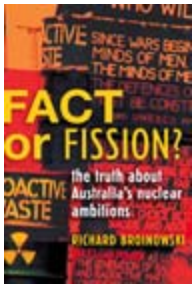
Richard Broinowski. ***Fact or Fission? The Truth About Australia's Nuclear Ambitions.*** Victoria, Australia: Scribe Publications, 2003.



By Duane Bratt
Department of Policy Studies, mount Royal College

Richard Broinowski, a former senior Australian diplomat, has written a useful history of Australia's nuclear activities. The book is organized chronologically with most of the chapters named after the corresponding Australian Prime Ministers: Gough Whitlam (1972-75), Malcolm Fraser (1975-83), Bob Hawke (1983-91), Paul Keating (1991-96), and John Howard (1996-present). The development of the Australian uranium industry is detailed, as is Canberra's role in developing and strengthening the international nuclear non-proliferation regime.

A major theme of the book is Australia's opposition to nuclear testing. Bilateral relations with France were strained for decades due to repeated French nuclear testing in the South Pacific. Following a series of French tests in 1973, Australia recalled its ambassador, sent its navy into the test region to monitor the situation, and joined New Zealand in launching an action at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). When France renewed testing in 1995, Australia responded by asking the ICJ to consider the use of nuclear weapons illegal, and formed the Canberra Commission of nuclear scientists to consider practical steps to eliminate nuclear weapons. It was not just France which faced the wrath of the Australians. When India and Pakistan conducted their tit-for-tat nuclear tests in 1998, Canberra was harsh in its condemnation and suspended its

defence links and foreign aid programs with the two countries. Australia later became one of the strongest advocates of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

Despite these actions, Broinowski joins other anti-nuclear critics in arguing that the Australian government has neither been consistent in its opposition towards nuclear testing, nor forceful enough in that opposition. There was a widely shared sentiment in Australia that economic sanctions should have been imposed, especially the suspension of uranium exports, in response to French nuclear testing. However, Broinowski provides evidence that Canberra feared French retaliation if it took a harder stance against testing, and argues that this explains the reliance on largely symbolic diplomatic protests. Broinowski also explores Australia's double standards in its position on nuclear testing. In 1973, both France and China were testing nuclear weapons, but China did not suffer even the symbolic protests that were leveled against France. This is explained through the arguments of scholars like Hedley Bull and Henry Albinski that "the Labor government regarded China as a key player in Labor's vision of a low-conflict Asian community. It did not see France, a former colonial power in the region, in the same light" (p. 110). Further evidence of Australia's double standards was the fact that while it had previously accepted American and British nuclear tests in the Pacific, it applied significant economic sanctions against India and Pakistan for their nuclear tests.

Broinowski's dissection of the nuclear testing issue reveals that the real aim of Fact or Fission is to provide a strong critique of Australian policy from a disillusioned former supporter of it. Broinowski makes clear that he initially supported the expansion of Australia's nuclear industry. Australia should, he had said, "develop the whole nuclear fuel cycle in Australia, enrich our uranium, fabricate it into fuel rods for power reactors,

lease these to power companies in other countries, take them back as spent rods, reprocess them and safely dispose of the radioactive wastes in Australia" (p. 10). Broinowski has now foresworn these views. His new position is that Australia should completely abandon its uranium industry because, notwithstanding International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards, Australian uranium has in the past been used in nuclear weapons programs and likely will be in the future. In addition, he is convinced that "there is as yet no proven method to isolate nuclear wastes from the biosphere for the time required for them to decay to safe radioactive levels" (p. 10).

Broinowski extends his critique, unnecessarily in my view, to include a scathing indictment of United States foreign policy, especially that of President George W. Bush, and Prime Minister Howard's support of U.S. policy. By abrogating the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty with Russia and altering America's nuclear posture review to include the possible use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states, Bush has "degraded the nuclear non-proliferation regime and the credibility of the [nuclear non-proliferation treaty] NPT" (p. 6-7). Broinowski argues that Bush has provided a great incentive for China to accelerate its nuclear weapons programme and for North Korea, South Korea, and Japan to acquire nuclear weapons. An Asian nuclear arms race is obviously not in Australia's best interests, yet Canberra has not stood up to the Americans. Broinowski explains this by referring to the "the syndrome of psychological dependence on the United States that afflicts Australian politicians and the public servants who advise them" (p. 6). He also insults Howard personally by stating that his aspiration is to be "America's deputy sheriff in the region" (p. 7) and its "regional lieutenant" (p. 279).

