

AUSTRALIA'S FOREIGN RELATIONS IN THE WORLD OF THE 1990S

Speech to the National Press Club by Senator Gareth Evans, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, following launch of Evans and Grant, Australia's Foreign Relations: in the World of the 1990s, Canberra, 4 November 1991

It is not so many years ago that the expression "Australian foreign policy" was almost a contradiction in terms. The Second World War and its aftermath did see something of a coming of age, with Evatt's role in the foundation of the United Nations and the quickening of interest in South-East Asia. But overall, it is hard to argue that anything much more was involved than a turning from one great protector to another.

One of Bruce Grant's and my arguments, in our book published today, is that the final evolution of a genuinely independent Australian foreign policy is a very recent phenomenon indeed. We link it, in fact, with the publication of the 1987 Defence White Paper which, in spelling out for the first time a coherent and achievable policy of defence self-reliance, liberated Australian foreign policy from the constraints under which it had traditionally laboured.

I cannot imagine that anyone is in doubt these days about the importance of our having an independent Australian foreign policy - one which is overwhelmingly shaped and governed by what is directly in our own national interest, and not by what may be necessary from time to time to get a foot inside a protector's door. The extraordinary events of the last two years have made it more important than ever that we refine and develop an effective Australian foreign policy, with a clearly developed sense of who we are, what we are capable of doing and what we should be doing.

The end of the Cold War, the collapse of communism everywhere but in East Asia, the Gulf crisis and the resurgence with it of a United Nations collective security role, the new attention being devoted in international affairs to human rights and the environment, the huge stakes that have now come to be involved in international trade politics - all these developments since 1989 have made it that much more apparent that the world is being dramatically reshaped around us, and that nations which are not quick on their feet in finding a place in the new order

are going to find themselves faltering alarmingly, both politically and economically. It is a matter of not only grasping new opportunities for the advancement of national interests, but not being left behind in the rush. We simply cannot afford to look upon foreign relations issues like moo cows gazing at the passing traffic.

Let me be a little more specific about some of the issues where which we need to be intimately concerned.

In global security terms, some giant strides have obviously been taken towards peace and disarmament. But much remains to be done. Even when all the commitments and proposals that President Bush and Gorbachev have now respectively floated have been implemented, there will still be some 30,000 nuclear warheads left in the globe - and this in an environment where no-one can be certain the Soviet Union will be immune from conservative backlash; where there is a major danger of proliferation still in at least three highly volatile areas of the globe (the Middle East, South Asia and North-East Asia); and where there is still a long way to go before we rid the world of chemical and biological weapons and the will to use them. It is difficult to argue that we have reached even the beginning of the end of the nuclear era, or the era of weapons of mass destruction.

The security future of our own Asia Pacific region is, again, as fluid, dynamic and uncertain as it has ever been. To the extent that there has been, or is likely to be, with the relaxation of the Cold War gridlock a diminution in the influence of the two nuclear superpowers, this is likely to be accompanied by a relative increase in the influence of the region's other major powers (China, Japan and India) and a significant enhancement of the military capability of a number of lesser powers to match their rapidly rising economic status. There is no shortage, moreover, of potential flashpoints - not least the Korean Peninsula or the South China Sea - that could generate real conflicts out of what at the moment may seem fairly remote contingencies.

Economically, the prospects of the world and our region are very finely balanced. Unless the Uruguay Round succeeds - and that is very far from being guaranteed at the moment - there is a very real and immediate danger of countries moving to solve their trade problems through unilateral measures, discriminatory bilateral deals and inward-looking regional arrangements.

There is a particular danger that battle lines will be rapidly drawn around three large, distinct trading blocs, built upon the Yen, Dollar and Deutschmark respectively, with offensive and defensive strategies being mounted that will make some of the battles of recent years between Japan and the United States over manufactures, or the United States and EC over agricultural subsidies, pale by comparison. Some of the biggest companies in the largest countries in the world are presently positioning themselves in all three "blocs" to minimise the impact on their profitability of such a development if it occurs, but the developing countries and smaller trading nations like Australia who want to sell into all the markets of the world to stay afloat need to be acutely conscious of just how sensitive the present situation is.

