



# AUSTRALIA'S RELATIONS WITH ASIA

## Early contacts

Dealings between Australia and Asia go back quite a few centuries. It appears that, from early times, traders from the Indonesian islands and pearlers from Japan came in small craft to visit Australia's northwest coastline, and even established occasional settlements there. For instance, there was a regular trade in *trepang* (sea-slugs) between Aborigines and Macassans from the archipelago during the sixteenth century.

However, in the cooler southeastern corner of Australia, it was the British who came to conquer and settle. Their steady destruction of Aboriginal society after 1788 was paralleled by a profound indifference, even hostility, towards Australia's Asian and Pacific environment. Indeed, during the nineteenth century, most Australians saw themselves as overseas British, and British Australia went out of its way to avoid Asian influences, for example, by the imposition of restrictions on Asian immigration. The old Australian dream was a 'white' ethnic dream. Australians used to view the Asian continent as distant and obscure, exotic and mysterious, somehow a world apart. Correspondingly, the sense of a 'threat' from Asia was pervasive. British Australians were afraid that their natural resources and their material prosperity would somehow attract expansionist Asian peoples, and that because of its large size and small population, continental Australia would be particularly vulnerable.

## From Federation to Pearl Harbor

As part of the British Empire and Commonwealth, Australia was not a noticeably active participant in world politics until the Japanese assault on Pearl Harbor in 1941. After Federation in 1901, the new nation preferred to leave matters of foreign policy to Britain. According to a former senior Australian diplomat, Francis Stuart, himself born in 1912: 'To Australians of my generation the community we belonged to was the Empire, not the individual country in which we happened to have been born.'<sup>1</sup>

Still, in the period between Federation and Pearl Harbor, successive Australian governments did take several steps to try to contain the power of Japan in the Asian region. After the Meiji restoration, Japan had embarked upon a vigorous schedule of modernisation and national aggrandisement, and actually defeated a European power, Russia, in 1905. Short of land and natural resources, the Japanese required cheap raw materials for their growing industrial economy. Spared colonial domination, they were also determined to prove that Japan was in no

way inferior to other world powers (see Chapter 15). This was an era in which overseas colonies were seen as an indispensable element of national strength, and Japan too sought territorial acquisitions abroad.

In these circumstances, Alfred Deakin, W.M. Hughes and other early Australian federal leaders regarded Australia's international situation as isolated and precarious, and argued that Australia had its own interests in the Asian and Pacific regions, which required safeguards. In 1909, and again in 1936, Australian leaders unsuccessfully sought non-aggression pacts between Asian and Pacific countries, including Japan. In 1919, W.M. Hughes was more successful in opposing a Japanese attempt to have a racial equality clause written into the covenant of the League of Nations. Significantly, Prime Minister Hughes maintained that the insertion of such a clause would threaten 'white Australia'.

There was, however, an erratic quality about Australian policy towards Japan, well demonstrated in the area of economic relationships during the 1930s. To return again to Francis Stuart, 'Australia's emergence as an independent nation has been hesitant and jerky, and there has been a lack of confidence sometimes in the process'.<sup>2</sup>

To help the country recover from the Great Depression, the Australian government in 1936 decided to implement a 'trade diversion' policy by imposing restrictions on the import of Japanese textiles, which were injuring the interests of British textile exporters to Australia. 'All policies,' wrote T.B. Millar, 'have their ambiguities and their penalties.'<sup>3</sup> So it was with 'trade diversion'. Because the policy made little economic sense, it was soon abandoned, but it clearly made no contribution to positive relations between Australia and Japan during a difficult period when Japan urgently needed overseas markets. Rather, it demonstrated an Australian incapacity to comprehend the predicaments of an Asian people. 'We operated very much on an ad hoc basis,' recalled a former senior Australian diplomat, Sir Keith Waller, 'we reacted to situations rather than trying to foresee them or to formulate a policy which would meet a future situation ... London was our principal source of information.'<sup>4</sup> Generally speaking, before Pearl Harbor, Asia was perceived as remote from Australia. European colonialism ruled much of it, and very little was written or talked about it. As far as Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies was concerned in April 1939, 'The British countries of the world must stand or fall together.'<sup>5</sup>

## The Pacific War and its aftermath

The outbreak of the Pacific War in December 1941 was, of course, essentially the responsibility of the great powers—Japan, Germany, Britain and the United States. It was signalled by a Japanese attack on the American Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor. Because of its relationship with Britain, Australia was automatically at war with Japan. Earlier Australian fears of 'aggression from the north' were suddenly and desperately realised. Before 1941, Australia had looked to the naval base in Singapore as the symbol of British protective strength in the region, but the dramatic events which occurred between December 1941 and April 1942 exposed the fundamental flaw in this strategy. As Patrick Morgan has aptly observed: 'The Japanese downward thrust exposed our primal fear—that we did not belong here, and would be dismembered and disappear.'<sup>6</sup>

