

## **THE LABOR TRADITION IN AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN POLICY**

Keynote address by Senator Gareth Evans, Minister for Foreign Affairs, to *The Labor Tradition in Australian Foreign Policy Symposium*, ANU, Canberra, 5 December 1994

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When I became Australia's Foreign Minister in 1988, I was acutely conscious of the Labor giants - Evatt, Whitlam and Hayden - who had occupied the seat before me, the values they stood for, and the distinctive tradition I was inheriting. It is one of the more constantly remarked features of the Australian Labor Party that we have a history, we remember it, we are proud of it, and in government we try to build consistently upon it. We do this not simply with the kind of sentimental attachment to the Patriarch and the Good Old Days that characterises our conservative opponents - but because for us our memory is part of our belief system. We moor our actions on the bedrock of the values and aspirations and memories that combine to generate the principles for which we collectively stand. As Stuart Macintyre put it in his inaugural Manning Clark Lecture at the 1994 ALP National Conference:

Politics without principles becomes a mere exercise in the pursuit of power. Politics without memory - a living, vital memory, that resists the temptations of celebration or nostalgia - becomes empty and cynical... True believers need beliefs.

Just as true believers need beliefs, traditions need time. And one of the inbuilt safeguards against an overly nostalgic view of Labor's foreign policy tradition is that the Labor Party, like Australia itself, came to foreign policy relatively late in its history. Australian foreign policy - if we think of this as a desire to pursue our external interests accompanied by some independent capacity to do so - is only a little over fifty years old. Before 1942, when Australia formally adopted the Statute of Westminster, even our constitutional capacity to enter into our own international commitments was circumscribed. It was not until 1940, under the pressure of the War, that our first diplomatic posts - beyond the High Commission in Britain - were established, and not until after that War that we really had a professional diplomatic service. And it was only in late 1941 - when Curtin made his celebrated appeal to the United States - that Australia for the first

time showed itself capable of addressing a fundamental issue about its place in the world other than reflexively, instinctively and dependently as a member of the British Empire.

From 1901 to the Second World War, Australian leaders, Labor and non-Labor alike, from time to time did show that they were interested in the world outside Australia, especially on issues such as immigration, regional security and relations with the United States and Japan. But Billy Hughes's banging the table about German New Guinea at Versailles is about the only really memorable instance of Australia giving effective voice to distinctive concerns on a significant international stage. When Australian leaders complained about Britain, sought more consultation with Britain, or offered a view distinctively different from Britain's, it was always within the framework of attachment and dependence, and always in an effort to influence Imperial or British policy rather than to create an Australian foreign policy.

**Evatt.** The creation of an Australian foreign policy, and the identifiable beginning of a distinctive Labor tradition in foreign policy, came only with Evatt. He was not Australia's first foreign minister - 'External Affairs' had existed as a separate portfolio since Federation, although more often than not held by the Prime Minister of the day as a minor additional encumbrance - but he was certainly the first to deserve the title. It is in Evatt's time, at least once the consuming preoccupation of fighting the War itself was behind him, that we can first clearly see what I would describe as the three dominant themes in the Labor foreign policy tradition - nationalism, internationalism, and activism.

Evatt's nationalist instincts were most evident in his institution-building both at home and abroad: his rapid consolidation of a professional Australian diplomatic service, reflecting his perception that Australia simply had to use its own voice to advance its own interests; and his desire to see Australia make a difference, and be seen to be making a difference, in the creation of the United Nations. There was, of course, in the domestic context a long Labor tradition of rather cockily expressed nationalism - of the 'temper democratic, bias offensively Australian' variety, rooted in a strong sense of place, and overlaid with ideals of equality, mateship and social justice. But in its external application, it cannot be said that Evatt's nationalism, or that of the Labor Party of the time, was of an especially confident kind. White Australia and the fear and prejudices which nourished it; and the perception of the world (and particularly our own region) as dangerous places from which Australia needed to be protected, were very strong strands in

Labor's nationalism right up until the Whitlam era. Evatt's and Chifley's early support for Indonesia's independence struggle against the Dutch was perhaps the closest we came to understanding the new forces at work in our region, and our need to reposition ourselves accordingly. This never became, however, a sustaining or dominant theme in our foreign policy at the time, and it certainly did not become one in the conservative era that followed.

