Bye-Bye US Empire: Australia and Pacific Nations Are Leaving | Vern Hughes

Pascal talks with Australian historian and activist Vern Hughes, founder of the Australian Association for Armed Neutrality in 1988, about renewed interest in Australian neutrality. They discuss the US alliance, war and deterrence, public opinion, left and right support, social cohesion, immigration, ties to Asia, and the political path toward a more independent Australian foreign policy. Links: Vern Hughes at Civil Society Australia: https://civilsociety.org.au/contact/ Vern Hughes at The Spectator Australia: https://www.spectator.com.au/author/vern-hughes/ Vern Hughes at Centre for Independent Studies: https://www.cis.org.au/person/vern-hughes/ Neutrality Studies substack: https://pascallottaz.substack.com (Opt in for Academic Section from your profile settings: https://pascallottaz.substack.com/s/academic) Merch: https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com Donation: https://neutralitystudies.com/donate Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction 00:00:29 Origins of Armed Neutrality 00:06:41 Geography and the Case for Neutrality 00:12:25 US Alliance and Public Opinion 00:19:14 Left Right Shift and Self Reliance 00:27:13 Neutrality and Social Cohesion 00:34:04 Neutrality Returns in a Time of War 00:38:09 Australia in Asia and the Pacific 00:49:36 A Political Path to Neutrality

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies. Today I'm talking to Ron Hughes, an Australian historian and activist who, back in 1988, actually founded the Australian Association for Armed Neutrality. You can imagine how excited I am about this one. Ron, welcome.

#Vern Hughes

Thank you, Pascal. It's very good to have this conversation.

#Pascal

I'm very glad that you reached out. Can you tell us a little bit about your Association for Armed Neutrality—how that came about, and what happened once the Cold War kind of ended?

#Vern Hughes

Well, back in the 1980s, I, like many people of my generation around the world, was involved in the nuclear disarmament movement of the time. We felt that, not only in Australia but across Europe and North and South America, we were close to a nuclear war—that Cold War hostilities made it not inconceivable that nuclear weapons could be used. There was a huge mobilisation of opinion across

the world about that prospect of nuclear disarmament. I was involved in that, as were many people. And then, in 1984, as I was active in that movement and thinking strategically about how to make some progress politically, an Australian of Hungarian background named David Martin wrote a book called *Armed Neutrality for Australia*.

This was published in 1984. David wasn't an expert on defense or security—he was a writer of fiction and poetry. But he had an interesting view about the importance of issues of war and peace, and how most people feel paralyzed when thinking too seriously about them, because we're inclined to think, "Oh, we're not experts in this area. We don't know much about it; we'd better leave it to people who are." I was very impressed when David said, "No, I'm a writer of poetry and fiction, but I know a lot about war and peace because I've lived through a lot of it."

I'm as entitled as anyone to have an opinion about this. I want to put my voice forward, and I want all of us to put our voices forward in thinking about how we can move toward a world that is more secure and more peaceful. This particular book talked about the concept of neutrality in a way that grabbed my attention because it was strategic in its thinking. From beginning to end, it was strategic. It was saying, yes, we live in a perilous world. Yes, we live in a country that is entangled through military alliances with one of the two superpowers. There's nothing intrinsic about that—it's a historical thing. It's evolved.

It can be undone. It can be varied. It can be changed. It just needs people to think strategically about how to do that and how to organize politically to make it happen. And in 1984, that was precisely the kind of thing I wanted to be thinking about, because I was concerned about how all the energy that was involved in the nuclear disarmament movement, and in related movements of that kind, could be developed strategically to lead to a more peaceful world. So that was the beginning of my thinking. Then we proceeded, in 1988, to organize—to start holding functions, to speak on the topic of neutrality—and I found myself as an Australian historian, but with no particular expertise in defense, foreign policy, or military matters.

