

## AUSTRALIA AND ASIA: THE ROLE OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Address by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Senator Gareth Evans, to the Australia-Asia Association, Melbourne, 15 March 1990.

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In international relations, as in human relations, image and perception can exert a powerful influence. Foreign policy is driven by national interests, but perceptions - at home and abroad - play an important part in the capacity of any country to pursue permanent interests. Image cannot substitute for substance, but a positive image can help to create a climate more conducive to achieving substance, just as a negative image can act as a brake on getting things done.

Image making and breaking is a complex subject, but it is one that is squarely relevant to Australia's external relations, and especially to the subject of Australia's relations with Asia. At a time of great change in the structure of international relations, it is more important than ever that relations among nations be based on an accurate understanding of each other's society and culture. In an age of increasing interdependence, mutual ignorance can carry a high cost.

Today, I wish to look at the role of public diplomacy, a concept, which I shall describe in detail in a moment, in bridging differences and in projecting an image of Australia in Asia which is conducive to advancing the many important interests we have in Asia. I want, at the outset, to emphasise that public diplomacy should not be seen in isolation. It is very much a part of the broader emphasis we have placed in our foreign policy on the nurturing of multidimensional relationships in our region. This was, for instance, the central theme of my parliamentary statement on Australia's Regional Security last December. It was also a key aspect of the Garnaut Report on Australia and the Northeast Asian Ascendancy. Both these documents take the view that Australia's interests in Asia - be they strategic, commercial or humanitarian - are most effectively pursued through the development of well rounded, multifaceted relations based on mutual benefit.

### THE NATURE OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

All diplomacy is an exercise in persuasion and influence. Public diplomacy differs only in its methodology and in terms of whom it sets out to influence and persuade. Traditional diplomacy seeks to influence the influential. Public diplomacy too reaches out to the decision makers and opinion formers, but it also casts its net much wider, beyond the influential few to the "uninvolved" many.

The essence of public diplomacy is the shaping of attitudes in other countries in a way which is favourable to our national interests. Its starting premise is that familiarity, far from breeding contempt, can in international relations be a spur to broadly based links between nations. We need to be concerned about what other nations think of us for the good reason that the images which others carry of us influence their attitudes towards us - not only in a general sense, but also with regard to our security requirements, to our goods and services, to our appeal as a place to invest in, to migrate to, to visit and so on.

Public diplomacy is, of course, not new. The ancient Greeks' penchant for the study of rhetoric was in part aimed at putting a convincing case to neighbouring states. In modern times, libraries, exhibitions and films have all become well tested "delivery systems" for public diplomacy.

There is no single approach to public diplomacy. How you approach it and what tools you use depend on your objectives and audience. Public diplomacy is sometimes divided into hard edged information programs and the more subtle appeals of cultural diplomacy. Yet such distinctions are neither precise nor particularly useful. Many information programs have a cultural component, and many cultural programs are designed to inform. Moreover, the separation of information and cultural programs ignores the fundamental requirement for public diplomacy to be implemented in a coordinated way, carefully calibrated to the needs and interests of the target audience.

A more useful approach is to look at public diplomacy in terms of the purposes it is designed to serve. In the first place, there is the role of public diplomacy in persuading opinion formers, or indeed the public at large, of the validity of a particular point of view on a particular issue. In extreme cases, such as in times of war, this can take on the form of hard-sell propaganda. But normally it is a question of arguing a case: convincing the United States Congress, for example, that export subsidies which may be aimed at the European Community have also caused real damage to efficient Australian farmers; conducting an information program about the merits of preserving Antarctica as a nature wilderness and land of science; assisting Melbourne's overseas campaign to stage the Olympics; launching a promotional campaign in Japan which emphasises the quality of Australian products; briefing journalists in the ASEAN countries about the objectives of Australia's initiative on Asia Pacific economic cooperation.

Persuasive public diplomacy is generally conducted by governments, since it is closely tied to the advancement of particular government policies, and does not usually involve the domestic community, or public, to the same extent as other forms of the genre.

