassuring voices were soon heard regarding the Dutch. A number of telegrams from The Hague and memoranda from the Pacific Division (DEA) stressed that the Dutch could not easily change the status of WNG. For example, Counsellor Patrick Shaw of the Pacific Division had stressed on 3 June that "should the Netherlands agree to a change of status it would be many months and probably over a year before the constitutional processes could be completed to give effect to the change", whilst it was added that A. H. Hasselman, the First Secretary of the Netherlands Embassy, had "emphasised...that of course it has no intention of agreeing to a change."¹⁷ Even more comforting were concrete steps by the Dutch to gain Australian diplomatic and military support in their apparent attempts to resist Indonesian claims. On 21 July, Hasselman wrote to Spender explaining that the Chairman of the Netherlands joint staff mission in Washington had been instructed to present a memorandum to the Combined Chiefs of Staff "regarding the strategic position of Netherlands New Guinea and in that connection, to stress the importance, for allied defense purposes, of maintaining Netherlands sovereignty over that area."¹⁸ One of the points of this memorandum was said to be "the readiness of the Netherlands to arrive at close military cooperation in this area with the U.S.A., Australia and New Zealand." The Dutch requested that the Australian representative on the Combined Chiefs of Staff back this move.

This seems to have been part of an orchestrated campaign to both soothe Australia and seek its support, for the letter came on top of a request by Dirk Stikker, the Netherlands Foreign Minister, to see Spender personally.¹⁹ A good rapport with Australia would itself be important to the success of an international drive to secure backing for their position – which was paralleled by a similar campaign by the Indonesians – in lieu of the deadlock that had occurred within the Netherlands-Indonesian Commission. Charged with the task of formulating a joint report on WNG, which would then be presented to the respective Governments, the Commission was not even able to achieve this, and separate reports were tabled weeks after the original deadline. The period between this breakdown (which, in reality, occurred soon after the Commission was formed) and a second ministerial conference on WNG scheduled for

¹⁷ P. Shaw (Counsellor, SEA Section, DEA) to Watt, 3 June 1950, in A1838/283, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1, NAA.

¹⁸ Note from A. H. Hasselman (First Secretary, Netherlands Embassy, Canberra) to Spender, 21 July 1950, in A1838/283, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1, NAA.

the end of the year, was one in which the protagonists were keen to gain a position of strength to take into negotiations.

Encouraged by the Dutch outlook, and yet wary of the possibilities that appeared inherent in the negotiating process, Spender travelled to the Netherlands in August. On 1 September he cabled Menzies, giving him a full report of the outcome of the talks.²⁰ He was evidently impressed with the fortitude of the Dutch attitude – indeed, Stikker gave him assurances that the Netherlands Government would not give in to the Indonesians – and he was consequently more confident than before that the forthcoming Dutch-Indonesian Ministerial Conference would result in a stalemate. Notably, his conviction over the immediate issue was not yet matched by identical sentiments regarding the exact long-term status of WNG, but even here his statements were becoming more certain than they had been:

So much for the immediate future. I am satisfied that we have succeeded in maintaining the status quo but next steps will present real difficulty....I found sympathetic support for our view from United States Ambassador but some disposition to seek to find some solution which of course means some compromise....It is this tendency to seek a so called solution that presents great danger. The course which I have advanced is that of no compromise. I think this is the safest one to pursue at the moment. If we show any disposition to compromise we only worsen our position later on and it may be that Dutch trusteeship will be accepted in which Australian vital interests will still be protected.²¹

Spender was, in fact, to have tremendous difficulty in his attempts to prevent a “solution” during the Dutch-Indonesian conference, but the enduring significance of the visit is that it seems to have provided final confirmation for the Australian Government that some kind of continuing Dutch involvement would be best.²² Certainly, ideas of sole Australian control were never mentioned again.²³

II

If February to April 1950 (when ‘active security’ against Indonesia was defined and implemented) revealed that Australia believed itself to be neither seriously threatened by Indonesia nor wholly dependent on the US and UK, but rather dominant in the

¹⁹ See Cablegram 96 from Sir Keith Officer (Australian Ambassador to France) to Spender, 8 May 1950, in A1838/283, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1, NAA.

²⁰ Cablegram S58 from Spender to R. G. Menzies (Prime Minister of Australia), 1 September 1950, in A1838/283, TS3036/6/1, Pt 2, NAA. In late July, Menzies has also used a visit to Europe to defend Australian WNG policy; in London he had reiterated to the British that Australia would not tolerate an Indonesian presence in WNG. See Phelps, *op.cit.*, p. 46.

²¹ Spender’s conversation with Ambassador Chapin may be found in telegram 334 from Chapin to Acheson, 30 August 1950, in *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter *FRUS*), Vol. VI, 1950, ‘East Asia and the Pacific’, pp.1059-60.

²² The visit did not, as Viviani (*op.cit.*, p. 168) has claimed, roughly coincide with a “crystallisation” of Dutch policy.

²³ Phelps, *op.cit.*, p. 46, gives scant attention to important Australian considerations of an independent claim to WNG during 1950.

Indonesia-SW Pacific area, then the period from May to August (in which some from of ongoing Dutch presence was chosen as best) provided confirmation.

Less direct attention was paid to the Indonesian position in these later months – just as there was less interaction with the British and Americans – but Australian activities, by inference, again betrayed presumptions of superiority regarding Indonesia, and comparative autonomy from Britain and the USA. Certainly, in hoping for, and encouraging, Dutch resistance in negotiations, Spender was supporting an attitude bitterly resented by the Indonesians as unjust, and opposed by the US and UK as contrary to a prudent spirit of compromise. In deciding to institutionalize this inflexibility by chasing a continued Dutch administrative engagement, the Minister was exhibiting a willingness to bear the ire of Indonesia, the USA, and Britain for some time. A cost of this kind would not have been borne by an insecure and dependent Government.

The main lesson of the emerging Australian attitude to the Dutch was, however, not so much the fact of Menzies Government confidence and independence, but verification from a different source of the positive conception that these characteristics represented. Put otherwise, in gravitating towards The Hague as a partial solution to the security question posed by the dispute, Spender and his colleagues behaved in a manner that again revealed Australians thought of themselves as representing a middle power. The principal point in this instance is that the Government ruthlessly and expediently looked to use the Dutch as a political and military proxy. Earlier works on WNG have failed to discern this coercive approach.²⁴ When faced with the awkward obstacles presented, on one hand, by Netherlands refusal to transfer any control in the negotiating process to Australia, and, on the other, by uncertainty over the eventual outcome of that process, Spender combined a willingness to admit to Dutch control with an unwillingness to allow them to decide alone what form this should take. His manipulative letter of 10 May, and retention of the option of Australian intervention, reveal this determination to have the Dutch, if they had to remain, remain on Australia's terms. Pemberton has argued that Menzies foreign policy was driven by an "imperial imagination"²⁵ and, arguably, this was a guiding force for his Government here; nation states, if faced with practical and, or, political problems in maintaining an 'outer' sphere of influence (or buffer zone) should look to create a pliable or cooperative substitute. Later support for complete Dutch authority, and the more harmonious and

²⁴ See Haupt, *op.cit.*, p. 103, Viviani, *op.cit.*, p. 168, and Phelps, *op.cit.*, p. 48.

²⁵ Pemberton in Cain, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

sentimental atmosphere that accompanied it, should not be allowed to obscure its machiavellian basis.