Evatt's most striking contribution was his internationalism, his commitment to the building of cooperative multilateral institutions and processes to address both security and development objectives. His contribution to the founding of the United Nations is the stuff of which legends are made, and rightly so - especially in his fight for the rights of the smaller powers against the greater in the roles of the General Assembly and the Security Council, and in his faith in the UN as an agent for social and economic reform and as a protector of human rights. No previous Australian leader had anything like Evatt's passion for cooperative internationalism, nor anything like his success in creating practical foundations for it.

Almost as innovative as his internationalism was Evatt's sustained activism over the whole of his period in office. His activism was purposeful and creative, and always evident in the driving, intellectually aggressive style that was his hallmark. It was successful because he was able to match his ideas to the times: a confluence which is critical to foreign policy success. Evatt had the great fortune to be foreign minister at a time when a new order was being born, and before the Cold War subordinated just about all international initiative to the demands of the East-West balance.

Of course it is possible to see echoes and continuities in all three of these themes throughout the entire course of Australian foreign policy after Evatt: for example, to take an early instance, the bipartisan support for the UN role in Korea. But I would suggest that it is only with Whitlam, and then again with the Hawke-Keating Governments, that one finds nationalism, internationalism and activism all really flourishing, and giving a distinct character to the different periods in questions.

**1949-1972.** During the Menzies era, never more conspicuously than in the Suez debacle, the British Empire mindset continued to nostalgically reverberate. When the reality of our dependence not upon Britain but upon the United States did finally strike home, under both Menzies and his taggle of successors, loyalty to

the United States - as Gough Whitlam has observed - became a test of loyalty to Australia in the same way that loyalty to Britain and Empire had previously been. There was not much national pride, or national confidence, in any of this. Nor, with the Cold War rendering the UN more and more impotent, and multilateral processes generally more and more sterile, was there much cooperative internationalism to pursue - other than as a regional extension of alliance relationships with the great and powerful.

True it is that we developed, particularly under Casey, cordial diplomatic relations with the emerging new nations of the region. True it is that Spender's Colombo Plan made a useful contribution to our long term relations with Asia. True it is that McEwen deserves credit for the 1957 treaty with Japan and the trading foresight that went with it. And true it is that men like Hasluck and Gorton had a certain distinctively Australian quality in their outlook upon the world. But against this there was Menzies's supercilious Anglophilia; the maintenance until the late 1960s of the full vigour of the White Australia Policy; the stridency of our support for Verwoerd's South Africa; the stridency of our antagonism towards China; the comprehensiveness of our dependence upon the United States; and the ultimate comprehensive misjudgment of our intervention in Vietnam. All this combined to reinforce the image, and the reality, of an Australia largely isolated and irrelevant in its own region, deeply unsure of its identity, utterly unconvinced of its ability to be a force for change in its own right, and wholly unclear about what kind of change it would want to pursue if it ever did have that ability.

**Whitlam.** The Whitlam Government (with Gough Whitlam himself unquestionably the dominant foreign policy figure throughout, even after he relinquished the formal portfolio to Don Willesee) well and truly broke this mould, showing a great capacity - as Evatt had done - to match Australian foreign policy to the mood and needs of the time. Recognising China; bringing home our troops from Vietnam; finally burying the White Australia Policy; swinging our vote behind Third World aspirations in the United Nations; taking France to the World Court for its nuclear tests in the Pacific; and accelerating Papua New Guinea's independence, were just some of the decisions in that tumultuously active three year period which set Australia on a new path. There was a new, much more confident, nationalism clearly evident - one easily accepting the need for Australia to form independent judgments, and for the first time wholly excluding race as one of its components. And this worked in comfortable tandem with a genuinely felt internationalism, one combining a strong commitment to

process (especially international treaties and international law) with a particular sensibility to the then relatively new agenda of decolonisation and North-South dialogue.

