

TAKING AUSTRALIA INTO ASIA

Address by the Foreign Minister, Hon Gareth Evans QC, to the Community Aid Abroad Conference, "Taking Australia into Asia: Trade, Investment and Human Rights", Melbourne, 23 February, 1996.

This election takes place at a defining moment for Australia, against a background of tremendous change, globally and regionally. Australians have a real opportunity to shape the kind of environment in which we want to live. We can move forward, consolidating and building upon all the repositioning we have already achieved - in response to the end of the Cold War and the emergence of East Asian economic dynamism. Or we can move backwards, to the age when we looked out fearfully and timorously at our neighbourhood - worrying always about threats, rather than being excited by opportunities.

So the election is, at least in part, one of those relatively rare events in Australian political history: a foreign policy election. However much the Opposition tries to paper them over, the differences between the opposing parties are real and enduring.

In Labor's policy launch here in Melbourne, the Prime Minister spoke of the need to keep the fire of Australia's relationship with our own Asia Pacific region burning. Labor is committed to enlarging that relationship in all its aspects: economically, strategically, politically and in human community terms.

Things are different in the Coalition. The Opposition Leader in his policy launch provided a telling indication that, despite all the Asia-friendly rhetoric, Liberal Party old-think still reigns supreme. He referred repeatedly and revealingly not to "this" region, or to "our" region, but to "that" region. And he could not bring himself to even refer to the region without hastening to reassure himself and his audience in the next sentence that a growing relationship here did not mean any diminution of our ties with Europe and North America. His stance was not that of a confident partner looking out, but a nervous outsider looking in.

And that is precisely the worry. After a political lifetime spent fearing our neighbourhood, worrying about Asian immigration and avoiding contact with

Asian leaders, John Howard remains a stranger to the Asia Pacific region. As they would say in the United States, he can talk the talk, but he can't walk the walk.

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The Hawke and Keating Labor Governments have had the privilege and the responsibility of steering Australia through a time of extraordinary change - the end of the Cold War, the emergence of extraordinary dynamic growth in East Asia, the revolutions in communications and information technology, the globalisation of markets. Through this period of change, we have formulated, articulated and acted upon a clear headed and realistic understanding of Australia's national interests, and how they might best be advanced. In our foreign policy generally, and particularly in the context of embracing Asia, we have been consistently creative and adventurous, but not to the point of losing touch with reality. We have set priorities based on what we can realistically hope to achieve, we have built coalitions of like minded nations to achieve shared goals, and we have deployed our resources systematically and energetically to achieve the objectives we have set.

Under Labor, Australia has become fully engaged and enmeshed as a political and economic player in the Asia Pacific region. We conceived of and inaugurated APEC, which has become firmly entrenched as the key body for enhancing economic development in the region. And we were responsible for the subsequent initiation of APEC leaders meetings, which has led in turn to the adoption of the 2010/2020 free trade and investment goal for the region. We were also one of the prime movers behind the development of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which has become, in the space of just two years, the key vehicle for discussing cooperative security issues in the region. It is worth remembering that when Australians last voted, APEC leaders and *never* met together, and ARF member states had *never* met together. That those meetings are now firmly fixed in the regional calendar is very much a product of Australian leadership. And they are starting to achieve real, substantial and lasting benefits both for us and the whole region.

Our regional initiatives have not been confined to these big new institutions. We took the lead in developing the United Nations peace plan for Cambodia; the

South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone, which is now at last about to be ratified by the United States, United Kingdom and France; and the concept of Indian Ocean regional cooperation. We have been party to a unique contribution to regional and bilateral security in the Mutual Security Agreement with Indonesia. And all this while strengthening and enriching our bilateral ties with Japan, China, all the ASEAN countries including Vietnam, Papua New Guinea, and the United States - in each case not because "Good Relations" are an end in themselves, but because they are a crucial means to the achievement of Australian national interests.

In all of our activity we have pursued what have always been defined as any country's basic national interest responsibilities - security and strategic interests on the one hand, and economic interests on the other. But we have added a very important third dimension: we've also defined as a clear national interest our interest in being, and in being seen to be, a good international citizen - actively and creatively engaged in advancing the emerging new agenda of transnational issues that reflect the dramatically growing global interdependence of the 1980s and 1990s. The phenomenon of interdependence cuts both ways: it creates or accelerates problems crossing state boundaries, but it also makes easier their solution as states develop new habits of cooperation and new common reference points. The problems and issues I am talking about include protection of the international environment, refugees, terrorism, drug trafficking, HIV/AIDS, the alleviation of poverty and human rights broadly defined.

The central point is that we do not see this national interest as subordinate to, or in conflict with, our more traditional interests in strategic security and economic prosperity. We see them as integrally related and indeed, mutually reinforcing. We *can* walk and chew gum at the same time. In particular, our good citizenship activities - our human rights dialogue, our humanitarian relief, our development assistance - form an integral, vital part of our overall engagement with Asia.

