

THE AUSTRALIA-INDIA COUNCIL: MAKING OLD FRIENDS CLOSER FRIENDS

Address by Senator Gareth Evans, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, on the Launching of the Australia-India Council, Melbourne Cricket Ground, Friday 26 June 1992

There is something particularly appropriate about launching the Australia-India Council in this place and in this company. Not only do we in India and Australia share a common love of sport, but also a strong commitment to democratic, parliamentary traditions. The presence of the Speaker of the Indian Parliament and his colleagues is testimony to this.

Of course neither India's traditions nor our own were always quite as democratic. I have always enjoyed the story about the Maharaja last century who, after being shown how to play cricket by representatives of the Raj, commented that it was all very nice, but why didn't they get the servants to do it!

I have a great personal affection for India, which I first visited in the late 1960s - travelling for weeks across the country in third class trains - and which I have been visiting ever since, particularly in recent years as Foreign Minister, as a result of which I have warm friendships with a number of ministers, parliamentarians, officials and academics. I am particularly delighted to welcome this parliamentary delegation to Australia, as both a symbol of an catalyst for the ever growing warmth in our bilateral relationship.

Accompanying all the official visits, there have been many other positive developments in the relationship over recent years, including significant increases in the level of bilateral trade, new arrangements for cooperation on science and technology, and more and more diversified cultural exchanges. Our political dialogue with India has also become more active and now includes regular bilateral exchanges on disarmament issues - a development which I particularly welcome.

All this comes at a time when important and far-reaching economic changes are taking place within India, and something of a reorientation of its external relations is also taking place - away from the traditional focus on the north and west towards, to a significantly greater extent, the Asia Pacific. Australia wants very much to be a beneficiary of these changes and I believe there is every reason why we can and should be.

The establishment of the Australia-India Council is an integral part of Australia's response to the changing relationship with India. The catalyst for the creation of the Council was

the 1990 Report of an enquiry into Australia's relations with India by the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. The Report found that despite recent initiatives, the past neglect of our relationship with India had not been overcome completely. There were still significant gaps in knowledge and awareness of India in the Australian community.

My response in Parliament was highly supportive of the thrust of the Senate committee's findings. I said then that the time was right to recognise that a revitalised relationship with India was here to stay, and that we had to invest the relationship with energy and vision.

A central element of the Council's role will be to maintain and accelerate in the 1990s the momentum which began to be generated in the relationship during the 1980s. And we want it develop linkages that matter not only at the level of government and business but in the wider community.

It is, I think, fair to say that what the Australian public gets to know or hear of India is frequently negative, depressing or exotic - and all too often, simplistic. Equally, there is no doubt that in the conduct of its relations with the region Australia still carries some baggage from the past. Stereotyped images die hard. But I would hope that one of the Council's early tasks will be to look for ways to promote a more balanced perception of modern Australian society in India, and of India in Australia.

The Australian Government hopes to be able to provide \$2.85 million for the Council's operations over the four years to June 1995. This is a clear indication of the Government's commitment to the Council. However, I do not see the Council as acting only in partnership with the Government. I hope it will attract participation by a wide variety of community groups in the task of giving the bilateral relationship between Australia and India a qualitatively improved and deeper character. Such groups would include the private commercial sector, the media, educationists, and those concerned with sport and the arts. Not least of all, I hope the Council will also draw on the resources and expertise of the 80,000 or so Indians who have made Australia their home.

I know the initiative to establish the Council has been welcomed in New Delhi. I am confident that the Indian Government will also offer its full support to the Council, and that it will reciprocate the Australian Government's efforts to inject greater vigour and enterprise into the bilateral relationship.

I believe we have, on the first Australia-India Council Board, a team that is more than equal to the task before it.

A former senior Australian diplomat, Graham Feakes, will be the Chairman. He brings to the Council nearly forty years of knowledge and experience in diplomacy, including

postings as a head of our diplomatic missions in Cambodia, Malaysia, and in the six years before his retirement in 1990, India. During his period as Australian High Commissioner to India, Mr Feakes was at the cutting edge of many of the recent advances in the relationship.

Allan Border hardly needs an introduction. It is fair to say that he is something of a legend in the subcontinent - as he certainly is in Australia - having toured India on a number of occasions, four times as Captain. His presence on the Council reflects my view of the importance of sport, especially cricket, in the development of the relationship: this is the area, more than any other, where Australians and Indians are entirely familiar with each other, and it is a marvellous foundation on which to build.

Five of the Council members come from Melbourne, and I am pleased to see they are with us today.

Paul Barratt, Executive Director of the Business Council of Australia, has had a long-standing interest in India-Australia relations, and brings to the Council his considerable expertise in trade and business matters, built on his experience working in government and in the private sector.

Cameron Forbes, senior correspondent for "The Age" newspaper, will be the Council's main link with the media, and will bring to the Council the benefits of a number of years covering Indian and South Asian affairs for that newspaper.

Dr Robin Jeffrey of the politics department at La Trobe University, is a frequent media commentator on Indian affairs.

Mr John Ries is the Chief General Manager of international banking of the ANZ group, and, as such, is a representative of Australia's largest business interest in India, ANZ Grindlays.

Dr Marika Vicziany, Senior Lecturer in Economic History at Monash University, has particular interests and expertise in India. She and Dr Jeffrey have both made a major contribution to the debate in Australia on closer relations with India.

There are another seven board members. They too are Australians prominent in their respective fields, with special and diverse interests in the development of the Australia-India relationship.

Michael Abbott, a South Australian barrister, has a particular interest in the art and culture of Asian countries, including India.

June D'Rozario manages a firm of consulting town planners and economists in Darwin and has served in the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly.

Associate Professor Ken McPherson, who is the Executive Director of the Indian Ocean Centre for Peace Studies in Perth, has an extensive background in Indian and regional affairs, including strategic issues.

Rob Meecham, Assistant Secretary of the Trades and Labour Council of Western Australia, has had links on trade union and labour matters with India.

Professor Soumyendra Mukherjee, Director of the Centre for Indian Studies at the University of Sydney, has been a mainstay in Indian studies in Australia for many years.

Ric Smith, a Deputy Secretary in my Department, has, among his duties, responsibility for India and other South Asian countries.

Colin Ward, of Sydney, has been particularly successful in establishing joint business ventures in India, and has been, until recently, Chairman of the Australia-India Business Council.

I am very proud of the quality of the Board members. That we have been able to attract such a team - and there were literally scores of good suggestions made to me, making choice very difficult indeed - speaks volumes for the commitment in this country toward making this new dimension in our relationship work.

Effective ties with our neighbours can only be forged, and any sense of "otherness" in perceptions in relations between Australia and Asian countries can only be broken down, if we are prepared to be both dynamic and responsive to changes in our region. We therefore look to you - the foundation members of the Australian-India Council - for innovative ways to build on the warm relationship that already exists with one of Australia's largest neighbours and oldest friends. I am confident that our expectations will be more than justified.

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