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The contribution of Britain’s colonies and self-governing dominions to the security of the Empire was the source of much debate throughout the nineteenth century. Opinions differed on how best to organise and support the military and naval forces required to protect British interests and the question became a source of ongoing tension between London and its various dependencies. In the more confrontational environment which emerged from the mid-1870s, the problems of imperial defence became more acute. British policy makers pursued a dual-track approach to the dilemma; entering into diplomatic arrangements with Japan, France, and Russia whilst simultaneously encouraging their imperial subjects to assume a greater share of the burden for the collective defence of Empire.

In this article, Christopher M. Bell examines how the Admiralty sought to encourage Dominion governments to contribute to the Empire’s naval defences in the years immediately prior to the First World War. Focusing upon Winston Churchill’s tenure as First Lord of the Admiralty between 1911 and 1914, Bell charts the various means by which London sought to foster meaningful support from its white self-governing Dominions of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. These attempts assumed two main forms; encouraging the development of indigenous, local naval forces, and motivating Dominion governments to subsidize warships for the Royal Navy. Whilst Australia and New Zealand were initially happy to follow the latter route; each committing to fund the construction of a battle cruiser in 1909, the Australian government quickly developed aspirations of controlling the warship it had paid for. This precipitated a prolonged period of wrangling between the Dominion governments and the Admiralty which went to the heart of the Dominions’ growing desire for an increased role in Imperial decision making.

As suggested in the article’s title, the Admiralty’s views on naval strategy often conflicted with the Dominion governments’ domestic and local security requirements. This had implications for the types of vessel the Dominions were willing to finance and potentially curtailed the scope for using Imperial contributions to support the Royal Navy in European Waters, where the growth of the German Fleet threatened the Imperial metropole. The naval leadership consistently espoused the importance of concentrating forces against the
greatest threat, judged at the time to be the Imperial German Navy. This often proved counter-intuitive to Dominion officials, who were concerned about more parochial issues such as coastal defence, local trade protection, and regional rivalries. Bell recounts how the Admiralty sought to satisfy these requirements within the broader framework of British strategy by encouraging the Dominions to form a federated Pacific Fleet, the existence of which would free British vessels for service in home waters. Discussing the Imperial Conference of 1909, Admiral Sir John Fisher summarized the arrangement; “we’ll manage the job in Europe,” he wrote, “they’ll manage it against the Yankees, Japs, and Chinese, as occasion requires out there” (264, n. 10). He also describes how Churchill sought to modify this scheme to fulfill the Navy’s commitments in the Mediterranean (269-70) as the increased pace of Italian and Austro-Hungarian construction threatened Britain’s ability to sustain a satisfactory level of strength against both Germany and its Triple Alliance partners.

In addition to the sensitivities of dealing with colonial governments, securing Dominion naval contributions also posed for Churchill a series of domestic political complications. The First Lord found himself squeezed between the government’s commitment to maintain certain standards of naval strength in the North Sea and Mediterranean and increasingly resolute opposition to additional expenditure from many of his Liberal and Radical colleagues. Whilst Dominion contributions offered the potential to solve this problem, convincing regional governments that such support was necessary created a problem for Churchill. Admitting publically that London required the assistance of her dependencies to sustain Britain’s naval hegemony would leave the government open to attack from the Unionists in parliament. At the same time, public and political opinion in the Dominions required an explicit request from the Admiralty in order to achieve the consensus required to license the expenditure involved in providing support. This was particularly true in the case of Canada, where the Conservative Prime Minister, Sir Robert Borden, promised to finance the construction of battleships for the Royal Navy, but proved unable to secure the support of the Liberal-controlled Senate for his plans.

By contrasting the naval discussions between London and Britain’s three white self-governing Dominions, Bell has made an important contribution to debates about Imperial defence, naval strategy, and Churchill’s record at the Admiralty. His treatment of the opportunities and complications of encouraging Dominion governments to assume a greater role in the collective defence of Empire provides a prelude to the well-documented Imperial military contributions during the First World War. The difficulties Churchill encountered in convincing Dominion governments to subsidize the Royal Navy directly hint at the growing sense of national identity made evident during the War. Yet, the Australian government’s willingness to release the battle cruiser it had funded in 1909 for service in the North Sea and the sense of pride HMS *New Zealand*’s service engendered in Auckland confirms the closeness of the ties between Britain and its colonies.1 Bell’s work supports those who have argued that the Empire did not represent a “bad investment” for the British taxpayer; regardless of the form it took, the Dominions supported the naval defence of Empire, and of Britain, before 1914.2

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1 For more on the Australian Navy see D. Stevens, *In All Respects Ready: Australia’s Navy in World War One* (South Melbourne: OUP Australia & New Zealand, 2014).