**1975-1983.** The brief tenure of the Whitlam Government meant that it did more initiating than consolidating. While the Fraser Government which followed it was more than happy to re-embrace Cold War verities, and all the East-West division of friends and enemies that went with it, it is to the considerable credit of Malcolm Fraser that on the issues which mattered most for Australia's long term capacity to advance its interests - and in particular to engage successfully with its own region - Whitlam's policies were not only continued but reinforced. In particular, Fraser and his Foreign Minister Andrew Peacock both understood, as many in the Coalition for a long time did not, the critical importance of the abandonment of government-legitimised racism at home and abroad - which positioned Australia to play an influential role in multilateral diplomacy, helped foster closer links in our region and, frankly, saved Australia from becoming an international pariah. Had Australia resumed policies of support for apartheid and opposition to decolonisation, our reputation would have taken a very long time to recover.

Some other policies of the Whitlam Government were retained for quite different motivations - for example the new relationship with China was seen more as a useful component of an anti-Soviet stance than as an integral part of a new approach to Asia. There was not much done in the inter-regnum between Labor Governments that was dramatic or path-breaking, not much (some Commonwealth initiatives on Southern Africa apart) that showed any particular appreciation of Australia's capacity to be an influential middle power, and not much that showed any particular appreciation of the kind of new and adventurous role that Australia might play in its own region. But nor did we lose any significant ground.

**Hayden.** It was left to the Hawke-Keating Governments from 1983 on to really fundamentally reshape Australia's foreign policy agenda, a task begun with great effectiveness under Bill Hayden and one which I have been trying to carry through since 1988. I believe that ours have been governments in the great Labor tradition - intensely nationalist in our determination to find and articulate a distinctive Australian place in the world; intensely internationalist in our willingness to work through multilateral institutions and processes in finding solutions to problems; and intensely active in pursuing the objectives we have

defined for ourselves.

There are four particular legacies that stand out from Bill Hayden's five and a half years in office. The first was his remarkable success (working, if I might put it this way, in creative tension with his Prime Minister) in redefining, not least to a very sceptical Labor movement, the relevance of the Australia-United States relationship. He was able, still at the height of the Cold War, to transform perceptions of the alliance - from a cheap but uncomfortable security blanket, to a mature relationship between sovereign partners. The 1983 ANZUS Council Meeting injected the crucial and long overdue note of realism, recognising that our friendship with the United States could not absolve us of primary responsibility for our defence. This was an important precursor to Kim Beazley's 1987 Defence White Paper, which in spelling out for the first time a coherent policy of defence self reliance, mapping how we could achieve it, and giving us a new confidence in our own defence capability, marked - as I have said elsewhere - the liberation of Australian foreign policy: the 1987 White Paper was the watershed after which Australia foreign ministers, really for the first time in our history, could think about the pursuit of national interests without having to be overwhelmingly preoccupied with the likely reactions of a great protector.

Hayden's willingness to test the strategic assumptions behind ANZUS also enabled him to justify, and explain, the importance of the Joint Defence Facilities in a way which was not only intellectually coherent but very much in touch with the longstanding support in the Australian community, and particularly the Labor movement, for peace and disarmament. In a way which linked together both nationalist and internationalist themes, he was able to explain the Joint Facilities not as the price we had to pay to keep up an ANZUS insurance policy, but as facilities that made an important global contribution to stable nuclear deterrence and the verification of arms control agreements.

