

Speech by Mr Kevin MP Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs

**Sir Edward 'Weary' Dunlop Asialink Medal award presentation to the Hon
Gough and Mrs Margaret Whitlam**

Wednesday 6 February 2001
Sidney Myer Asia Centre, at the University of Melbourne

Gough Whitlam
Margaret Whitlam
Sir Ninian and Lady Steven
Carrillo Gantner
Lady Southey
Lieutenant Governor Of Victoria
Professor Gilbert
Distinguished Guests
Citizens (and Non-Citizens) of the Commonwealth

Tonight I would like to talk about three things.

I'd like to talk about Australia's engagement of Asia.

I would like to talk about Gough's contribution to that engagement over half a century.

And I would like to talk about the future of that engagement - and, more broadly, the future of our international engagement.

But to begin at the very beginning and, in the tradition of the American revival, with a word or two of personal testimony, about the impact which our guests of honour have had on an entire generation of Australians - including this one.

My own intellectual odyssey and personal engagement with China and the region more broadly began with Gough.

As a kid growing up in the Queensland Country under the occasionally benign, but more often malign, Bjelke-Peterson dictatorship of the 1970's, it was Gough who opened this person's eyes to the world beyond - by which I mean a world not just beyond the Tweed, radical though that was at the time as the Tweed, in those days, constituted our very own Mason Dixon line. But the region beyond our shores, a region whose importance to Australia lay in its own terms, not in terms of some artificial construct placed on it as an object of alliance or empire. An importance from the proximity of its geography, the longevity of its history, the dynamism of its economy and the depth of its society.

Somewhere in the archives of the Department of Foreign Affairs lies a starry eyed letter from an equally starry eyed fourteen year old from deep within the Queensland veldt asking the Department's Minister how one went about becoming an Australian diplomat. The news had not reached Queensland in those days, or at least my part of it, that Gough in addition to being Prime Minister of the Commonwealth, was also, for a season its Foreign Minister. So back the letter came, signed by the great man himself, (I held it up to the light each morning to make sure of that) advising that is was probably a good thing that I went to University first and, having graduated, that I then write a letter of application.

And being the good little Queenslander that I was, with a natural (some would say pre-programmed) predisposition to respond to authority, that is what I did.

When my mother discovered the letter (mothers in those days, unlike the present, seemed to have an untrammelled right of interception of adolescent correspondence), consternation broke out in the household. Mum was a swinging voter. Sometimes she voted Country Party. Other times DLP. And the thought of her son receiving correspondence from Australia's Socialist in Chief was a little too much to bear.

I watched with wide eyes on the flickering tube Gough and Margaret embark on their triumphal march to China in 1973. I read every word about who Gough met and what was said. His meeting with Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong.

So some years later, consistent with the instructions I had received from Australia's Chief Socialist, I fled Queensland, gained entry to the Australian National University in Canberra, where I studied Chinese Language and History - being by the way, the first of my family to attend University. My family having been in this country since 1790, and my own University education made possible because of the Whitlam revolution in higher education.

And occasionally, just occasionally, as I wandered beneath the gums between the Menzies Library and the Coombes Building at the ANU, clutching my character cards, muttering deep incantations to myself as I tried to commit this most beautiful language to memory, occasionally I would see the great man himself, post dismissal and post politics, striding purposefully about his new professional home in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies where he was a visiting fellow.

Here endeth the testimony, which has been a particularly long-winded way of my simply saying, "Thank You Gough".

And as a footnote, my mother these last three elections has voted Labor, proving that redemption is possible for us all.

I said I would talk about Australia's engagement of Asia. Of course, it is a misnomer in the first place to refer to anything called "Asia" because no such homogeneous entity exists. What, therefore, does being engaged with Asia mean? Asia itself is primarily a term of geographical convenience used to describe a range of countries whose internal diversity is invariably greater than their shared commonality. "Asia", for example, is home to six of the world's great religions (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Shinto) compared to Europe's two (Christianity and Judaism). Asian linguistic diversity is enormous compared with that of the Germanic and Romance languages of Europe and the broader family of Indo-European languages to which they belong. In this context, it would reflect our sophistication as a nation if the next generation of Australians were at least capable of accurately differentiating the cultures of the region rather than perpetuating the mythology of a homogeneous "Asia" to our north populated by a homogeneous race of "Asians". The crudity of these perceptions is itself an impediment to developing a productive understanding of the reality of regional diversity.

Although Australian attitudes to Asia have changed significantly over the 200 years of European settlement, Asia, in the Australian mind of the late twentieth century, had become a complex collage of disparate and, at times, conflicting images. There is no single, simple prism through which Australians perceive Asia. There are, of course, many prisms - the products of a patchwork of perceptions formed and fashioned as much by historical experience as by profound ignorance.