In the path of the Japanese advance, Singapore fell. Britain, tightly engaged in the European conflict with Germany, was unable and probably unwilling to defend Australia at that stage. Francis Stuart recalls that:

... at the beginning of 1942 Australia found itself facing a wholly new war situation. It was no longer a remote base which could contribute forces to a European war; it was a likely theatre of operations itself, facing a local enemy...<sup>7</sup>

Under a new Labor wartime government, Australia turned to the United States for assistance, and relied upon American military efforts until the Japanese surrender in August 1945. Still, the near-triumph of Japanese imperial armies brought home the need for Australia to become a much more active agent in regional affairs on its own behalf. Despite its own defeat, Japan had shattered the myth of European superiority in Asia and furnished opportunities for nationalist revolt. Australia's 'stake in the Pacific is paramount'<sup>8</sup> claimed the Minister for External Affairs, Dr H.V. Evatt, in March 1946; and in March 1947 he announced that Australia would work for 'a harmonious association of democratic states in the Southeast Asia area'.<sup>9</sup> Towards Australia's closest Asian neighbour, Indonesia, Dr Evatt's deeds matched his words. As early as July 1947, Australia granted de facto recognition to the new Republic of Indonesia, and supported Indonesia at the United Nations against a series of Dutch attempts to regain control over the vast archipelago. The highpoint of Dr Evatt's cooperation with Asian nationalist leaders occurred with his participation in an anti-colonial conference called by India's Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, in New Delhi early in 1949. Generally, Australia had little difficulty at a diplomatic level in cooperation with the Western-oriented nationalist leaders of South and Southeast Asia.

At other levels, the path was not as smooth. Even after the comprehensive defeat of Japan, Asia was still regarded in Australia as potentially the source of greatest threat to the country's security. Generally preoccupied with domestic reconstruction, the postwar Labor government led by Ben Chifley from 1945 to 1949 wanted to have a larger Australian population, and positively encouraged European immigration to meet that requirement. At the same time, the Minister for Immigration, Arthur Calwell, rigorously reaffirmed the 'White Australia' policy, and deported those few Asians who had come to Australia as wartime refugees. By mid-1948, Mr Calwell's zealotry had provoked much hostile publicity in various Asian countries, so Prime Minister Chifley authorised the despatch of a 'goodwill' mission to Southeast Asia, headed by Professor W. Macmahon Ball, and the provision of 25 postgraduate scholarships for Asians to study on a temporary basis in Australia. Later, Macmahon Ball was to recall the 'mockery of sending a goodwill mission, while the Australian Government was deporting Asians with racist contempt and inhumanity'.<sup>10</sup> Certainly the Labor government, until its electoral defeat in December 1949, remained defiantly unrepentant in its desire to exclude Asians from permanent settlement in Australia.

Meanwhile, Dr Evatt had moved to have a harsh international peace settlement imposed upon Japan. As another senior Australian diplomat, Alan Renouf, observed: 'Towards Japan there was a national feeling of bitterness that could not be ignored'.<sup>11</sup> On the basis of Australia's wartime efforts and Dr Evatt's energetic personal diplomacy, Australia achieved membership of the Allied Council for Japan and the Far Eastern Commission. In practice, the victorious United States controlled both the Allied military occupation of Japan and the terms of the peace treaty. For example, when the Australian government sought to have the Japanese Emperor Hirohito tried in court as a war criminal, the United States avoided such a drastic step, already looking to a revived and Western-oriented Japan as a likely future ally.

For already the onset of the Cold War (see Chapter 21) meant that the international agenda was changing for Australia. Indeed, by 1948, decisive victories by communist forces in China, together with a series of violent, communist-led revolts in Indochina, Malaya, the Philippines and Java, had provoked alarm across the political spectrum in Australia. Dr Evatt actively sought a new regional security pact which would encompass non-communist Asian countries, the United States, Britain and Australia, but for the time being Australia had to accept an informal agreement with Britain and New Zealand called ANZAM, involving consultation and coordination of strategic planning and military operations in the British-administered Malayan area. When the communist guerrilla army of Mao Zedong triumphed in China in 1949, the Australian Labor government did not formally recognise the new Chinese authorities. About to face a general

election, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) did not want to provoke opposition claims that it was 'soft' on or supported communism at a time of worsening international tension between the Western powers and the Soviet bloc. In fact, Australia did not decide to recognise the People's Republic of China (PRC) for another 23 years.