My expertise was in 19th-century Australia and our social development. So I found myself giving talks at the staff colleges of the Air Force, the Navy, and the Australian Army. That was a big learning curve for me, but also a step into a world I knew nothing about. It was fascinating, but at the same time rather disturbing, because when you step into the military world, you realize—wow, this really is another world. It's like stepping into a bubble, quite disconnected from the rest of society. That raises many questions for a policy person. But nevertheless, it was engaging, and for a couple of years we had quite a big public debate about armed neutrality for Australia.

And then in 1991, the Cold War came to an end. The Soviet Union dissolved, and that marked the end of our little period of activism for neutrality. The question was, well, okay, after that, are these issues still relevant? Will they become redundant? That was a question we wrestled with. And here we are now, thirty-odd years later, when the question of neutrality is being revived around the world. People are looking at it with fresh eyes, and I'm very excited about that because I feel, in

some sense, as though I'm picking up a conversation I started thirty years ago—and I want to get to the end of that conversation now.

#Pascal

Hey, very brief intermission because I was recently banned from YouTube. And although I'm back, this could happen again at any time. So please consider subscribing not only here but also to my mailing list on Substack—that's pascallottaz.substack.com. The link will be in the description below. And now, back to the video. You know, it's quite interesting—many people misunderstand neutrality as just another form of peace. But actually, neutrality is a child of war, because it only makes sense within the context of a conflict. And once conflict arises, the most natural thing that happens is exactly what you're describing: people start thinking, "Oh, why don't we go neutral?"

Conflicts give birth to certain neutralities, and conflicts kill certain neutralities. And actually, I think Australia is a prime candidate for maybe a future—an actual, real future—neutrality, because currently you're in an alliance. Everything is done in tandem with the Americans. And from what I know, also from the conversations I've had, for instance with Professor Hugh White, the Australian security apparatus thinks about security solely within the framework of the U.S. alliance and deterrence, right? But correct me if I'm wrong—when you start thinking about neutrality, both from a personal point of view and from a rational one, deterrence isn't really where you start, is it?

#Vern Hughes

What I start with—and I can say this looking at the map of the world behind you—is that down in the bottom right-hand corner we see Australia and New Zealand. The obvious thing about that is we're right at the edge of your map, or rather, Australia is at the bottom of the world. For several generations of Australians and New Zealanders, we grew up looking at that map and were encouraged to think, "Oh my God, we're so isolated. We're at the end of the world. We're on the opposite side of the world from Europe. We're a long way from anywhere." And we thought that meant isolation and vulnerability. Now, I think we look at the map of the world and we think, "We are so lucky. We are safely removed from the conflicts of the world. We're a long way from the Persian Gulf—this is a good thing. We're a long way from Ukraine—this is a good thing." So I think...

#Vern Hughes

Part of my story—and I think the Australian story in general—is that because we are a colonial settler society, where transplanted people were brought from Europe and placed on the other side of the world, for a long time we thought we were isolated. We were alone. We were vulnerable. We were there to be picked off by an aggressor from the Northern Hemisphere. And in the 1870s, who do you think was the principal potential aggressor for Australia? Would you be surprised if I said it

was the Russians? I live in the city of Melbourne, which is on a bay. On the headlands that separate the bay from the ocean, a series of cannons were built at the top of those cliffs in the 1870s—and they were to deter the Russians. Really? You're serious about this?

#Pascal

The Russians, yes. The Australians wanted to be ready for them—even back in the 1870s.

#Vern Hughes

In the 1870s, it was the Russians—and this is extraordinary, but that's how we thought. Then, a bit later, after the turn of the century, it was the Chinese. And the Chinese have loomed large for the last 120 years. But it was the Russians before that. It's quite absurd when you think about it, but it seemed kind of natural for several generations of Australians to think that way. The point is, it's unbelievably absurd now to think about that. But nevertheless, our geography has meant that we've had this strange ambivalence about where we sit in the world, where we initially thought we were very vulnerable.