The problem with this anti-American, anti-Bush, and anti-Howard approach is that Broinowski does not really explain either what Australia could do differently, or how Australian security would look without a dependence on America. In the post-Cold War security environment, what would be the impact of a fissure of Australian-American relations? Would Australian security, as that country is surrounded by much more heavily populated and armed countries like China, Japan, the Koreas, Indonesia, India, and Pakistan, be advanced if it antagonized its most important ally? Given Australia's historic fear of abandonment due to its geographic isolation, Canberra knows that on important security issues – like the Vietnam war, or the war against Iraq – it must support its American ally. In my view, Broinowski underestimates the very real constraints that exist in Australian foreign policy.

Although Canada is only mentioned peripherally throughout this book, I could not help but compare Australia's nuclear history with that of its Commonwealth partner. Broinowski argues that there are four fundamental realities which have guided Australian nuclear policy. First is Australia's "abundance of uranium deposits, and the commercial pressure from the Australian mining industry to turn it into a substantial export earner" (p. 4). At the same time, it has attached its uranium sales "with comprehensive bilateral and international safeguards so that Australia is not, and cannot be seen to be, a potential contributor to nuclear weapons proliferation" (p. 4). The second has been Australia's "reliance on great and powerful friends for defence" most notably the United States (p. 4). Thirdly, Australia's nuclear scientists, through the Australian Atomic Energy Commission (AAEC) and the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO), have significantly influenced its nuclear policy.

Lastly, Australian public opinion has become increasingly vocal in its opposition towards nuclear testing and the disposal of nuclear waste.

In describing each of these fundamental realities, Broinowski could easily be talking about Canada. Canada has a commercial interest in the export of uranium as well as its indigenous CANDU nuclear reactor technology and has also adopted safeguards to ensure that it is only used for peaceful purposes. Its military security is dependent, even to a greater degree than Australia, on the United States. Over the course of its nuclear history, the scientists at Atomic Energy of Canada Limited (AECL) have been very influential in determining the direction of Canada's nuclear policy. Finally, the Canadian public is also opposed to nuclear tests (particularly those with some Canadian connection) and the long-term disposal of high-level nuclear waste in the Canadian Shield.

The reason I bring in this Canadian-Australian comparison is because of the great similarities in their nuclear policies. Both Ottawa and Canberra have a commercial interest in trying to ensure the success of their nuclear industry, but at the same time they have been leaders in establishing a nuclear non-proliferation regime. In fact, much of their international reputation in the disarmament field rests on the fact that they both have the technological ability to develop nuclear weapons, but they have elected not to pursue that option. Nevertheless, both countries face two dilemmas which have led them to pursue policies that have eroded their professed support of the international nuclear non-proliferation regime. The first dilemma is between advancing their economic interests and preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons. For example, the economic imperative that led them to sell uranium to France (Australia) and

CANDUs to India and Pakistan (Canada) also damaged the nuclear non-proliferation regime by assisting the three recipient countries' weapons programmes. The second dilemma arises because of Canada and Australia's security and economic reliance on nuclear weapons states, principally, but not exclusively, the United States. This has led them both to allow American nuclear weapons on their soil. In effect, while Canada and Australia are strongly opposed to *horizontal* nuclear proliferation, they have supported *vertical* nuclear proliferation.

By focusing exclusively on the Australian case, with few references to other middle powers, Broinkowski's critique lacks a certain degree of context. He makes it appear that only the Australians have double standards and contradictions in their nuclear policy. A bit of attention to comparative analysis would have shown that these apparent contradictions are not due to poor political leadership, but can be explained by the economic, security, and political dilemmas facing medium sized, highly developed democracies.

Duane Bratt teaches political science, with a specialty in international relations, in the Department of Policy Studies at Mount Royal College, Calgary, AB. He is an expert on Canadian nuclear policy, with articles published in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Non-Proliferation Review, and the International Journal. His book The Politics of CANDU Exports will be released later in 2004.