This article also provides an additional layer of detail to Prof. Bell’s other recent work on pre-War Admiralty policy. Here Bell has advanced a convincing and thoroughly documented alternative to the argument that Churchill was preparing to enact a major shift in naval strategy, inspired by the ‘revolutionary’ ideas of Admiral Sir John Fisher, on the eve of the First World War. “There is no evidence,” Bell writes, “to suggest that Churchill’s determination to concentrate British and Dominion capital ships in European waters diminished prior to the outbreak of war in 1914” (277). In fact, the Admiralty had well-developed plans for how it intended to deploy its battleships and battle cruisers in the North Sea in 1915 and beyond (277-78). This interpretation fits more broadly into the international context of 1912-14, by which point Britain had ‘won’ the Anglo-German naval race and relations between the two powers were improving. As Churchill later recalled “the spring and summer of 1914 were marked in Europe by an exceptional tranquility…naval rivalry had at the moment ceased to be a cause of friction.” Whilst the Admiralty would have to wait until 1916 for the vessels ordered between 1912-1914 to enter commission, after that point the British superiority over Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz’s fleet extended consistently. “It was certain,” Churchill later noted, “that we could not be overtaken as far as capital ships were concerned.” This degree of security prompted the First Lord to renew his earlier proposals for a ‘Naval Holiday’ between Britain and Germany. The suggestion that Churchill was contemplating abandoning the policies which had secured this promising position does not represent the documentary record as convincingly as Bell’s more measured analysis. Even were Churchill to have been willing to reduce the concentration of British capital ships in the North Sea, his professional colleagues were absolute in their opposition to such a move. Vice-Admiral John Jellicoe, the Second Sea Lord and Commander-in-Chief designate, minuted in July 1914 that “it is highly dangerous to consider that our ships as a whole are superior or even equal fighting machines” to their German equivalents. As Bell

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9 Jellicoe to Churchill, July 14th, 1914, ADM 116/3091.
illustrates, the entire thrust of Admiralty policy under Churchill was to “concentrate in home waters rather than on the periphery” (278). This manifested trends in strategic thought evident from the 1870s onwards.

This study of Churchill’s administration of the Admiralty in peacetime will also be of considerable interest to those scholars who remain overly critical of his ‘meddling’ in strategic affairs in 1914-15. Churchill was without doubt an unusually active and involved First Lord, but he was far from unique in developing a deep affinity for his adopted Department. Moreover, his energy and imagination made him an effective political head of the Navy; many of the problems he encountered in managing the issue of Dominion contributions were complicated by factors outside of his control, and the failure to create an integrated Imperial squadron in the Pacific prior to 1914 can hardly be blamed upon Churchill alone. Nevertheless, Bell is critical of the condescending manner in which the Admiralty treated Dominion governments; “Churchill can be criticized for the Admiralty’s deteriorating relations with New Zealand and Australia (277). As is the case in his earlier works, Bell thus presents an equitable treatment of Churchill, which eschews well-entrenched stereotypes and provides real insight.

It would have been interesting to hear more about the contributions of the Federated States of Malay and the lack of substantive Indian support for the Royal Navy, but this would have been beyond the scope of a single article. This is a well-written, timely account of the administration of Imperial grand strategy. It offers insight into consensus building and coalition politics that remain relevant and marks Bell out as one of the foremost scholars writing about Churchill today. Given the enduring fascination the subject engenders, this is no small accomplishment.

David Morgan-Owen is a Lecturer in Defence Studies at King’s College, London. He conducted his undergraduate study at the University of Exeter between 2005 and 2008, where he went on to receive an MA in History in 2009. Thereafter, he earned his Ph.D. in Maritime History from the same institution in 2013. Before joining the Department he held the post of Visiting Research Fellow at the National Museum of the Royal Navy, Portsmouth. Dr. Morgan-Owen’s area of research is the history of the Royal Navy and of British defence administration between 1880 and 1918. He has published a number of articles on the Royal Navy in this period and is currently completing a monograph dealing with the manner in which the threat of foreign invasion was perceived and responded to in late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain.

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