



2018 Asialink Sir Edward 'Weary' Dunlop Asia Medal



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Awarded to

Mr Peter N Varghese

CITATION

When Peter Varghese decided to end a 38-year career as one of Australia's most esteemed public servants in 2016, he did so in typically self-deprecating fashion. He described himself as "an accidental public servant". Peter claimed to have stumbled into government after university while he was still trying to figure out what to do with his life, as so many others have done. We can be grateful he did.

Peter left an undeniably important mark in Canberra and various Asian capitals, while working quietly, deliberately and mostly behind-the-scenes. Weary Dunlop would have approved of the combination of dedication and humility. By virtue of character and contribution, there could be few worthier recipients than Peter of an award that marks a career-long commitment to improving Australia's understanding of, and integration with, Asia.

There was nothing accidental about what Peter brought to public life and to public policy. As diplomat, foreign policy maker, and now educational leader, Peter has endeavoured to ensure Australia embraces both the opportunities and challenges presented by our immediate region.

He has been an architect of policy – for example, heading the secretariat that drafted Australia's first White Paper on foreign and trade policy in 1996-1997 and authoring a ground-breaking plan for Australia's economic engagement with India through to 2035. In this capacity, Peter has been a vigorous advocate for deepening Australia's economic, security and cultural ties with Asia.



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But he also has been a wise advisor to prime ministers and foreign ministers, aiding both Coalition and Labor governments navigate the increasing complex and dynamic environment within which policy is set.

On Peter's watch, Australia's strategic circumstances and the nature of diplomacy and foreign policy experienced fundamental change. Together we have witnessed the relentless rise of China, the relative strategic decline of the United States and the emergence of important new centres of economic opportunity and competition in Asia. New technologies have burst on to the scene, changing the way we communicate and compressing decision times.

As Peter noted in a valedictory speech in 2016, it was never more vital to have strong national governance and a public service capable of supporting government with impartial advice, high integrity and "a capacity for deep policy thinking".

Seniors and peers agree that in a succession of overseas posts and roles in Canberra Peter delivered on all those counts. The highlights of a remarkable career include overseas postings as a junior diplomat to Vienna and Washington in the 1980s, followed by appointments as High Commissioner to Malaysia between 2000 and 2002 and to India between 2009 and 2012.

At home, Peter proved his calibre as a speech writer to former foreign minister Gareth Evans and senior international advisor to prime minister John Howard between at the time of the invasion of Iraq. After serving in the prime minister's office, he was appointed director-general of the peak intelligence body, the Office of National Assessments, between 2004 and 2009. In 2010, Peter was named an Officer of the Order of Australia in recognition of his work in public administration, foreign policy and intelligence. The pinnacle of his government career, and a sign of how well regarded he was by both sides of politics, came when the Labor government made him Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in 2012.

Peter retired from the public service in July 2016 to take up the post of Chancellor of his alma mater, the University of Queensland. Even there, Peter has been a tireless advocate of expanding the university's international profile and connections. He has recognised the necessity of forging foreign partnerships and driving standards in a globally more competitive education market, especially in Asia.

The halls of academia have not dampened Peter's appetite for a practical contribution to public service or public policy. In April last year, he delivered to the prime minister a 500-page report, An India Economic Strategy to 2035: Navigating



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from Potential to Delivery. Its value was noted in Canberra and New Delhi. India's former foreign secretary, Shyam Saran, praised it as "a timely, sound and realistic blueprint" for relations and an "excellent" starting point for a counterpart Indian strategy.

Peter's authorship of the India strategy highlights another reason why he is such a worthy recipient of the Weary Dunlop Medal. Born in Kenya of Indian parents from the state of Kerala, his personal journey is as remarkable as his professional one. It embodies the spirit of Weary's own mission to improve Australia's understanding and engagement of Asia through his work for the Colombo Plan and numerous visits as a physician and teacher to India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Thailand in the 1950s and 60s.

The Australia that Peter arrived in at the age of eight in 1964 harbored a diffident view of Asia. It was a European country, maintaining its strongest ties to Britain and the USA. It was in the grip of fighting the quasi-war of Confrontation with Indonesia. It had no diplomatic relations with Asia's biggest country, China.

As Peter has noted, the White Australia policy was still firmly in place. But through hard work and a belief in education, Peter and his family of eight siblings forged a new life here. At the University of Queensland, where his father taught, Peter took a Bachelor of Arts with Honors and a University Medal in history in 1978.

The experience of marrying an Indian family identity with the reality of life in the parochial Australia of the 1960s and 70s, helped shape Peter's worldview. He is a proud Australian, who has spoken of the value of multiculturalism, and the richness and opportunity our diversity provides us.

But Peter's vigorous advocacy for Australia's integration with Asia is balanced by a belief in the significance of the values we bring to the region. In accepting an honorary doctorate from UQ in 2013, Peter called on Australians to engage the world "with a clear sense of who we are and what we believe in".

While we do not force our values on others, we hold true to the values that define us. In doing so, we "never forget that foreign policy is not just about our hard interests. It is also about our values and the principles which we want to see embedded in the international system."

Peter brought that perspective to decades of diligent effort in advancing the quality of public administration and of Australia's place in its region; as he put it, the creation of an Australia "which is outward looking, which understands the diversity



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of its region, which is comfortable in the company of other cultures and which instinctively accepts that an Australia open to people and ideas is a richer and immensely more secure community.”

Weary Dunlop would approve.