

SHOOTING AT THE MOON

Address by Senator the Hon Gareth Evans, Minister for Foreign Affairs, to launch the book *Shooting at the Moon* by Marje Prior and Heide Smith, National Press Club, Canberra, 12 September 1994

For many Australians, their involvement with Cambodia has been a love-hate relationship, with many emotional highs and lows, and quite a few agonising questions of principle to confront. For whatever reason, Australians seem to have been drawn to Cambodia, whether through the United Nations, government or non-government agencies, just personal contacts, or the impact of history: they seem to have been deeply moved by the amazing ability of the Cambodian people to deal with hardships totally outside their control, and almost beyond our imagination. For myself, of all the many issues I have dealt with as Foreign Minister, it has been the search for peace in Cambodia about which I have felt most strongly in personal terms. I know many of you here today hold similarly strong views about that search, and the part that the UNTAC operation played in it.

Marje Prior and Heide Smith's book, *Shooting at the Moon*, sets out to capture the views and experiences of Australians, and Cambodians, who did play a part in the peace process. Their reactions to the place, and the times, have been vividly recorded by Marje in more than seventy interviews. Together with Heide Smith's superb photography, their words make a fitting dedication to the efforts of all Australians who have been personally involved in Cambodia. Although I wish Marje had fixed up a bit of hideous syntax at the beginning of my own interview - which probably sounded all right at the time, to coin a phrase, but which reads horribly now - I am delighted to be able to launch the book.

I am delighted not least because I found myself, in the book, in the company of so many people who have committed themselves, one way or another, to Cambodia's future. And it is their words rather than my own views on Cambodia, which I'm sure most of you already know pretty well, which I would like to talk about today.

The book had its origins in three visits Marje made to Cambodia in 1993, where she met and interviewed a wide range of Australians and Cambodians: military, police, electoral and human rights workers, civilian UN employees, politicians, aid workers, business people and Cambodian expatriates returning home. They all had stories to tell which were revealing of the place and the time. *Shooting at the Moon* brings together just some of those stories, highlighting just some of the experiences.

[XXIX/94]

The book's primary focus is on incidents and events experienced by its contributors during 1993-94. But it also reflects the spirit in which Australians have been involved in Cambodia over a much longer period, going back to the memories of those who knew Cambodia, as I did, well before the Khmer Rouge came to power.

Shooting at the Moon includes, for example, the stories of the Australian aid agencies, who have played an important role in Cambodia for many years. In 1979, when the nightmare of Khmer Rouge rule - if not of the ongoing civil war - had ended, they were amongst the first to provide assistance to the devastated Cambodian state. Australian aid workers established close links with, and provided substantial humanitarian support to, Cambodians both in the border camps and throughout Cambodia itself. Much later, when the peace process had begun in earnest and UNTAC had appeared, the repatriation of hundreds of thousands of Cambodians from the camps created new pressures and demands on the aid agencies, which Australians were quick to meet. And they have gone of responding: there will be a need for the agencies to continue their work of rehabilitation and reconstruction there for years to come as, of course, must be the case in any country which has known such devastation.

The political interest in seeing peace return to Cambodia travelled a tortuous and difficult path, and it left its marks on all who became involved. Bill Hayden, who did so much to lay the groundwork for our peace plan, was certainly scarred by the reactions of his ASEAN colleagues and the United States to his efforts to engage Vietnam in a rethinking of its Cambodian role.

Andrew Peacock faced the ire and criticism of his parliamentary colleagues for questioning his party's policy assumptions at the time: you will find his story in *Shooting at the Moon*. And I take this opportunity to put on record my own appreciation for the very supportive bipartisan role Andrew Peacock played throughout the time that I was wrestling with the peace plan and its implementation.

I faced myself a no less critical time than Andrew Peacock had - in my case from a critical Parliament and a very hostile press - for most of the period leading up to the signing of the Paris Agreements in 1991. But the international community eventually moved with us, and domestic opinion in Australia came to recognise and accept the momentum for peace in Cambodia, and the centrality of Australia's role in it.

The appendices to the book list the names of all members of the Australian armed forces and Federal Police who served with UNTAC. They were a formidably professional and effective group, who should be deservedly proud of their efforts. For many, it was their first time to face the realities of conflict. Each and every one of them no doubt has his or her own personal story, but the selection recorded in Marje's book will serve as a reminder to them all of the contribution they made.

Particularly moving are the accounts of the Cambodians themselves, although Marje has concentrated more on those who were returning to Cambodia after years away. Life had been immeasurably hard for all Cambodians, and all of them had both great fears and great expectations throughout the UNTAC period. At the political level, too, it took a special courage for the Cambodian factions to enter into the peace agreement, to dare to grasp and mould their own futures. It also took courage to recognise and admit that years of animosity, and destruction of personal relationships, could not be swept away overnight. For many ordinary Cambodians, this was - and continues to be - difficult to come to grips with.

There are many others - human rights workers, civil administrators and electoral officers - all of whom did their own jobs marvellously, individually and collectively, and whose stories are scattered throughout these pages.

