

## THE AGE OF ANGKOR:

### TREASURES FROM THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF CAMBODIA

Edited transcript of speech by Senator Gareth Evans, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, at the Media Launch of the Exhibition of Treasures from the National Museum of Cambodia, Canberra, 29 July 1992

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One of the questions I am most often asked by people is simply that: why is Australia, why are you personally, so involved in this Cambodia issue? Of all the foreign policy issues that exist around the world and around the region, why is it that there has been such a strong Australian identification with, such a strong commitment to, this particular one?

Let me try and tell you. I think there are four reasons. First of all, from a hard international realpolitik point of view, the Cambodian problem throughout the 1980s was one crying out for resolution on regional strategic and security grounds. It was the most important, complex and intractable of all the security problems of the time. It involved not only the four factions warring among themselves on the ground, but their international sponsors and patrons: in the case of the Khmer Rouge, China; in the case of Hun Sen, Vietnam with the Soviet Union standing behind; in the case of the other two factions, the West. And it involved acute continuing regional tensions: between China and Vietnam, between Vietnam and ASEAN, between really all the countries in the region who, in one way or another, had a stake in the outcome of that particular internal conflict. It was a sore that could have erupted at any time, creating a really major regional threat to security of a kind from which it would have been difficult for Australia to remain disengaged.

The second reason was obviously that this was a humanitarian crisis crying out for relief and resolution. The number of people who have suffered in Cambodia, and the period of time for which they suffered, has really been unprecedented in modern times. Throughout the whole period since the secret bombing of Cambodia in 1969 precipitated the country into the Vietnam War; since the overthrow of Sihanouk in 1970 produced the civil war that continued with a great deal of bloodshed until 1975; since the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1978 perpetrated a reign of genocidal brutality unrivalled since Hitler died in which at least a million, maybe twice as many people as that, died in horrifying circumstances; since Vietnam invaded the country in 1978, plunging the country back into a renewal of a civil war, reminiscent of that of the early 1970s; the Cambodian people have suffered more than any people on this planet ever deserved to suffer. And our hearts went out to them, as hearts did everywhere.

The third reason for Australia acting was that this was a problem about which we believed we could actually do something. There are many problems about which your hearts go out, your minds go out, and about which you want to be able to do something - but where, in the realities of international relations, you simply cannot. But there are also some kinds of problem in relation to which it helps not be a superpower, or a major power, carrying the baggage (of suspicion and uncertainty as to motive) that is invariably associated with being of that status. Australia approached this issue as a somewhat distant and disengaged non-threatening, middle-sized country, that nonetheless had good lines of communication open to all sides - in the world at large, within the region and within Cambodia itself.

Against that background my predecessor, Bill Hayden, strove long and mightily to make an impact on the resolution of the Cambodian situation. In the whole period from 1983 to 1988, he did a great deal to keep the issue alive in international consciousness by the visits he made; by the seminars he sponsored; by the initiatives he generated, including the idea of a war crimes tribunal against Pol Pot; by the modification of Australia's positions in the United Nations, recognising some legitimacy in Vietnamese interests and not entirely embracing traditional ASEAN positions: all this in a way which, not entirely painlessly, built up and established Australia's credentials as a country genuinely committed to a resolution of the Cambodian issue. And it was that foundation on which I was able to build when I became Foreign Minister in September 1988.

Events started occurring with considerable rapidity in 1989, beginning with the Vietnamese indicating that they were prepared to initiate the withdrawal of their own troops from Cambodia. France initiated a big international conference in mid-1989, bringing together all the warring parties and interested parties, in a way which had everybody's hopes incredibly high that a resolution of this would at last be achieved. But that did not happen. Negotiations eventually broke down because the particular four-party transitional-government mechanism that was proposed to bring the country out of the age of darkness into a period of resolution and reconciliation was not a solution that could be sold to all the warring parties.

It was against that background, in late 1989, that Australia came into the centre of the picture with the solution that we devised built around a central role for the United Nations - not just in peace-keeping, a familiar role; not just in election organisation, also familiar enough; actually in the conduct or supervision of the whole internal government of the country during the transitional period. It was a relatively simple idea, but one that needed an awful lot of diplomatic effort to persuade other countries, to make them see that this was the way through the impasse. I want to pay tribute again today, as I have on many previous occasions, to the work of my own Department and in particular, Mike Costello, for the extraordinary role that was played in developing and selling this particular idea through that crucial period of December/January 1989-90: in one crucial sequence, Costello was involved in thirty separate meetings in thirteen different countries over a period of just twenty-one. This was the kind of effort, sustained over two long years of

protracted negotiations, which eventually produced the Comprehensive Paris Settlement of October 1991 now being implemented. All this did represent a very considerable achievement for Australian diplomacy: for our creativity, professionalism, endeavour and sheer stamina in following an idea through. Cambodia's was a problem about which we believed we could do something, and about which we proved - in the event - able to do something.

There is a fourth reason why Cambodia has loomed so large in our foreign policy, at least for me personally. It is simply that this was a problem I personally really wanted to do something to help resolve. I guess we are all products in all sorts of ways of our own personal experiences, and my own travel in Cambodia as a student in 1968, before all the horrors of war, civil war, genocide and invasion started occurring, did leave an indelible impression in my mind. I remember Phnom Penh, as it then was, in 1968 - bustling gregarious, elegant but slightly faded French provincial architecture, in all sorts of ways a little bit seedy, but a city absolutely alive and vital. I remember the countryside of Cambodia - tranquil, timeless, people going about their marketing, their cultivation, their village life as they had gone about it serenely and changelessly for centuries. I remember the share taxi that I hired with four or five Cambodians in the Phnom Penh market-place for the ride to Siem Reap - a decrepit, broken down old Buick or such like, careering through the countryside scattering kids and chickens, crossing the Tonle Sap by barge, stopping for a snack at the dusty cross-roads of Kompong Thom (now the, unhappily, site of some many ceasefire breach reports).

