

2013 'Weary' Dunlop lecture by The Honourable Tony Abbott MP

It is an honour to deliver this Sir Edward “Weary” Dunlop Asia Link Lecture. “Weary”, apparently was an ironic nickname. People called him “Weary” because he never was.

There is nothing ironic, though, in naming the Asialink lecture after “Weary” Dunlop. As a prisoner on the Burma Railway, he could hardly have had a worse introduction to Asia. Yet, as a medical specialist, he returned repeatedly to Asia to help train surgeons under the post-war Colombo Plan.

Weary Dunlop was a surgeon, prisoner of war, philanthropist and Victoria’s first ever rugby union international. He could inspire hope when all seemed lost and he could forgive those who had been his implacable enemies.

Instead of disappearing into the prosperity of comfortable, post-war Australia, he reached back into Asia. On trip after trip, he helped to hone the skills of his medical colleagues across our region and helped to forge some of the connections that have transformed the way we see our neighbours and the way they see us.

Weary Dunlop wasn’t the only Australian of the war time generation to transcend magnificently any bitterness towards the Japanese.

My former constituent and local Liberal Party branch president, the late Captain Norman White, another POW, was the much loved convenor of a monthly Japanese business lunch in Sydney.

The suggestion that Australians of that era regarded Asia as a place to fly over (or to sail past) on the way to England is just dead wrong.

Our society has not been entirely free of misunderstanding, prejudice, and perhaps even racism in its darker corners. It’s also marked by curiosity about the wider world, impatience with received truth, and a willingness to give almost anything and anyone the benefit of the doubt. The easy going disposition of most Australians plus the beginning of backpacker tourism in the 1950s and the rise of the global village has made Asia an exhilarating place for us to visit and to make friends more than somewhere exotic and sometimes strange.

The parties I lead have long been more alive to Asia’s opportunities than its challenges. It was, after all, Sir Robert Menzies who first called the “far east” the “near north”.

It was Sir Percy Spender who established the Colombo Plan which educated the leaders of our region here in Australia – perhaps our greatest ever exercise in soft power.

It was Menzies and Sir John McEwen who negotiated the 1957 trade treaty with Japan.

Japan’s then-prime minister Kishi, the grandfather of today’s prime minister Abe, observed that the trade treaty and the Colombo Plan were proof of Australia’s “awakened Asia-mindedness”.

It was Harold Holt who ended the White Australia policy.

It was Malcolm Fraser who began large scale Asian immigration.

And it was John Howard who signed the deals which led to China becoming our largest trading partner.

As John Howard observed in his 1997 Weary Dunlop Lecture, “history that is written with a chip on the shoulder tends to be very poorly balanced”.

Like Prime Minister Howard, I acknowledge the achievements of all previous governments, not just Liberal ones.

Australia’s deepening relationship with Asia started with Menzies and has continued without substantial interruption ever since.

Under my leadership, the Coalition has emphasised the need for our foreign policy to have a “Jakarta not Geneva” focus.

At some level, Australia is engaged wherever there is a citizen to protect, a value to uphold, or an interest to advance. Australia does have global interests, so developments in America, Europe and the Middle East often concern us.

That said, we need to focus our efforts where we can make the most difference. For some years now, the centre of world economic power has been shifting decisively and dramatically to Asia and to our part of the world.

Today, seven of Australia’s top ten trading partners are in Asia. Together, they account for just over 50 per cent of our trade.

On current trends, China is on track to become the world’s largest economy within a couple of decades.

There is much to welcome in this. As with Japan, Australia has played a part in the rise of China. Our iron ore furnishes much of the steel that’s building its cities; our coal and gas powers much of its booming industry; and our universities and colleges have opened their doors to many of its people.

Yes, our friendship with China is more recent than that with Japan and less developed than that with the United States. Nevertheless, it is more and more important to us.

Our relationship with China has come further in the past 40 years than that with any other country: from a country with which we did not even have diplomatic relations to our biggest trading partner and largest source of immigrants.

China’s rising economic power has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. Indeed, the emergence of the Chinese middle class in little more than a generation may qualify as the most remarkable transformation in human history. Inevitably, economic success means more integration with other countries as well as more competition with them.