I am conscious that not all those attending this Conference are fully comfortable with, or prepared to fully accept, what I have just said. For example, in the preface to Community Aid Abroad's latest publication "*Australia's Aid Program - Mixed Messages and Conflicting Agendas*", which I understand is being launched later today, the authors accept the general principle that "good multi-purpose aid" can be delivered. But then there is a detailed criticism of our aid program as it is presently constructed which does not really reflect that perception. There tends to be a fundamental but unspoken premise underpinning much of the NGO world

view. This is the assumption that foreign policy making revolves around a series of propositions in which one goal can only be achieved by sacrificing another. In such a black-and-white world, values are always colliding head-on with expediency - and always coming off second best. Some of these zero-sum propositions include:

- trade and investment ties are built *at the expense of* labour standards and workers rights;
- defence and security ties are *at the expense of* regional human rights;
- Australia can only build closer ties with Indonesia *at the expense of* the rights of the people of East Timor;
- APEC will boost trade liberalisation in the region *at the expense of* the poor and the vulnerable - this was a key theme of ACFOA's report "Winners and Losers"
- The aid budget can only build infrastructure *at the expense of* community development, and Australian firms can only be involved in aid delivery *at the expense of* poverty alleviation.

Essentially, there is a moral judgement lurking here, in which Australia's economic and strategic engagement with Asia is characterised as a policy of self-interest, pursued *at the expense of* policies of altruism or idealism such as humanitarian relief, poverty alleviation, promotion of human rights and environmental protection.

I believe these dichotomies are simply false. The lesson that the Labor Government has learned and applied since the early 1980s is that in an increasingly interdependent world, a sophisticated, mature and integrated foreign policy does not require head-on collisions. We *can* achieve all our desired goals without sacrificing - indeed, greatly enhancing - the values that we share and hold dear.

Let me explore that assertion with you - to the extent I can in the limited time available - across the spectrum of human rights issues, looking first at civil and political rights and then at economic, social and cultural rights.

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Two basic points should be made at the outset about our approach to human rights issues. A fundamental consideration is our insistence that human rights are universal values - not Western values to be imposed on the non-Western and developing world. States that fail to ascribe value to the dignity, liberty and well being of their citizens who ignore the rule of law, and who fail to strive for equitable development and distributive justice, are not responding to basic human needs, which transcend ethnic, religious and state boundaries. Nor can they ultimately survive in peace and concord. Human rights are everyone's business: they are universally shared and ultimately impact on the security and prosperity of us all.

Equally fundamental, we recognise no hierarchy of human rights. Of course we value highly, civil and political rights such as freedom of expression, equality before the law, freedom from arbitrary detention and torture, and the right to participate in the political process. But we don't regard 'human rights' as only about these things, and we don't regard these rights as somehow of more elevated value than the basic rights to food, shelter, clothing, health and basic well being.

Australia continues to be one of the most active countries in the world on civil and political rights issues. I doubt whether any government makes more bilateral diplomatic representations than Australia about specific cases involving individuals and groups: averaging some 500 a year at both ministerial and official levels, in most but not all cases based on Amnesty International's data.

We press our concerns without inhibition, across the full range of human rights issues, and with the full armoury of official, ministerial and Prime Ministerial involvement. A sample of recent activity includes: representations by me and by officials about Chinese dissident Wei Jinsheng; representations by me late last year about Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the child recognised by the Dalai Lama as the incarnation of the Panchen Lama; representations by me and others about Indonesian jailed trade unionist Muchtar Pakpahan repeated inquiries about the investigation into the 1993 murder of Indonesia trade unionist Marsinah; representations in connection with jailed religious and political activists in Vietnam; representations about political prisoners in Burma, and our concerns over the arrangements for the repatriation of Mon and Karen ethnic refugees.

We can't pretend always to be successful in these endeavours. The strike rate - in terms of getting some substantive and worthwhile response - is probably not much higher than ten to fifteen per cent. But we believe it important to be persistent, on the principle that liberty always has a better chance at being respected under a spotlight than in the darkness.

We are of course constantly urged to do more, to be more strident, to make more visible and more noisy protests. But there is really only one overriding rationale in all this activity: to be effective. We want to achieve productive outcomes and to genuinely help those whom we say we want to help. We want an improvement in the position of victims of human rights violations, not comfort for our own consciences. If that means working behind the scenes - and not being seen to be doing as much as we are doing - then that is where we will work.

The hottest topic on the human rights front is undoubtedly the question of East Timor. This is an issue about which I have always felt strongly. I was appalled by the circumstances of the Indonesian invasion in 1975, and have been doing everything I can as Foreign Minister to alleviate its continuing consequences.

