**Summary of December 2013 Address**

Our speaker was Graeme Gill, Professor of Government and Public Administration, Sydney University – “Vladimir Putin and Russian Politics.” Graeme is considered a world authority on Russia and Putin.

Graeme joined the Department of Government and International Relations at Sydney University in 1981 and was appointed to the Chair of the department in 1990. He has been a member of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia since 1994 and has also held a variety of positions at Sydney University. He has held visiting positions at Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Washington, Moscow, St Petersburg and Florence Universities.

Graeme is President of the International Council for Central and east European Studies and also currently sits on a number of editorial boards. His main interests lie in Russian and Soviet politics, but he has also published books on various aspects of democratization and on the origins and development of the State.

Having just returned from Russia Graeme had wondered how he would open his address to us and on reflection seized upon a change he had observed whilst there. In 1913, to celebrate the 300th anniversary of rule by the Romanov dynasty a memorial was built in Moscow. In 1917 with the Bolshevik revolution everything changed, the Romanov names were removed from the memorial and replaced with the names of Lenin and an eclectic group of other revolutionaries. In November 2013 the communist era changes were removed and the Romanov Czars names reinstated. The result of this full circle event was the effective expunging of the revolution and to Graeme is reflective of the Russian public life today, i.e. Russians should not live separately from their history.

Russia today is a question of: what are we and where are we going? How should the 70 years of Communism be characterised. Today Russia is made up of roughly three demographic groups. Firstly, those who are under 30 years of age and have no experience of the communist era. Secondly, those who are 30-40 have some experience of the era but also witnessed the dissolution of the Soviet Union and are not completely negative about the changes that have occurred. The remaining older group who experienced the era want to return to it. They find nothing good in Putin’s rule and their belief is, he is all bad. These were the people who were building the Soviet experience and therefore find it difficult to reject the period. Whilst the era was one of hardship, difficulties and increased killing, over it’s 70 year period it was also an era of im proven ent industrialisation, technology and education, although education levels are now falling.

What is the political system that is emerging since the fall in December 1991? Yeltsin had been elected President of Russia in June 1991. When the Soviet Union was collapsing in October 1991, Yeltsin as leader of the largest republic, announced that Russia would move to a democratic market based, capitalist economy. He wanted Russia to be projected and received as a “normal society”. Towards the West. Yeltsin believed that if Russia were able to produce wealth its society would be more stable. However, Yeltsin became discredited as a result of his economic reform with Russia suffering a severe depression from 1992-97; one far deeper than the 1930’s depression in the West. Poverty levels became high and people’s savings were lost through hyperinflation. In the 1900’s beggars or gypsies developed as a socio group and whilst they were still there in 1991, as a result of the long depression, older Russians and then younger ones merged into this group and it became a way of life in Russia. The reforms were seen to be a mechanism to pass assets to “associates” and the Oligarchs developed as a group influential in Russian politics. By 1993 Yeltsin was confronted with opposition to his presidential power of decree and threatened with impeachment. Yeltsin dissolved parliament in September 1993 in contravention of the constitution, and ordered a referendum on a new constitution. The parliament declared Yeltsin deposed. Tensions increased and in early October Yeltsin called in the Special Forces and elite army units to resolve the situation with some blood spilt. The result was a new constitution with a strong presidential system.

By the end of the 1990’s there was change to the authoritative rule and the Russian economy developed. Goods became cheaper, resource prices (particularly oil) improved and the economy entered a boom period from 1998-2008. In this period the economy grew at between 7.8% p.a. and living standards increased. By this time Yeltsin had become erratic with his physical health and mental stability increasingly precarious. Following a period of political fallout Yeltsin named Vladimir Putin as Prime Minister in August 1999. Putin’s action in sending the Russian army into Chechnya in September 1999 saw his popularity grow and in December 1999 Yeltsin resigned and appointed Putin as acting President. Putin was elected President in March 2000. Graeme referred to the Putin period as 1999-2008 and 2012-present. One of the major impacts from Putin’s time has been the tightening up of the legal system. Eighty-three provinces make up Russia. Many of them have gone their own way with their own constitution, political and economic system. The President’s power was initially limited in the political and economic management of these provinces. Putin took action to re-negotiate with the provinces and brought them back under central control. The President was popularly elected, as was the lower house but there were some appointments still made by the President. Power was concentrated in the President which enabled the bypass of parliament if necessary, thus essentially increasing the President’s personal power. Graeme acknowledged that Putin has suffered some personal damage over his time, but opinion polls, still commanded popular vote in the low 60%. Putin was not a “Yeltsin” whom the people saw as disillusioned, an embarrassment (asleep in meetings, “under the weather”, confused in society and generally a “billion”. Putin is seen as the opposite - he is physically fit, does not drink and emanates power. Whilst the initial Chechnya action was positive for Putin the August 2000 sinking of a Russian submarine was not good for him. There was lack of initial response and Putin refused assistance offered from the United Kingdom and Norway. Putin had been on holidays and did not return. When he attended a relatives meeting and was trying to talk to them, a woman, who was taken away by two men, heckled him. It was a PR nightmare but essentially the police remained the same as to his popularity.

Graeme completed his presentation by addressing the current political situation in Russia. At present Putin is in control, with those he deals with trying to understand what he wants and what he will accept. Whilst there is still some opposition the political parties are weak isolated and fractured. It is very difficult to criticise, where the media is owned or supports the government, although the social media does have some effect. The electoral system does not encourage political competition and other parties face harassment with no facilities for the holding of meetings. Fraud involving still exists. For civil societies resources are “puny” and if they have political purpose money needs to come from overseas and foreign agent registration is required which reduces their establishment and growth. For Graeme it is reflective of the 1930’s purges. In general the system is clunky and not working well, but it is not until 2018 that Putin faces the next election and until then and whilst he remains there will be no change.

Questions from members included – What happened to Gorbachev, Putin’s use of nationalism, the Ukraine in the European Union, the Russian mafia and would the Russian revolution have been another reason for World War 1?
Ray Hyslop thanked Graeme for his stimulating talk, full of political undercurrent and back stabbing and Russian attitude to various countries. Ray acknowledged Graeme's in-depth local knowledge and what really happens in Russia, which in summing up makes us thankful for our political and economic structure.