In addition to the traditional preoccupations of politico- strategic and trade diplomacy, a whole new set of issues has come to occupy the international agenda, bringing with them both new pressures for countries like ours to play an enhanced role, and new opportunities to do so - issues like the international environment, refugee flows, narcotics trafficking, and human rights observance. Interdependence, cooperative action and collective action have become the new catch cries, and those countries less than actively involved in the new "third agenda" diplomacy are not only not helping their immediate neighbours, but not helping themselves.

All this means that Australia's foreign policy should be the subject of rather more intelligent debate and informed discussion than tends to be the case at the moment, and it is in order to generate, or at least to contribute to, such a debate and discussion that the book launched today was written. The tradition hitherto in Australia (although there are of course plenty of honourable individual exceptions) is that detailed attention is really only paid to foreign affairs issues when they get caught up in domestic partisan politics, or have some strong personality component, or have a full-scale blood and thunder dimension.

The Cambodian issue is a good case in point. While there has been probably more Australian interest in this than just about any other Asian regional issue, and a great many stories in particular about the dangers of a Khmer Rouge resurgence, detailed diplomatic reporting and analysis of the political settlement process has been sketchy, and not a single Australian newspaper ran a front page story on the final signing of the settlement agreement in Paris two weeks ago. By contrast, every quality European and North American paper I saw the next day - and I checked eight of them - gave the story prominent front page space. Because

it didn't involve a personality clash or, for a pleasant change, an attack by the Opposition, or what could be described - or caricatured as the case may be - as a row or a kowtow, and involved a positive step forward rather than another descent into the abyss of violence, it did not justify more than a minor inside page run in any Australian paper, notwithstanding the central role that this country had played in bringing the settlement about.

The story did get a much more substantial run a day or two later with some drama about the possibility of Australian peace-keeping soldiers being injured, and then with the material generated by Stephen Solarz's announcement about the Nobel nomination and Hun Sen's visit - about none of which latter coverage I'm complaining! - but the nature of these stories just reinforces my point.

Another example of what I have in mind is the coverage of the question of regional security dialogue, which - notwithstanding some systematic and serious efforts by Australia in a variety of forums to shape a new approach to this issue - only became the subject of sustained attention in the media with the story, based on a leaked exchange of correspondence, about an alleged row I had with James Baker on the subject. This was far more fun to play with than any real analysis of what Australia was proposing, or what its pros and cons might be.

I have to say that a secondary theme in this coverage, and it has been all too common elsewhere, was the tendency to undersell - indeed greet with destructive scepticism - the contribution we were trying to make internationally. (Our approach to this issue of regional security, incidentally, has come over the last year to be so widely accepted that it is now only no longer at all controversial, but has become almost boringly commonplace!). It is difficult enough putting ideas and principles into the international market-place without having to fight a latter-day 'cultural cringe' at home: that sense almost of incredulity that anything Australia has done could really make a difference.

The truth of the matter of course is that foreign policy has not been, since the end of the Vietnam War nearly two decades ago, the stuff of which election victories have been made or broken, or even on which leadership reputations have strongly depended. Some anti-communist fixations apart, Malcolm Fraser's foreign policy had more in common with Gough Whitlam's than either would comfortably admit (at least before Kerry Packer met Conrad Black!), and so far as the present Opposition is concerned, I have had the impression that, with only a handful of exceptions, the flurry of outraged press releases periodically released on foreign

policy issues have been written with as little conviction and enthusiasm as they have been received.

In talking about encouraging debate on Australian foreign policy, I am not referring to more of the same breathless gossip that so often passes for political debate on domestic issues. I am talking rather about more serious, considered analyses of issues like regional security; the significance of APEC and competing ideas about regional economic relations; political and economic developments in the extraordinarily rapidly developing countries of our immediate region; the arms control and disarmament agenda; and ways of advancing human rights issues in an Asia Pacific context.

