Towards the end of September 2017, former Prime Minister Tony Abbott suggested that Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull should use Australian troops to ensure future domestic supplies of natural gas by invoking ‘defence powers’ and militarily seizing control of the resource from the states, thereby eliminating tardiness regarding its exploration and supply. Abbott’s suggestion was met with derision, Treasurer Scott Morrison mocking his ‘khaki solution’, along with media commentators who reckoned Abbott was acting like an off-the-cuff antipodean version of Donald Trump. But Abbott was on home turf, echoing a long held and seldom discussed Australian tradition: the use of the military against the Australian people.

From the outset, white settlement of Australia met indigenous resistance. Until the establishment of policing after 1810, and the development of case specific punitive ‘settler’ parties/expeditions and the use of special purpose militarised ‘police’ units, resistance was quelled by the military. Military units continued to be deployed when indigenous resistance could not be otherwise contained, for example during the declaration of a lengthy period of martial law in the Bathurst (NSW) region in 1824; during the infamous ‘Black Line’ operation in Tasmania in 1830 which was led by troops.

Nor were the convicts a docile, compliant mass. For example, in 1804 convicts confined to the boondock fringe of Sydney at Castle Hill, rebelled and made a break for freedom, aiming to march on Sydney, commandeering vessels, and escape penal servitude. Many had become convicts for their roles in the Irish Rebellion of 1798. Some 300 were involved in the escape. Poorly armed, they met with the full fury of martial force, including summary executions, an encounter bloodily intensified by military anti-Irish sentiment.

Between 1792 and 1810, the colony of New South Wales increasingly came under the control of the NSW Corps, a special military force recruited to work in the convict colony, replacing the regular Marines who had done the task since 1788. The leaders of the Corps worked to advance their own personal interests, eventually mutinying against Governor William Bligh, sending him packing, and acting as a junta until 1810. The arrival of Governor Macquarie in the colony with trusted troops and the re-establishment of legitimate authority ended the junta’s rule. The junta had acted as juntas do, exercising its monopoly of weapons and force to entrench corruption, generate personal fortunes specialising in land grabbing, in cases establishing ‘family’ wealth that continued across generations.

In Sydney during the 1840s, the port city was a ferment of radical ideas and related speakers and publications, the population emerging from a convict past and many railing against local exploitation, poor living conditions, authoritarian colonial administration, sharpened by the awareness of democratic ideas and ideals that came in with migrant baggage and variously floated in via the sea lanes from other parts of the world. Throughout the decade, the military machine was numerous deployed to keep insurgent citizens at bay.

In 1854 as the result of arbitrary authority and growing demands for democratic rights in the colonies, miners on the Ballarat goldfields revolted against the government, some 1000 assembling at their ramshackle Eureka Stockade to make a poorly armed stand under the ‘Southern Cross’ flag. Resistance was ruthlessly crushed by military and police forces and a period of martial law ensued. While the revolt was crushed, the miners’ action led to the reform of laws they had contested and served notice on colonial authorities to get serious about the extension of democracy in the Australian colonies.

Industrial disputes flared during the 1890s in the contexts of drought, economic crises, increasing worker mobilisation and militancy. Along with the police, who at times in terms of uniforms, leadership, and tactics were ‘militarised’, military units were deployed to quell worker militancy. Major deployments took place during the 1890 Maritime Strike, extensively in Newcastle (NSW) but most
During the twentieth century, anti-labour interventions by the armed forces intensified. Military and naval units were mobilised as back-up during the 1923 Melbourne Police Strike and also provided strike breaking assistance; troops were used as strike breakers during the 1949 Coal Strike in New South Wales; army and naval personnel were used to variously break bans by the Seamen's Union of Australia (SUA) and the Waterside Workers' Federation in 1951, 1952, 1953, and 1954; the navy was used to break an SUA boycott against the Vietnam War in 1967; the air force was used to break union bans on Qantas in 1981; the navy and air force were used to break the 1989 industrial campaign by the Australian Federation of Air Pilots. Also that year, the dispatch of troops was authorised to back-up South Australian police against demonstrators at the Nurrungar joint Australia-United States military satellite base.

During the Cold War a significant political-industrial role, code named Operation Alien (1950-1953), was envisaged for the armed services to act as strike breakers and ensure the maintenance of essential services in the event of significant industrial upheavals. On the eve of the 1951 referendum to ban the Communist Party of Australia, the army was placed on alert. From 1950 and throughout the Cold War, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation planned a series of internment camps for 16,660 leftists (men, women and children) in the case of a national emergency, police to do the initial rounding up, the army to run the camps. Armoured cars and troops were used to intimidate agitated unemployed Italian migrants at the Bonegilla reception camp in Victoria, 1952. The nature and extent of the covert involvement of defence force personnel in the 1998 War on the Waterfront is yet to be fully understood.

In 1978 during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting (CHOGRM), a bomb mysteriously exploded in a garbage bin outside the Hilton Hotel (Sydney) where CHOGRM members were staying. In response Prime Minister Fraser deployed nearly 2000 troops to act against the unseen, unknown, never identified alleged threat, occupying the town of Bowral for a couple of days during a CHOGRM rural retreat. Armoured vehicles took up strategic positions on feeder roads to the town, military aircraft used private airstrips and golf courses, and a de-facto form of martial law was established, with fully armed troops occupying the streets of Bowral and neighbouring Mittagong. Behind the scenes, the legal fallout from this deployment revealed a cavalier disregard for significant aspects of civil and constitutional law.

Long term, this unprecedented and controversial decision, along with the bombing, had significant ramifications. Security was placed firmly on Australia's national agenda and fundamentally changed the nation. The power of the federal government in domestic affairs was strengthened, terrorism became a specific legal entity, and counter-terrorism became the preserve of the army. Legal and constitutional errors revealed by the 1978 exercise in martial law were variously addressed by legislation making it easier for the federal government to use the armed forces in peace-time on domestic soil against perceived threats to Commonwealth interests, and enabling the army to have domestic police powers, including the domestic right to 'shoot to kill', something previously hedged by legal niceties.

The military attracted its share of anti-democrats and rightists. During the first half of the twentieth century private quasi-military outfits proliferated, especially during the 1920s and 1930s. Anti-democratic, right-wing, itching for a decisive anti-leftist show down in the streets of Australia, these organisations went by names like the Order of Silent Knights, the Blackshirts, the White Guard, the Old Guard, the New Guard, the League of National Security. Collectively they had an estimated membership of 130,000, many of the members ex-servicemen. With access to arms and ammunition, these outfits were disciplined, conspiratorial, well-organised and financed, and had significant links with serving, often high ranking, military personnel. The last known of these, The Association, folded in 1952, and was headed by General Sir Thomas Blamey.

So to 2007, and the bizarre and controversial Northern Territory National Emergency Response, the Howard government's solution to complex and long standing social, health, legal issues and problems in indigenous communities across the remote vastness of Northern Territory. With bi-partisan support Howard sent 600 troops and Australian Defence Force (ADF) units to spearhead the top-down federal
management of traditional lands and communities, variously bypassing, ignoring, disregarding, overriding, local initiatives and inputs. In effect this was an attempt at radical social engineering at the point of a gun.

It would seem that elements in the leadership of the ADF are up for anything, the more radical the better. I reckon that when Abbott made his call for the use of troops to ensure future domestic supplies of natural gas, there were those in the ADF community rubbing their hands in glee, recognising in his words a long Australian military tradition, and saying "Bring it on".

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