What we are trying to do is to build up, as a close and valued neighbour, a position of trust and confidence with Indonesia so as to gain influence and to win the adoption by Indonesia of a fundamental new approach to reconciliation in East Timor. East Timor is a regular and recurring topic in my own contacts with the Indonesian Government, and in Prime Minister Keating's contacts with President Suharto. We have also pushed hard in other forums, including the United Nations. Fretelin spokesman Jose Ramos Horta - not one of my greatest fans, last year calling me 'the greatest hypocrite in the world' - recognised this in an interview he gave ABC radio last December, in which he said he was pleasantly surprised and very happy to discover from diplomatic sources just how substantial our behind-the-scenes representations in the UN and elsewhere had been.

More obviously vocal protests are not always productive. The Dutch Government, a major aid donor contributing some \$100 million a year to the Indonesian economy, tried after the Dili massacre to apply some conditionality to its aid: the only result was for all Dutch aid to be henceforth refused. Again, at the time of the Bogor summit, President Clinton overtly raised the question of political autonomy for the East Timorese, only to have an Indonesian Government spokesman immediately thereafter declare that any question of

autonomy was now off the agenda.

Of course to be valuable, human rights dialogue must be just that - a real exchange, involving a real attempt to persuade, rather than a formal statement of position. I don't hesitate to raise these issues personally in meetings with foreign ministers, prime ministers and presidents; it can be done, politely but firmly. What matters, in countries where considerations of face rank more highly than they do in Australia, it is not so much what one says, but how one says it, that matters. But that doesn't mean playing charades. When I say I raise these issues, I mean I raise them seriously. Unlike Alexander Downer, who claimed last year that he had raised human rights in a meeting with Vietnamese Foreign Minister Cam only to be rapped over the knuckles by the Vietnamese Embassy which retorted, in its own statement, that human rights had not been discussed at all. If this is an example of the human rights representations that Mr Downer thinks he could get away with in government - perhaps a phrase for the record, but no exchange of any substance whatever - we can expect very little progress to be made on human rights at all.

One further point on civil and political rights. A key strategy we have pursued is to encourage the strengthening of human rights institutions. Through the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission - which is slated for substantial cuts by the coalition in this election - we have worked with the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and India. My own portfolio also provides direct funding to local NGOs involved in human rights - though this would have to be at risk from the coalition's hair-raising proposed cuts to the portfolio budget. I am particularly proud that we were able to support the founders of the independent Commission on Human Rights in Jakarta - and I am delighted that a member of that commission, Asmara Nababan, is addressing this conference.

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Australia is also committed to the advancement of economic and social rights around the world, but with our resources primarily focused on the Asia Pacific region. The core challenge is the alleviation of poverty; more than one billion people live in poverty around the world; 70 per cent of them are women.

It remains true, although it is not always popular on these occasions to say so, that the best form of poverty alleviation comes from economic growth itself. This is why Asia Pacific societies have themselves sought economic growth - to yield

real benefits for their people: jobs, income security, higher living standards, greater availability of and access to education and health.

Good citizenship questions apart, Australia has clear cut national economic and security interests in supporting this process. Where the Asia Pacific region continues to have sustainable and equitable economic and social development, within a stable regional security environment, that is of lasting benefit to Australia - not least in the form of jobs for Australian people. That is why we encourage policies which enhance that process of growth - through for example the trade liberalisation goals of APEC. At the same time we recognise that while the rising tide lifts all boats, some do not float as high as others, and we seek to make the most effective interventions possible to help remedy those shortcomings.

We have increased Australia's aid budget in real terms for six successive budgets. This year we are providing just over \$1.5 billion, which represents 0.33 per cent of GNP - a proportionate decline because of the rapid growth of the Australian economy but still substantially better than the 0.30 per cent OECD average. We retain the aspiration to continue real increases in aid to reach the UN target for official development assistance of 0.7 per cent of GNP, and the commitment to at least get to 0.40 per cent by the year 2000 - difficult as even that will be.

The contrast with the coalition stance is stark. They have revealed that they will make real cuts in the total aid budget as part of a half billion dollar slice out of the Foreign Affairs and Trade portfolio. Not a reallocation of aid spending - from infrastructure projects to local community development projects or other directly focused humanitarian support, which would no doubt appeal to some here - but a straight cut of \$382 million, involving the scrapping of the Development Import Finance Facility (DIFF) scheme, that will push Australia's official development assistance to less than 0.30 per cent of GNP, below the OECD average for the first time.

To fulfil their promise, the coalition will have to explain to many of our Asian neighbours that they won't be able to deliver the development assistance projects, some 52 of them, already actually agreed, and often as the highest bilateral aid priority. My colleague Gordon Bilney has rightly called this coalition decision "stupid and short sighted". The coalition regards DIFF as a "business subsidy". But the most recent set of projects funded through DIFF were designed to bring clean water to cities and townships in China, the Philippines and Vietnam - aid

directly addressing the basic needs of the poor.