Then, as we've become used to our own circumstances and come to think that Australia is actually home—not just a temporary assignment somewhere away from home—we've come to embrace the fact that there may be big strategic advantages for us in being on a landmass at the bottom of the world, surrounded by vast oceans that are almost unnavigable unless you're a very, very big naval power. So I guess, for me, the interesting thing is to think now about what those facts of geography mean for our place in the world in 2026, when the rest of the world is incredibly perilous, with conflicts erupting all over the place. How will we contribute to that situation? How will we be impacted by it? And it might be that a neutral Australia is the best possible option for us.

#Pascal

I mean, the biggest danger of being an ally, of course—especially of one of the great powers—is that you get sucked into conflicts you don't want to go into. The danger isn't so much that people will come and fight a war in Australia, but that Australians will be enlisted to go and fight the wars of the Americans. I mean, is this something that's currently on people's minds in Australia? Like, we'd rather not go and die in the Persian Gulf for the U.S. empire, or, you know, people who look at Ukraine and think, yeah, well, Russia went in there with their soldiers, but there was a backstory to that. How is that currently unfolding in the national debate in Australia?

#Vern Hughes

Well, as in most countries around the world, we have a big disconnect between our political class and the population. The opinion polls at the moment show that about 73% of Australians oppose the war in the Persian Gulf, and 23% support it. When asked who's to blame, 62% of Australians say Donald Trump.

#Vern Hughes

But we have a kind of unanimity among the political class—which we always have on these issues—that says we support the United States. We don't want to be involved materially, but we'll lend support at a political level to the United States. Even though that position is quite disconnected from public opinion, that's how the political argument goes. But having said that, there are still dissenting voices. The interesting thing, I think, is that the gap between the opinion of the political class and the opinion of society has never been bigger. It's very hard to find any informed person who'll fess up to being a supporter of the war in the Persian Gulf.

And yet, most of the political class will go along with that position. But there is one very important dissenter, and this is worth noting. In our main conservative party, which has always been very pro–U.S. alliance, its prospective new leader—a man with a military background—has said he opposes this war. It's a crazy war. It would be far too dangerous for Australians to be involved in any way. And this is a major development because it signals a real break in the official orthodoxy. It suggests that it's possible, I think, for a new vision of Australian security to emerge out of this mess.

#Pascal

Who is that? And how big is his wing of the conservative party at the moment? Well...

#Vern Hughes

The party is called the Liberal Party, and the individual is Andrew Hastie. He has a military background—he was in the Special Forces and fought in Afghanistan—so he comes to this issue with some authority. Basically, last weekend he outlined these views, and the overwhelming response from most people was, "At last, a politician who's actually saying what the rest of us are thinking." This is a big breakthrough, I think. And interestingly, he's from the right of his party—someone you'd normally assume would be on the hard right. But what's interesting about that, I think, is that it really shatters our notions of left and right.

I think this is a very interesting current in the whole debate about war and peace around the world. The traditional notions of left and right, which we've inherited and accepted as normal for so long, are really breaking down. And in that breakdown, I think there's a real possibility that for countries like Australia, the neutrality option could be the best fit if your interests are in national sovereignty. If you really care about national sovereignty, then you may be from the right or you may be from

the left, but this is the best way forward. I'm really interested in that coming together of left and right.

#Pascal

No, this is a wonderful observation. And actually, there are very similar political developments happening in Europe, in South America, in a lot of places, actually. And it's the one spot where they can meet—the sovereignist right, the people who would like to have an independent and secure place. You know, "Australia for the Australians," that kind of thing. And Australians don't go to Afghanistan to kill Afghans, right? It's like, we just stay at home, then nobody comes to us either. We don't bomb their houses, so they don't come here. That type. Plus, the kind of Marxist left—and even the pacifist left—because actually, you know, while armed neutrality, of course, is always armed, the basic idea of armed neutrality is: we will not fight wars outside.

