
UNIT 4 POLICY MAKING PROCESSES

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4.1 INTRODUCTION

Formulation of foreign policy, in some sense, is not too different from making public policy in the domestic arena. However, as public policies are crafted to deal with domestic matters – be it social, economic or cultural, formulation of such policies are largely subjected to the issues and demands arising from domestic constituencies. To that extent an array of domestic pressures conditions them. In the realm of foreign policy, while domestic constituencies bring to bear on its formulation, external forces and circumstances influence it. In other words, the international community has direct interest in aspects of the given foreign policy of the country in question. Therefore, each country while formulating its foreign policy has to balance carefully the domestic pressures against forces emanating from outside. In another respect foreign policy is different from domestic policy formulation because its implementation being outside the country, its efficacy largely depends on co-operation that a given country can muster in implementing its policies.

Seen in this perspective, Australian government like many other parliamentary democracies looks in two directions while formulating its foreign policy. On the one hand is the global order with its built-in array of political, military, economic, and other pressures that constantly compete to influence the country's foreign policy agenda. On the other hand, no less is the influence of the domestic or internal forces within which the foreign policy making establishment in the country has to reorder and set its foreign policy objectives and priorities. It is against these parameters, that any country has to make the choice in dealing with issues in the realm of its foreign affairs.

Keeping these in focus, this Unit attempts a descriptive analysis of how Australia's foreign policy is formulated and implemented. In doing so, the Unit explores the prevalent policy-making environment in Australia and the elements that make the environment. Further, it will describe the organisational set up and the antecedents of the Australian foreign policy establishment, its structure and the way it gathers and incorporates the views and perceptions of the different constituencies both in the domestic and foreign arenas that help shape its foreign relations.

4.2 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- 1) understand the role of domestic variables and international environment in the formulation of a nation's foreign policy;
- 2) discuss the structure, process and implementations of Australia's Foreign Policy;
- 3) examine the impact of societal factors on Australia's Foreign Policy making with a particular focus on the role of public opinion, media, pressure groups and political parties; and
- 4) analyse the role of different institutions and agencies in the formulation of Australia's Foreign Policy, such as Parliament, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Department of Prime Minister's, Cabinet; Department of (Aus Aid); Australia Trade Commission and Australian Security Agencies.

4.3 POLICY MAKING ENVIRONMENT

By all accounts, Australia is not a major power comparable to the countries of Western Europe or the United States. To that extent the scope of its policy initiatives are without doubt somewhat limited. The elements of geography, demography and the economy of Australia together with its placement – both geo-physical and geo-political – in the global setting admittedly has set limits to its ability to initiate and pursue an independent foreign policy. Yet, there is what may be called the mainstream Australian culture, in part inherited from the British and in part evolved over the long history since federation which has given the people of Australia a sense of national identity. These values and identity are no less significant and do provide needed directives and guidelines in the formulation of its foreign policy.

Australia's democratic system of government, largely the legacy of inherited as well as acquired values and identity, has encouraged an open and pluralist model of policy formulation both in the national and international contexts. The making of foreign policy in Australia, therefore, is a long process composed of a number of interlocking variables, which, as has been stated earlier, are factored on the inherent as also the changing values of the Australian society. Not only is the range of these variables extensive, but also their impact on the policy process changes from time to time.

Any consideration of foreign policy making in countries such as Australia, therefore, necessarily calls for a review of these divergent influences that emanate from the societal level to the state apparatus. At the societal level a variety of elements such as public opinion, the views and perceptions of the mainstream media, powerful pressure groups and, above all, the political parties – national and regional – exert considerable influence on the policy formulation. And at the state level, constitutionally established organs of the government such as the parliament and the executive and its bureaucratic instruments give the final shape to the set of policies for implementation. At each of the levels the different elements of the society and the institutions of the government constantly interact which in the final analysis give the shape and the content of the policy. In other words, it is a continuous two way process rather than simply either the society or the state determining the content and contours of the policy framework.

Keeping these in view, the following sub-sections attempt a descriptive analysis delineating the different elements and entities that influence policy choices and formulation both at the societal and state levels.

4.4 SOCIETAL ELEMENTS

In all democratic societies, the perceptions and aspirations of the general citizenry do reflect the policies pursued. In other words, the way the larger community looks at foreign policy issues certainly impact on policy choices. When governments develop policies they tend to take into consideration the general perceptions of the public. To that extent, the attitudes and beliefs of the public obviously set the broad parameters for policy formulation.