We accept the modernisation of China’s armed forces because that is what all countries want for their military. Of course, the more successful the country is, the more capacity it has to throw its weight around; but it also has less reason to do so and more to lose from the attempt. Growing power is accompanied by increased

responsibility.

In Australia's experience so far, a stronger and more confident China has been a better friend and there is no reason why this shouldn't be the experience of other countries too. We already have a strong relationship with China based on shared interests and I would hope that, over time, it might be based more on shared values. The rise of China, of course, is just one part of the more general rise of Asia.

Within 50 years, another Asian giant – India – is likely to be among the three largest economies in the world.

With India, Australia has democracy, the rule of law and the English language in common – not to mention cricket! India is also a source of our migrants to rival China and the United Kingdom.

Partly because of India's long preoccupation with the non-aligned movement and statist economics; and partly because of Australia's historical amnesia and fascination with China, this relationship has been neglected.

There was the Rudd-Gillard Government's off-again/on-again attitude to uranium sales on our side; and on theirs, the fact that no Indian Prime Minister has visited – even for a Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting – since Rajiv Gandhi. Still, no one should underestimate India now; nor its potential to be a global superpower in this century.

Although Japan has hardly grown economically in the past three decades, it remains the world's third largest economy, a mature liberal democracy, Australia's second largest trading partner, and an important military ally.

Japan is understandably anxious about China's ambitions in the China Sea. Australia, for its part, takes no sides in territorial disputes but insists that they be addressed peacefully and in accordance with international law. Whatever the historical rights and wrongs, no one's current best interests would be advanced by threats of force, let alone use of it.

Then there's Indonesia, Australia's nearest large neighbour, a country whose size, proximity and potential makes it our most important overall relationship.

Although one hundred million Indonesians still earn less than \$2 a day, its GDP already matches ours (at least in purchasing power terms) and, most likely, will be several times ours in a few decades.

With India, Indonesia is the emerging, democratic superpower of Asia.

Being Indonesia's "trusted partner" is easier said than done, given the media's tendency to play to stereotypes and past disagreements over East Timor.

Still, there is already a very wide range of military and academic interaction plus the affinity born from hundreds of thousands of Australian tourists in Indonesia each year and tens of thousands of Indonesian students here in Australia.

Over time, I hope to see more Australian students in Indonesia and more Indonesian tourists in Australia as Indonesia's economy grows and our mutual understanding expands.

In the meantime, the new government is working on structures that can absorb the passions unleashed when Australia could be made to seem oblivious to Indonesia's good will or when Indonesia could seem hard on an Australian citizen.

Challenged over whether he was pro-Asia or pro-America, John Howard famously observed that Australia did not have to choose between its history and its geography - particularly as America remains deeply engaged in the Asia-Pacific region.

Almost uniquely for a great power, America has used its strength not to weaken others but to strengthen them. That's why a strong America is good for Australia and for our friends and neighbours in the region.

More or less openly, almost every Asian country wants to retain a strong American presence. Even China understands how much it has benefited from the global stability and economic freedom that US power has largely brought about. Any significant decline in the United States' influence and interest in our region would be significantly destabilising and therefore bad for everyone.

The growing economic strength in our region gives Australia more opportunities but, if not matched by commensurate strengthening of our own economy, it also makes us more vulnerable.

A stronger economy is the foundation of successful foreign policy as well as of successful domestic policy. Cutting taxes and reducing red tape to boost productivity is ultimately as relevant to our international standing as it is to our domestic prosperity. The Coalition's economic reforms are not at odds with any aspect of our foreign policy but are necessary to make all our policies work to their best.

Redirecting flagged future increases in spending from foreign aid to domestic infrastructure should actually boost our influence in the region when it helps to bring about the stronger economy on which our international standing rests.

After all, Australia's international clout does not rest on the size of our aid budget but on the size of our economy and the weight it gives us in the wider world.

Regardless of the relative size of the aid budget, during disasters and emergencies Australia will always be there to lend a helping hand.

John Howard's swift gift of \$1 billion to help Indonesia recover from the Indian Ocean tsunami was an important element in the growing rapport between our countries.

Indonesia is Australia's largest recipient of foreign aid. At some point, Indonesia's overall economic strength will make further Australian aid unnecessary - as has already become the case with China and India.