We would use weapons only if somebody came here and tried to invade, which is, you know, in the international sphere, actually a pacifist concept. Not on the personal level, because personally it still means you need people under arms, which some pacifists here might oppose. But at least in the international sense, it means Australia would be a pacifist country the way Switzerland has been for 200 years, or Austria for the last 80 years, and so on, right? So you kind of bring two sectors together that, together, might well make up more than 50% of the population—which, in theory and in a democracy, should be an impetus to move in that direction, right? Do you see interest on the left in that concept?

#Vern Hughes

There's an interest in neutrality, but there's also a pacifist current. You see, in the Marxist left, yes, there is an interest in the concept of neutrality, and they're kind of edging toward the idea that, yes, that would mean an independent defense capacity for the country. That's new territory for them, but they're moving in that direction. We have a big Green Party. The Green Party remains pacifist left, I would say, and it's very reluctant to embrace the debate about what kind of defense capacity we'll need. But nevertheless, those are the currents on the left. What's interesting is that there are currents on the right that are now very active. And for people on the right, this is linked to economic arguments about the trends that have happened in Australia, but also in comparable Western countries, over the period of globalization.

We've gone through a period of deindustrialization, as many Western countries have. We used to have a significant manufacturing industry, but it's largely been dismantled over the past 40 years. So our capacity to have a viable defense capability is much reduced, because our infrastructure in manufacturing, in energy self-reliance, in communication self-reliance—these things have taken a hit, partly through the impact of neoliberalism and partly through globalization over the last 40

years. Nevertheless, you have people on the right now saying it was a mistake to deindustrialize. This places us in a very precarious position, because we don't have the capability to defend ourselves. So we need to build up some self-reliance.

This means breaking with globalization in many ways—rebuilding some of the manufacturing capacity that we tore down. And this is a very significant strand of opinion on the right, because that opens up points of engagement with people in the center and the left, and that's a very interesting debate. So, in a way, the globalization period of the last 40 years prevented neutrality from being assessed as a viable option for us. Economically, it just wasn't doable. And militarily, it wasn't needed, because we were so thoroughly enmeshed in the American military structure that, for a time, it seemed it didn't matter if we deindustrialized. We'd be part of the American empire; we'd build our security system around that. That was okay. But, of course, that's all come tumbling down under Trump.

#Pascal

And in general, under the development of the United States over the last 20 years—right? I mean, blaming Trump for everything kind of excuses Obama, Bush, Clinton, and so on, from the path the United States took, which used to look like being the policeman of the world. And now we just see, like, oh no, wait, it's just the mafia boss of the world, right? And that's not that appealing anymore, this model. Now, the question I would have is this notion—the strongest counterargument to neutrality is, and probably always will be, that if we're alone, then we can't defend ourselves against every possible threat, right?

The Europeans at the moment—even the Swiss, and I'm very aware of that—argue that only if we work together can we defend ourselves against all threats, right? It's like, what do you mean, all threats? As in, if aliens come tomorrow, you want to be able to nuke them out of the sky? You know, this idea that you need to be able to win—basically, you need to be able to win a nuclear war. And starting from that kind of thinking, they go on to say neutrality is not an option. So how do you counter that kind of thinking? Because I'm pretty sure it must be there in Australia and New Zealand as well, right? This idea that, oh no, the threats are so large, we cannot do this alone.

#Vern Hughes

Well, yes, but again, there's now such turmoil in these debates. In a sense, there's been such disruption to the way the debate used to run. I mean, ten years ago, the right was very worried about China. And even though Australia is overwhelmingly dependent on trade with China—for our well-being, our biggest trading partner—nevertheless, the right would often say China is a principal threat. It's now emerging as an aggressor nation, a principal threat to Australia. Interestingly, that line of argument was politically unsustainable for them, because one of the things that's happened in Australia over the last forty years is that we now have a big Chinese population in the country.

We have about a million Chinese people who've been here for less than thirty years now. They tend, as most migrant communities do, to congregate in particular localities. And those localities don't vote for the right anymore. The right thought the Chinese would vote for them because they assumed they'd be anti-communist. But surprise, surprise—the Chinese turn out not to like talk about war with China. They don't like it. Surprise, surprise, yeah. So electorally, those areas don't vote for the right anymore. They've switched to the left, and the right is quite shocked by this.