A second type of public diplomacy is what might be termed inductive public diplomacy: looking for opportunities not so much to persuade on a specific point, but to generally encourage particular target groups to adopt a positive and open outlook about us.

Inductive public diplomacy could be said to include visitor programs, the exchange of parliamentary delegations, scholarships for future community leaders to study in Australia, and certain cultural programs such as the establishment of Australian studies centres.

Thirdly, there is the role of public diplomacy in projecting a familiar, benign and constructive image. This approach is not designed to persuade or to directly influence, nor is it directed to any particular target group, but rather is designed to promote a general impression of Australia abroad. Sometimes its purpose is essentially symbolic, such as providing centennial gifts, or the events which might surround a ceremonial visit by a Head of State. It is an area of public diplomacy that deals largely in symbols and images - a form of subliminal foreign policy advertising. Its driving assumption is that communities in other countries are more likely to respond positively to overtures from those they understand than they are from those whom they neither know, nor care about. In short, it is the use of public diplomacy to facilitate in a fairly general way the achievement of Australian objectives.

Image projection is particularly relevant to Australia's relations with Asia where cultural, religious and social differences are wide. Most contacts in the broad area of cultural relations fall into this category, as do the general information programs carried out by Australian embassies. Image projection of this kind derives from many sources. Often the most widely circulated images have nothing to do with government programs. The television series "Return To Eden", for instance, has an enormous following in Indonesia and undoubtedly helps to shape the image of Australia held by many ordinary Indonesians. The huge success overseas of serials like "Neighbours", films like "Crocodile Dundee", and books like "The Thorn Birds" are similarly bound to have an effect on the way in which Australia is perceived in other countries.

In Asia, Radio Australia plays a particularly important role in informing the region about Australia. For many it is probably their only link with Australia, which is one reason why the government hopes to upgrade Radio Australia's capability to broadcast into Asia. Here, as elsewhere in public diplomacy, credibility is crucial to success, and Radio Australia's complete independence from government control is the touchstone of its credibility. Were Radio Australia to be seen as a tool of the Australian government, its credibility in Asia and beyond would be diminished. Even though its broadcasts sometimes create difficulties for our official bilateral relations, our overall interests are much better served by a Radio Australia which is valued for its independence, and for the window which it opens onto Australian society, than by a broadcaster of government propaganda.

## AUSTRALIA'S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY PROGRAM

Public diplomacy programs are a prominent part of the foreign policies of several countries, especially the superpowers, the Europeans and - in Asia - China and India. Institutions like the British Council, the Goethe Institute, Alliance Francaise and the United States Information Service are active throughout the world and operate with budgets that run to several hundred million dollars.

Australia, by contrast, has until recently placed very little emphasis on public diplomacy. There are probably several reasons for this. Unlike, say, Germany after the War we have not had a reputation to rebuild. Unlike the two superpowers, we have not seen the same need to indulge in the great propaganda campaigns which were the public face of the Cold War. Unlike Britain and France, we do not see ourselves as the standard bearers of a great culture or language with - as the French say - a "mission civilisatrice". Indeed over the years there has been in Australia a certain ambiguity about the meaning of Australian culture, at least as regards its suitability for export. We have as a community also been in the past somewhat ambivalent towards so called "high culture", and about how high culture should relate to popular culture in terms of our national identity.

No doubt our past neglect of public diplomacy has also reflected not a little scepticism about its measurable returns. People can readily understand the persuasive role of public diplomacy, or the value of trade promotions or scholarships. But other aspects of public diplomacy - image projection, general facilitation and so on - are more vulnerable to the barbs of the sceptic. It is not always obvious, with these aspects of public diplomacy, how the means match the ends, or indeed whether the programs deliver the goods at all. This will always be a conceptual problem with public diplomacy because it is very much a long term process in which results are not easy to measure.

Whatever validity these explanations may have had in the past, they do not stand up to the demands of the present. We can no longer see public diplomacy as an optional extra in our foreign and trade policies. As a country dependent on international trade, as a nation committed to a close and constructive involvement in the culturally diverse Asia Pacific, and as a self confident community with a distinctive national identity, public diplomacy has an important role to play in helping to advance Australia's many international interests.