## Containment of communism

To the staunchly anti-communist Liberal-Country Party coalition which assumed government in Australia in December 1949, the wider world seemed a grave and ominous place. Indeed, by June 1950, a third world war seemed imminent, especially given the outbreak of the Korean War. In Australia, the old, familiar 'threat-from-the-north' theme was loudly revived, this time with a communist face. The Liberal-Country Party government was preoccupied with the containment of communism in general, and Maoist China in particular, and its world-view assumed a negative, defensive hue. According to External Affairs Minister Richard Casey in October 1954:

If the whole of Indo-China fell to the Communists, Thailand would be gravely exposed. If Thailand were to fall, the road would be open to Malaya and Singapore. From the Malay Peninsula the Communists could dominate the northern approaches to Australia and even cut our life-lines with Europe.<sup>12</sup>

To avoid such drastic possibilities, the Australian government sought friendly great-power involvement to bolster existing non-communist Asian governments. Australia entered an alliance (ANZUS) with United States and New Zealand in 1952, joined the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in 1954, and sent arms and troops to the campaigns in Korea (1950-53), Malaya (1955-60), Malaysia (1963-66) and Vietnam (1965-72). Prime Minister Robert Menzies told parliament on 29 April 1965 that: 'The takeover of South Vietnam would be a direct military threat to Australia and all the countries of South and South East Asia. It must be seen as part of a thrust by Communist China between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.'<sup>13</sup>

Such a viewpoint woefully misread the antagonistic historical relationship between China and Vietnam. More important to Australia, though, according to Francis Stuart, was 'the political decision that we should demonstrate solidarity with the United States'.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, by 1967, more than 8000 Australian armed forces personnel were on active duty fighting in the Vietnam War. Breakaway anti-communist Labor groups which had formed the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) in the mid-1950s lent vociferous support to these government actions. The official Australian Labor Party opposition likewise viewed Asian communist revolts with concern, but preferred any Australian participation in Asian wars to be limited, and conducted under the sponsorship of the UN. The ALP would have preferred extensive economic assistance to Asian countries under pressure. More radical views emerged during the late 1960s, describing communism in Asia as a significant anti-colonial and modernising device that Australia should not seek to interfere with, much less contain. The costly Western experience of the Vietnam War lent considerable credence to these views. By April 1970, a total of 404 Australians had died as a result of that war, and a further 1961 were wounded in action.<sup>15</sup>

From 1950 onwards, the Liberal-Country Party government in Australia had recognised that more than military measures were needed to set the path of political and social change in Asia on a non-communist direction; that living standards mattered as much as (if not more than) guns and troops. At a meeting of member countries of the Commonwealth of Nations in Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in 1950, the Australian delegation led by Percy Spender was largely responsible for the establishment of a broad scheme of economic and technical assistance to Asian countries.

External Affairs Minister Richard Casey later summarised the nature of this 'Colombo Plan' as follows:

Under the Colombo Plan, the more highly developed participating countries pledged themselves to assist the countries of South and South East Asia by contributing both resources and benefit of their acquired skills so that the living standards of the people might be raised.<sup>16</sup>

Two key aspects of the plan were capital aid projects and educational assistance schemes, both directed towards economic development. As well as the provision of military and economic aid to sympathetic Asian countries, the Australian government energetically extended a network of diplomatic missions throughout non-communist Asia. Casey noted: 'Our security might well be said to depend on the early information we get as to trends and events. It is not enough to rely entirely on what we get from British or American sources.'<sup>17</sup> In the light of the Vietnam War, this proved to be a prophetic statement. In economic policy, despite reservations on political and emotional grounds, there was a significant diversification of Australian trade during the 1950s and 1960s, especially towards China and Japan. Indeed, by 1967, Japan had replaced the United Kingdom as Australia's largest export market. Japan's postwar reconstruction meant a ready demand for Australia's agricultural produce and mineral resources, and Australia in turn furnished a ready market for Japanese manufactured goods. In Alan Renouf's view, 'the economic rapprochement with Japan represents the major foreign policy achievement of Liberal-Country Party governments since the Second World War'.<sup>18</sup> Under the Colombo Plan, many thousands of 'sponsored' and 'private' Asian students were allowed to train in Australian educational institutions. Western diplomas and degrees (including those obtainable in Australia) possessed considerable economic value and social prestige in those Asian countries committed to policies of rapid material development and national modernisation. Finally, after Sir Robert Menzies retired as Australian Prime Minister in 1966, the government amended immigration policy to permit a limited entry of qualified Asian people to live permanently in Australia.

