

If only he was the last...

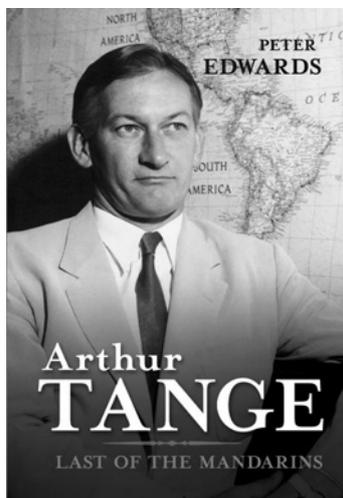
John Roskam reviews
*Arthur Tange—
 Last of the mandarins*
 by Peter Edwards
 (Allen and Unwin,
 2006, 336 pages)

Australians like to think they live in a democracy and that, in democracies, elected politicians determine what governments do. This outstanding biography proves much of that theory wrong.

Few people other than public service aficionados have ever heard of Arthur Tange. But as Secretary of the Department of External Affairs for a decade from 1954, and then as Secretary of the Department of Defence from 1970 to 1979, Tange had a decisive influence on the country's foreign and defence policy. He was at least as important as any of his ministers and he was more important than most.

We are still managing the aftermath of the decision that Tange and others made in 1958 to not go to war with Indonesia over West Guinea—a decision that ultimately led to what is today called West Papua being incorporated into Indonesia. In the 1970s, Tange was one of the earliest advocates of what is known as the 'Defence of Australia' doctrine, under which Australian military forces would concentrate on defending national territory rather than engaging in 'expeditionary' activities overseas. Debate about the doctrine is alive and well today.

Arthur Tange—Last of the mandarins reveals the consequences of what happens when governments and ministers come and go, but public servants don't. Public servants can gain immense power, and generations of the public servants have sought to disguise this power by claiming that they mere-



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ly gave advice to ministers which is 'frank and fearless'—ministers are free to come to their own conclusions.

If only it were that simple. Forceful and intelligent personalities, such as Tange, have the capacity to direct policy in a myriad of ways—and they do. Under Fraser, Tange reached the apogee of his influence. Fraser had greater trust in Tange than he did in many of his ministers.

Peter Edwards is Australia's leading diplomatic historian and his latest work is much more than the life story of a long-serving bureaucrat. Edwards achieves his ambitious task of putting Tange's career into the context of the domestic and international events of the period. He particularly succeeds in

rescuing the forgotten years of Australian history from 1945 to 1972. Historians usually take this to be the period of Menzies-inspired somnolence—it was anything but. Post-war Coalition Governments had to manage their way through the Cold War, the Korean War, Suez, West Papua, the Indonesian Konfrontasi with Malaysia, and then Vietnam.

Reading about unpleasant people is always more interesting than reading about nice people, and Edwards has some good material with which to work. Tange was a dictatorial bully who enjoyed his subordinates cowering in fear. It sounds as though he didn't even say good morning to his secretary:

He [Tange] would enter the office with the curtest of greetings to his loyal and long-suffering secretary, Sylvia Brown, and whichever young male diplomat was serving at his executive assistant, then slam the door to this office as if it had no right to be there. Often the slam would displace the same picture on the same wall by the same amount as it had the previous day, and the day before that. At his insistence he would be brought a cup of tea at precisely 10 each morning and another at precisely 10.10. Their arrival and the removal of the empty cup would pass without thanks or other time-wasting courtesies.

The fact that Tange kept on getting promoted speaks volumes about the condition of the post-war public service. Thankfully Edwards doesn't delve too far into the realms of psychology to explain such behaviour, except to note the comment of Roden Cutler which was that Tange's rudeness was a product of his shyness. Shy or not, Tange was someone who few wanted to work for, or work with. On his retirement, he was not appointed to the board of any private or public sector company.