And, of course, I remember vividly as anyone who has ever been near the place does, the experience of seeing Angkor for the first time. This extraordinary city at the cross-roads of Buddhist and Hindu civilisation; the extraordinary temple of Angkor Wat, the largest in the world, far bigger in area than St Peters, if not so high; the friezes in the outside galleries, hundreds of metres long, powerfully expressive and rhythmical, but extraordinarily refined; the Bayon - with the faces on its towers, modelled so it is said, on the face of King Jayavarman seven hundred years ago but so extraordinarily evocative of the faces of present day Cambodians (not least Hun Sen himself, as I keep thinking whenever I meet him).

And then to go back from this experience in Angkor to Phnom Penh, to the Cambodian National Museum. Then as now the home of some of the greatest masterpieces of world sculpture. I have remembered for twenty-four years the heads, the bodies, the figures, almost ethereal in character, with an extraordinary degree of refinement and grace of serenity about them, but also simultaneously an extraordinary power and communicative impact they make upon you. And then there are the friezes, the pediments from the Bantei Sreay temple, from an earlier period than Angkor and about thirty kilometres north - a temple with the well-deserved reputation as probably the most exquisite piece of architectural sculpture existing anywhere in the world.

So that's the Cambodia, and the art of Cambodia that I saw and remembered. And this is the Cambodia, the art of Cambodia, that is now here in Australia at this exhibition - thirty-three pieces, all of them leaving the country for the very first time; pieces that have now safely arrived in Australia, courtesy of Senator Ray and the RAAF, of Qantas, of Telecom and, particularly crucial in all of this, of the extraordinary dedicated staff of the Australian National Gallery, led on the ground by Dr Michael Brand.

It may be that the foundation for this exhibition being entrusted to Australia did lie in our contribution to the peace process. That may have been a necessary condition of this exhibition occurring but it certainly wasn't a sufficient condition. There had to be something much more than my involvement and that of the Australian Government: it really did need the Australian National Gallery to put the concept together and to deliver it. The story began in August 1990 with Neil Manton from my Department, making his first visit back to Cambodia after having been posted there twenty years earlier, exploring the possible development of a cultural relations program. That visit led shortly thereafter to one by Michael Brand, the Curator of Asian Art and Andrew Durham, the then Head of Conservation here at the ANG: those two conceived and developed the idea of an exhibition in Australia of this material, in return for which Australia would contribute a program of technical assistance in conservation of a kind that would be indispensable to the preservation of Cambodia's art treasures, and the further development of the museum and everything in it.

Following the October 1991 Peace Settlement in Paris things moved very quickly: Hun Sen's visit to Australia and to the Gallery led to him saying yes in principle, and my own visit to Cambodia in December tied things up a stage further. There were more than a few bumps subsequently, not least the one about three months ago when it looked as if the whole exhibition was going to be aborted, but here it now is. This exhibition will be an absolutely stunning one, one giving great credit to the ANG and everybody who has made it possible here in Australia.

More than that, this is an exhibition that will be a source of great pride to Cambodia and to Cambodians - it should also help focus international attention back on the magnitude and the magnificence of the Khmer cultural tradition - helping rebuild that sense of the country's own civilisation, in a way that should be a unifying factor in that process that's going to be so crucial over the next year or two ahead in a way that will flow through into significant tourism, once the infrastructure for that has been able to be rebuilt.

Let me finish by trying to respond to one intriguing question that I haven't yet tried to answer, and I'm not sure that I can: why is it that these sculptures, buildings, have survived at all when so much else was physically destroyed during that devastating period of Cambodian history? When the National Library was being turned into a pigsty and all its books and documents burned and destroyed, why was it that the Museum stayed more or less intact - badly neglected, with the ceilings sagging under the weight of dead bats

and bat-droppings and - yes, but complete nonetheless. Why, when music and dance and the institutions associated with their promotion disappeared, did these sculptures survive? When nine out of every ten of the country's artists, conservators, protectors of the country's cultural heritage were murdered outright by the Khmer Rouge, why was it that Angkor survived intact, again sadly neglected but with only minimal damage? Why were the doors of the museum simply locked, when so much else was razed to the ground?

I think the answer to that has to be along the lines that were suggested by Michael Brand himself in a recent interview when he said here was something, perhaps, just too big, too powerful, for even the Khmer Rouge to be capable of destroying. They could destroy the cities; they could murder one million, maybe even two million of the population; they could murder the artists and the conservators and the protectors of the nations cultural heritage; they could burn or destroy the countries documentary history; they could seek to create a 'year zero' civilization, to pretend that nothing had previously occurred, that the future was to be made anew; they could behave in just about every conceivable way as the Huns and the Goths and the Vandals of ancient history - but somehow they just couldn't bring themselves to destroy the temples, the sculpture, the physical essence of Cambodian civilization. It was just too big for them, the pull was just too much, it seems, for them to be able to resist. I think that when Australians and through us, the rest of the world, come to see this exhibition in just a few weeks time people will appreciate for themselves, perhaps in a way they've never been able to in the abstract, just how that could possibly be - just how compelling the impact of these pieces is on the mind and on the senses.

I congratulate again on their achievement everyone within the Gallery, from Betty Churcher down, who has been associated with planning and creating this exhibition; Telecom and others associated with its sponsorship; Qantas and the RAAF and everyone involved physically in getting it here. This will be unquestionably one of the most important and memorable exhibitions this Gallery has ever had, and I certainly am very proud personally to have had some association with it.

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