Australia and Asia. To the extent that a large part of public diplomacy is about reducing cultural distance, making Australia better known abroad, and ourselves knowing more about the nations with which we must trade and live, public diplomacy is more relevant to our relations with Asia than with any other region. Asia, after all, is where we live, and must learn the business of normal neighbourhood civility. Our position in this neighbourhood is, however, quite distinct, even by the standards of an area of great diversity. The cultures, traditions and languages of our nearest neighbours are very different from ours. We are a multiracial community but, although in Asia, we are manifestly not an Asian people.

Public diplomacy, and the exchange of people and ideas which it embraces, can help us better to manage these differences. It can help Australians look out on Asia not as cultural misfits trapped by geography, but as members of a common neighbourhood of extraordinary diversity and enormous potential. And it can help our neighbours see us as a natural part of the region, as a reliable trading partner, and as a country which seeks to play a constructive role in regional affairs.

In recent years we have made great strides towards these objectives, but it must be acknowledged that Australia continues to have something of an image problem in Asia. While there are many positive elements to our image, we are seen in a number of quarters as being of declining relative importance, tainted with racism, with an inefficient lagging economy, and major industrial relations problems. That much of this image lacks substance is less important than the fact that it is widely held, and that it impinges on many of our interests in the region.

We also face the separate but related problem that the peoples of Asia know very little about us and what kind of society we are. The polls summarised in the Garnaut Report on community perceptions of Australia in Northeast Asia reveal huge gaps in popular perceptions of Australia. The problem here is not that we have an unfavourable image but that, to the extent that we impinge at all on the consciousness of ordinary North East Asians, it is in terms of a collage of simple images: Australia as a land of open spaces, exotic flora and fauna, an exporter of commodities - and a good place in which to relax! We are not seen as a dynamic economy, nor are we perceived as a country with intellectual and cultural achievements in our own right.

None of this should surprise us given the limited exposure Australia gets at the popular level in these countries. In an age when most images are derived from the television screen, it is only to be expected that average viewers in Tokyo or Soeul will glean what little information they have on Australia from travelogues or nature shows which focus on the Australia of koalas, surf and sand.

At one level there is little we can do about this, in that there will always be an autonomous development of community attitudes which will take place regardless of what we do in our public diplomacy. This is the reality of global communications. Nor is this sort of one dimensional portrayal of Australia at the popular level necessarily harmful to our interests in all cases. In terms of tourism, for example, it is probably a plus.

At the same time, there can be no question that a more accurate and rounded image of Australia than currently exists would greatly help us to build the sort of multidimensional relations in Asia that we seek. For example, encouraging television stations in Asia to screen "Beyond 2000" - as we are currently doing - can help present Australia as a technologically advanced country with a depth of scientific talent.

Current public diplomacy programs in Asia. This financial year my Department will spend around \$6 million dollars on public diplomacy world-wide. This figure does not include some fairly big-ticket items like government publications and AIDAB funded scholarships, or expenditure on such projects as trade pavilions, all of which could arguably also be counted as public diplomacy. By far the largest portion of the public diplomacy budget is spent in Asia. For instance, of the four bilateral councils which have been established to foster cultural and other non-governmental links, three cover Asian countries (China, Japan and Indonesia).

While the funds available are modest, these programs have played a very useful role in extending our links with important Asian countries. The Australia-Indonesia Institute, which was established last April, has already put in train an imaginative work program targeted towards the "young and influential". It is also paying particular attention to the media and exchanges in such fields as the law, teacher education and sport. The Australia-China Council has done a great deal to expand relations between the two countries in many fields. It is currently playing an important role in keeping open people-to-people links at a time when it is vital that China not turn inward. The Australia-Japan Foundation has for fifteen years now made a valuable contribution to the development of the bilateral relationship, and to improving our knowledge of Japan, and Japan's knowledge of us. The high profile which Australian themes currently have in media-rich Japan in no way diminishes the need to maintain and enhance our public diplomacy effort there.