As well as the achievements, there were nevertheless some genuine limitations on the Asian policies of the Liberal-Country Party governments in office between 1949 and 1972. Obsession with 'containing' communism and China bred a simplistic, rigid and stereotyped view of the nature of political and social change in Asian countries, instead of a careful, probing analysis of the needs and dilemmas of individual Asian societies. Frequently there was a tendency to regard Western-oriented Asian leaders as good (in the face of overwhelming evidence of the corruption and unpopularity of some governments), and to regard all radical and/or communist Asian leaders as bad (in the face of overwhelming evidence of their self-discipline and popularity). In the phrase of a subsequent Australian Foreign Minister, Senator Gareth Evans, 'had we known more of Vietnam we might have seen more grey and less red'.<sup>19</sup> Australia's anti-communists also found it hard to comprehend why countries like India and Cambodia chose neutrality and pacifism in the Cold War. To some extent, official stereotypes were reinforced by the fact that, at least until 1958, no Australian diplomats were trained to proficiency in any Asian language. The Eurocentrism of Australia's professional diplomats became legendary. According to another former diplomat, Gregory Clark, there was no real effort to attract into the public service people who were knowledgeable about Asia. The preference was for professional generalists.<sup>20</sup>

Obviously, this practice restricted the capacity of Australian diplomats to communicate with most Asian peoples who knew no English. A classic instance occurred in Singapore during the 1959 elections for self-government in the island state. The then Department of External Affairs in Canberra recommended that Australia should oppose the publicly radical, aggressive politician, Lee Kuan Yew, and support the conservative, pro-British candidate, Lim Yew Hock, warning that

Lee's election as chief minister would foreshadow a communist takeover. In fact, quite the reverse occurred after Lee Kuan Yew's electoral victory in 1959, when Lee emerged as the staunchest and most successful non-communist leader in Asia.

Gradually, Australia's diplomatic service did devote more attention and resources to training its professional officers in several Asian languages and cultures. However, even at the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, Australia still did not have a single specialist diplomat fluent in an Indochinese language. Moreover, the determination of the Liberal-Country Party coalition not to extend recognition to communist Asian governments such as the PRC, North Vietnam and North Korea meant that Australia lacked direct sources of information and no chance of significant human contact with 25 per cent of the world's population. In Alan Renouf's words, 'the intense preoccupation with security and the antipathy to "international Communism" blinded vision and prevented policies more suited to the national interests'.<sup>21</sup>

Wholehearted reliance on containment of radical Asian social movements by the great Western powers, such as the United States and Britain, left Australia rather naked and confused when the interests and policies of those Great Powers changed, as they did in the late 1960s. After Indonesia abandoned its futile 'crush Malaysia' campaign in 1966, the British government decided to withdraw the bulk of its military forces from 'East of Suez', though Gurkha battalions remained on guard duty in Brunei and Hong Kong. More significantly, from 1968, American Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon commenced the long, difficult process of negotiation with and withdrawal from Vietnam (see Chapter 22). Still more dramatic moves were afoot. In 1971, President Nixon, without consulting his Australian ally, decided to visit his old foe, the PRC, with a view to normalisation of relations. A shaken Liberal-Country Party coalition government in Canberra tried to adjust to these international shifts until the federal election of December 1972 swept them from power, and brought the Australian Labor Party back into office under the dynamic, assertive and highly personalised style of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, who also served as foreign minister until December 1973.

## The Whitlam interlude

Gough Whitlam brought qualities of business, publicity, robustness and enthusiasm to Australian diplomacy that had not been experienced since Casey, Spender and Evatt. Having long regarded foreign affairs as his area of primary interest and expertise, Whitlam indicated his intention to bring Australian policies quickly into line with international realities. This realism was also touched with reformist zeal. Whitlam wanted 'a more independent Australian stance'. He wanted to make Australia a more 'distinctive' and 'well-regarded' nation, a country noted for its tolerance, its commitment to human equality and racial justice.<sup>22</sup> No longer would Australia be too constrained by the 'alliance syndrome' or its traditional links with Britain and the United States. In a sharp series of external initiatives, Whitlam abandoned the anti-communist Guomindang government of Taiwan; exchanged diplomatic recognition with the PRC and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), withdrew remaining Australian military units from South Vietnam, Cambodia and Singapore, took Australia out of the anti-communist Asian and Pacific Council, and supported the creation of a zone of peace in the Indian Ocean and a neutralised Southeast Asia under the auspices of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which had been formed in 1967. According to Mr Whitlam, Australia no longer viewed Southeast Asia 'as a frontier where we might fight nameless Asian enemies as far to the north of our own shores as possible'.<sup>23</sup> Consistent with its opposition to Australian military interference in Asian political change, the Whitlam government accepted without protest the coming to power of communist governments in South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in 1975. Though some sections of the ALP

may have preferred self-determination and independence for the former Portuguese colony of East Timor, Whitlam's realism prevailed here as well. Australia accepted the forcible absorption of East Timor into the Republic of Indonesia during the latter part of 1975.

