

TRANSCRIPT OF THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP, PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA AT THE ASIALINK CONVERSATIONS DINNER

HO CHI MINH CITY, 20 NOVEMBER 2006

Thank you very much honoured guests, Sid, it's a great pleasure for me and for Janette to come to this dinner tonight, at the end of our visit to Vietnam, the first visit that I have paid to this country in any capacity and the first visit to Vietnam by a serving Prime Minister since 1994. I'm particularly conscious that the host organisation for tonight's dinner is Asialink, because it was to this organisation that I went as a hopeful Opposition Leader, some 12 years ago almost in 1995, to deliver an address on the future foreign policy of the Coalition if it were to be elected to office in the election which we knew would occur early in 1996. I must say that I went to that meeting with a fair amount of baggage in some foreign policy circles. I was regarded by somebody...I was regarded as somebody who wouldn't comfortably deal with the countries of the region, and that was a view not only expressed as you might imagine, and naturally by my political opponents, but also by some learned commentators, self-appointed and otherwise.

But I did and I remember the address very well. And I remember the courtesy that was extended to me. And I've kept a particular regard for Asialink ever since. And it has been an organisation that in a very bipartisan, or non-partisan I think is the right way of putting it, way endeavoured to build relations between Australia and the nations of Asia. And these 'Conversations' are but the latest manifestation of that commitment. And as I think back over the last 10-and-a-half years, and I think of the context in which these 'Conversations' have taken place, there have been some truly astonishing changes in our region. I think in many respects, still the most remarkable change that has occurred in our region has been the wonderful transformation to democracy by Indonesia – the largest Islamic nation in the world, Australia's nearest neighbour, a country which is now the third largest democracy in the world and a country whose leader is viewed properly with enormous respect and regard, not only in the region, but around the world.

But, of course, that transformation in Indonesia is not the only, by any means, transformation. The country which is our host at the present time has continued to change and develop, to impress and to leave its mark on the region. I hadn't been to Vietnam before and that was my loss. I have been impressed with the generosity of spirit of the people, their entrepreneurial attitude. As someone with my political leanings, it's wonderful to see the embrace of small and medium-sized enterprises and the belief that they are very much part of the future of this country.

And this afternoon I had the quite moving experience of addressing the graduation ceremony, just across the road, of RMIT Vietnam. And to hear that magnificent young man who got the special award, give such an eloquent address about his hopes for the future of this country and his commitment to learning and the dedication he brings to opportunities he's been given, made me feel that there are many things that from time to time Australia and her institutions get



truly right. And the commitment of that wonderful Melbourne institution, Australian institution, RMIT in this country, is certainly one of them.

Australia's relations with Vietnam have of course gone through a number of iterations – and we're all aware of that – and I was especially reminded of them earlier today and it's important to understand the process of change, and friendship and reconciliation that has occurred over the last 30 or 40 years. To know that the two countries now see themselves as sharing a future in a very positive, cooperative fashion in our region, to recognise that we still, of course, have our different political systems – and one of the things I have learnt over the last 10 years, or perhaps one of the things I have continued to believe was correct over the last 10-and-a-half years is that there's never any point, if you want to build a strong relationship with another society, there's never any point in pretending that certain differences don't exist because what you are in effect saying is that you don't take the relationship seriously enough and you pretend that somehow or rather you can ignore the differences, and in the end, you are seen as not really interested in the relationship. There are differences and we understand that. There are deep political and cultural differences. But there are common bonds, a shared membership of the fastest growing economic region in the world. The most amazing transformation is occurring, the centre of gravity of the world's middle class is shifting to this part of the world and it will remain here for the foreseeable future.

The extraordinary growth of China, to which I'll return in a moment, and the continued path towards the same goal of India, means that in a few short years we'll have middle class populations of between four and eight hundred million people in this part of

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the world. And for the first time since the industrial revolution, that will rival the dominance of the world's middle class by Europe and North America.

The bilateral relationship between Vietnam and Australia is part of that. Today as you know I opened the, or launched, I think it's been open for a while, but I was delighted to be associated with it, the BlueScope Steel investment here in Vietnam, near Ho Chi Minh City, which is the largest single investment in this country by an Australian enterprise. Our bilateral trade was over \$5 billion in 2005-06, that's a 33 per cent increase over the previous year. Our people-to-people links, so fundamental to any bilateral relationship, are very significant. I've spoken about RMIT. In addition, we have 5700 Vietnamese students in Australia, there are some 7000 Vietnamese students associated with Australian-linked institutions in this country and most importantly of all there are almost 200,000 Vietnamese or Australians of Vietnamese heritage.

And as I walked on my regular early morning foray around one of the lakes in Hanoi, and negotiated a path between the local citizenry who were doing their morning exercises, I think two or three of those 200,000 either, having returned to Vietnam or perhaps paying a visit here, were there because they recognised me and we exchanged some pleasantries and they spoke warmly of the time that they had spent in Australia.

So it's a very good relationship and the Government of this country did itself proud with the hosting of the APEC gathering, a most important event in the history of Vietnam over the last 30 years. APEC, of course, is the most important forum of which Australia is a participant and I agree very much with what Sidney Myer had to say about APEC. It is the premier organisation – the others are important – but could I also say when talking about regional architecture and talking about regional fora, we shouldn't get too hung up about the organisations – in the end it's the shared objectives and it's the bilateral relationships that are the most important.

