

AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Address by Hon Gareth Evans QC MP to the House of Representatives, Canberra, 28 August 1999 (Extract from *Hansard* p 8125).

Mr GARETH EVANS (Holt)(3.48 p.m.) — In foreign relations change is the only constant and certainly there has been change since the Labor Party left office in 1996 — nowhere more so than in East Asia and nowhere more so than as a result of the economic meltdown in East Asia in 1997 which has fundamentally changed the landscape in a number of respects, certainly in Indonesia, making within the art of the possible in relation to East Timor things that were simply not within the art of the possible when we were in office.

But what has not changed in that landscape has been the underlying fundamental realities that must form the base for any contemporary Australian foreign policy, whoever is in power. What are those realities? First, Australia is within the Asia-Pacific, in the East Asia region. That is where we live, that is where we must survive strategically, that is where we must prosper economically, and that is where we must find our place and role if we are to develop our full potential as a nation. Underlying reality No. 2: Australia's interests, like those of every other country these days, extend beyond the traditional security and economic interests that traditionally preoccupied diplomacy. In a globalised world there is a whole basket of transnational issues in which Australia, like every other country, has an immediate interest — issues of human rights, of the environment, of unregulated refugee and other population flows, of health pandemics, of terrorism and of narcotics. These are the sorts of issues which need cooperative multilateral action.

We in the Labor Party, while in government, summarised that basket of interests as amounting to Australia's interest in being and being seen to be a good international citizen. Being a good international citizen because those issues can only be resolved by cooperative action. Being seen to be a good international citizen because there is a reputational spin-off, in cruder national interest terms, if you do this sort of thing extremely well and cooperatively with others.

Thirdly, the reality about our underlying foreign policy situation is that Australia's capacity to advance our interests, whether they be of the economic, security or international citizenship kind, are necessarily limited. We do not have the military clout and we do not have the economic clout of the great powers. Our power is the power of persuasion, and that has to be understood by anyone in charge of any Australian foreign policy in the contemporary environment.

The fourth underlying reality about Australian foreign policy in the contemporary era is that we have very little capacity to advance our interests, however defined, by relying on our great and powerful friends. Those days are over. Our great and powerful friends have interests of their own. They are less immediately focused on this area than was the case in the Cold War era. They have a responsibility to participate in the resolution of problems in our area, as everywhere else; but, as for the notion that we can somehow routinely rely on that kind of relationship and that kind of support, those days are over. That has to be at the beginning of one's understanding of contemporary foreign policy.

The final reality about our contemporary situation is that to advance our interests — and this is really just a corollary of what I identified before — Australian diplomacy must have a strong multilateralist flavour and it must have a very strong Asia-Pacific and East Asian regional flavour. That does not mean kowtowing to the countries in our region. That does not mean sucking up to them. That does not mean overaccommodating them in all the ways that have been suggested as characteristic of our policy by the Prime Minister in recent days. It does mean understanding that this has to be the shape and the character of our foreign policy and that, if we are to be productive and if we are to be effective, it involves an intelligent, civilised relationship with those countries in our region and a willingness to put our resources into multilateral cooperative action as well as routine bilateral action of the kind that this government seems to most favour.

Approaching foreign policy in this way, Australian foreign policy in the 1980s and 1990s was seen, I think universally, as being very successfully advanced. In the region, it enabled us — with cooperation with Indonesia in particular — to bring a solution to Cambodia; it enabled us to establish the architecture of APEC; and it enabled us to establish, at our initiative essentially, the ASEAN regional security dialogue forum. More globally, it enabled us to play a role in the resolution of the apartheid agony; it enabled us to play a role in establishing the Antarctic wilderness park; it enabled us to play a crucial role in bringing the chemical weapons convention to a conclusion; it enabled us to play a very significant role in initiating a whole new international debate, now abandoned by the present government, on the elimination of nuclear weapons.

