

## FAREWELL TO DICK WOOLCOTT

Speech by Senator Gareth Evans, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, to Retirement Dinner, Parliament House, Canberra, 26 February 1992.

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Whenever I think about Dick Woolcott - and that is rather a lot lately, because I keep reading about him in the newspapers - it is as one of a very select group of people, those who have become role models for an entire genus.

There are others in this Pantheon - Mandrake the Magician, for example, Attila the Hun, Conan the Barbarian, Louis the Fly - but right up there with them is Dick the Diplomat: the very model of the model professional, the Platonic form of diplomat.

It cannot be said that this phenomenon is under-recognised. Take Greg Sheridan, for example, in The Australian of 12 February:

Pinstriped, punctilious and perfectly erect, Mr Woolcott is the diplomat's diplomat, the very epitome, the embodiment, of diplomacy. Again yesterday he spread his mellifluous blanket of charm across a willing and appreciative audience.

Or again, Craig Johnstone in the Brisbane Courier Mail on 1 February:

Mr Richard Woolcott, 64, Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and consummate gentleman, is about as perfect a diplomat as you could get. Not too tall but impressive, not too friendly but polite, not too pushy but assertive, he is the sort who would not look out of place either at the football or sitting in the lobby in Raffles.

He is the near perfect foil for the nervous, arrogant, and often explosive Foreign Affairs Minister, Senator Evans. He wears suits better, too.

I wouldn't want it to be thought that I am jealous of any of this. A little envious, yes - but jealous, no. Dick and I in fact sorted out the ground rules for our relationship very early on. My text was from Gough Whitlam:

I don't care how many prima donnas there are around here, so long as I am prima donna assoluta!

Dick began his career, as you all know, as a journalist - and there is a credible body of evidence to suggest that he never actually left that profession. Unquestionably one of the great skills he has brought to the Department during his 42 years of service is his capacity to communicate - in speeches and articles and in press briefings both formal and informal.

This enormous skill was recognised in his appointment in the mid 1960s as the Department's first Public Information Officer - back in the days when the Ministers allowed officers to do this sort of thing.

One of Dick's marks as a communicator has been his great gift for the telling phrase. Certainly I have plundered more than a couple from him - perhaps none more succinct, or useful, than the one about Australia, in Asia, moving from being "odd man out" to "odd man in".

This was of course much more than a piece of clever phrase-making on Dick's part. It reflected his very great conviction about Australia's place in this region, one that he has articulated with great vigour and great foresight for a great many years. Take, for example, these lines from a speech he gave more than 20 years ago to the Public Relations Institute of Australia, at a time when the notion of comprehensive Australian engagement with Asia was very much less fashionable than it is today:

Australia is on the threshold of a bright future if it makes the right choices. We can stand still and allow ourselves to become regarded as a bucolic, inward-looking, materialist, racist, self-satisfied, apathetic, pleasure-seeking member of the world community, slumbering at the southern end of the globe; a sort of Anglo-American step-child which never really grew up; a second-hand transplanted society which lost its momentum before it decided in which direction it wanted to move.

Or we can continue to work to become an accepted, distinctive, tolerant and well-regarded nation in the Asian and Pacific region. The choice is ours.

I don't know how, looking back over his career, Dick chooses to rank his own achievements, but the one that stands out for me is the absolute steadfastness with which he has pursued that latter vision throughout his career. In the time that Dick and I have been working together, I think it would be acknowledged that quite a bit more of that vision has been realised than in any comparable earlier period.

Unquestionably one of the largest of our achievements has been the creation of APEC - defining the concept and bringing it to life. And unquestionably an absolutely key role in that process was played by Dick in his capacity as the Prime Minister's special envoy - building as he did on his enormous network of regional friendships and contacts, and his

enormous capacity to sell ideas.

APEC will be seen in future decades as one of the very real watersheds in the process of achieving Australia's integration and acceptance into this region as a fully fledged player and partner - and there could be no more appropriate monument on which to carve Dick's name.

Dick Woolcott's climb to the top of the Departmental tree was measured rather than meteoric - maybe it was because he took to heart that old nostrum that "the ape, the higher he climbs, the more he bares his arse".

But for the last 20 years or so, I do not think anyone has been in any doubt that it was really only a question of when, not whether, Dick Woolcott became Secretary. And certainly in the job he has not only kept his backside admirably well covered, but has made a crucial contribution to the Department's corporate good health.