Australia's historical engagement with Asia did not begin well. In the mind of the pre-Federation Australian colonies, the peoples of the region were regarded with a combination of xenophobia at home and paternalism abroad. Unbridled racial hostility towards Chinese on the Victorian goldfields, legitimised by the equally unbridled white supremacism of publications such as the *Bulletin*, did much to cause early Australian colonists to view "Asia" with profound suspicion. "Asians" were seen as the proper province of either missionaries or military diplomacy - a fitting field of endeavour for the London Missionary Society in partnership with the Royal Navy. Australians, at best, became bit players in these grander schemes of empire. Missionaries were despatched from Melbourne to help covert the Chinese hordes, just as gunboats were sent from Sydney and Adelaide to Tianjin to help keep these same heathens under control for the benefit of the imperial powers. There was not a separate Australian view of Asia. Nor, given the circumstances of time, could we perhaps reasonably have expected one.

With the dawn of the twentieth century, xenophobia and paternalism yielded to strategic paranoia. Asia was no longer seen exclusively as a large untilled field of mission ripe for the harvest of souls. It came instead to be seen as a source of strategic threat to the continuation of Western imperial presence in the region in general and of the security of the Anglo-Celtic occupation of Australia in particular.

The fall of Saigon in 1975 marked the beginning of a new period of Australian perceptions of Asia; the lens through which we observed the region changed from strategic instability to one of economic opportunity. The creation of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the rapid development of the Newly Industrialised Countries of North-East Asia, economic liberalisation in China, and the creation of APEC transformed the Australian paradigm of Asia into one of economic growth, exports and investment.

We are, however, now entering a fourth phase of our engagement with Asia and, if any of you out there are historical determinists and are of the view that history is a matter of linear progression, the events of the last several years in this country have demonstrated that this is not the case. Hansonism at home and the Howard Doctrine abroad. Whatever consensus we once had on the project of our national engagement with the region is now in part unravelling.

There is now in this country a battle for ideas between those of us who support sustained and comprehensive engagement against those engaged in the business of incremental dis-engagement. And not just dis-engagement from our region. But a broader dis-engagement from the world - and from much of the institutional architecture that has developed over the last 50 years to govern the world.

There are those that argue that regional engagement is not as simple a proposition as it once was. The Asian Financial Crisis post 1997. The political transformation of Indonesia and, as a consequence, of East Timor. And now, since 2001, the war against Terrorism. All these factors, to para-phrase a commentary written recently by our Foreign Minister, making the region an infinitely more complex place than it once was - and demanding therefore a more textured response than we have had in the past.

I have news for Alexander. The region has always been a complex place. It was even complex in Gough's time as well. Fresh complexity does not, of itself, exonerate inertia or complicity in the politics of dis-engagement. And by and large, our partners in the region have now become quite good at deciphering the code language of

Australian domestic politics and they tend to spot dis-engagement when they see it. And that is what we've seen in recent years - be it by accident, design or, even more disturbingly, plain dis-interest. The reality is probably a disconcerting cocktail of all the above.

My simple proposition is this. For this nation of 19 million in a region of 3.5 billion, the logic of comprehensive engagement is inescapable. The view that you hear in some quarters that globalisation has somehow rendered Asia redundant to the Australian national interest is absurd. No one disputes the importance of North America. No one disputes the importance of Europe. Nor should anyone dispute the fact that nearly 60% of our exports still go to Asia; more than a million jobs in this economy depend on our exports to Asia and our security continues to be inextricably linked to Asia - as it has been since 1941.

The engagement debate continues to rage - in fits and starts. And it will do so for sometime yet. In that debate, it is critical that women and men of intellect, commitment and goodwill participate so that the project of comprehensive engagement begun in the Whitlam years can prevail. And become, once again, entrenched as the bipartisan consensus.

This leads me to the second point I said I would address this evening: namely, Gough's historical contribution to the cause of engagement, and what the character of that contribution, taken in the context of the times, has to say to us today. A prophet is never welcome in his own land.

That certainly was the case with our guest of honour this evening.

When, in the 1950's and 1960's, he led the debate within our own party to repudiate White Australia; when he led the intellectual debate against the prevailing foreign policy orthodoxy (otherwise called the Domino Theory); where he led the debate for Australia's diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic of China; and where he led the broader debate in support of comprehensive regional engagement - the common feature of all the above is that Gough took risks.

In the politics of the 1950's and 1960's, this was not necessarily the way to win friends and influence people - within one's own party, let alone the country at large. The political culture at the time was a cocktail of "reds under beds", "the yellow peril", a protected, inward looking economy spawned under the policy architecture of McEwanism, and a social conservatism in which BA Santamaria rejoiced.

