

Professor Des Ball AO: the insurgent intellectual



***New Mandala* co-founder Nicholas Farrelly pays tribute to one of the world's leading strategic studies scholars and an irreplaceable member of the ANU community.**

Professor Desmond Ball AO
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Des Ball arrived in Canberra in February 1965, as a 17-year-old fresh from Timboon in country Victoria. He was a scholarship boy who had earlier topped his home state in three matriculation subjects. Des had never been to a university campus or spoken to an academic. When he arrived at the train station, he was met—accidentally but auspiciously—by Colin Plowman, who was then the Registrar of the Australian National University. Colin brought him to the Acton campus in what Des remembers as his “old humpback yellow Holden”. Des’ academic journey had begun.

An arresting start

Before long, Des was making his mark on ANU, both academically and socially. Just before Christmas of his first year, Colin had the happy opportunity to write to Des notifying him that he had won the “Shell Company Prize [for] the best first year student in the Faculty of Economics”. The prize came with the princely sum of 25 pounds. For Des, Canberra was a long way from home and, like many in his high-achieving cohort, he found himself ensconced at Bruce Hall. These were heady times, recently described in a newspaper article as “days of debauchery and high jinks at ANU”.

From this period, there is the story of Des’ arrest for offensive behavior at an anti-Vietnam War rally. Des, while still a member of the ANU Company of the Sydney University Regiment, became implacably opposed to military conscription. He considered it antithetical to the values of freedom for which Australians were supposedly fighting. Journalists loved the contrast: they never failed to call Des a “prize-winning economics student” when they reported his “offensive behavior” charge.

To shed light on the case, all these decades later, it is worth turning to Bronitt and McSherry’s *Principles of Criminal Law*, the leading text in the area, now in its third edition. Across four pages of dense legal summary, the authors analyse the implications of the 1966 case immortalised as *Ball v McIntyre*. It hinged on whether Des’ behaviour, climbing onto a statue of King George V while holding a placard that read “I will not fight in Vietnam”, was offensive. Justice Kerr—who of course later played a leading role in the dramatic events of the 1975 Whitlam dismissal—held that “offensive behavior” must be “calculated to wound the feelings, arouse anger or resentment or disgust or outrage in the mind of a reasonable person”. In Kerr’s judgment, the reasonable person would find Des’ protest “foolish and...misguided” but that the reasonable person would understand such conduct to be “truly political conduct” and thus would not “have his feelings wounded, or anger, resentment, disgust or outrage aroused”. Bronitt and McSherry note that Ball benefited from the advice of ANU law students who supported his cause, and he was able to present reasoned legal arguments in his own defence. He also had in his corner an ANU academic named Kep Enderby, who went on to become a Labor MP.

Throughout his student years, and beyond, Des became a “person of security interest” to the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation. The beauty of a system where secret documents are one day released to the public, even if they are redacted, means Des eventually got a clear picture of what ASIO thought of his early years at the ANU. In one five-page briefing, the then Director General of ASIO, writing to the Secretary of the Department of Defence, clusters Des with a group

of academics “the majority of whom have radical tendencies”. When Des began publishing material about the joint intelligence facility at Pine Gap alongside Robert Cooksey, an ANU international relations lecturer and one of Des’ mentors, ASIO paid close attention. Des, for his part, long disputed many of the inaccuracies in the security intelligence files, some of which he claimed were the result of confused identification with other long-haired young men. When asked in recent years about the ASIO surveillance, Des said he was surprised by “the extent of the resources that they had devoted to me. I think that ASIO had lost the plot by then”.

Academic star

Des was getting a very different sort of attention from the ANU’s academic leaders. Throughout his undergraduate career, Professor Fin Crisp, then the ANU’s Professor of Political Science, conducted a sporadic correspondence with Des’ father, Jack. For a time, Jack was concerned about his son’s progress and no doubt wondered about his political orientation – which was explicitly anti-war in the leftist tradition. These letters are a striking insight into Des’ early years in Canberra and the enthusiasm that Professor Crisp felt for the young man’s prospects.