One interesting feature of the book is its coverage of the full spectrum of views and emotions the Cambodian issue generates: ranging from highly supportive to condemnatory of the UN role in Cambodia, both praising and criticising the Cambodian factions and everyone else. I have to say here that Marje Prior's views on the success of the UN mission in Cambodia are not ones that I fully share. I acknowledge that she gives credit where it is due, recognising the efforts of the individuals involved in Cambodia - that is of course the crux of the book - and the outstanding success of the elections.

But I must take issue with some of her remarks, particularly in introducing the chapter titled "White Elephant of Peace", criticising the United Nations as an organisation, and the role of UNTAC. Along with a number of other people interviewed in the book, Marje believes the United Nations could and should have done more. Well, yes: in an ideal world, this may have been the case. With the unmatched advantages of hindsight, the UN and the international community of which it is the manifestation, might have done things differently: certainly a better fist, for example, could have been made of the civil administration function, which was in many ways at the core of the concept of the whole peace process.

But I believe the UN's performance, with all the limitations which were placed upon it - not least the enormous one of the non-cooperation of the Khmer Rouge - was certainly better than could have been feared. The Paris Agreements gave the Cambodians the best possible framework to help themselves, and they were certainly a strong enough framework - when administered by someone with the courage and flair of a John Sanderson - to carry the process through to a very successful election, the installation of a genuinely democratically-elected government, and the establishment of strong flows of international financial support.

It was never intended that the United Nations would maintain a large-scale continuing presence in Cambodia. Indeed, that would neither have been welcomed nor agreed to by the Cambodian parties themselves. A comprehensive peace, and the establishment of a democratically-elected government, were the ultimate goals of the Paris Agreements. It was not the task of the UN to achieve or impose those goals, but rather to provide the environment for the Cambodians themselves to be able to do so. The UN role

was not an end in itself, and a durable peace could not have materialised from the UN presence alone. The simple reality is that the UN presence in Cambodia was never more than a means to achieve an end: the UN's job was to give peace a chance, and that it did.

The Cambodian people themselves recognised this. While there will always be critics, the faith of ordinary Cambodians in the UN and the Paris Agreements, and their optimism for the future was most clearly displayed by their huge turnout at the elections, which was - at least everybody will agree on this - beyond anyone's expectations. And I think you will find that the views of the Cambodians contained in the book reflect the conviction that the future of their country lies in their own hands. As Mike Costello writes in his Foreword, "the search for peace has not been easy and is not yet complete. Peace is not something which can be won for all time; it must be strenuously safeguarded and strengthened by a thousand small acts every day." It is now vital for the Cambodian government to get its policies in place, its administrative systems organised and its programs delivered if peace is really to have a chance in Cambodia.

Even so, there will be a continuing role for Australia and the international community in providing the assistance the Cambodian government will need to discharge its responsibilities. The key to improving the lives of the vast majority of the Cambodian people - those who live in the countryside - is social and economic development. There can be no such development without security in the countryside. I believe the government of Cambodia has the right to seek from countries, such as Australia, which are committed to the success of the peace process, the kind of assistance - particularly in the form of training and institutional support - which will allow its armed forces to provide that security. We are presently considering what kind of assistance it might be possible and appropriate for us to give in this respect. I do not want to say anything more now on this subject, except that any support for the Cambodian military forces that we might give would not involve any diversion of funding from our development assistance budget for Cambodia, which we recently increased to \$92 million over the next four years.

Australians who have never been to Cambodia may have found it difficult to form a picture of what the country is really like, despite the widespread media

coverage over recent years, and despite the hundreds of pictures they have probably seen of Angkor Wat and similar temples. *Shooting the Moon*, with its first-hand accounts and magnificent, compelling photographs, will certainly help to fill that gap. It will certainly go some way in bringing home to ordinary Australians what it was like for other ordinary Australians - and in some cases, extraordinary Australian - to be part of those stirring events.

I think that all those Australians reading this book will certainly have a real sense of pride in the work and contribution of individual Australians in Cambodia. They will certainly come to recognise, if they haven't already, that the Cambodian people themselves have suffered more than any people should ever have to suffer from their experiences - and will begin to have a sense of just what that suffering must have been like. They will know more of the gritty truth about what has happened in that country, shorn of heroics and of simple-minded pessimism or optimism.

As such, Marje Prior and Heide Smith have made a most valuable contribution in putting together *Shooting at the Moon* as a primary historical document of the Cambodian peace process. I commend it to you, and I certainly encourage you all to buy it. What's more, I encourage you to buy multiple copies, because the profits from the sales will be donated to a trust fund that has been established to support media scholarships for journalists from developing countries. I want to commend Marje for her generous gesture in getting the trust underway. I know she will be speaking separately on the details. So it should be enough for me to say, especially to the media representatives among you who so avidly support a free press, that every book purchased will not only provide a very worthwhile and enjoyable read but at the same time help budding members of your own profession. And what could be a nobler cause than that?

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