

Australia in the South Pacific

Address by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Senator Gareth Evans, to the Foreign Correspondents' Association, in Sydney on September 23

It is particularly appropriate for me to be making my first significant speech in Australia as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to the Foreign Correspondents' Association.

Foreign ministers and foreign correspondents — as I was saying to my Department in a marginal note the other day — share in part at least a common trade: we both of us spend a good deal of time explaining exotic, incomprehensible foreign parts to sceptical domestic audiences.

In that context I am very conscious of the role that foreign correspondents in Australia have in developing awareness internationally about Australia. For all of the excellent efforts of our Embassy in Washington, for example, popular American perceptions of us depend as much on the sort of copy filed by the AP bureau in Sydney as on coverage of any visit an Australian minister might make to the United States.

Foreign then we both may be, but while I am in this job I hope that we won't be foreign to each other.

This first speech comes hard on the heels of my first overseas visit. You will all know how deliberately the destination for that trip was chosen. It was a very good visit and successful beyond most expectations.

New Foreign Ministers off to such flying starts can easily develop grandiose delusions. They could be tempted to cast themselves in the mould of a James Cook discovering the Pacific for the first time — without recalling his last unfortunate encounter in Hawaii; or a Hannibal lumbering off to distant lands with a travelling party of elephantine dimensions, conquering all before him without recalling his ultimate defeat. I am sure that if I had any difficulty resisting such self delusion the admirably sceptical travelling media party who accompanied me would have successfully reminded me of my mortality.

Even if this visit could not be claimed to mark a watershed in our

relations with the region, it was nonetheless, I believe, an important one for three main reasons.

It was important for me personally, in giving me a much better understanding of the region. It was important as a demonstration of the commitment I have made on behalf of the Government to making our relationships in the region our most immediate priority. And it was important in contributing to the final shaping of a newly thought-through Australian policy approach to the region which I want to spell out today.

For me personally the visit did make very clear some things that I had previously — I suspect in common with most Australians — not fully appreciated.

I saw for myself the real individuality of the countries of the South West Pacific, an individuality which underlined the error of some past Australian perceptions of the region as a group of friendly, uncomplicated — and indistinguishable — islands.

Australians have, recently at least, not had much difficulty understanding that there are great differences between countries in Asia: no one, I guess, would these days confuse Malaysia with Vietnam. But too often the very real differences between, for example, even such near Polynesian neighbours as Tonga and Western Samoa, or such near Melanesian ones as Vanuatu and the Solomons, have been overlooked in generalised, not to mention romanticised, views of the Pacific.

A part of that individuality is the increasingly wide-ranging and varied agenda which each relationship entails. The fabric of relations is becoming more complex year by year, if not day by day, in a way which expands both the opportunities for cooperation and the scope for disagreements on both sides. In other words, our relations are becoming richer, more interesting and challenging, and less predictable.

As I became more familiar with the differences between individual island nations, I saw tangible evidence of what I already knew to be under way — a quite dynamic process of political and economic change in most countries of the region.

We are well into the post-colonial age of the Pacific, and generational change is producing new leaders for whom the movement towards independence and away from former colonial relationships is not the starting point in their political thinking. And many of the countries in the region are realising with increasing clarity that they are facing the challenge of implementing significant economic change, faced as they are with what seems to be an inherently unstable international economic environment, and dependent as they are on a very narrow range of commodity exports, highly vulnerable to fluctuations in international commodity prices.

I am conscious that some of you, at least, know the region very well and have had a much longer acquaintance with it than have I, so I won't burden you with a long list of specifics. Suf-



The Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Senator Gareth Evans, and the Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands, Mr Alebua, in Canberra in September. Photograph by Michael Jensen, AOIS.

face to say that the most spectacular and public evidence of political change is, of course, what has happened since May 1987 in Fiji. But upheavals such as that experienced in Fiji should not divert our attention from the less spectacular political and economic change going on in all the different countries of the region.

I said that a second important feature of the visit was the commitment it demonstrated to making the South Pacific region our most immediate priority.

For Australia, the South Pacific must be a region of the highest foreign policy and security significance: we have fundamental, long-standing and largely unchanging interests here, which deserve strong bipartisan support.

Developments which affect the security of the South Pacific region, of which we are a part, cannot but affect the security of Australia. To turn our back on the region is no more than a purely theoretical possibility. To do so would not only disappoint and distress small, and in some cases fragile, polities which we have encouraged to turn first to Australia, but would diminish Australia's standing with other friends and allies as a serious participant in international affairs.