Besides, there is absolutely no reason why we should shrink from allowing Australian firms to provide goods and services under our aid program. It is perfectly possible to provide high quality aid which promotes equitable economic development, especially in our immediate region which is less well served by Western donors, while at the same time demonstrating Australian expertise and opening up new opportunities for Australian business.

This story is particularly well told in the case of the agreement by the Australian Government and the Government of Vietnam to work together to build a bridge over the Mekong River at My Thuan. This project has attracted criticism from Community Aid Abroad as an exercise in trickle down development; and, perhaps not entirely by coincidence, it has also been attacked by Alexander Downer as a "white elephant", the funding for which the Coalition will shift to more direct community support, notwithstanding that Vietnam has identified the project as its highest bilateral aid priority.

Every day more than 20,000 people and 5000 motor vehicles carrying 4000 tonnes of freight, cross the Mekong at My Thuan by ferry. Over the next few years these traffic volumes are expected to double. The ferries are so busy they are already operating 24 hours a day. Even so, crops and other produce are often spoiled because of the delays in crossing the river.

The difficulty of making the river crossing has led to all sorts of inequalities in the kind of amenities that exist in the area. People to the north of the river have to travel 80 kilometres to reach the nearest hospital. South of the river, there is virtually no industry. Eight million of the 15 million people who live in the Mekong delta, live south of the river. They are mostly peasant farmers, and mostly poor: in many areas a quarter earn less than \$7 a month. Up to 40 per cent of their children suffer from malnutrition.

So in 1993, the Government of Vietnam asked Australia to help build a bridge over the Mekong River at My Thuan. After studying the technical and economic feasibility of the project, the Australian Government agreed to do so. We have agreed to share with the Government of Vietnam the \$83 million cost of the bridge, providing \$55 million over six years.

In any developed economy, this problem would have been fixed years ago. If it

was the Murray River instead of the Mekong, a bridge would already span it. If Australian families were denied access to health care because the river was in the way, or Australian farmers whose goods were spoiled because of the delays in the ferry, the uproar would have been loud, legitimate and effective.

The best proof of the appropriateness of the My Thuan project is that the people themselves living on both sides of the Mekong actually want it. The My Thuan bridge will quite simply help improve the well being of the people living in this part of Vietnam. It will also involve - as a smaller fringe benefit - English language tuition and professional training for Vietnamese engineers, drafts persons, builders, environmentalists and others. The bridge expenditure in any one year, represents just around 20 per cent of Australia's total aid to Vietnam - so there is plenty of room for us to continue with community development in Vietnam such as health, education and water projects.

The Coalition's opposition to My Thuan has nothing high minded or intelligent about it. It is all of a piece with the Coalition's continuing failure to recognise that the Vietnam War is over, and that we should all be looking to the future.

The Labor Government has encouraged Vietnam into the mainstream of market economy growth in the region. We resumed aid. We successfully push Australian business opportunities in the country. BHP and Telstra and the major Australian banks have substantial involvement in the country. We have built close ties with the political leadership as it engages in the historic task of renovating their centrally planned economy.

But the Liberals are still stuck in the mind-set of the past; still coming to terms with their mistakes in Vietnam War. I have already referred to the bungled human rights dialogue with Foreign Minister Cam. An even more spectacular insult was offered by John Howard to the visiting senior Vietnamese party official Do Muoi. Mr Howard refused to meet him, saying: "thousands of Australians of Vietnamese origin saw the elevated treatment of the Do Muoi visit as inappropriate and potentially divisive". Mr Downer chimed in that the visit was "inappropriate, insensitive and potentially divisive"

As recently as last month, Tim Fischer attacked the former US Defence Secretary Robert McNamara for admitting he was wrong about the Vietnam War. And just a few days ago John Howard told the "Four Corners" program that he himself did not admit he was wrong about the Vietnam War. When it comes to Vietnam, the

coalition cannot admit it was wrong; it wears the same old blinkers of ideology it wore in the 1960s and 1970s. Then as now, they are prepared to put their own ideological self-doubts ahead of advancing Australia's best interests.

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This is indeed, in significant part, a foreign policy election - and the choice is clear. It is a choice between continuing to make things happen for Australia in the region, and turning the clock back; and a choice between a team of proven leadership, vision, stamina and professionalism, and a Coalition team of newly-minted supporters of Asian engagement whose hearts and minds are simply not in the enterprise.

Where John Howard has been repositioning himself to escape his past, Labor has been repositioning Australia for the future. There has been no more crucial element in that repositioning than our embrace of, and acceptance by, Asia. That will be put at risk by the election of a Coalition Government on 2 March. It is in Australia's interests that that not happen.