

**EVATT REVISITED:
INTERPRETATION OF SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE**

**PROCEEDINGS OF A CONFERENCE WHICH RE-EXAMINED THE FINDINGS OF THE
ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE USE AND EFFECTS OF CHEMICAL AGENTS ON
AUSTRALIAN PERSONNEL IN VIETNAM.**

An ANU Public Affairs Conference, organized by the Centre for Continuing
Education, Australian National University, Canberra. April, 1989.

These proceedings are published by the Centre for Human Aspects of
Science and Technology (CHAST, University of Sydney) and assisted
financially (in part) by the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia.

ISBN 0 949269 79 4

**CHAST, Room 723, Carlaw Building, University of Sydney,
Sydney, Australia, 1989**

Printed on re-cycled paper

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The planning/organizing committee comprised the above editors as well as Mr. T. McCoomb, National President of the Australian Vietnam Veterans Association and Ms Liz Lowrie of the Centre for Continuing Education, ANU who also was the conference administrator and co-ordinator. The conference organizers acknowledge the financial assistance of the Printing Industry and Kindred Union (NSW Branch) and the Municipal Employees Union (Federal Council).

PESTICIDES, THE VIETNAM WAR AND THE EVATT ROYAL COMMISSION

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The existence and findings of the Evatt Royal Commission reflected the convergence of several wider dynamics, each of which illustrates the inseparability of science and politics.

The issue of pesticides has commonly been perceived as basically a scientific one concerning agricultural and public health benefits versus health risks. But an understanding of the dynamics of the pesticide issue requires an examination of the power of various interest groups, notably chemical companies, government agencies and the environmental movement. The corporate, government and scientific promoters of pesticides originally established the pesticide paradigm, in which pesticides were seen as the only suitable response to pests. The later rise of the environmental movement aroused concerns about health and ecological impacts. The movement's activities were basically reactive, opposing the alleged excesses of the pesticide supporters. Fundamental questions concerning the organisation of agriculture and corporate promotion of chemicals overseen by government regulation were not confronted.

Even within the narrow confines of the issue as defined by the corporate-environmentalist confrontation, science was more a tool of struggle than an adjudicator of evidence. Each side selected assumptions, interpretations and evidence to promote its own case. In addition, more direct use of power has been used, mainly by the pesticide lobby, to deter or discredit critics through withdrawing funds, smearing reputations and sacking people.

The war in Vietnam since 1946 initially proceeded largely independently of the pesticide issue. As US military involvement increased in the 1960s, popular opposition began to develop in the US. The opponents had many possible avenues for dissent, including counterproductiveness of intervention, waste of money, loss of lives (US and Vietnamese), inappropriateness of supporting the repressive South Vietnamese government, and abuse of US government power. As the war progressed, the massive use of herbicides became one focus of opposition, drawing on a worldwide tradition of revulsion against chemical warfare, the developing environmental consciousness and anti-war sentiment generally. The combined forces of critical scientists, the antiwar movement and the media eventually mobilised sufficient clout to end herbicide spraying.

In the aftermath of the war, US and Australian veterans were given little support from either their governments or the opponents of the war. It is possible to enumerate many grievances which might have mobilised the veterans: inadequate benefits, bad military leadership, and criminal action by governmental leaders. For reasons which remain to be fully elucidated, groups of veterans were most effective in mobilising against Agent Orange and the chemical companies which manufactured it. Arguably, the M-16 rifle (for example) would have made more suitable a target, given evidence about its inappropriate design leading to many deaths. In any case, by focussing on Agent Orange, many of the bigger issues of the responsibility for the war were overshadowed.

The Evatt Royal Commission both reflected and reinforced the narrow agendas derived from

the pesticide and Vietnam War controversies. Rather than dealing with all impacts of pesticides and their alternatives, the Commission's terms of reference only included military use in Vietnam. Rather than dealing with overall responsibility for the war, the Commission only dealt with health consequences for veterans.

On the one hand, the Commission's orientation reflected the aggressive stance of the pesticide supporters: critics of herbicides were grilled and attacked, and portions of submissions by herbicide manufacturer Monsanto incorporated directly into the report. On the other hand, the Commission took a generous attitude towards the veterans' health problems, recommending full compensation virtually regardless of their origin.

The very existence of the Commission can be analysed as either testimony of the persistence of the veterans or as evidence of concerns about pesticides and about the Vietnam war being channelled into a narrow dead end. Although the Commission could have defused both issues, it succeeded in neither. Its extreme pro-pesticide position and parroting of chemical company views discredited its scientific stance, while its generous recommendations for veterans were able to be ignored by the government due to the fuss over the Agent Orange findings.