We have clear geo-political, or strategic, interests in preserving and promoting peace in the region; in promoting internal political stability and the peaceful evolution of democratic political systems in the island states; in keeping the region free from destabilising activity by any external power or group; and in minimising superpower tension in the region.

We can choose not to pursue these interests, but such a choice would leave us unprepared to respond effectively to hostile exploitation of political instability.

Hence our legitimate interest in what has happened recently in Fiji, New Caledonia and Vanuatu. Hence also our strong objection to trouble-making by any external power which lacks legitimate interests in the region — thus the firm stand we took last year in respect of what seemed clearly to be then growing Libyan interest and activity in the region. And thus our vigorous efforts to encourage positive attitudes in the island states towards Australian security perceptions, and to encourage appreciation of those perceptions as a shared interest.



Princess Salote Pilo Levu Tuita of Tonga paid a call on an Australian high school during the recent State visit she and her father, King Taufa'ahou Tupou IV, made to Australia. Her Royal Highness spent a morning at Canberra High School on September 7, as the guest of students and staff, to celebrate the school's "twinning" with Va'vau High School in Tonga. The twin-school project was set up in 1987 with the assistance of UNESCO. Photograph by Michael Jensen, AOIS.

Part of the set of interests I have been describing involves assisting in the economic development of the region as a whole. Political stability and peaceful evolution on the one hand, and optimum economic development on the other, are inseparable. Since economic development is very much the central preoccupation of our island neighbours, as the welcome new focus on economic development strategies evident at this year's Forum clearly demonstrates, we neglect our responsibilities in that regard at great risk to our essential security interests.

We have, of course, aid responsibilities as the most developed country in the region, which we ought to discharge for their own sake, whatever the associated benefits. But it is also fair for us to make, as we do, the assessment that the risk of developments which may compromise the still generally peaceful environment of the region are reduced if there is political stability, and this in turn is strengthened if the economies of the island states develop in step with the reasonable expectations of the people.

Australia also has straightforward economic and trade interests of its own in the region. Quite apart from our economic relationship with New Zealand — now our third-biggest trading partner — the island states are a valuable market for a range of Australian producers, an area of substantial Australian investment (some \$85 million worth in the case of Fiji) and the site of important commercial ventures. I am, of course, committed to defending and advancing these interests.

Furthermore, we have a set of interests in the South Pacific, as elsewhere, which I think can best be described as those involved in being, and being seen to be, a good international citizen. I have mentioned in passing already the humanitarian dimensions of aid delivery. It is also the case that we are committed to vigorous efforts towards the protection of basic human values, as incorporated in the relevant UN conventions, including the Human Rights Covenants. And we have an interest in developing the kind of support for the global standing of international agreements in such areas as human rights, environmental protection and peace and disarmament which bloc support from our region can give.

All of these interests — and the realities of diversity and change I mentioned earlier — require detailed and sensitive policy responses. In the light of all the resonances struck by my visit, and the very successful Forum meeting just concluded, it seems appropriate now to try to give some expression to the overall shape of the South Pacific policy that has been evolving in recent times.

During the past 18 months policy towards the Pacific has been subject to far greater debate in Australia, both within and outside government, than ever before, focusing on and resulting from political change, particularly in New Caledonia, Vanuatu and Fiji.

The debate has frequently involved criticism of Government policy, and there may have been occasions on which criticism has been deserved. On the other hand the criticisms have

often been inconsistent. If policy seeks to proceed in a sensitive and low key way, commentators are likely to assert that not enough is being done by Australia in a particular circumstance, and to accuse the Government of neglect of the region. But if the Government gets up front, seeking to be not just engaged in a situation but very publicly engaged, then we tend to be criticised, according to taste, either for insensitivity or neo-colonialism.

There is of course no harm in robust public debate, and much good in it to the extent that it helps spread awareness of and agreement on fundamental Australian interests in the region. We simply have to live with the internal inconsistencies and the misplaced criticism which seems inevitably to go along with that debate.

I do admit, however, to being less than impressed by some of the shriller criticism heaped upon us — not least by the Opposition for our policies in the Pacific. This kind of criticism tends to focus most often on claims of declined and declining Australian influence in the region, the implicit assertion being that somehow a carefully constructed policy edifice of former times is now a collapsing house of cards.

