

AUSTRALIA, THE MIDDLE EAST AND CENTRAL ASIA

Address by Senator Gareth Evans at the opening of the Centre for Middle East and Central Asian Studies (CMECAS), Australian National University, 24 February 1994

You have already heard - and I think it worth repeating - that this is not only the first national centre for Middle Eastern studies in Australia, but also the first in the Western world to combine the study of the Middle East and Central Asia in a single centre. Once again, the Australian National University finds itself at the forefront of academic initiative in Australia. That is entirely as it should be. It is a particular tribute to the efforts of the Vice-Chancellor of the ANU, Professor Deane Terrell; of the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Professor Richard Campbell; and, of course, of Dr Amin Saikal, the Centre's first Director, for whom this occasion represents the culmination of an idea which he has so doggedly pursued for a number of years. He should be justly proud to see his dream come to fruition this evening.

It is certainly true that there has in the past been a lack of informed and balanced discussion of Middle Eastern matters in Australian public life, let alone Central Asia, where the deep geo-political changes of the post Cold war years have wrought an extraordinary change to the political and economic landscape of the region. The reasons for this are clear. Not only are Australian specialists few in number, but they - and research materials upon which they depend - are widely dispersed. In that sense, the establishment of a centre like this one is long overdue, and something I welcome wholeheartedly.

The Centre's founders have set out its aims in an inclusive, rather than an exclusive way - that is to say, the Centre is to appeal to a wider audience than one devoted to scholarship alone, and it is only right that it should be so. Naturally the Centre is primarily an academic body, designed to foster the study of Middle Eastern and Central Asian affairs; to encourage the exchange of ideas and resources at a national level; and to link the work of Australian institutions with their international counterparts.

But all of you here this evening realise that pursuing the thorough, objective

research which is the hallmark of any good university, need not mean that the interests of the wider community - including the business community and the those who serve in government - are forgotten. Quite the contrary: the spread of reliable information about difficult and contentious subjects will greatly assist policy makers and all those who have to frame investment and marketing strategies.

I am pleased to see that the Centre will be aiming for a balanced and comprehensive approach to Middle Eastern and Central Asian cultures and languages. The existing graduate and undergraduate programs already bear this out. These are difficult and worthwhile subjects, all too often neglected - and, sadly, often distorted and misrepresented. Their proper study is doubly important as it will give us not only a better understanding of the culture of Middle Eastern and Central Asia peoples with whom we are dealing overseas, but also of the many thousands of our fellow Australians whose origins lie in those countries.

Australia's role and interests in the Middle East

It is still occasionally asked why Australia should have a view on Middle Eastern matters at all. After all, the region is not in the front rank of Australia's foreign policy priorities and its problems, moreover, seem to many to be almost impervious to the efforts of outsiders to resolve.

The answer is obvious, and can be briefly stated. Like other Western countries, we have important economic, strategic, political and humanitarian interests in the region. The Government also takes the view that Australia's broad political interests are served by upholding Australia's image in the region as a well-informed observer with a sympathetic understanding of the complexity of Middle East political issues, and by urging moderation, restraint, and compromise. We recognise that our capacity to influence events is limited, but that should not stop us from seeking to ensure that our voice is heard.

Naturally, the fact that we *have* developed policies on contentious subjects occasionally causes the Government some difficulties. Ours is a multicultural society, one in which some aspects of the Government's foreign policy inevitably give rise to sensitivities in the community. Our Middle East policy is no exception.

But the most important element of our relations with the Middle East as a whole

is trade and, notwithstanding the views of some of the Government's critics, we are doing quite well in this field. Australia's trade relations with the great majority of countries of the Middle East are in good shape - though the Gulf states and Iran remain far and away our most important trading partners in the region. Since the Gulf War, when world trade with the region contracted as a whole, our exports to the Middle East have grown by 22 per cent, and in 1993 were worth over \$2 billion.

There are increased opportunities for Australian business in non-traditional exports to the region. AUSTRADE in Dubai and Riyadh have targeted telecommunications, building materials, horticulture, foodstuffs and education and training as the sectors of maximum potential. Exports of processed food increased by 47 per cent between 1991 and 1993, while exports of engineering products increased by 115 per cent over the same period, to \$178 million.

Regarding our broad political approach to the region, I said earlier that the Government believes Australia's interests are best served by our being heard as an impartial, concerned observer. And I believe our voice *is* heard. Our policy towards the Middle East peace process, for example, is known to be balanced and consistent. We are as unequivocally committed to Israel's right to live in security behind recognised boundaries as we are to the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people - including their right to independence and the possibility of their own independent state if they so choose.

We have from the outset supported the current peace process, which began in Madrid in October 1991; we enthusiastically welcomed the signing last September of the Israel-PLO Declaration of Principles, and the exchange of letters of mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO. It is encouraging that the two sides appear to have resolved most of their outstanding security problems, and that there is a good chance that Israel will have completed its withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho by the scheduled 13 April. I am also optimistic that Israel will soon be able to reach open agreements with Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, although these talks have progressed slowly - often maddeningly so. Overall, however, and now more than ever, we can say that, as far as peace is concerned, it is a question of 'when' rather than 'if'.