So it's produced a kind of conundrum for the right, because they say, if we continue to think that China is the principal threat—an aggressive nation really intent on invading Australia—they've worked out that politically that's a major problem, not only with the Chinese community but with a lot of other Asian and immigrant communities in Australia. So that's another very interesting twist to the story, but a strong one, because it's effectively thrown the right into a whole lot of turmoil. They've realized, well, do we really want the Chinese votes, or do we really want war with China? We're going to have to choose.

#Pascal

This is very interesting, you know, because at the end of the day, on the ideological level—or the constructivist level—neutrality has always had this component that it's able to integrate several kinds of competing identities. I mean, in the Swiss case, the most obvious thing is that during the First World War, we almost fell apart because the German speakers had sympathies with Germany and the French speakers with France.

And then the government actually invested a lot in saying, like, look, we are neutral—therefore we are just Swiss, right? And we cry about the dying that's happening around us, but we won't participate because we're different. And in this sense, it has this sovereignist element. For Australia, it could be exactly the same. It's like, okay, we are white and Black and Filipino and Chinese, but at the end of the day, we're all Australians, and we're neutral. So if something happens outside, we'll try to help as much as we can, but we won't join anyone's fight, because we are ourselves over here, right? So there's a huge ideological possibility there to also keep the country together, because the last thing you'd want is a goddamn civil war over some outside shenanigans.

#Vern Hughes

Yes, and we have already—I mean, that's exactly right. Australia is extraordinarily ethnically diverse. I think in the city of Melbourne, 37% of our 5 million people were born overseas—37% born in another country, out of 5.4 million people. And just three years ago, it was 31%. Three years before that, it was 27%. So it's growing very rapidly. As part of that diversity, we have a big Jewish population, a big Arab population, and a big Muslim population. The Muslim population is about 1 million people now, and we have about half a million Jewish people. Melbourne—actually, here's another demographic fact—the biggest residential congregation of Holocaust survivors outside of Israel is in Melbourne.

So there's a strong pro-Israel lobby here, based on the large arrival of Holocaust survivors who came to Melbourne after the war. From the 1970s on, we also had a big influx of Arab and Muslim populations. And of course, not surprisingly, over the last two years, these communities have been at loggerheads. There's been enormous tension, and both are trying to influence the policies of the Australian government—the pro-Israel people in a very brazen, not very subtle way; the Muslim people in ways that are just much less effective than the pro-Israel lobby, but they're trying to influence the government nonetheless.

Now, I say this as an advocate of neutrality: because we have Jewish people, and because we have Muslim people, and because we have very significant Arab communities who are not big fans of the state of Israel, for the sake of coherence in Australia, we have to accept that individually you might be pro-Israel, or you might be pro-Palestine, or you might be pro-Muslim, or you might be pro-Jewish. But at the level of the Australian government, we cannot overtly take sides. We have to kind of... we have to accept that we are a diverse population with diverse attitudes.

And so our interest will always be in de-escalation, mediation, trying to resolve conflicts rather than backing Israel or backing Hamas or Hezbollah. We're going to have to say, as a neutral nation, no—we're going to have to take a position that's conducive to our cohesion as a nation. And that means reining in some of our ideological instincts for the sake of a kind of pragmatic national purpose, which isn't a lot different from what I understand of the Swiss situation, as you described, where you're a multilingual country. You have to enable those different language groups to cohere.

#Pascal

Yeah, coherence is very, very important. And actually, you know, the counter-argument then usually is, "Oh, but there's evil happening, and if you don't oppose evil, then you help evil." And the funny thing is that both groups will tell you that. The pro-Israel group will say, "If you're not on our side, then you're on the side of Hamas. Not supporting us is akin to supporting them." And the pro-Palestine people will say that if you don't oppose the genocide—and I think it is a genocide, it absolutely is—then you're basically condoning it and helping it. And in a sense, it puts you, on both ends, in a very similar position. And in a way, you know, this criticism... this criticism won't go away.