An important feature of the work of the bilateral councils, and of our cultural relations program generally, is that they do not restrict their cultural involvement to "high culture". They seek to cover the full range of activities which illustrate the sort of people we are: from rock bands to sporting coaches, from Aboriginal art to jazz groups, from design exhibitions to the Sydney Dance Company. We will often try to build our cultural relations programs around a particular trade event: our plans for participation in the Vladivostok Trade Fair later this year, for example, include putting together art exhibitions, television shows and films.

We also seek to encourage the cultural community in Australia to develop more links with Asia, so that it becomes as natural to tour Japan or Thailand as it has been to tour Britain and the United States. Here, as elsewhere, it is important to stress that our cultural relations programs are not designed to assist the Australian cultural community, or to directly involve the government in establishing links between cultural disciplines in Australia and overseas. Cultural relations are a part of our overall public diplomacy effort which is in turn governed largely by our foreign and trade policy priorities. What we do in the area of cultural relations will in practice often be of assistance to cultural groups in Australia and complement the government's domestic program of support for the arts and culture, but such assistance is not and cannot be the determinant of our programs.

## DOING MORE

What we are currently doing in the area of public diplomacy is effective within fairly narrow limits, but it leaves much of the task unaddressed. And it leaves many important countries in Asia, particularly in South East Asia, virtually without any public diplomacy program. These are large gaps which we must begin to fill.

Expanding our public diplomacy is not simply a question of resources, important though funding always is. It is also a matter of improved coordination, a sharper focus, a more sophisticated definition of objectives and a more rigorous means of evaluation. These are all aspects of our public diplomacy which we are currently working to improve. The decision finally to bring the former Australian Overseas Information Service - which has had several homes over the years - into the amalgamated Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade was an important step in the right direction. So was the more recent decision to create a new Public Affairs Division within my Department which brings together the various information and cultural components of our public diplomacy.

Council for Australia Abroad. As an important part of this process, I am announcing today that the Government intends, when returned to office, to establish a Council for Australia Abroad to advise me on means of giving greater drive and direction to projecting Australia overseas.

At present a wide range of government departments and agencies, as well as private organisations and individuals, help shape Australia's image abroad. The Government's intention in establishing a Council is to better harness this activity to further Australia's overall public diplomacy objectives.

The establishment of such a Council was recommended in the Garnaut Report, although there with a Northeast Asian regional focus rather than the general brief I propose.

I see the Council including the titular heads and chief executive officers of such organisations as the Australia-Japan Foundation, the Australia-China Council, the Australia-Indonesia Institute, the Australia-New Zealand Foundation, the Australia Council, the Australian Tourist Commission, AUSTRADE and Radio Australia, as well as relevant Commonwealth and State government departments.

I am confident that such an approach will sharpen our public diplomacy efforts, enable us - when fully refined, developed and implemented over the next few months - to develop appropriate strategies for particular countries and to obtain and mobilise the necessary resources to carry out these tasks. We also hope to involve the private sector, and to offer Australian companies the opportunity to participate in activities overseas which will not only enhance the perceptions foreigners have of Australia, but will also assist those

companies in developing their profiles in markets abroad.

## PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND THE AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY

The decision to establish an Australia Abroad Council reflects the important role which the Australian community can play in public diplomacy. Relations between nations are not the exclusive preserve of governments. There are a whole range of contacts, through travel, business, the arts, professional associations, service clubs, and community action groups which occur totally without any government involvement. These contacts add extra texture and depth to our bilateral relations, and they inevitably contribute to community perceptions abroad about what kind of nation we are.

Foreign policy, like all policy in a democracy, should be the product of a dialogue between the government and the community. Public diplomacy is not just about what we do overseas. It is also about engaging the Australian community in a conversation about our policies and objectives, and about helping Australians better to understand the world around us.