More generally, I would like to see a much better informed understanding of the complexity of foreign relations issues, the multiple constraints that exist in the real world of multilateral forums and bilateral relationships, the way in which we need to not only pursue what is in Australia's national interest but to recognise what is within our capacity to influence and what is not, and the priorities it is sensible for a country like ours to set in mobilising those scarce resources we have at our disposal.

Analyses like these might not make for headlines or big by-line exposure, but they would be performing a real service for Australian decision-makers and publics who have too often in recent years simply failed to fully appreciate what is going on around us, how it impacts upon us and what we might be able to do in response.

The book that Bruce Grant and I have written is designed to open up all these issues in a systematic way - not from a party political perspective but from an Australian perspective. We cannot pretend to have had the last word on any of the issues in question - not least because events continue to move so quickly - but we hope that we may have done something to put public discussion of them on a more serious and substantial base than has been common in the past.

There are two big themes in what we have written that go beyond all the detail. One is that being of secondary size does not mean being second-rate in international affairs, and that we can as a middle power effectively deploy our resources not only in a way that advances our own interests, but does help at the same time to make the world a better and safer place.

The other theme is that Australia's future is essentially as an Asia Pacific nation (with the emphasis no less on Asia than on the Pacific); this is where we live, must survive strategically and economically, and find a place and role if we are to develop our full potential as a nation; and this is where we can become effectively integrated without losing the essential characteristics of our own national identity.

Henry Kissinger apparently said at a gathering in Sydney recently that "When I am shaving in the morning I am not thinking about Australian foreign policy". Of course it is the case that a geographically remote country of 17 million people in a world of five and a half billion should not get ideas above its station: that line appears as the second sentence of our book! But a middle power like Australian can nonetheless do a great deal - using techniques of coalition building and niche diplomacy, paying careful attention to priorities and credibility maintenance, exercising intellectual creativity at the right times, and through sheer persistence and stamina.

We have shown as much in recent years by, for example, our successful initiatives with Cambodia, APEC and Antarctica, and the roles we have played in the GATT Round through our establishment of the Cairns Group and on apartheid through our membership of the Commonwealth Committee of Foreign Ministers on Southern Africa. (Not a bad return from the taxpayer's dollar, incidentally, for a Department whose current annual budget is less than the cost of the recent avionics update for the F-111.)

All of these activities, and in particular our efforts with Cambodia and APEC, led one senior South-East Asian diplomat to refer recently to a "fresh breeze blowing from the South". Again, French Foreign Minister Dumas referred in Paris two weeks ago to Australia, with our Cambodia initiative, having brought to bear, when hope was weakening, "a veritable second wind" to the settlement process. I am not sure that I am entirely comfortable with these various "wind" metaphors, but their use does I think demonstrate that Australian diplomacy is now being taken very seriously around the world.

There have been times in our history - and the diplomatic historian W J Hudson refers to Billy Hughes in Versailles and Dr Evatt in San Francisco in these terms - when "posture was policy", and not inappropriately so in the sense that "if Australia was to stay in from the margin of international society, its natural place at that time, it had to make a noise" (W J Hudson, Evatt at San Francisco, Paper

delivered at ANU, 4 April 1991). Nowadays I think it fair to say that we can afford to rely less on sheer noise, and more simply on our record of effective performance, in making our continuing contribution to world affairs.

Australia's need to more closely and comprehensively engage with Asia is not only perhaps the most important, but also the trickiest, of all our foreign relations tasks. The changing nature of our relationship with Asia is the most commonly recurring theme in our book: there has been no greater turn-around in contemporary Australian history than the appreciation that this region from which we so long sought to protect ourselves, whether by esoteric dictation tests to exclude migrants, or high tariffs to protect our manufacturers, or security alliances with the distant great and powerful - is now the region which offers us the most.

