

AGENDA FOR THE NINETIES:

AUSTRALIAN CHOICES IN FOREIGN AND DEFENCE POLICY

Speech notes for book launch by Senator Gareth Evans, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canberra, 14 November 1990.

When the Chinese invented the curse "may you live in interesting times" I think they must have had in mind authors attempting to set down an analysis of world events which will retain validity beyond the inevitable delays involved in publishing.

The contributors to the book deserve congratulation for undertaking not the usual leisurely examination of what has happened already, but rather tackling what is current and what is and should be on Australia's agenda for the future. It no doubt took a degree of academic courage to project changes and suggest continuities when the world was - and is - changing so dramatically and quickly around us. In some areas the future has already become the past. German unification, for example, which the book postulates as likely to be part of a gradual process of reform, has taken place with a speed and thoroughness that only a professional visionary could have foretold. And visionaries generally don't make their living by contributing to this sort of publication!

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was another wild card which the book could not have anticipated - but which is now fundamentally influencing the way the international community is fashioning the new post-Cold War security order. Iraq's action does certainly vindicate one of the central themes of the book - as Coral Bell puts it, the mutation of the central strategic balance between the Soviet Union and the United States into a multilateral balance in which regional powers have far greater salience. Indeed it is clear that the end of superpower confrontation, while certainly having had highly beneficial results - not least in diminishing the threat of nuclear war between the superpowers and facilitating resolution of a number of regional conflicts - could well have removed a restraining influence curbing other regional tensions and enmities. Life for the post-Cold War foreign policy maker will not be any easier.

If I am, or any other foreign policy maker is, to have a chance of getting policy responses right in the new international environment, it is crucial we have a clear understanding of the issues and options: that we be well informed, have a sense of the larger trends and currents at work, and be stimulated to think creatively about ways of tackling the various issues with which we will be confronted.

The real utility of this book is that it does provide a better and more up-to-date compendium of this kind of material than exists elsewhere (at least until I get around to writing a book of my own on Australian foreign policy!). I remember asking Stuart Harris when I was appointed Foreign Minister two years ago for a reading list of current material on international relations which would expose me to a range of current assessments and forward thinking on issues relevant to us. Stuart duly obliged, as you would expect, but there really was nothing on his list which would have been anything like as immediately useful to me as this volume.

The weight of the book is strongly focused on strategic and security issues, the traditional preoccupation of international relations. I found all the chapters here pertinent and useful - from the Editor's introductory sketch of the changing international balance, to the regionally focused studies of her and Gary Klintworth on North Asia, of Leszek Buszynski on ASEAN, of John Piper on the Pacific, of A D Gordon on India, of Robert Miller and Richard Higgott on Europe East and West, and the thematic studies of Trevor Findlay on arms control and Ross Babbage on the Australia/US alliance.

The trade, investment and economic cooperation dimension of our external policy has much less quantitative weight in the book, with the discussion pretty much confined to Stuart Harris's very interesting chapter, although it is an important sub-text in the Higgott and Babbage papers as well. Given the acknowledgement that various contributors make about the interdependence these days of politics and economics, I found this under-emphasis a little surprising, but guess it is a function of traditional disciplinary preoccupations rather than any lack of appreciation of the significance of the issues concerned.

Similarly I found it just a little surprising that, with the exception of Allan Burnett's excellent chapter on the environment, the new "third agenda" of international affairs gets so little attention. Not only in relation to the environment, but in a whole number of other problem areas where countries have come to appreciate that only multilateral strategies are likely to be able to use effective problem solving, the international agenda has been transformed in recent years. I am referring, for example, to the so-called "non-military threats to security" like the narcotics trade, international health problems and unregulated population flows, together with the question of human rights protection, and for that matter, the whole area of development assistance and cooperation.

In my own approach to the conduct of Australian foreign policy I have tried to give, if not equal priority, at least some roughly equal shape and substance to the three broad areas of Australian national interest, which I have identified, respectively, as geopolitical and strategic interests, economic and trade interests, and our interest in being and being seen to be a good international citizen.

Priority setting, both within and as between these categories, is a complex business, in which one has to take into account not only what one would ideally like to do, but what one is realistically able to do. It also involves recognising the great many cross-linkages which exist between different kinds of national interest pursuits. This is a point we have probably stressed most in the context of regional security: in my Parliamentary Statement last December I hope I made very clear the Government's conviction that security is best understood as a multidimensional concept - in which not just military capability, but economic relationships, good cooperative relationships in the "third agenda" subject areas, and systematically developed human contacts at all levels, are all crucial determinants of the security environment.

What I and my ministerial colleagues have been particularly concerned to do is identify areas in international relations, apart from the development of bilateral relationships, where Australia can make a positive and useful impact - can move the game forward. And I think we can point to a number of areas in recent years where we have done just that:

- on the global security agenda, in relation to chemical weapons;
- on the regional security agenda, in relation to Cambodia;
- on the global economic agenda, the Cairns Group;
- on the regional economic agenda, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation;
- on the international "third agenda", our high profile role in developing the case for sanctions, especially financial sanctions against South Africa; and our Antarctic initiative.

These various initiatives - most of which have been proactive rather than reactive - have had, I think, five common characteristics: the careful identification of opportunities for effective action by a middle-sized power; the application of creative imagination in devising solutions or strategies; the application of professional diplomatic skill in carrying the issue forward; and the application simply of energy, and stamina, in seeing the issue through to fruition.

We cannot of course rest on our laurels in a world and a region where the total environment and ground rules of international relations are constantly changing. The '90s will bring an immense range of new challenges, which we will need to anticipate and effectively respond to. A great many of those challenges are very well identified in this book: indeed so graphically and persuasively that I wonder whether contributors didn't experience the sort of malicious joy that goes with setting out a good job of work for someone else to do!

The challenges we face in the '90s are going to be different from those of the '80s, but no fewer and no less difficult. In taking the forward-looking approach they have taken to that agenda, and in chancing their arm with predictions to the extent they have, the publishers, editor and contributors are all very much deserving of our thanks. I congratulate them all for a job very well done, and declare their book duly launched.

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