4.4.1 Public Opinion

In discussing public opinion, distinction has to be made between the opinion of the general masses and that of the elite. In contrast to that of the general public, the elite exert more often direct and significant influence on policy formulation by virtue of their position. By and large, the elite is composed of key members of the government, the opposition leaders, opinion makers in the media, the business community and other pressure groups. However, the elite opinion is evolved within the loose framework provided by the foreign policy mood of the general public. Yet, on occasions, specific issues – be it political or economic – may be dealt with by the government on the basis of elite opinion alone. On larger issues such as, for instance, involvement in major wars like the Vietnam war or Australia's involvement in the war on Iraq, unless public opinion is supportive, it will be quite difficult for the government to take a decision on its own. But public opinion changes with changing times. At the time of Federation, Australia was largely composed of white Australians who saw themselves as a European outpost in a potentially hostile regional environment. In the earlier years, Australian public opinion, therefore, was quite supportive of Australia's reliance on the British Empire and subsequently the American alliance against the perceived threats emanating from Asia. However, since the end of the Second World War and, more so, since the abrogation of the 'White Australia' and the consequent large scale immigration of Asians, public opinion was supportive of giving priority to developing links with Asia and became critical of the government's Euro-centric foreign policy. No doubt, Australia's foreign policy orientation changed in the 1980s and 1990s. But as some observers suggest, this change was more in response to Australia's economic imperatives than it was to the prevalent public opinion, though the government couched its policy statements by saying that its Asian orientation was part of its 'new vision' for Australia.

4.4.2 Media

Given that media generally subserves specific pressure groups or the elite class, the influence they exert on foreign affairs is only marginal. In Australia, the print media is largely confined to metropolitan centres such as Sydney and Melbourne and their readership is to that extent is restricted. Among visual and audio media, the two leading are the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), both of which may be described as elitist. However, it may be added that media do play some role in informing their audience and clientele about international affairs. Still the emphasis is more on attracting the attention of the viewers to its programmes than offering cogent analysis of the critical issues involved. Its influence is largely related to the extent it helps shape public opinion on a given issue. Certainly, in the case of Australia, on specific matters concerning immigration issues or policy towards the Australian aboriginal, the media have greatly helped to encourage forceful public opinion. To that extent, it has less direct influence on policy formulation and the government deals with specific foreign policy issues.

4.4.3 Pressure Groups

Unlike public opinion or opinion-making media, pressure groups representing particular elements or interests within Australian society exert greater influence in policy making. But the role of the pressure groups on policy formulation in Australia will have to be seen on the basis of what they intend to do as specific interest groups. For, there are pressure groups, which are sectional such as the Australian Chambers of Manufacturers, Australian Council of Trade Unions and the Australian Mining Industry Council. Their interests are largely confined to policy matters concerning tariffs, worker rights and investment rules. In other words, they campaign for the causes that these sectional groups represent. Then there are promotional pressure groups such as Australian Conservation Foundation, Amnesty International, East Timor Independence Group whose interests are on larger issues concerning global environmental and human rights issues. Quite often they articulate quite forcefully on these issues based on their perceptions in concert with pressure groups outside the country. The techniques adopted by these pressure groups are also different from that of public opinion makers. They focus attention on the executive government where the key decisions about Australian foreign policy are made. This may involve liaising and lobbying with the members of the cabinet and members of the parliament alongside embarking on 'mass' campaigns.

4.4.4 Political Parties

As an overwhelming influence on the policy making process, Australia's political parties without doubt excel all other societal elements including the pressure groups. It has been an established Australian tradition that

the major political parties – Australian Labor Party, Liberal Party and the National Party (formerly known as the Country Party) – define and articulate foreign policy on behalf of their members. Notwithstanding their complex organisational structure at the national and local levels, the resolutions arrived at in intervals in the national conference of these parties become binding in respect of policy choice or the course of action to be pursued by the party in power. While these resolutions, often described as the party's national platform, indicate the general line or course of action to be pursued yet in day-to-day affairs the party in power cannot wield much influence on the conduct of the policy.

Given that the overall national interest is involved in foreign policy making, it is observed that there exists a general consensus among the political parties and an unwritten tradition of bi-partisanship in matters relating to Australia's international affairs. However, a closer scrutiny of the stance taken by the leading Australian political parties would suggest the contrary. On specific larger issues, the position taken by the Labor party has been different from that of the National and Liberal parties. Labor has consistently taken the view that Australia should remain independent and that its focus should be regional (i.e Asia-Pacific) rather than Euro-centric. With respect to dealing with international disputes, the Labor party has been of the view that Australia should adopt an internationalist stance rather than Western alliance orientation. And above all, it has maintained an all-inclusive approach to the Australian community's role in foreign policy. Yet there have been occasions when the Labor party had adopted a position somewhat similar to that of the other parties with some differences in emphasis and style.

4.5 STATE INSTITUTIONS

In this section an attempt is made to identify the different institutions and agencies that are engaged in the foreign policy formulation. These institutions are the different organs of the government such as importantly the legislature and the executive, which are constitutionally assigned the task of policy making. What are these tasks and how effective are these institutions in foreign policy making and implementation is described in this section.