Bill Hayden's second legacy was to develop a real role for Australia in the international peace movement, again in a way which fused nationalist and internationalist aspirations - and defused a number of traditional anxieties of the Left. Partly it was a matter of making clear, as I have just noted, the role of the Joint Facilities; partly it was a matter of championing a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty despite the strong opposition of the Reagan Administration; partly it involved tackling the uranium exports issue head-on, by pointing to the contribution this made to others in the world keeping their side of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation bargain; and partly it was appointing an Ambassador for

Disarmament to persistently and noisily beat the drum on arms control and disarmament issues both at home and abroad.

A third major legacy of the Hayden period was to have Australia accepted by the international community as a responsible and knowledgeable voice on Indo-China, and in particular on Cambodia - then, as for so long, the most intractable security problem in the region. Driven in the first instance by the Labor movement's strong commitment to resuming aid to Vietnam (this being hamstrung by the international hostility to that country's invasion of Cambodia), Hayden's efforts did not win many immediate plaudits from either ASEAN or the US, but they were ultimately seen not only as having generated a sense of urgency about the problem, but as having laid some important foundations for its solution.

Bill Hayden's fourth major legacy, and in many ways the most significant for the advancement of Australia's long term interests, was the amalgamation in 1987 of the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Trade, creating an infinitely stronger institutional base for the global, regional and bilateral trade and economic strategies which have assumed so much prominence since John Dawkins instituted the Cairns Group in 1986, and subsequently under five very capable Trade Ministers - Michael Duffy, Neal Blewett, John Kerin, Peter Cook and Bob McMullan.

**Since 1988.** When I became Foreign Minister in 1988, inheriting all these legacies and so conscious of the traditions that lay behind them, it was not very long before I had to confront the reality that the set of verities which had fixed the shape of the post-War world as we had known it, and within which we had defined and pursued our own national interests, were rapidly crumbling. The centre of gravity of world trade and production was shifting, much faster than anyone had previously thought likely, from the Euro-Atlantic to the Asia Pacific. And the Cold War, the great definer and freezer of world wide power relationships and the great inhibitor of cooperative international problem solving, was coming dramatically, and much faster than anyone had thought possible, to an end.

Trying to make sense of this avalanche of change, and not be overwhelmed by it, I found myself asking some very basic questions. Where did Australia now fit? How should we be reacting to the myriad of events and choices crowding in upon us? And what might be the areas in which a country of our size and clout could

credibly seek to lead the way? In answering these basic questions I saw no alternative but to go back to basics - to try and define with precision what were Australia's basic interests, and how we might best protect and advance them given both our capacities and the constraints upon us. I had rather hoped that there would be a book somewhere with all these questions posed and answered in a way I found compelling, and which at the same time sat comfortably with the nationalist and internationalist beliefs and instincts I had inherited. But there was not, and I ended up instead writing one myself!\* \* Whatever its other merits or demerits may be, this at least chronicles - for future archaeologists of the Labor foreign policy tradition - the layers of material through which I sifted in trying to construct a foreign policy that would work for Australia in confronting this almost wholly new world in the 1990s and beyond.

In essence, the sustaining model which has emerged is of Australia as a middle power with a strong Asia Pacific orientation, pursuing confidently and actively - at global, regional and bilateral levels as appropriate - clearly defined geopolitical interests, economic interests and what can be described as good international citizenship interests. (These last include cross border environment problems, refugee problems and the like, which are by their nature beyond the capacity of any one country to solve; together with human rights and related problems which, for other reasons, may require international efforts to resolve.)

Globally, as indeed at all levels, we have to recognise our limitations. As a middle power, not a great or a major power, we do not have the clout to rely on anything other than our capacity to persuade - a capacity often best applied by building coalitions of the like-minded. We cannot do this across a wide front; we have to be selective in the kind of issues we run with. But we have had a number of successes on the wider global stage by doing just that. In the economic sphere, we were very important players through the whole course of the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade negotiations, not least through the role we played in establishing the Cairns Group of like-minded agricultural trading nations as an effective third force between the United States and Europe. And on trans-national issues with a good international citizenship dimension, for example, we built - with France - a strong coalition to save the Antarctic environment from mining and drilling; and we were central players for many years in crafting the sanctions strategy which finally brought down apartheid in South Africa.