All this has involved a significant learning experience - on both sides - and that is continuing. One of the things that I think has been hardest for many Australians to learn - and I do not exclude myself from this description - is that if we are going to really succeed in comprehensively engaging Australia with our Asian region, this is going to require some moderation of our own instinctive behaviour, which is characteristically direct, blunt and straight down to tin-tacks.

What is involved here is simply recognising the very different cultural milieu that does by-and-large operate within Asia - there are of course significant variations between the different Asian cultures. The essential characteristic of that milieu is that how something is done is as important, if not more so, than what is done. I have described this on various occasions as simply learning normal neighbourhood habits of civility.

The important thing is to be able to conduct relationships this way, fully alert to local sensitivities, while at the same time not conceding anything so far as our own sensitivities are concerned. Australia's national values give central weight and importance to democratic principles and to fundamental human rights - not just economic, social and cultural rights of an essentially collective character, but individual civil and political rights as well. There is absolutely no reason why in our regional dialogues we should concede any ground in the advancement of those principles, but every reason why we should do so in a way that is not likely to be counter-productive.

All of this subtlety, I have to say from hard experience, tends to be a high risk

activity so far as the Australian media is concerned. Carefully crafted nuances get lost in transmission and drowned in a thunder of commentary: a dissociation becomes an apology, an explanation a grovel. The Embassy case in Malaysia is fresh enough in everyone's memory, not least mine, to serve as an example. Let me make my point by recalling a conversation I had with two journalists who shall remain nameless, shortly after the first "grovel-rash" story appeared. I began by saying that most of the adverse commentary in Australia seemed to have been premised on a misleading report of my speech in Kuala Lumpur: I had said there that a particular series of incidents had been "seen as offensive, and on occasions downright insulting", but this had been reported almost everywhere as me saying that those incidents "were" offensive and insulting: in the process an objective description of a reaction had become a value-laden judgment.

My two friends from the media were quite unfazed by this observation. Journalist A said, "Sorry - I can't really see the difference". Journalist B said, "Well - I accept that there was a difference in what you said. But mate", he went on, "you know as well as I do that these little words tend to drop out of reports, and if they don't the subs are just as likely to take them out anyway. The colour words are 'offensive' and 'insulting', and if you don't want them to be reported, you shouldn't use them".

So much, I guess, for subtlety and nuance in our relationships with Asia. I and my colleagues will go on trying, but we really do need your help.

We need the help of those of you in the Press Gallery in reporting accurately, for better or worse, what we in Government are doing and saying as we go about - hopefully sensibly - trying to build effective partnerships with governments and business, not only in Asia but all around the globe. We need your help in informing yourselves more systematically and comprehensively about what is happening in our region, and the different currents that are shaping it. We need your help in being careful to at least not inadvertently generate havoc in relations with our more sensitive neighbours: if you want to do that deliberately, then of course that is your choice in a free society, and governments will just have to cope with the consequences as best we can.

But above all we - not just the Government but the whole Australian nation - needs your help in simply raising the quality of debate on foreign policy issues: by giving higher priority to news items that are not just the foreign relations equivalent of local crash-and-bash stories, to trying to look at issues rather than

just the personalities and personal clashes that may or may not be associated with them, and to trying generally to develop a more systematic understanding in our community of the extraordinary changes that are occurring in our region and how we might as a nation benefit from them.

You, the journalists, do have a particular responsibility in setting the national public affairs agenda. If you believe that issues stories are as important as personality stories, then it's up to you as journalists to fight for the space in your bulletins and papers - and to make those stories attractive and readable to readers, listeners and editors.

The conduct of Australia's foreign relations is perhaps more than any other area of Government activity an on-going, non-static process. I hope that I have done my bit - by using all the opportunities for understanding my current office has given me - to get some information and ideas about our foreign relations into the public domain. But if those ideas are to be refined and developed, and to keep pace with events as they unfold throughout the rest of the 1990s and beyond, the process is going to need a lot more contributors - from the media, from the universities, and from throughout the community - than has been the case so far.

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