Peace must embrace the entire Middle East, because the region's economic, social and security problems are clearly interdependent. The multilateral arm of the peace process is vital because it properly aims to deepen the sense of national

security through mutually beneficial and reinforcing multilateral cooperative measures in all three areas. It rightly brings together not only the immediate regional parties to the peace talks, but a wide variety of other Arab states and, equally importantly, non-regional states which feel able and willing to contribute to the task of peace building. If ever there was a need, an *opportunity*, a test case for the process of multi-dimensional peace building, (which I have strongly advocated, particularly in my book *Cooperating for Peace* which I launched at the UN General Assembly last year), it lies in the Middle East.

Australia has been directly involved in two of the five multilateral working groups - those dealing with Arms Control and Regional Security, and with Water Resources. Our potential to contribute has been welcomed by the region at least in part because our policies on, for example, arms control and halting of spread of weapons technologies (including nuclear, biological and chemical weapons) are regarded as impressive and consistent. Consistency is our hallmark, whether in urging all regional states to become signatories to, and uphold the principles of, the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, or in protesting against human rights violations - which we do impartially, whether in Israel or in Iran, or anywhere else in the world. I believe it is a sign of the maturity of our relationship with countries as diverse as Iran and Israel that we have been able to conduct an honest and open dialogue on a range of multilateral issues of interest to both sides, including human rights, and to maintain important trading relationships at the same time.

Australia and Central Asia

Historically, Australia has had much more contact with the Middle East than with Central Asia. It is a simple fact that we know too little about the Central Asian states - states which were until very recently part of the Soviet Empire, which sit astride the historic Silk Road, and are at the crossroads of Eurasia. We know that some of them are frail creations, whose borders have shallow historical roots: the continuing crisis in Tajikistan unhappily illustrates the problems posed by ethnic resentments unchecked by an overriding commitment to a common nation state. We know, too, that the study of their rich cultures has been neglected. But, by the same token, we also now know that this vast area, still underdeveloped, has immense economic and political significance.

This has not escaped international attention. In 1993, Kazakhstan attracted about \$10 billion in foreign investment, only marginally less than Russia, just as it has

also collected between 20 and 40 percent of all the project financing undertaken by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The potential of Kazakhstan has not escaped some Australians, either. It ought to be acknowledged publicly that it is Australian business people who deserve much of the credit for our early successes there. Many of you will not know that it was an Australian company, AOTC (now Telstra) which in 1992 completed building the first link in Kazakhstan's international telecommunications grid. It was built on a site outside Alma Ata that I myself had visited the year before - during a visit which, I'm pleased to say, was one of the first made by any Foreign Minister to post-independence Kazakhstan. Since the visit to Australia by the Kazakh Prime Minister last year, Telstra has won another significant contract (valued between \$11 and 13 million).

I am not trying, simplistically, to evoke a business paradise. I am simply pointing out real opportunities which Australian business, and my Department, have had some success in exploiting. I've mentioned Telstra's initial breakthrough. It should also be noted that the World Bank has favoured Australian Federal organisations - including in particular DEET and DSS in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan - in awarding contracts for social infrastructure developments in Central Asia.

There are large potential earnings in the region for Australian companies in mineral production and management, where we have a competitive edge. The same is true of port development. Perhaps the greatest obstacle to the rapid development of Kazakhstan's economy - and for that matter, to the development of Uzbekistan - is the lack of transport infrastructure. And we're good at building infrastructure.

Some of the Central Asian economies are developing to the point where they are becoming credible competitors in our overseas markets, especially in the agricultural field. In 1992, for example, a Kazakh supplier cornered about 30 per cent of the Australian market for the combs and blades used in sheep-shearing. That's a fairly good illustration, I think, of the 'global village'. It is far better to enter into a cooperative relationship with a young and rapidly-growing economy like this one rather than to ignore it, and let others reap the benefits.

Australian foreign policy: flexible and pragmatic

Everyone here knows that the focus of Australia's foreign policy has in recent

years been squarely on the Asia Pacific region. There are obvious reasons for this, and we are of course pleased that our diplomatic efforts in our own immediate region have been so successful. But our foreign and trade policy is flexible and pragmatic enough to continue to embrace other traditional areas of Australian interest, the continuing growth in our trade with the Middle East being one such example.

Our foreign and trade policy must be flexible enough to identify and make the most of new opportunities. I am only too aware, for example, that Asia doesn't suddenly stop at China's western borders. The trade that already flourishes between China's western provinces and Siberia could, and probably will, easily flow into Kazakhstan and other Central Asian republics. There's no reason why we in Australia, with our acknowledged expertise in long-distance communications and dry-land agriculture, can't be part of that growth. There's no reason, for that matter, why we can't engage in strategic partnerships with Chinese or Indian businesses, for example, making the most of their regional experience to undertake projects in third countries in Central Asia.

It follows from what I have been saying that I look forward to the Centre playing a central role in providing information, analysis and vision which will be of enormous benefit, not only to academic specialists and students, but to the Government and the business community. I am honoured to have been invited to be a member of the Advisory Board and of course delighted to have been asked here tonight to open the Centre. I wish every success to this Centre and all those of you who have had the vision, and made the effort, to establish it. I look forward to being associated as Foreign Minister with its work for many years to come

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