**VALE DES BALL**

Address by Professor the Hon Gareth Evans AC QC FASSA FAIIA, Chancellor of The Australian National University, to Memorial Celebration, *Remembering Professor Desmond Ball AO 1947-2016*, Llewellyn Hall, ANU, 22 November 2016

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

The life of Des Ball that we celebrate here today was an intellectual life, a public policy life, and a personal life all magnificently well-lived. His contribution over 40 years here at the ANU encapsulates everything that this great university of ours is about.

As Chancellor I could not feel prouder or more privileged than to be able to lead you through this celebration today, in the course of which, in order to help us reflect on what this academic giant of ours, and giant of a human being, was and achieved during his lifetime, you’ll hear not only from me and the Vice-Chancellor, but his family, some of his closest colleagues, and some of those he helped or influenced – all of us the better for having known him.

I have to confess that when I first got to know Des personally, which was not really until after I became Foreign Minister in 1988, I was not at all sure that I *was* going to benefit from the experience. I decided that for my first major speech on foreign policy, made here at the ANU, I would not pronounce on the US alliance, relations with China or Indonesia, or any other specific current issue, but rather – because I was still working and thinking myself into the job – I would describe the basic conceptual framework in which I would try to operate, in terms of how I would define national interests, identify opportunities for action and set diplomatic priorities. Flushed with this analytical tour de force, I was rather deflated when Professor Ball came up to me afterwards and said ‘Well that was all very well, but when are you going to say something interesting?’

Des, then as ever, didn’t want conceptual theorizing: he wanted red meat – and potatoes, and peas, and gravy as well. He was an empiricist, or as someone once called him, a *hyper*-empiricist, who loved hard data, original data, and collected personally masses of it, out on the ground and in the jungles – whether those be on the Thai-Burma border, Northern Australia, or the even more impenetrable jungle of the US nuclear and intelligence community – and who was wholly focused on the policy implications, and relevance for *good*  policy, of that data

Others will talk about other aspects of Des’s enormously influential professional career – in reshaping our thinking about Australian defence policy generally, and in particular the possibility of a genuinely self-reliant defence policy; in creating the intellectual framework for regional security cooperation, and doing much of the practical grunt work to help advance its institutionalization; in dramatically improving our understanding of the dynamics of the ethnic minority conflicts along the Thai-Burma border; and nurturing both the idea and the reality of ANU as an absolutely world class community of scholars.

I want to focus for just a few moments on the extraordinary *global* impact that Des’s work has had, above all the seminal contribution of his research and thinking on the issue of nuclear weapons strategy, and the question of whether a contained and controllable nuclear war would ever be possible. Des challenged head-on the prevailing assumption of US and other nuclear strategists in the 1970s that a limited nuclear war could be fought and won. He argued that the first targets in any nuclear exchange would be the other side’s command, control and intelligence facilities – its eyes and ears – and demonstrated, on the basis of his own nose-to-the ground research, that these facilities were immensely vulnerable. He argued, totally convincingly, that once so blinded, the real people operating in this chaotic real world environment would not be able to distinguish a ‘controlled’ strike from a full-scale attack, and would retaliate with everything they had. The result would be, in the words of former US President Jimmy Carter, writing in the 2012 festschrift in honour of Des, *Insurgent Intellectual, ‘*a catastrophic slide into uncontrolled escalation and all-out nuclear war’.

Carter invited Des to participate in the major international conference he co-convened with former President Gerald Ford in the mid-1980s, bringing together US and Soviet experts and policymakers to try to introduce some sanity into nuclear thinking on both sides at a time when Cold War tensions were still very high. And he summarized Des’s contribution in these words: ‘Desmond Ball’s counsel and cautionary advice based on deep research made a great difference to our collective goal of avoiding nuclear war’. It might be a little bit of a stretch to say of Des, as the *Sydney Morning Herald* did in reporting Carter’s assessment that he was ‘the man who saved the world’. But he certainly did more to advance that objective than any Australian politician has ever done!

Des’s best known work, on the role of the US defence facilities in Australia at Pine Gap and elsewhere, in his 1980 book *A Suitable Piece of Real Estate* and subsequent volumes, also had global significance in addition to its implications for the Australia-US alliance. It brought a burst of sunlight into what had been an indefensibly secretive area of Australian security policy, where the presence of these facilities had exposed us to nuclear attack without the public having the faintest idea of whether the security return began to justify this risk. His finely honed argument, in particular that Pine Gap was crucial for arms control verification and any hope of nuclear arms reduction, was critical in persuading the ALP – which otherwise would have been hugely reluctant to continue hosting the facilities even on a joint management basis – to retain them. The logic of this position, of course, and Des was always very clear about it, was that nuclear arms control and disarmament should be actually actively pursued by the Australian government: unhappily, that has been the case for only one side of politics in recent years – but that’s a discussion for another day

The big difference between Des Ball and so many other nuclear policymakers past and present is that he never, ever lost sight of the human dimension. It may have been most visibly explicit in his days of activism against the Vietnam war, but it ran like blood in the veins in everything he wrote not only about nuclear warfare, but Asia Pacific security architecture and strategy, and in his extraordinary work of recent years on Burma/Myanmar.

It was the human rather than the ideological dimension of all of these issues that mattered to him. Because of his immersion so deeply and so long in military topics normally the preserve of those whose instincts are on the right, it is tempting to label him, as I did at the launch of the festschrift, as either ‘a hawk with dovish characteristics, or a dove with hawkish characteristics’. But as his long-time SDSC colleague Ron Huisken has put it: ‘He is not an ideologue of any kind, and labels like hawk, realist, constructivist and so on seem quite out of place. Des is what I’d call a forensic analyst with a work ethic of Dickensian proportions’

That work ethic, and prodigious output, puts even the most obsessively productive of the rest of us to shame, not only for its quantity but for its consistently magnificent quality. We are celebrating today the life and work today of someone who was not just a treasure for the ANU, but someone the Japanese would have called a ‘living *national* treasure’. We should so describe him because he was not just a brilliant researcher, a brilliant analyst, a brilliant writer and a brilliant educator – but because, as so many of his colleagues and students and friends in high and low places on this campus, in this country, in this region and around the world will testify, Des Ball was a brilliant human being.