There were some limitations, of course, on our strike rate. An agonising limitation, and one that gave me an enormous amount of pain, was our inability to move the game forward on East Timor in Indonesia, because of the situation as it then stood. I know that the member for Aston, Peter Nugent, is a much more civilised fellow than his performance in his last contribution would suggest —

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Nehl) — It is not his last contribution.

Mr GARETH EVANS — It is my second last. For him to suggest that we did not pursue the issue of autonomy, or that we did not pursue the issue of a massive draw-down of

military presence by Indonesia in East Timor, is just a canard of a kind that is beneath the standards to which he usually aspires and which he usually achieves. That is not right. It is something that drove my foreign policy, and I drove my diplomatic counterpart, Ali Alatas, crazy with the insistence with which I pursued that. But we were not able to move it because the Realpolitik situation before the 1997 meltdown was just not of a kind which enabled Indonesia to be moved by that kind of pressure.

The government tried to move on that front last year, and I, for one, thought that the Howard initiative in actually raising the issue of autonomy followed by an independence ballot was an entirely reasonable and realistic initiative to pursue in the environment as it had evolved after 1997. What was not realistic to pursue was the enthusiastic scramble for credit which followed when Indonesia, largely in a fit of pique — not on the basis of inspired conceptual willingness to appreciate the force of Australia's, or anybody else's, logic or argument — went further and said that if East Timor rejected autonomy they would embrace independence. It was then that, instead of scrambling for credit, the Australian government should have had warning bells jangling all over in exactly the way that Xanana, Belo, Ramos Horta and the rest were urging. So that has not been a triumph for Australian foreign policy, for all the reasons that have been articulated very well by the leader and others in recent times.

What has happened more fundamentally since this government has been in power has been an erosion of our credibility and an erosion of the effectiveness and the coherence of the foreign policy which we were developing in an effective and coherent way. We may be now doing the right thing in East Timor by our military presence there, and I for one am absolutely persuaded that we are. But why do we have to express the way in which we are doing it so arrogantly and so patronisingly and regard it as an exercise in the application of Australian values as distinct from universal values? Why did we have to allow to take wing the notion that we were doing it as a deputy for the United States global police chief? We were doing it in order to pick up a theme that was running hot and strong in the whole international environment: an absolute distaste and disgust with the appalling behaviour of the Indonesian military and the necessity of the international community to respond to that through the United Nations. The pitch was wrong, the spin was wrong, and the articulation was wrong, because the mind-set which lay behind this approach by the government was wrong.

We have lost any kind of leadership role in APEC or the ARF. We are no longer playing that active, credible, multilateral role in the United Nations and elsewhere — whether it is on disarmament issues or anything else — that gave us the status of a really effective niche player in the international scene, a player that really could move the agenda forward. What we have got now, in lieu of those sorts of achievements of the past, is the Howard doctrine — by Robert Gordon Menzies out of John Foster Dulles.

Instead of emphasising our commitment to the region of which we are part, we are now

emphasising what makes us different: our 'special place' as a European, Western civilisation. Instead of emphasising the universal values that we want everyone to subscribe to, we now talk incessantly of Australian values. Instead of emphasising the healthy independence which for the last decade or so has characterised our friendship with the United States — our critical alliance friendship — we now go out of the way to paint ourselves as acolytes of the United States. And all of that is hopelessly astray in terms of coming to grips with the kind of contemporary realities about our policy that I described.

One of the hardest things is to get the balance right between realism and idealism. It is stupid to talk in terms of one or the other. What you have to do is to have a sensible and intelligent balance, and you have to know when to stop. You have to be prepared, when pushing the policy envelope out as far as it will reach, on human rights or anything else, to be conscious of the art of what is achievable and to stop short of anything that is counterproductive. You have to explain frankly what is possible and not create expectations, internationally or domestically, that you cannot satisfy. And you always, but always, have to be very deeply reluctant to advise or to embrace courses of action which involve the shedding of other people's blood.

All of those things, I think, have been beyond the capacity of this government to articulate so far as its foreign policy is concerned. The kind of foreign policy we have seen is not one for the 21st century. Unhappily, it is one for the 1950s, and this government ought to go back to the drawing board. (Time expired)