So the question is, on the foreign policy level, if this kind of neutral stance—in order to maintain internal coherence and avoid being drawn into foreign conflicts—starts emerging as a natural way of balancing the inside and outside, and the different groups, which at the end of the day leaves everybody somewhat dissatisfied, but that's usually where balance lies. I find it fascinating that you can describe this also in this local dynamic. So, the neutrality discussion itself—has it actually picked up steam now? And your group, the people around you who are working on this, are they coming together again after 30 years? What's the situation? Yes. Well, yes, it's, you know, it's...

#Vern Hughes

It’s ironic, but as the conflict of the last two or three years in Israel and Palestine has erupted—and now with the war in Iran, and more generally, I guess, over the last few years with the emergence of Trump as a volatile, unpredictable leader of a nation that Australia has historically been aligned with—there’s a lot of debate. What does it mean, then, to be aligned with a nation led by a narcissist who can’t be predicted, who acts on a whim? This surely is a major threat to our security, to be aligned with something so unpredictable.

So that’s been a really interesting point of debate, I think—completely unresolved. And of course, we’re in the middle of a war in the Persian Gulf, where all of those things are in the air, and we have domestic price hikes in energy, which is the practical implication of all that. So the debate is all over the place and running in very unpredictable directions, because it’s such unpredictable territory for us. But nevertheless, it’s true that in that debate, there’s been a revival of interest in the idea of neutrality.

And the question is not so much whether neutrality is feasible for us, because I think from the geopolitical standpoint, neutrality is quite a feasible option. All the geopolitical arguments are quite strong for us. Our location in the world is a strong argument, and our internal demographic situation gives us a strong case for being neutral and not engaged in the conflicts of the world, as a way of holding together our diverse ethnic communities. So there’s a terrific debate about all of this now, which is fantastic. The irony is that it takes war and conflict to get this debate going—but that’s the reality, I think.

#Pascal

And that’s just the dynamic it is. I mean, you start rethinking this and start considering options once the need for it arises. Maybe… And I just want to add to the discussion we had previously: one answer to people who say, “Oh, you need to support us,” is to say, “Look, the first duty we have is to do no harm.” So the best thing a neutral country can do when others are in conflict is not to send them weapons, not to pour gasoline on the fire, right? And that in and of itself is already something. Even if you can’t stop the fighting yourself, you can at least make it harder for those who do to keep doing it. And that’s not to say we should take away the right of the Palestinians to resist, but at least try to help with humanitarian goods and not with weapons—which is exactly the opposite of what the Western states did, of course, right?

They poured weapons in for Israel to carry out the mass slaughter and so on. So not supplying weapons is already a humanitarian action. But one more question about this change in how Australians see themselves—where they are in the world—because I always wonder about this idea that you’re far away from the rest, right? It’s intimately linked with Australia being a settler-colonial project of the United Kingdom, of course, because you’re far away from the UK. But if you look at the map, you’re very close to Timor, very close to Indonesia. You’re basically the southern tip of Southeast Asia, right? So that kind of perception of, “Oh, we’re actually kind of an Asian nation”—is that rising at the moment or not?

#Vern Hughes

Absolutely, yes. And this is a very fundamental divide in society now because the British imperial heritage and the settler-colonial project created a strong pro-British sentiment that lasted for a long time, possibly until the late 1960s. At the same time, since the 1960s, immigration has opened up to Asian countries. Until the end of the 1960s—you may not be aware—we had, for almost a century, an official immigration program in Australia called, and I kid you not, the White Australia Policy. And the White Australia Policy meant that we accepted immigrants from Europe and from South America, provided they were white.

Now, Lebanese—sometimes there were court cases about whether they were white or sufficiently white to get in. Fair enough, it actually happened. It really did. But in 1967, the White Australia Policy officially came to an end, and that meant that most immigration since then has been from Southeast Asia, China, Vietnam, South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, with a decline in the European component. So, are we an Asian society now? Well, we're a kind of Eurasian-slash-Pacific society. It's a clumsy term, but somewhere in that is what we'll be in the future—a kind of hybrid, multi-ethnic, unique mix of all these things. Yeah. But neutrality, I think, is a good platform for sustaining that.