In the political and security areas of global diplomacy, we led the way in 1993 in bringing to successful fruition the negotiation of the Chemical Weapons



Convention, after twenty years of fairly fruitless collective endeavour before then. And what we are doing now on the question of a comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty (CTBT) and the renewal of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) has made us one of the half-dozen or so most active and influential countries in terms of those policy objectives.

That is also perhaps true of our activity in the whole area of United Nations reform, as we try to re-shape ideas about how the UN should carry out its peace and security role in the post-Cold War environment - ideas which I have incorporated into a second book, launched at the UN General Assembly in 1993.\* The successful implementation of the Cambodian peace plan stands as a demonstration of what can be done: and Cambodia does continue to be regarded around the world as a UN success, despite the security and other problems with which the country obviously continues to grapple. But the outcomes in Bosnia, Somalia, and Rwanda are clear demonstrations of the limits of UN authority. While, with Cold War shackles removed, there is more cause now for optimism about the UN's role than at any time since Evatt, there is still a huge gap between hopes and expectations, and the capacity for effective delivery.

This Labor Government's very strong commitment to the United Nations - on the basis that, despite its limitations, it is the only fully empowered body with global membership that we have - is the aspect of our internationalism which generates, these days, the most frequent and noisy political criticism. Some of that criticism, especially of our willingness to have our laws and practices reviewed, and on occasion criticised, by UN human rights bodies, is wildly exaggerated: we retain the sovereign capacity to make and apply our own laws as we see fit, but are willing to expose ourselves to this scrutiny because we hope that, by doing so, we will encourage other nations to be equally willing to have universally applicable standards applied to them.

The other familiar criticism of Australia's current internationalism - about our entering into too many multilateral treaty obligations on too many different subject areas - is simply misconceived, betraying a profound misunderstanding of global interdependence and the sheer range of international activity which demands some commonly agreed action. How is it possible, for instance, to deal with problems such as global warming short of global cooperation? And how are we to combat narcotics trafficking and international terrorism without coordinated action? How realistic - or fair - is it not to regulate through treaty bodies the allocation of satellite space or the global telecommunications channels

which underpin international commerce? Refusing to sit at the treaty negotiating table will not stop the process of international treaty making. But it will certainly stop Australia from protecting its interests in those negotiations. We either deal with the world or it will deal with us.

The most active, and probably the most distinctive, dimension of Australia's diplomacy in recent years has been regional - as we have set about trying to give systematic content to the idea of an Asia Pacific community (in the Chinese literal-translation sense of 'big family', rather than the capital 'C', wholly economically integrated, European sense): a community, moreover, in which Australia is unequivocally seen not as an outsider or bit player, but as an accepted, involved, participating partner.

The most visible manifestation of this has been our initiative under Bob Hawke in launching the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) process in 1989. We have played a leading role since, under Paul Keating especially, in expanding APEC's horizons - to the extent that it has gone well beyond data exchange and policy dialogue, and even beyond the specific cost saving strategies we describe as trade and investment facilitation, to the point where it is now about to play an historic role in advancing trade liberalisation. APEC is now accepted both within the region and around the world as the Asia Pacific region's pre-eminent economic forum, and as an engine for potentially very major economic change. If there had been any lingering doubt about its relevance and utility, this was comprehensively dispelled at the Bogor summit.