The other side of Tange was his steel-trap mind, and this, together with total lack of fear of anyone made him indispensable to ministers. Garfield Barwick, like Tange in many ways, particularly appreciated these qualities. In contrast, Paul Hasluck and Tange had a hearty dislike of each other. Hasluck thought that Tange was the representative of a particular class of public servant—those who were ‘inbred’, self-satisfied, and who believed their own publicity. Hasluck was to write that the External Affairs department in the 1950s and 1960s:

had the attitude that foreign affairs was a mystery in their own keeping’. While other departments kept Cabinet will informed of their hopes and fears, ‘External Affairs often seemed to have the attitude to Cabinet that bright young men have to their parents: ‘It’s no use trying to explain it to you. You would not understand.’

One of the many strengths of the book is the way in which Edwards captures the mentality that Hasluck described. What emerges starkly from the pages is the sense of superiority possessed by Tange and his compatriots. The diplomatic ‘professionals’ understood the world far more clearly than did ministers and governments, and it didn’t much matter whether those ministers and governments were Coalition or Labor.

Tange did much to establish the ‘department line’ from External Affairs—a line described by Edwards as ‘a sort of middle way’ between the policies of the two sides of politics. On the one hand, there was ‘the fervent idealism of Evatt and some of his close associates, who treated the United Nations as the best means to solve virtually all international disputes’. Against this, there was ‘the dismissive condescension of Menzies and Casey, who resented the time and effort they had to give to what they regarded as an ineffective talking-shop, increasingly dominated by countries with views hostile to Australia and its friends’. As Edwards documents it,

neither of these ‘extremes’ appealed to people such as Tange because diplomats ‘are trained to pursue their national interests, but with a professional preference for conciliation rather than confrontation’.

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The problem arises when diplomats’ perceptions of what is in the ‘national interest’ conflict with those of the democratically-elected government. And such was the case with Indonesia. In the face of suspicion and hostility towards that country by both the Coalition and the ALP, External Affairs consistently pursued a policy of engagement, arguing that it was in Australia’s best interest to be on good terms with whatever government (either communist or not) controlled the Indonesian archipelago.

The readiness of diplomats to abandon principle in favour of ‘balance’ and ‘conciliation’ is demonstrated in Edwards’ revealing discussion of Tange’s time as High Commissioner to India in the late 1960s. At a meeting with Krishna Menon, the rabid anti-American, pro-Chinese Indian politician, Tange was concerned that because he was Australian, Menon would automatically assume that therefore he was pro-American. The fact that Australia *was* allied to the United States seems to have escaped Tange.

Another thing that seems to have escaped Tange was that of the two sides fighting the Cold War, one side was clearly preferable to the other. The implication of Edwards’ research is that

Tange had difficulty appreciating that the Soviet Union was not the moral equivalent of America. In 1966, Tange complained that the Coalition Government was using value-laden terms such as ‘communist aggression’ and ‘free countries’. He asked rhetorically whether it was ‘unnecessarily provocative to talk about the ‘free world’. Free from what? If Tange didn’t know what, in 1966, the ‘free’ world was free of—as it appears he didn’t—then he laboured under some very serious misconceptions.

Arguably Tange’s greatest success came in November 1976 with the publication of a Defence White Paper. As secretary of the Department of Defence, the paper carried Tange’s imprimatur. The paper was the ‘foundation document’ of national strategic policy for next 25 years, and it argued that the country’s defence forces would not be involved in any large-scale deployments beyond Australia’s shores—instead the focus was to be on the defence of the continent. This ‘isolationist’ outlook was first endorsed by Whitlam, and a few years later it was blithely accepted by Fraser. (Of course it is the very opposite of the position taken under John Howard.) Edwards notes that ‘Tange found it immensely satisfying that a conservative government had endorsed many of the principles that he had been pressing on Labor and coalition governments for years, and that had been considered controversial and dangerous when adopted by the Whitlam government’. Indeed.

Arthur Tange—Last of the mandarins is an essential companion to an understanding of Australian post-war diplomacy and politics. The conclusions one can draw from it are more than a little concerning.

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