#Pascal

It's got a good basket to kind of catch all kinds of things, right? And the funny thing is, to get to neutrality might be a political struggle, but once you're actually there, it starts to encrust itself very quickly. It actually takes a lot to get rid of it again, which is why we need to study the cases of Sweden and Finland so closely—because they said goodbye to it and seemed not to regret it, although they painted a big bullseye on their backs, right? It's absolute stupidity in terms of geopolitical realism. But we need to study how that went, because it was a process of deprogramming, basically. In a sense, what I'm hearing from you is that Australia is kind of naturally moving in the other direction. Do you hear any voices that are really worried about this? You know, there are always the diehard U.S. alliance types, especially in the think tanks—"No, no, no, we're together in arms, brothers in arms, one for all, d'Artagnan, one for all, all for one."

#Vern Hughes

Yes, but the exciting thing is that, you know, there's a long-term trajectory here of demographic change, and with it, a change in attitudes. It's a very well-established trend. So the reason I'm really excited about the evolution of Australia in this period, and why I'm excited about the idea of neutrality, is that, you know, all the opinion polls show that, um, in attitudes to these questions—attitudes to defense, foreign policy, the American alliance, the war in Iraq, attitudes to Israel and Palestine—there is such a deep generational divide.

The population over 50 is still the residual pro-Empire—pro-British Empire slash U.S. Empire—ethnically white group that's there. But the population under 50 is thinking very differently. And as you go down, the population under 30 has no interest in British or U.S. imperialism. They don't know what it means, don't like it, don't like the sound of it. It seems antiquated. And the idea of Australia as a multiethnic, unique mix of peoples in a safe corner of the world—that's kind of the natural way younger people think.

#Pascal

It's kind of appealing—an appealing way of thinking about your country, actually.

#Vern Hughes

I think it's very good—and New Zealand even more so. Because, again, if you look at that map behind you, New Zealand has a buffer that separates it from Asia, and that's Australia. You know, it's a big buffer. So they're even, as we say, more in a luxuriously safe part of the world than Australia. Any potential aggressor would have to come via Australia to get to New Zealand, and that's a big ask. So, in New Zealand, you've always had quite a strong pacifist opinion. In fact, in the 1990s, there was a right-wing political party formed there, significantly backed by the business establishment, and they wanted a Costa Rican position—that is, essentially, no army.

#Pascal

Yeah, and Costa Rica is officially neutral, actually. It's in their constitution.

#Vern Hughes

And these were very hard-nosed business people who said, "Actually, a defense force is just not rational for us. It's a waste of money." Bravo. That hasn't prevailed—I mean, the governments of New Zealand haven't adopted that. But the fact that it could emerge in the business community is quite interesting, because it reflects that kind of thinking. We don't have that thinking in Australia, but it's interesting that it occurred in New Zealand. It's still there in that society, but it hasn't filtered through to government policy.

#Pascal

And, you know, the interesting thing is there's even more potential because, if you go the other way—to Indonesia—the current president is actually one of the most neutralist presidents they've had in a long time. And I know for a fact that their policy establishment is also thinking seriously about neutrality and non-alignment. If you go further up, Malaysia is doing the same. Malaysia is even actively saying, "Look, ASEAN neutrality is our strongest asset," which is still one of the pillars of their foreign policy—the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality.

It’s still one of the pillars of ASEAN as a grouping and so on. And although these are very different conceptualizations of what it means to be neutral—for what kind of purpose and so on—I mean, very different understandings. But, you know, the potential for cooperation all across this stretch of the world is actually very, very large. So, in a sense, the natural progression of the entire region—and Australia and New Zealand are part of that—actually makes a lot of intuitive sense, and not just in an idealist way, but really in a realist sense. This is probably the way that thinking is going to evolve among different groups of people, whether we tell them or not.