As far as possible, Australian aid should be designed to enable other countries to stand on their own two feet as quickly as possible. It is good that Australian citizens contribute to a range of charities dedicated to improving the individual lives of poor families in poor countries. The Australian Government's aid, however, should be directed towards improving other countries' governance and strengthening their economies.

Reducing the rate of increase in the aid budget over the next few years will enable the new government to ensure that our aid really is best targeted and most effective. Aid must mean doing good for donees rather than merely feeling good for donors. The government retains the Millennium Development Goal aspiration of spending 0.5 per cent of gross national income on aid but is concerned that it not reinforce

stereotypes of a rich first-world and a poor third-world that are already rapidly being overtaken by events.

In any event, trade rather than aid is the best way to sustainably boost poor countries' prosperity – as the extraordinary success of Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, Thailand, Malaysia, and more recently, China and India demonstrate. The more quickly countries can integrate with global markets, the better for their citizens.

Australia generally allows the products of our Pacific island neighbours freely to enter our markets. We support freer trade on a multilateral, plurilateral and bilateral basis. We already have free trade agreements with New Zealand, the United States, Singapore, Thailand, Chile and Malaysia, and are working on them with Japan, China, India and Indonesia. Then there's the Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade negotiation that's making good progress.

Tonight, I can confirm that a free trade deal has been negotiated with South Korea, subject to detailed consideration by the Cabinet and by the Parliament.

This is a significant breakthrough towards a deal that started in 2009 but has been stalled for eighteen months. Better access to Korea for Australian agricultural produce will help Australian farmers and Korean consumers; while better access to Australia for Korean manufactured products will help Korean workers and Australian consumers.

In this way, the desire for a better life can drive the kind of interactions which ultimately change human hearts and build a better world as well as a richer one.

The universal dream of a more peaceful, harmonious world will only be achieved if people everywhere are more aware that what unites us all is more important than anything that divides us. It means encouraging people to put themselves in others' shoes so that everyone is more drawn to the golden rule of ethics: to treat others as you would yourself be treated.

In our own region, this means more Australians who can speak Asian languages, catch cultural meanings and navigate local networks.

It means starting with children at school. The decline in the study of foreign languages is a worrying erosion of Australia's broader international literacy.

In 1960, for instance, 40 per cent of year 12 students studied a second language compared to just 12 per cent today. Asian language take-up has been steadily declining over the past decade such that barely 1000 year 12 students across our country are enrolled to study Indonesian.

The new Government will work with the states to reverse this trend.

Last year in Bali, I was part of a high-level meeting between Indonesia and Australia. Of the seven people in the room, six had been educated in Australian universities.

Over the past couple of decades, Australian universities have built a \$15 billion a year export industry around fee-paying students. The number of Asian students in Australian educational institutions has grown from 170,000 a decade ago to 320,000 now. Of the two and a half million international students in Australia over the past decade, 1.9 million have been from Asia.

It is a largely market-based version of the old Colombo Plan.

The new government wants international education to be a two way street. Our New Colombo Plan will be different and better than the original, adding an outward bound component to the original inward one. Yes, our region has much to learn from us, but we also have much to learn from our region.

So, under the New Colombo Plan, thousands of Australian undergraduates will study at the universities of Asia and the Pacific, complementing the thousands who come to Australia to study each year. We will return the compliment that the region has paid to us by learning as much in their countries as they have learnt in ours.

Over time, a period of study in the Asia Pacific should become a “rite of passage” for Australian undergraduates.

Over the next five years, the Government will invest \$100 million in the New Colombo Plan. A pilot scheme involving Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan and Singapore will operate in the coming academic year with a full roll-out in 2015.

Another important element of the New Colombo Plan will be an internship programme involving the business community.

It’s all part of restoring our focus and reinforcing our mindset to reflect our geographic reality and our economic future by deepening our links with our neighbours.

This is hardly news to the supporters of Asialink. You have worked for many years to deepen relationship with our region.

I thank you and congratulate for all you have done; and hope that the work of the new government might complement yours.

This is always the challenge: to keep faith with the best values of our forebears, and to build on them to face the challenges of today and tomorrow. Weary Dunlop was a great teacher for his time and an inspiration for ours and would, I’m sure, be pleased with what we have in mind.