

## ROMANCING THE STONE: THE NEW FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE OFFICES

Address by Senator the Hon Gareth Evans QC, Minister for Foreign Affairs, at the unveiling of the Foundation Stone for the new Foreign Affairs and Trade Offices, Canberra, Thursday 6 May 1993

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When I published my book on Australia's Foreign Relations in 1991, written with Bruce Grant, I dedicated it :

To the men and women of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade - a very fine career service and an under-appreciated national resource.

I have long had the view that those very fine men and women should have somewhere reasonably tolerable in which to advance their fine but under-appreciated careers.

The existing 'Kremlin' building simply didn't begin to satisfy that condition. I first learned to loathe the Kremlin, that enormous pile of speckled-brown-dog stonework known as the Administrative Building, when I was working as a consultant to Attorney-General Murphy back in 1972 - and spent my time dodging cracks in the lino and talking over clanking and wheezing pipes in the part of the building; that was occupied by AG's. So one of my very first - and unquestionably most reckless - promises to the new Department in 1988, made in my speech to the assembled throng in the cafeteria after succeeding Bill Hayden as Foreign Minister, was to try and do what I could to get the Department into a modern, workable building.

Well, it has been a long and difficult haul. But the task was made a lot easier with the Consultant's report which came out in December 1991, which projected that the basic electrical, mechanical and hydraulic services in the building were at risk of failing completely in 2 - 3 years time; that fire safety deficiencies had the "potential for life threatening situations"; that the sewerage system had the potential to back up and cause the evacuation of parts of the building; and - as if that were not enough - that the air distribution and air conditioning systems did not comply with the requirements for Commonwealth premises, and could not be upgraded. This was finally enough to convince Cabinet that postponement of the matter was neither feasible nor responsible and, in the context of the 1992/93 Budget, the sensible decision was taken to relocate the Department into a new office block here in York Park.

Because of the passions that this decision has stirred - synthetically election-driven though they may have been - it's worth making the point again that the new building was not purpose-designed for Foreign Affairs, nor was it designed as an expensive prestige building for anyone else.

Its design was meant simply to be modest, efficient, safe, functional and cost-effective - while at the same time having certain external architectural features (e.g. the fenestration and roof lines) to bring it into visual harmony with its much more expensive neighbour on the hill: and in all of these respects I think the architect succeeded admirably. DFAT's only design input was to identify its space requirements,

Passions of course, whether synthetic or not, are not unusual in matters architectural, where everyone has their own ideas about style and utility . A lawyer's idea of good architecture, for example, tends to be something that falls down fast enough, with negligence spectacular enough, to sustain a good three month building case. Diplomats, on the other hand, would reasonably aspire to functionality, longevity and just a dash of good taste - aspirations not remotely satisfied in the building they currently occupy.

Perhaps the most astonishing aspect of the controversy over the new building has been the amount of media time spent in trying to convert what will incontrovertibly be seen as a monument to commonsense, into a monument to something else: some kind of Taj Mahal or Xanadu, or - more prosaically from some of our alliteratively minded media colleagues - "Gareth's Gazebo".

But let us not be mistaken. If the new Foreign Affairs and Trade building were to be a monument to either love or personal vanity, I would like to have had just a little bit of a say in the final product! But I didn't: we have inherited a building that was already on the drawing board as a building for someone else.

I have no doubt that once all the brouhaha dies down, the new Foreign Affairs and Trade Building will come to be seen for what it is - a modest and attractive national asset, housing a group of highly professional public servants dedicated to their crucial role of advancing Australia's interests both at home and overseas.

And no one should doubt for a minute that this is precisely what the Department does. Senator Cook has already spoken of the central role of the Department in increasing Australia's economic growth by promoting increased trade and investment, particularly in the Asia Pacific region of which we are part.

But of course, the Department does much more to protect and promote Australia's long term security in all its manifestations economic and otherwise. It plays a crucial role in keeping its collective finger on the pulse of international issues of significance to Australia; injecting constructive ideas on their resolution; encouraging dialogue on regional security; and ensuring that Australia itself is acting - and is seen to be acting - as a responsible international citizen. Australian initiatives such as the Cairns Group, the Cambodian peace plan, the protection of Antarctica's environment, the Chemical Weapons Convention and APEC project a positive image of Australia in the region and the world, and have shown, moreover, that creative and energetic middle powers can and do play an influential role in international affairs.

Lest it be thought that the Department only operates at this semi-stratospheric level, I would remind you all of the 'shopfront' services it provides to hundreds of thousands of ordinary Australians each year, in issuing passports and assisting Australians travelling abroad through the consular services of our missions.

All of these activities add up to a Department which is delivering real benefits to the Australian community. The move to new premises - the first step of which we are celebrating today - will ensure the Department does an even better job than the one it is currently doing.

I want to thank all the many people that worked so effectively together to bring us this far, including Senator Bob McMullan and his Ministerial predecessor, Senator Nick Bolkus, and their officers in the Department of Administrative Services, including particularly Australian Estate Management and Australian Construction Services; my other Canberra political colleagues, Ros Kelly and John Langmore; Colin Hollis, Chairman of the Public Works Committee; Chief Minister Rosemary Follett and the ACT Government authorities who have facilitated the design and planning stages; the National Capital Planning Authority; Max Hughes and his team in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; and, of course, the Design Architect, Mr Harry Leong.

I ask my very co-equal portfolio colleague, Senator Peter Cook, to join me now in unveiling the foundation stone for the new Foreign Affairs and Trade Offices.

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