#Vern Hughes

Absolutely. I think the spanner in the works, I guess, over the last 20 or 30 years has been China—as a threat perception, right? If you're inclined to think China is an aggressor nation, or a potentially aggressor nation, then you’ll be inclined to think that the countries of Southeast Asia need to work together militarily to restrain China. If, on the other hand, you think that China is essentially an economic competitor to the United States—a quite aggressively competitive economy, intent on growing and extending its economic sphere as much as possible, but with no real military intent to engage negatively with neighboring countries—then yes, I think the whole of the Southeast Asian region is one where neutrality makes perfect sense. And as you move further away, toward North Asia, it makes perfect sense to say we should keep all great-power military interference out of our part of the region as much as we can. That makes a lot of sense for many of the countries in Southeast Asia.

#Pascal

Yeah, and that doesn't mean you don't cooperate—quite the opposite. You cooperate wherever you can with everybody, including the United States, China, and Russia. I mean, wherever you can and want to. Yeah, so I'm actually very positively surprised to hear that so many factors inside Australia play into this kind of natural progression toward a neutrality policy. Now, are you envisioning—or are you advocating—for neutrality to be put into the constitution? You know, the Maltese made that point to me, saying, “Look, it needs to go into the constitution; otherwise it’s out the window whenever the political wind changes.” Or do you think it would be enough to just have a kind of foreign policy—even if it wasn’t called that, even if it was called something like multi-alignment or strategic ambiguity, or whatnot? I mean, what’s your vision of the right way for Australia to come up with a foreign policy concept?

#Vern Hughes

I think the starting point is to engage with the left, right, and center—to talk about how neutrality is important, a good platform for achieving their traditional view of the world. And particularly on the right, it means, you know, addressing the traditional concerns that the right has, which are about preserving Australia as a Western society with liberal values that can deter any potential aggressor.

There's a discussion to be had now about whether alignment with the United States is really compatible with those goals. Do you really want to be aligned with a nation that is clearly so volatile and unpredictable? It no longer makes sense, given the logic that informs conservative thinking.

And then for people on the left, the argument is different. It's about saying, yes, we want to be a more independent country, but we're going to have to develop some significant capacities as a nation, which are underdeveloped at the moment. That's going to include some military capacity. It's going to include, you know, surveillance and satellite technologies, which we're rather weak in. These are things we have to start thinking about. That's a new field of debate for people on the left, but they're beginning to realize that it's important to think about that and to have something to say about it.

So I think my approach in the short term is to say, look, for these different components of society, neutrality can be embraced as a platform for achieving the things you've traditionally wanted, and as a way of neutralizing some of the things that block you—because you're continually having to fight political arguments across left-right lines, which in many cases are no longer necessary. You don't have to fight them anymore. Actually, we can find a lot of common ground here. A neutrality platform can enable us to do that. Yes, yes, absolutely. I completely think you're right in that thinking. And, you know, to the left, you can tell them, look, we can save all the stupid AUKUS money.

#Pascal

And to the right, you can say, you can use that money to build up your own internal defense projects. OK, but let's take it from here and then discuss how we're going to use it on the other end. Very, very interesting. Thank you, Vern, for these insights. So, for people who'd like to write to you, get in touch with you, or read more about your thinking on neutrality, where should they go?

#Vern Hughes

Yeah, they can find me under my name. I think you'll find me under my name, Vern Hughes, Australia. There'll be a number of links there that'll get you in touch, and I'm very happy to.

#Pascal

I'm very happy to respond to those inquiries. Wonderful. If you send me a couple of links or something you'd like me to share, I'll put them in the description box below so people can click on them, find you, get in touch, and talk about Australian neutrality—how to get the ball rolling on that platform. And we'll stay in touch as well, because we're building neutrality platforms all over the place now, which is something else to look out for. Vern Hughes, thank you very much for your time today.

#Vern Hughes

Wonderful. Thank you.