

ASIALINK DINNER: WEARY DUNLOP AWARD PRESENTATION

Remarks by Professor the Hon Gareth Evans AC QC on Presentation of 2015 Sir Edward “Weary” Dunlop Asia Medal, Asialink Dinner, Sydney, 16 June 2016

Thank you for the honour you have done me in adding my name to the long list of distinguished recipients of this award – which brings together, in formidable combination, one of my all-time favourite Australian organizations, and one of my, and just about everyone else’s, all-time favourite Australians.

I have loved Asialink since its foundation for the breadth and consistency and sheer quality of its vision and commitment to closing the distance between Australia and Asia; getting Australians to engage with the region; and getting us to think of ourselves as part of this region and as real partners of every country within it.

And I have loved the late Weary Dunlop not only as a magnificent human being– as close as we have to a secular saint for his legendary role on the Burma-Thailand Railway – but for the way in which, inspired rather than embittered by the horror of his wartime experiences, and believing strongly that Australia’s future depended on our learning to live in and with Asia, he became one of the great pathfinders of Australia’s Asian engagement.

So I could not be prouder to be receiving now, from Asialink, this medal that so appropriately honours Weary Dunlop’s memory.

For as long as I can remember I have believed that Australia’s future is going to be determined much more by our geography than our history. And my generation, past our use-by date though we may now be, was probably the first to really start getting this: feeling it not only intellectually, but instinctively - not least with all the travelling so many of us did in and across Asia during our student days and early adulthoods.

As your very generous Citation hinted, nearly all the most formative experiences of my own youth, both exhilarating and scarifying – and certainly the ones that were ever-present at the back of my mind when I became Foreign Minister in 1988 – were *Asian* experiences:

- eating noodles and drinking beer in student hangouts from Bandung to Bangkok and Kyoto to Kathmandu; but also
- seeing close up the degradation of wartime Saigon;
- meeting scores of youngsters in Cambodia who I knew later must have been slaughtered in the Khmer Rouge genocide;
- experiencing the craziness of Maoist Chia during the last twitches of the cultural revolution and Gang of Four days in 1976;
- standing under the epicentre of the nuclear bomb blasts in Hiroshima and Nagasaki less than twenty years after the event; but then
- having one’s faith in humanity restored by travelling in third-class trains for weeks at a time around India...

During the eight years I was Foreign Minister, and to some extent both before and since in a variety of other roles, I tried to make a reality in a number of ways, both bilateral and multilateral, of what I said in one of my first ministerial speeches, which was partly quoted in the Citation:

We should not believe that we are cultural misfits trapped by geography. Australia and Australians should see the region not as something external which needs to be assuaged, but as a common neighborhood of extraordinary diversity and significant economic potential. The region is primary for Australia because it is where we live, and must learn the business of normal neighborhood civility. It is where we must find a place and a role if we are to develop our full potential as a nation.

In trying to make that vision a reality, I can't pretend there were not some bumps along the way. One that I'm sure a few people here tonight will recall was when, drawing on the idea of the American Hemisphere, I had the brilliant idea of reconceptualising the region, or at least that part of it east of India, as the 'East Asian Hemisphere', and proudly unveiled at a conference a big new map, drawn like a big orange-quarter, in which Australia in the south featured just as prominently as China in the north. The whole enterprise collapsed in something of a heap, however, when someone pointed out that the Chinese (and I think also Japanese) characters for 'East Asian Hemisphere' triggered some rather unhappy memories across most of the region, being effectively indistinguishable from those for "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere"!

But what I think made all the effort worthwhile was another experience I had – the last I will burden you with – in Jakarta during one of the big conferences on the Cambodia peace process in the early nineties, to which the Citation again kindly referred. During a break in proceedings, while looking for a quiet place in which to make a phone call, I inadvertently stumbled into a room where half a dozen ASEAN ministers, including my good friend Ali Alatas but a bunch of others as well, were chatting over coffee. I of course started apologising profusely for the intrusion, but my apologies were overborne by calls to stay and join them, with one colleague saying, in words I will forever remember, 'Come on in. You're one of us.'

Maybe the day will come when no-one regards that kind of exchange as memorable or exceptional, but I don't think we are quite there yet. When it does come – as it surely will, with Asialink, and Premier Mike Baird, and so many others in this room, and around the country, and around the region all working for it – that will be the day when Australia's Asian future really will be ensured. And that will be the day when I really *will* feel that I have deserved this award.