When he took up the reins in 1988, the amalgamation between Foreign Affairs and Trade, while formally more or less complete, was - I think it would be widely acknowledged - a very long way from complete in the hearts and minds of a great many of the people thrown thus together. Perhaps Dick's proudest managerial achievement has been to bring that amalgamation to fruition in every sense, to create a single, united Department that has produced a series of outstanding achievements - and is generally as happy and contented as any collection of individuals ever can be who believe that their quality is congenitally under-appreciated!

It is Dick's personal skills that have made him the ideal person to preside over that transition. He has been, I have been universally told, Good for Morale. He has been willing to invest confidence in people, delegating ample responsibility to them, and at the same time dealing warmly and sympathetically with the kind of personal problems that inevitably arise in an organisation this large and complex.

A crucial ingredient in Dick's success in the Department is that he believes in talking to people. (I am reminded in this respect of the Wisconsin woman I read about recently with a multiple personality disorder who initiated a rape charge against a fellow worker. She met the defence of consent by explaining that while it was the case that one of her personalities had indeed agreed to the dirty deed, the other 45 had not been consulted ...)

The person Dick has most consulted throughout his adult life and career has clearly been his wife, Birgit. I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute tonight both to the quality of her advice, and to the very direct and personal contribution she has made to Australian diplomacy. Like so many such contributions made by the spouses of Australian representatives abroad, it is a contribution that has been too often unsung. The sustained

and professional work that has been done overseas by spouses like Birgit has simply not received the acknowledgement, let alone financial compensation, it deserves. I know that the spouses of Dick and Birgit's generation did not seek such acknowledgement or compensation. I simply hope that, in Birgit's case, recognition by others of Dick's talents, and the knowledge of her own job so well done, have been reward enough.

I suppose that one way of coping with the sense of under-appreciation that afflicts us all from time to time is to draw upon our reserves of humour. Dick certainly has had such reserves in abundance throughout his career.

Some of their manifestations have acquired legendary status, not least Dick's account, while High Commissioner to Ghana, of the ceremonies in 1968 which earned him the Humane Order of African Redemption from the Government of Liberia. This audience will no doubt be familiar with the despatch in question: the rest of the world became so with its publication (I cannot imagine with whose help) in The Bulletin of 9 June 1973. I think probably the most instructive of its anecdotes, not least to SES aspirants, was the account of the exchange in a lift between President Tubman and his appropriately deferential deputy: "Did you break wind, Vice President?". "No, Shad, but I will if you want me to."

Then there is the account sent from New York in 1985 of the early stages of the Iran-Iraq conflict where it was suggested by our Ambassador that if things were not handled carefully, "we may find ourselves up Shi'ite Creek without a paddle".

Or again, the rather extraordinary exchange between UN New York and Canberra a few months earlier on the subject of the relationship between diplomacy and another more popular indoor sport, which led our Ambassador to muse as follows:

"There are, of course, any number of reasons why people's attention might, in this curious profession of ours, stray from the job at hand. We move, after all, in a milieu where the conversation is replete with references to first entry privileges, members, on-site inspections and final acts."

I am glad, at least, that he did not succumb to vulgar stereotyping and refer to "back-channel diplomacy".

But now I do understand a little better, why Dick's internal memo pads in New York were printed with the salutation: "While you were out fucking around ...".

It is difficult to even contemplate Dick Woolcott in retirement. But I know that he would not want to be cast in the category of professional diplomatic limpet. I note in that respect, according to a cable I received a few days ago from Bonn, that when Hans-Dietrich

Genscher's grandson recently declared that he wanted to be Foreign Minister when he grew up, Genscher responded that Germany did not need two Foreign Ministers!

I do hope very much that, in retirement, Dick will be given the opportunity to go on contributing from his vast store of personal experience to Australia's national interests. Maybe his plea now will be like that of the Bishop who prayed:

Oh Lord, use me as you will - but preferably in an advisory capacity.

But whether in an advisory role, or an active operational role, Dick's contribution to the causes and institutions to which he now turns his hand will, I am certain, go on being invaluable.

Dick has won my personal gratitude for the very staunch support I received from him during a period of enormous change and achievement in which the Government has placed very great demands on the foreign service. He and Birgit deserve the thanks of the wider community for their commitment over more than four decades to the skilful advancement of Australia's interests.

Dick Woolcott is a very notable Australian and an outstanding servant of his country. On my behalf, the Government's, and all of yours, I wish him, and Birgit, a long, happy and productive retirement.

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