The other important context in which a sense of community is growing in the Asia Pacific is security. When I first floated, four years ago, the possibility of the evolution in the Asia Pacific region of a new regional architecture - modelled very loosely on the emerging CSCE in Europe - to respond to the new security realities of the post-Cold War world, I met with a less than enthusiastic response. But times have changed, and what seemed very radical propositions then have now become almost regional orthodoxy. The most important development was undoubtedly the convening in July this year, in Bangkok, of the eighteen member ASEAN Regional Forum: a new process of dialogue and cooperation embracing all the region's major security players (including all those countries traditionally hostile towards or nervous about each other), and with an agenda that already includes trust and confidence building measures, the development of preventive diplomacy processes and, possibly, cooperative peace keeping activity.

The meetings in Bogor and Bangkok - consolidating and putting in place, respectively, both the economic and security dimensions of a new regional architecture - have made 1994 a watershed year, marking the transition, from theory to something very close to reality, of the idea of an Asia Pacific community.

None of the global or regional strategies I have been mentioning imply a neglect of more traditional bilateral diplomacy, although the days have long since gone when the maintenance of Good Relations with a long list of individual countries was perceived as any kind of end in itself. The importance to Australia of countries like Japan, China and Indonesia, not to mention the United States, speaks for itself, but there are very many other countries around the region and the rest of the world with whom we have worked hard to build comfortable, confident working relations. The ever-increasing interdependence of nations - in trade terms, in regional security terms and in the context of the ever-widening round of multilateral negotiations in the UN system and elsewhere - makes close attention to a great many bilateral relationships a matter of necessity rather than choice.

The internationalism, and activism, of current Australian foreign policy should be self-evident enough, but perhaps a final few words should be said on the question of nationalism. Nationalism touches foreign policy most closely in the sense of confidence which it imparts to a nation in the conduct of its external relations. And that sense of confidence, in turn, must flow from a strong sense of who we are and what we believe. The past decade has seen the bonfire of very many certainties. But while all change is painful, it can also be creative, and we have the opportunity now to be truly creative in the way in which we define our nation and our place in the region and the world.

In the wake of the Bogor summit some commentators - and not a few cartoonists - have implied that Australia's entry into the Asia Pacific community will be at the price of our national values. This is a profoundly mistaken view. Engagement with Asia - even the kind of comprehensive engagement with Asia which I have been advocating - does not mean us becoming in any way less Australian. As Prime Minister Keating said in his inaugural Weary Dunlop Lecture in 1993:

Australia is not and never can be an 'Asian nation' any more than we can - or want to be - European or North American or African. We can only be Australian, and can only relate to our friends and our

neighbours as Australian.

But while we are and always will be uniquely Australian, we do have something to contribute to the evolution of a new Asian civilisation - or at least a new cross-fertilised Asia Pacific civilisation - and that civilisation will in turn be reflected in the further evolution of a new, but still uniquely Australian, identity for us. The message which is increasingly being heard and understood in our region is that none of its members, jointly or individually, can really afford to go it alone; that none of us can hope to benefit fully if we are not prepared to contribute and participate fully in the whole region's economic and cultural richness; and that none of us can guarantee our security better alone than we can by working cooperatively with everyone else.

Australians' scepticism as a people has often inhibited our confidence as a nation. We have been wary of standing on our own in a world which we have perceived as dangerous. Today, we have an opportunity - as bright an opportunity as we have ever had - to make our own way: not as a nation which wants to go it wholly alone, but as one intensively engaged with the rest of the world, and particularly with our own region.

This is a very exciting time to be Australian. For the first time in our history we really are right at the heart of one of the centres of world activity. And there is no doubt that Australia is being increasingly seen, regionally and internationally, in the way in which we want to be seen: as a modern, innovative, socially and economically advanced, multicultural society which takes a confident and independent line in pursuing our national interests, and does so energetically and actively, but is always willing to pursue those interests (and a little bit of disinterested idealism as well) by working cooperatively with others in the international community.

If all this represents, as I think it does, the culmination of a distinctively Labor tradition in Australian foreign policy, then we in the Australian Labor movement have much of which to be proud.

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