4.5.1 Parliament

According to the Constitution of Australia, the powers of the national government are vested in the federal legislature. But in respect of foreign policy, the Parliament has only a modest role compared to the executive branch of the government. This is in sharp contrast to the presidential form of government as in the United States where power is divided between the legislature and the executive. Congressional committees such as the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in the US have a major role in foreign policy formulation and selection of key officials in the Department of State.

In Australia, the parliament at best provides a forum in which major foreign policy issues are discussed. More often, it is the executive that explains its position and the opposition presents its critique. These debates are a useful means to inform the general public about the governments thinking. Rarely however, do these debates lead to any major modification in the policy content. There are the parliamentary committees such as the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade and Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. They not only invite testimonies from interested groups and individuals but also discuss at length the issues involved. On the basis of these deliberations, these committees submit reports, which are made public. The impact of these reports is only at the level of influencing the general environment within which the policy is formulated. In reality, it is the executive branch of the government that assumes the charge of actual policy formulation and implementation.

4.5.2 The Executive

In the executive branch of the government, the primary responsibility is reposed in two key figures – the prime minister and the foreign minister. Of these two, the prime minister can play a decisive role if he so desires. Not only because he heads the ruling government, in Australia certain historical antecedents also account for his paramount role in foreign policy making. Although at Federation, the Department of External Affairs was established, it did not function as an autonomous department with independent charge on international affairs. Its responsibilities included communications with Britain, immigration and naturalisation

and the administration of territories. In 1911 when the Prime Minister's Department was established, some of the functions of the Department of External Affairs were transferred to the Prime Minister's Department. For all practical purposes the Department of External Affairs was downsized and even ceased to function as a separate department. And in 1916 the Department itself was abolished. Ever since, and even after the setting up of an autonomous Department of External Affairs in 1935, Australia's Prime Minister continues to wield considerable power in the formulation of the country's foreign policy. Instances are aplenty in subsequent years too when the prime minister had even over-ruled his foreign minister's view on key foreign policy issues of Australia. For example, Prime Minister Ben Chifley openly resisted his foreign minister's move and aligned firmly with the US in the Cold War in late 1940s and early 1950s. Again there are instances where the prime minister himself had served concurrently as the foreign minister or chose a weaker person as a foreign minister so that he could assert himself effectively in foreign affairs. It is true that the foreign minister has bureaucratic support through his department now known as the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Yet, quite often the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPM and C) with its own International Division and the Office of National Assessments (ONA) established in 1977 outmatches foreign ministry. The officials of the International Division of the DPM and C occupy places of central importance in the conduct of Australia's foreign policy. It consists of three branches – Foreign Affairs; APEC, Trade and Multilateral; and Defence and Office of Security and Intelligence Co-ordination. While it may be said that the responsibilities of these agencies are generally in matters of foreign policy co-ordination, they nonetheless on occasions have been the prime force in policy making. As these agencies directly report and make their discreet recommendations to the Prime Minister on a range of issues, which fall in the domain of foreign policy, overall the DPM and C remain an important part of the foreign affairs bureaucracy.

4.5.3 The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Headed by the foreign minister, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) bears the primary responsibility for the making and conduct of Australia's foreign affairs and policy. The responsibility of DFAT, among others, includes importantly management of Australia's foreign, political, security, legal and trade relations at both bilateral and multilateral levels. Besides it administers the country's overseas cultural, trade and public affairs programmes through three agencies – Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID); Australian Trade Commission (AusTRADE); and Australian Security Intelligence Service (ASIS).

Although DFAT's antecedents go back to 1901 when the Commonwealth government of Australia came into existence, it is still not a very large ministry. At the time when the Australian federal public service was established, the foreign ministry was one among the seven foundation government agencies. However, it went through a process of restructuring – sometimes even ceased to exist! Mention was made earlier that with the setting up of the Prime Minister's Department in 1911, many of the functions of the foreign ministry were taken away, and in 1916 it even ceased to exist. However, in 1935 when it was re-established, it had struggled through for a long time to establish its autonomy as an administrative authority against the power of other more established departments such as Trade and Defence. It was only in 1987 when steps were taken as part of the administrative reforms, the existing Department of External Affairs was merged with parts of the Department of Trade – Multilateral Trade and the Economic and Trade Development Groups, sections of the Bilateral Trade Group and the Trade Development Council Secretariat. With the amalgamation and restructuring, the ministry since then came to be known as the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The restructuring enhanced the department's capacity for integrated policy formulation and implementation across a wide range of political, economic, social and security issues in the international affairs. Yet another notable innovation of the restructuring has been the appointment of two ministers of equal cabinet status to the DFAT.