The message of Whitlam in the midst of all this was that he saw the future - and did not resile from meeting it head on.

It was not all Camelot. There were failures. There were frustrations. And there were compromises. There always are. Such is the nature of politics. Gough himself, as Margaret has often concurred, is fallible, capable of human error - albeit rarely. But to take one example, to address the Parliament, as he did in 1954, in the midst of the McCarthyism of the time, and argue the case for the diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic of China, took some courage.

He saw the future and did not resile from meeting it head on. He showed us that, in setting in foreign policy agendas, like domestic policy agendas, he who dares wins. Which brings me to my final point this evening: where to from here in our great project of regional engagement?

I believe that as we craft a new vision for Australia, we must be clear in our purpose and resolute in our prosecution of that purpose.

What are the ingredients of this vision? They are, I think, simply these:

Together, as Australians, we must build:

- A secure Australia;
- A competitive Australia; and
- A compassionate Australia.
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A secure Australia. A competitive Australia. And a compassionate Australia.

The first responsibility of any nation state is to guarantee the security of its citizens. Not only must they be free of classical military threat, so too they must be free from the new threats to our security - terrorism, narcotics and the various elements of what the literature generally describes as so-called "soft security".

However, if the events of September 11 demonstrate one thing and one thing alone, soft security is now hard security and what the nation now requires is a new, integrated and total approach to security policy which responds comprehensively to the new environment. The Swedes traditionally have called this "total defence". In the new environment, we would do well to adopt that model to our new circumstances.

A secure Australia, therefore, means doing new things well. It is also about doing old things better. Old things like having decent relations with our neighbours and the region at large. It remains, I think, a fairly basic axiom that if we have good relations with our neighbours and the region, our security is enhanced. If our relations are poor, our security is impaired. There is no particular rocket science in this. But when we take this message to the people, a secure Australia means an Australia not just with a robust defence but also an Australia comprehensively engaged in the neighbourhood of which we are part.

In addition to a secure Australia, Australians also want a competitive Australia.

Protectionism is anathema to this nation's long term economic interest.

It is also anathema to the interest of the developing world.

But a competitive Australia is not simply about the size of the tariff wall - reduced, as it has been, by successive Labor Governments since Whitlam.

It is also about having a world class education system, a world class training system, world class universities, world class research institutes, world class technologies in ICT and biotechnology.

And to do this requires leadership. It requires vision. And none of this means Government simply vacating the field, as appears to be the current orthodoxy, waiting in vain for Adam Smith's invisible hand to do its work.

What the neo-Liberals often forget is that any proper reading of Smith renders education as a public good - not a private market.

And what of the third dimension of our national vision. A secure Australia. A competitive Australia. And a compassionate Australia.

There are some in this country who seem to believe these are mutually exclusive propositions. That is, if you make this country secure, that if you make it competitive,

that somehow, by some inexplicable mathematical process, we must diminish its compassion.

I do not hold that view.

I believe Australians are an intrinsically compassionate people. Look at the response to bush fires, to flood and to drought. Australians, in our historical experience and certainly in my living experience, respond with open hearts when they see human need - irrespective of whether that need is at home or abroad.

I believe that, as a people and as individuals, we are diminished if we ignore the sufferings of other human beings.

In fact, we are not fully human unless we engage that suffering. Be it in Afghanistan, in refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran, the rolling famine in North Korea or the appalling underdevelopment that is Africa.

In doing so, we must be regionally engaged. We must be globally engaged. We must honour our global obligations. And that means our international treaty obligations as well. Not only is it right that we do so. It is also in our self-interest that we do so because we ourselves depend on the international system.

I say again that I believe Australians are intrinsically a compassionate lot. I believe it is the job of leadership to make us proud of that compassion. Not to despise it. Not to demean it. And not to appeal to nor to appease the darker forces also at work in our human nature.

A secure Australia. A competitive Australia. A compassionate Australia. As a nation, we can walk and chew gum at the same time. We can manage all three. Other countries do so. So can we.

Of course none of this is easy. All of this requires leadership. Leadership from all of us. Leadership of the type demonstrated by Gough a generation ago.

And that is the task to which we, on our side of the shop, are now committed.

I note with sadness Gough's concluding remarks. He said *"this is a period in our nation's affairs where I am less confident than any time in the past 30 years that Australia is progressing purposefully towards the objective of Australian engagement with Asia"*.

Unfortunately he is perfectly right about our present. Our challenge, as the generation that follows him, is to prove him wrong about our future.

Gough, Margaret - the Great Helmsmen (or should I say Helmspersons) of the nation. We, the Nation, salute you.