Such a view of the fragility of Australian influence and interest in the region is palpable nonsense. My first brief taste of the region as Foreign Minister has reinforced for me the knowledge that we continue to be as actively engaged and as important a player in the changing political and economic environment of the South Pacific as we ever were.

I am not complacent about the Pacific, but I am saying that we continue to have very important assets in the prosecution of our national interest in the region.

We have the most extensive diplomatic network of any country in the region and a growing cadre of regional experts, both in my own Department and other actively engaged Government departments, such as the Department of Defence — to say nothing of a deeply and constructively engaged Ministerial colleague at Defence.

We continue to have the largest aid program of any country in the region and we continue to be the largest economic power in the region generally.

And we continue to enjoy not only respect but a good measure of genu-

ine affection in all of the capitals I visited.

This continuing bedrock of historical familiarity goes hand in hand these days with frank exchanges of perception — in our country-by-country relations — about the region's security and development, and something of a developing consensus about how to deal with both.

Of course we are not always going to get every policy decision absolutely right, and equally obviously we are not going to be able to predict every twist of events. We didn't predict the coup in Fiji. But if that was a failure, then it was failure shared with every other observer, diplomatic and non-diplomatic. There have been many other instances where we have seen change coming: who would now say for example that Bob Hawke's warnings in August 1987 about the possibility of bloodshed in New Caledonia were misplaced?

Just as we can't predict everything and can't expect always to get our policy responses 100 per cent right in every circumstance, neither can we reasonably expect totally untroubled relations with all the countries in the region. This would only be so if relations were less substantial than they are.

The question is how we approach our relations — new in many ways and more substantial as they are — and what kind of overall policy approach we should adopt.

Benign neglect — largely allowing events to take their course and reacting when they threaten Australian interests — is not a realistic option. The conceivable choices are:

- (a) To act as the guardian of perceived Western alliance interests to deny access to the region by the Soviet Union or other countries potentially hostile to Australian interests, on the assumption that our interests are indistinguishable from general Western interests;
- (b) to seek an independent position of dominance or hegemony as a proximate Western but essentially external power; or
- (c) to maintain and develop a partnership with Pacific island countries which promotes regional stability through economic development and the encouragement of shared perceptions of strategic and security interests.

In the past, our approach had elements of all three options. That

worked as long as it was not challenged. I think I have demonstrated already — and I shall come back to this again in the particular context of Fiji — that it has now been challenged, most importantly from the region itself.

The logic of geography, of principle and of events impels us towards option (c). The essence of this option, which I would describe as a strategy of constructive commitment, involves:

- promotion of close, confident and broadly-based bilateral relations with all Pacific island countries;
- promotion of effective regional cooperation, especially through the South Pacific Forum and other regional organisations like the South Pacific Commission;
- recognition that, for Pacific island countries, security hinges on economic and social development, and offering assistance to achieve both;
- respect for the full sovereignty of all Pacific island states, in relation to their internal affairs and their right to establish diplomatic and commercial links with countries from outside the region; and
- promotion, at the same time, of shared perceptions of the region's strategic and security interests, laying the basis for a regional approach to situations, internal or external, which put regional stability at risk.

The value of such an approach is that it identifies Australia as an integral part of the region, strengthens our capacity to promote the national interest within it and provides a firm basis for the resolution of differences.

This strategy proceeds from the understanding that while we have by virtue of our size, wealth and historical connections greater influence than anyone else in the region, we should exercise it with sensitivity and we should recognise that we will not always achieve immediately, or at all, the outcome we want. But it is based also on the belief that our constructive commitment does contribute to stability and development in the region, and that encouragement of stability and development constitutes the only secure way to ensure successful long-term pursuit of national interest.

The strategy recognises that differences will arise between Australia and its island partners. To think that they will not is to patronise island countries and to make assumptions about relations based on their small-

ness and our relative size. It is an indispensable part of the strategy of constructive commitment that we continue to deal on a basis of sovereign equality and mutual respect with those nations, and reject the prejudices of those whose thinking begins and ends with crude notions of relative size and power.

I have no such prejudices, and I hope that it will be clear to all of you — as I am sure that it was to all of the countries I visited — that this Government's policy approach is firmly grounded on the principles of constructive commitment I have spelt out.

In that light, the visit marked a new positive stage in our relations with a number of the countries I visited.