The restructuring of the DFAT brought to end the traditional rivalry between the then existing Departments of foreign affairs and trade. It has also facilitated the reorientation of Australia's foreign policy to focus increasingly on Asia and the Pacific unlike in the past when these departments pulled Australia between two directions – one towards the West and the other towards Asia-Pacific region. Now, the Department has a clearer sense its mission giving it an effective delivery system in respect of its varied services. In turn, the

restructuring has enhanced substantially the DFAT's status and standing as a key agency of the government in foreign affairs thanks to which not only the agenda of Australia's foreign policy has become broader but also the policy choices that it makes allows the country to realise its targets.

4.5.4 Other Departments

Of the other departments/ministries that exercise functional policy responsibilities, the Department of Defence (DoD) is the most important. While the elements of the DoD concerned with foreign policy matters is rather modest, its involvement with foreign policy derives from the responsibility the DoD has for the defence and security of Australia. During most part of the Cold War period when issues of security were at the forefront of the country's foreign policy agenda, DoD had a crucial role in directing Australia's international relations. With the end of the Cold War, new imperatives be it in terms of Australia's growing interest in co-operative security or in respect of fighting international terrorism have made DoD's influence in respect of foreign policy making rather pervasive. In turn, these developments have signalled closer liaison between DoD and DFAT.

Besides the DoD, other ministries that orchestrate on foreign policy matters are the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) which has very recently been renamed as the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, the Department of Treasury, the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs and the Department of Environment. Given the involvement of other ministries in many foreign policy issues, admittedly there exists scope for inter-departmental conflict in policy formulation. Such conflicts are sorted at two levels. One is the Cabinet where the ministers heading the different ministries discuss matters and engage in negotiations and compromise. The other is at the lower level where officials of the different ministries sit at inter-departmental committees and settle differences.

4.6 SUMMARY

Although foreign policy formulation is not too different from domestic policy enunciation, it has to take into consideration not only the domestic views but also those of external constituencies such as other nation-states and multilateral organisations. Seen in this light, Australian government like many other parliamentary democracies looks in two directions while formulating its foreign policy. One the global order with its built-in array political, military, economic, and other pressure that constantly compete to influence the country's foreign policy agenda. The other is the influence of the domestic or internal forces within which the foreign policy making establishment in the country has to reorder and set its foreign policy objectives and priorities.

In the foregoing descriptive analysis, an attempt was made to identify the different domestic elements that direct and guide the foreign policy making process in Australia. When the government develops policies it tends to take into consideration the general perceptions of the public. Yet with some exceptions, public opinion has not made any significant influence in foreign policy issues. Similarly, the media as an opinion maker has less direct influence on policy formulation dealing with specific foreign policy issues.

However, pressure groups representing particular elements or interests within Australian society exert greater influence in policy making. As an overwhelming influence on the policy making process, Australia's political parties without doubt excel all other societal elements including the pressure groups. It has been an established Australian tradition that the major political parties – Australian Labor Party, Liberal Party and the National Party (formerly known as the Country Party) – define and articulate on their views and stance on specific foreign policy issues.

At the governmental level, the parliament at best provides a forum in which major foreign policy issues are discussed in Australia. There are also the parliamentary committees such as the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade and Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, which review foreign policy issues. Without doubt, the executive branch of the government wields greatest authority in foreign policy formulation.

Not only because the office of prime minister heads the government, but also because of certain historical antecedents in Australia he exercises paramount role in foreign policy making. Ever since, and even after the

setting up of an autonomous Department of External Affairs in 1935, Australia's prime minister continued to wield considerable power in the formulation of the country's foreign policy. So vast is his influence that at some instances the Australian prime ministers had even over-ruled his foreign minister's views on key foreign policy issues. At times, the prime minister himself had served concurrently as the foreign minister or chose a weaker person as a foreign minister so that he could assert himself effectively in foreign affairs.

It is true that the foreign minister has bureaucratic support through his department now known as the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Headed by the foreign minister, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) bears the primary responsibility for the making and conduct of Australia's foreign affairs and policy. At the time when the Australian federal public service was established, the foreign ministry was one among the seven foundation government agencies. Yet it did remain pre-eminent in policy making until it was restructured in 1987. The restructuring enhanced the department's capacity for integrated policy formulation and implementation across a wide range of political, economic, social and security issues in the international affairs.

Yet, looking at the track record of Australia's foreign policy posturing in recent decades on major foreign policy issues both regionally and internationally, it may be said that DFAT's role in formulating policy choices have been quite encouraging. In turn, it also reflects that the structures and the processes have admittedly played an influential role in policy making.

4.7 EXERCISES

- 1) Identify the different societal elements that influence foreign policy making in Australia.
- 2) Write a brief note on the role of Australia's Parliament in foreign policy formulation.
- 3) Give reasons as to why the Prime Minister in Australia wields paramount influence in the making of foreign policy.
- 4) Sketch briefly the functions and the role of Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in the formulation and implementation of Australia's foreign policy.

4.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

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