An audience of members of the Australia-Asia Society needs no tuition in the importance of fostering a deeper understanding in Australia of Asia. Public diplomacy has a role to play in this: through the work of the bilateral councils whose brief is not just to inform others about Australia, but also to inform Australia about others: through support for the study of Asian languages in Australia; through encouraging more cultural contacts; through media briefings and other domestic public affairs work that my Department does on a regular basis; and in short, through encouraging Australians and Asians to devote more attention to Australia and Asia "in each others' minds", as the Garnaut Report so elegantly put it.

Public diplomacy of this sort should not be seen as the government educating the community. It is very much a two-way process. Sensible government means drawing on the resources of the community. When we speak of the value of public diplomacy we mean also the value to the government of new ideas, of informed community debate about foreign and trade policy issues. Discussion in the universities, at conferences, in seminars can all help pave the way for new policy approaches. Governments often are not in a position publicly to advocate novel, adventurous or controversial ideas. Community groups are, and they can play a useful role in preparing the ground for changes in policy, and for easing governments gently into new approaches.

Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation is a case in point. Today, the concept of enhanced economic cooperation among the dynamic economies of the Asia Pacific is accepted as an idea whose time has come. The Ministerial level meeting which I chaired in Canberra last November has set the process in motion. One of the reasons why our APEC initiative



succeeded when it did was the very impressive ground work which had been laid over several years by the PECC process, involving government, business and academia. Without that background of prior discussion and analysis outside the formal intergovernmental framework, it is unlikely that the participants at the Canberra meeting would have felt as comfortable as they did with the basic concepts.

The way in which the PECC process helped prepare the soil in which the APEC seed was planted is a convincing testimonial to the worth of so called "second track" diplomacy. Second track diplomacy - the advancement of common interests through non-government channels - reflects the reality that foreign policy is a product not just of government fiat, but of a complex interaction of domestic interests and values with other national and international interests. Second track diplomacy is important because relations between States no longer run exclusively along the fixed rails of "first track" diplomacy - the diplomacy of governments.

Second track diplomacy often involves serving government officials as well as non-government participants. But neither second track diplomacy, nor public diplomacy more generally, are about the government seeking to manipulate or control what is done internationally outside the government arena. Public diplomacy is not about tethering community groups to the government's foreign policy agenda. It is not even about coordinating government and non-government activity. Above all, it is not about creating front organisations. It is about the value to Australia of building up a multidimensional relationship with Asia and beyond. And it is a recognition that rounded relations, of the sort that it is in our common interest to develop, cannot be built by governments alone. They must also embrace the exchange of people and ideas.

## CONCLUSION

International relations are these days so complex, so criss-crossed with contacts beyond the direction of governments, that diplomacy can no longer afford to ignore the community. And as democracy spreads, in Asia as elsewhere, the need to take account of public opinion will grow even more urgent.

We are currently at a watershed in international relations, and whatever that watershed opens on to, it is going to place large demands on Australian diplomacy. In this environment of change and opportunity it is especially important that the various threads of our external policy pull together and are pursued in an integrated way. Just as our international economic interests dictate the logic of integrating our foreign and trade policies, so also is there a need - in terms of the totality of our external interests - for traditional diplomacy to be supplemented by active public diplomacy.

What Australia can achieve in foreign policy depends to a large extent on how we are

perceived. This is particularly true in terms of what we can achieve in Asia. Over the last decade, Australia has made great strides towards being accepted as a natural participant in regional affairs, not least through our active efforts on a Cambodian settlement and on Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation. If we are to build on those achievements, and take full advantage of the many economic opportunities in Asia, we will need not only to ourselves become more Asia-literate, but also to do more to imprint a positive image of Australia onto the subconscious retina of Asia.

Mutual understanding and knowledge between neighbouring peoples are not always a guarantee of peace and prosperity, as the history of Europe and other regions demonstrates. But mutual ignorance is a greater risk, not only because it can lead to a chain of misunderstandings and errors, but also because a relationship in which the knowledge gap is wide will always be a stunted relationship. We do not seek a foreign policy scripted in Madison Avenue, but the time is clearly ripe for Australia to enhance its public diplomacy effort.

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