In Crisp’s letter of 15 December 1967, at the end of Des’ third year, he told Jack that his son:

...first took a laboring job after the examinations in extremely hot weather, but wisely gave it away after a couple of days. I persuaded him to have a good hair-cut at that point because, as I told him, he would not get any sort of worthwhile employment while he looked like one of the Apostles. This time I, teasing him, succeeded and he is looking quite spruce at the moment. This worked very well because he met the incoming Vice-Chancellor...recently and he (Sir John Crawford) has taken Des on for some vacation employment digging up some material in the libraries...This experience, and this close interest on the part of Sir John Crawford, could be the making of Des, provided he does a good job for Sir John, and I am sure he is fully capable of doing it.

At the same time Professor Crisp wrote to Des directly saying: “I will eat my hat now if you do not chew up a First for us next year...I have been tremendously bucked with your results, and was particularly proud to parade your results at the meeting of the Economics Faculty this afternoon”.

In the end, Professor Crisp did not need to eat his hat. With a thesis titled “The anti-ballistic missile and international stability”, Des’ honours triumph came with a clutch of awards, including the Tillyard Prize, the ANU’s top honour for an undergraduate student.

A scholar’s scholar

From then, Des made quick progress towards the completion of his ANU PhD, awarded in 1972, for “The Strategic Missile Programme of the Kennedy Administration, 1961-1963”. Under the stewardship of Professor Hedley Bull, and a number of the other leading figures in US nuclear strategy, Des came to understand the dynamics of nuclear escalation, and command and control, which led to some powerful conclusions. Des determined that the notion of “limited” nuclear war was fanciful and that after the exchange of a modest number of detonations, escalation was

inevitable and irreversible. With his newly minted PhD, he had a short stint teaching at the University of Sydney, before he returned to Canberra to take up a research fellowship in the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre. These were busy and productive years, where Des made some of his most significant contributions to the understanding of global strategy.

It was that work, along with his studies of American facilities in Australia, and particularly *A Suitable Piece of Real Estate* published in 1980, which first made Des famous. He had developed his early career under the watchful supervision of his close friend, Professor Bob O'Neill. Bob saw Des' great potential and provided the resources and crucial political support for his research activities. Some of his great collaborations also began back then, including with Jol Langtry, with whom Des shared his many trips to northern Australia where they measured rivers, mountains and beaches to understand the nitty-gritty of the defence of the vast Australian continent.

But Des was still looking to understand other issues of global concern. In July 1986, the front-page of the *Cobden Times*, his home region's newspaper in country Victoria, ran the astonishing front-page splash: "Timboon link with Soviet spy claims". In a report that spilled over onto page 10, Des was credited with claims that the Soviet Embassy in Canberra was listening to sensitive Australian communications. The report talked of Des' parents, Mr and Mrs Jack Ball, and his sister Raelene, and declared that they were all "justifiably proud...but take no credit for his achievements".

As the head of the ANU's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre from 1984 to 1991, Des was also receiving attention from universities abroad, eager to lure him away from Canberra. Happily, a tranche of new ANU professorial posts were being advertised to commence in 1987 and Des was encouraged to make a bid. Beyond his academic endorsers, Des' referees from the policy world were a serious group: former US President Jimmy Carter, former US Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara and then Australian Defence Minister Kim Beazley. In his letter of reference, Beazley argued "Desmond Ball's work on global strategic issues is acknowledged internationally as outstanding".

The official summary of that pivotal professorial appointment quoted an esteemed global scholar who suggested: "Dr Ball is one of the most creative and significant students of international security in the world. Only a handful of people are his peers, and I would not place anyone clearly above him". Des' appointment to his special professorial post did not slow down his output. He continued to write and research with unstoppable passion, while teaching occasional seminars and supervising a growing stable of talented PhD students.

In the late 1980s he was also working on what would remain one of his only un-published works. And like so many things in Des' career, it is a ripper of a story. The manuscript was called *Diplomatic Ears: A guidebook to Russian diplomatic establishments and their antenna systems*. At 528-pages it was a systematic, global survey of the era's Russian signals intelligence capabilities. Des accumulated the materials by travelling all over the world and meticulously mapping relevant facilities, in Africa, Asia and Europe. The work was compelling and

comprehensive. The big pity was the timing. Once the giant manuscript was completed, the Cold War was over, and that horse had bolted. *Diplomatic Ears* never did see the light of day.

