



*Remarks by Mr Peter Varghese AO, Chancellor of The University of Queensland, on receiving the Sir Edward 'Weary' Dunlop Asia Medal*

**Asialink Chairman's dinner, Sydney, 13 March 2019**

Thank you, Lindley, for those generous remarks.

Thank you, Gareth, for a magisterial lecture, characteristically full of substance and solutions. I once worked as a speechwriter for Gareth. It was the definition of redundancy.

To Andrew Robb, Penny Burt and Mukund Narayana Murti, can I thank Asialink for this honour. The medal for sustained work on Asian engagement really belongs to Asialink because you have been such a consistent and important advocate and promoter of Australia's links to Asia. No more so than Andrew Robb. And I also want to acknowledge Sid Myer and the Myer family for their long standing support for the work of Asialink.

To my wife, Margaret, without whom there would have been little achieved in my professional life, a very special thank you - although I suspect she may think less Asia and more domestic might have been a much better policy mix.

I am humbled by this honour. Humbled to be in the company of such distinguished previous recipients who include a former prime minister, two foreign ministers, including of course Gareth Evans, and other great Australians such as Dick Woolcott and Ross Garnaut, and Sister Mary Theodore whose lifelong work in India with the disabled was such an inspiration.

Humbled by the connection to Weary Dunlop who was a great leader and an inspiration: a man who was entitled to be bitter but chose instead to walk the path of his better angels. As Sir Ninian Stephen said of Weary Dunlop: "With perhaps only Douglas Mawson, of all Australians, he shares a lone eminence of sustained heroism and superb achievement".

These are challenging times for Australia and Asia. We face, to adapt a phrase from the late Tom Wolfe, a "bonfire of certainties". Optimism is the currency of diplomacy. But these days some of us still wake up optimists but go to bed pessimists.

We are currently in the middle of a profound transition in international relations and that is probably the worst time to put it into perspective. Some of what we are seeing today are exaggerations or aberrations, which are unlikely to become enduring trends. But others go to the bedrock of global geo-economics. Deciding which is which is far from easy.

What we can be certain about is that Asia's place in Australia's future will only grow. It will not be the Asia of the last four decades: the Asia, which combined strong economic growth with strategic stability; the Asia of straightforward choices.

The next four decades will likely see a contested Asia, a strategically ruptured Asia searching for a new settling point. An Asia of multipolarity. An Asia, which both helps to drive global growth and grapples with the large challenges of economic reform.

If that sounds like a hard road, we should never lose faith that it can also for Australia be a fruitful journey.

We cannot eliminate the uncertainties ahead. But there is much we can and should do about positioning Australia in Asia. That means understanding our advantages in proximity, in strong institutions, in high skills, in world-class universities, and in complementary economies.

The truth is there are few countries, which are better placed to reap the economic returns of closer engagement with a changing Asia than Australia.

But for Australia Asia is so much more than a market. It is where our security will be determined and through migration and connections forged by diaspora, communities it will over time exert a larger influence on our society, on the way we see ourselves and are seen by others.

For two centuries, Australians have juggled history, geography, values and culture. We may not see it clearly yet, but we are creating something distinctive: a diverse but cohesive society; a nation grounded in the values of the enlightenment but open to new ideas; a community with a strong sense of place but recognising that we must make our way in a world where the centre of gravity is shifting.

And for all of the baggage we carry on issues such as race, and our historical fears of Asia, Australians, more than any other country I am familiar with, show a willingness to accept people for whom they are not where they come from. There are, and always will be, exceptions to these traits but taken together they are a wonderful asset in our engagement with Asia.

Yes, there are uncertainties and yes, we will have to make some tough choices, strategic and economic. But if we play to our strengths, if we are clear eyed about our interests and values, if we engage with both our head and our heart, Australia can be exquisitely positioned in Asia.

That is my main message. Australia cannot solve the geopolitical challenges facing the region. But we can prepare for them and think through what form we want them to take. That is what the burden of leadership is ultimately most about: not just anticipating trends but working to shape them with a sense of social and moral purpose and a commitment to the best interests of our community. It is what Weary Dunlop would have striven for.