My discussions in PNG all took as their starting point the provisions of the 1987 Joint Declaration of Principles, and the integrated framework it provides for international relations: both sides acknowledged that this umbrella declaration provided a new and more ordered framework for the conduct and future of our bilateral relations.

In the Solomon Islands, we put behind us recent differences and agreed to look only forward rather than back.

In New Caledonia, my visit bore in significant measure the first fruit of our improved relations with France and with the territory of New Caledonia itself.

And everywhere I visited there was specific and warm appreciation for the symbolism evident in my decision to go to the Pacific as my first trip abroad, only eight days after I was sworn in as Foreign Affairs Minister.

There was of course the unhappy business of my cancelled visit to Fiji. Fiji is in many ways a test case for the concept of constructive commitment to the region which I have been outlining. The dimensions of the challenge are the greater for the centrality of Fiji to the region in all sorts of ways, not least in transport, communications and education.

The uncomfortable reality is that the coups in Fiji represent a blow to democratic principle in a region where attachment to democratic processes has hitherto been maintained wherever those processes have been introduced. Not all Pacific island countries have what would be regarded in the West as fully democratic political institutions: in Western

Samoa and Tonga, for example, traditional representative structures continue to prevail over Western blueprints. What sets Fiji apart from other countries is that events since May 1987 have constituted such a step backwards.

Furthermore, the economic decline in Fiji places an impediment in the way of economic development in the region. And the coups have also meant that the region's capacity to speak as one in world forums, in the confidence that its own home is in order, is impaired.

The challenge for Australian policy has been to exercise our influence in a helpful way to assist the restoration of stability and economic growth in Fiji. Our judgment is that it is only by an outcome to present problems which is broadly acceptable to all communities even if it is not an option which is universally preferred that stability and development in Fiji can be restored to their pre-coup levels.

We should not forget that we have significant influence in Fiji. We are far and away Fiji's largest economic partner, and we are the largest bilateral aid donor. We are an important neighbour whose voice has traditionally carried weight across a wide spectrum of Fiji's political and social leadership.

But in exercising that influence we need to have very close regard to all the other voices in the region, most of whom have taken the view that anything more than diplomatic representations in the ordinary way would constitute an unacceptable interference in the internal affairs of a fellow regional member.

And in exercising that influence we must also be judicious if it is to have a constructive effect. If we allow our use of influence to be seen too publicly as the alternate application of carrots and sticks, that will undermine our influence on the fragile body politic in Fiji, by having a counter-productive effect on that part of Fiji's leadership which, at this time, does not share our judgment that long-term stability and development can best be achieved by a return to full democratic parliamentary government.

The decision which the Prime Minister and I took that my visit could not proceed — faced as we were with a condition of access that I not see the leader of the opposition forces, a man committed to democratic processes and who will undoubtedly be a major

player in any return to representative political institutions in Fiji — should be seen as a decision made in the light of our continuing efforts to use our influence judiciously. We judged that we should not leave uncorrected any view that the sort of attempt at engagement which my proposed visit represented was simply a code word for accommodation at any price. So we put down a marker and have no doubt that it was noted.

I am pleased that this matter at least has now been resolved and that I am now able to visit Fiji as I will in three weeks' time under conditions which are acceptable.

I hope that when I do so I will be persuaded that the interim Government is making genuine efforts towards reconciliation, and that there is a chance that a constitutional outcome will be secured which is broadly accepted — even if only with resignation in some quarters throughout the country.

Fiji will continue to test us, as we pursue policies designed to meet all of the competing requirements of national interest.

I am confident that we can meet those requirements. We can't be complacent and we aren't complacent, but in Fiji, as in the region generally, we do have a lot going for us.

I intend continuing in the region as I have begun — with sustained effort, with energy and with constant engagement — in pursuit of Australia's interests and those of the region in partnership with our island neighbours.

I expect that I will get my fair share of criticism, but if that is in the context of constructive debate about Australian policy then I will be happy to hear it.

I hope we can all start from a shared awareness of just what Australia's national interests in the Pacific are, and I hope we can avoid shrill and shallow politicking. This Government has not neglected the region and will not do so. The policies in place, which I have sought to articulate today, leave us well placed to manage, sensitively but firmly, the challenges now before us and those still to come.

In the end, I believe that only the axe grinders or the ill informed will mistake the evolution of Australian policy to reflect the changing nature of the region for declining Australian influence.