After the USSR

As the Soviet Union collapsed, and Des put that manuscript in a drawer, he was not going to rest on his laurels. Other international problems still needed resolution. Des worked conscientiously to help establish the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific. It is still the premier second track forum in the region, bringing together academics, policy makers and military personnel to discuss the most pressing issues of the day.

Des also sought out new research topics with relish. From the mid-1990s he produced a unique set of studies of sensitive security matters in Thailand and Myanmar. His focus was paramilitaries, and particularly the shadowy groups that fight Thailand and Burma's civil wars. His time on the Thai-Myanmar border also saw him develop a passion for ballads about Thailand's storied Border Patrol Police. Over the years he fanatically pulled together what is probably the world's only comprehensive collection of these songs. It fills three large boxes.

How did Des manage to publish such a huge volume of high-quality scholarship? Those who worked closely with him can testify that Des never wavered from his methodical and comprehensive treatment of his research projects. His paper files are beyond legendary. It has been said that he never wrote a sentence that he could not improve with an extra footnote, and he assiduously monitored the citation practices of colleagues and students alike. His heavyweight books on Thailand's paramilitaries testify to this approach.

Such academic work was founded in the careful accumulation and weighing of evidence, of all sorts. The contradictions and complexities of the evidence informed his analysis. In many cases he was prepared to leave readers to draw their own conclusions about the subject at hand. To meet his own high standards, he worked hard, whether at home, in the office, or on the road. He often only paused to follow the fortunes of his beloved Collingwood Football Club.

For Des, scholarly effort was also a profoundly social activity. During his career he accumulated a remarkable circle of friends, collaborators, admirers and critics, and, yes, a few enemies too. With correspondence and interactions with Presidents, Governors General, Prime Ministers, Ministers, spy chiefs and military leaders, Des' circles were as wide as they were deep. Perhaps the most important connections in Des' professional life were with his global network of co-authors. A perusal of his list of publications, which stretches to more than 24 tightly-packed pages, indicates that he worked closely with scores of other academics, journalists and analysts.

In his research, Des took calculated risks, all in the interest of better serving the peaceful and democratic values that formed his personal ideology. Writing in 2012's [*Insurgent Intellectual*](#), a volume that paid tribute to Des' immense academic contributions, former United States President Jimmy Carter explained that:

Desmond Ball's counsel and cautionary advice based on deep research made a great difference to our collective goal of avoiding nuclear war... The fundamental lesson learned was that nuclear war is inherently uncontrollable, and that our fundamental goal must be to reach a world without nuclear weapons, and to eliminate every single nuclear weapon from the face of the earth.

So, what did Des, the strategist, make of war? With his life-long study of its consequences, he once described himself as “almost a complete pacifist”. He was pragmatic and idealistic in equal measure, and found great stimulation in considering contrarian views. His enjoyment of discussing projects and publications was contagious. For Des, the life of the mind required constant attention to detail and a capacity to see connections in every possible direction. His career demonstrated a remarkable mix of intellectual stamina, logistical determination, and boundless creativity.

It was fitting that in his final years he received the Peter Baume Award, the ANU's highest recognition. He was also made an Officer of the Order of Australia in 2014. At the same time, Des fought valiantly, for many years, against the cancer that eventually sapped his strength. He was proud that he managed to keep up his output of publications right to the end. Yet he was prouder still of his family and the untiring support they offered. With his passing, Australia has lost one of its finest public intellectuals, a humble man and original thinker whose scholarship will offer great lessons to future generations.

Professor Des Ball AO is survived by his wife, Annabel, their children, Katie, Matthew and James, and his sister, Rae.

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The Australian National University held a public [memorial service](#) celebrating the incredible career and life of Des Ball on Tuesday 22 November. A shorter version of this article appeared in [Fairfax media](#).