I was very interested in what Sid Myer had to say in his report of the 'Conversations' about negotiating sometimes between the conflicting interests of the big powers. I do think that he made a very valid point about Australia's capacity to do that. One of the extraordinary things about the last 10-and-a-half years is that Australia has simultaneously built a very close, pragmatic, productive, and I believe enduring relationship with China, yet at the same time has become even closer to the United States. And that experience challenges one of the more absurd propositions often put around that there is a sort of a plus and a minus in relationships with countries, particularly large countries in the

region. And that if you get too close to one, you pay a price in your relations with the other. Our experience, in respect of China and the United States, could not be more different. I think what it does demonstrate is that Australia is seen, properly, as a country which has both a presence and a significance in the region, it has a respect because of its great economic strength, it also has a regard because of its good faith dealings with a variety of nations, it brings assets and qualities to the region not brought by other countries but it is also, I believe, respectful of large power realities.

It's also seen a loyal country. Now that may sound a very old fashioned expression to use, but all nations respect a certain consistency and loyalty. I think of my country's association when I use that expression – not automatically with the United States as some of you may think I do, now of course we are a close and unapologetic friend of the United States, and I've seen it as my responsibility as Prime Minister to further build on that because I think it is in our nation's interest to be close to the United States, and I think it's in the interests of every country in this region to have good relations with the United States because it is still a nation of immense power and goodwill, and will remain so and, in my view, is likely to remain the most powerful economically and military for an indefinite period into the future. But I think of our very close relationship with Japan, a relationship that was built, initially, in the years immediately following World War II when the prospects of that occurring were seen as rather dismal and it required a certain amount of political courage by, in particular, the then trade minister and deputy prime minister, John McEwen, in signing the commerce agreement that we will mark 50 years of next year. And it remains a very significant relationship for our country that we have kept that close relationship and we have, over the last 10 years, notwithstanding that relationship and also the very close relationship with the United States, built a very productive relationship with China.

I think all this tells you that in the end what really matters is the substance of a bilateral relationship that you have with a nation. And if you can bring some quality, some assets, some goodwill and some good faith to that relationship then the other relationships that you have are not going to work against it.

I don't think we should ever see a foreign policy as being something that perpetually requires you to make choices between different countries. You have to, from time to time, make choices about the values that are important to your own society. But this is a region, and we're talking about our region, of enormous variety. And I thought the reference that was made to the significance of cultural and religious difference is important. In the last few years we've had talk about inter-faith dialogue in a manner that you never heard of



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10 years ago and that, of course, has been a, plainly been a product of the concern that people have felt after the rise of terrorism and the need to separate out from our attitudes towards Islam, our natural hostility towards those who pervert that great religion for their own obscene purposes. And to the extent that we can, whatever our faith, or if we have no faith, work to a better understanding of Islam and its positive contribution, and to recognise the need to guard against some knee-jerk criticism of a particular faith because of the way in which some people dishonour it, we will be all the better.

Australia is a nation that, for many years now and for an indefinite period into the future, will always see its immediate interests and concerns as being tied up with the Asian-Pacific region. Our trade, our strategic responses, a significant part of our investment, they are very much bound up with this part of the world. And the emphasis that Asialink has placed on our links with the societies of Asia, has played a very, very important role in my country's understanding of that reality. But we're also a nation, as I have been at pains to point out on occasions over the last decade, we're also a nation that has links with different parts of the world. And one of the advantages I suppose of being Australia is that we do bring to this region those linkages with Europe, by reason of history and culture and political system, and of course our very close links with North America. And it does, so far from being a liability, it does enable us to add value to the relationship we have with this region.

But it is not possible for anybody to travel around this region, as I do frequently - next week I will be paying a short bilateral visit to Malaysia and then in December attending the East Asia Summit in Cebu in the Philippines. It is not possible to do that now without being struck daily, in all the encounters one has, with the extensive links that Australia now has with the countries in our region. And they're represented here tonight, the commercial links, the wonderful work done by our foreign service, and Austrade and of course increasingly the people-to-people links. I tell the story, well it's not a story, it's a fact, that when I meet many Asian leaders, that

15 per cent of the electors enrolled in the division of Bennelong, which I represent in the national parliament, are of Chinese ethnicity. Sydney of course is now the home to a very significant Chinese population, it's not the only Asian population in Sydney, but it's certainly the largest. And combination of Mandarin and Cantonese is now the most, if you can combine them, is now the most widely spoken foreign language in Australia - and that's a little fact, a little vignette, that's probably known to a lot of you but when you tell that to an Asian leader or even more so to a European leader they're perfectly astonished. And it's just an illustration of the way in which we are naturally and comfortably and permanently part of this region and see our future in it. But I think we have done it in a way that has not altered our own sense of who we are, and our particular characteristics, and what we bring to our region and what we bring to the world.

So can I finish by saying two things, probably repeating two things but I think it's important to finish with this emphasis: that the journey, the bilateral journey that Australia and Vietnam have travelled, over the last few decades, has been an important one, it's been a very positive one and I have certainly been greatly struck in the few days I've been here by the very evident desire of the people of Vietnam to be friends with the people of Australia. And that's important, it's important to me as Prime Minister of Australia and I know it's important to many Australians as well.

And finally can I again congratulate you, Sidney, and your great organisation for what you have done over many years to foster a better understanding of relations between our two nations. And Australia has, I believe, done a very good job of reaching out to the region, of seeing herself involved in the affairs and the future of the region, and sharing the hopes and aspirations of the hundreds of millions of people that comprise the Asian-Pacific region, of which we will be forever be a part and I know a very active and willing participant.

Thank you.