During its relatively short period in office until November 1975, the Labor government continued to provide substantial economic and technical assistance to Asian countries, and broadened the scope of this aid to include communist countries as well. As Whitlam said: 'In our region, in our dealings with all the countries of that region we think it's time for an ideological holiday'.<sup>24</sup> Significantly, too, the ALP's flamboyant Minister for Immigration, Mr Al Grassby, abolished any racially discriminatory practices in immigration policy towards people from Asia.

### From Fraser to Hawke: Caution, conciliation and engagement

The basic conciliatory framework established by the Australian Labor government of Gough Whitlam was maintained by his conservative successors when the Liberal-Country Party coalition returned to national power in November 1975. If anything, Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser moved Australia towards even closer ties with the PRC, partly as a counter-weight to the Soviet Union, which was then perceived as the most likely threat to Australia's security. The days of a possible 'downward thrust from communist China' had long gone. Moreover, after the Cultural Revolution in China had run its destructive internal course (see Chapter 25), Australia saw great potential for trade, investment and technical exchange in accord with the outward-looking modernisation espoused by China's new leader, Deng Xiaoping. Even before Mao Zedong's death, Mr Fraser visited Beijing in June 1976, but kept Australia at a distance from the Soviet-backed Socialist Republic of Vietnam, which was formally established in July 1976. When, sick of Pol Pot's atrocities, Vietnam invaded Cambodia at the end of 1978 (see Chapter 41), Australia publicly opposed Vietnam's actions as a form of Soviet-inspired intervention, and continued to give legitimacy to the coalition government of Democratic Kampuchea, until Foreign Minister Andrew Peacock stepped in and changed this policy in October 1981.

Pragmatism, rather than ideology, had indeed become the order of the day amidst the ancient feuds and contemporary complexities of Asian politics. Closer to Australia's shores, the Fraser government kept up recognition of Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor, despite undercurrents of misgiving in the wider community about possible Indonesian expansionism. When, after 1975, streams of desperate political refugees poured out of strife-torn Indochina and East Timor, the Fraser government made provision for many thousands of them to settle in Australia. The days of 'White Australia' had also seemingly long gone. Meanwhile, many thousands of young Asians continued to receive secondary and higher education in Australian schools, colleges and universities. For many Asian parents, from Hong Kong to Jakarta, Australia was not only closer than Western Europe or the United States as an educational venue for their aspirant youth, but it was cheaper, even though Australia now preferred to charge fees for educational services rather than provide large numbers of scholarships.

The electoral defeat of the Liberal-Country Party coalition in March 1983 saw a determinedly cautious ALP government led by Bob Hawke seek an improvement of links with Indonesia and continue good relations with China. Indeed, throughout the 1980s, relations with the PRC improved so far as to take China near the top of the Hawke government's foreign relations priorities. In strategic and military terms, Australia continued to rely upon its alliance with the United States through the ANZUS treaty. Yet Australia's trading dependence upon the new economic superpower, Japan, became more evident. As early as 1970, Japan was taking huge quantities of coal, iron ore, beef, and wool, and supplying a sophisticated range of manufactured goods and motor vehicles in return. By 1991, this bilateral trade between Australia and Japan was

worth A\$23 billion per annum, and Japanese firms had invested over A\$36 billion in the Australian domestic economy, mostly in tourism and property development. About 350 000 Japanese people took holidays in Australia each year.

## A passionate commitment

By the late 1980s, the Australian Labor government's involvement in Asian regional affairs took on the quality of passionate commitment. In January 1989, while on a visit to one of the booming 'tiger' Asian economies, South Korea, Prime Minister Bob Hawke publicly launched the concept of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, which became known by the acronym of APEC. Developed in tandem with Japan, APEC envisaged the development of a consultative framework for economic cooperation, inter-governmental dialogue, and interaction for the region of the world with which Australia now traded most, and from which at least half of its new immigrants now came each year. Even though APEC included the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, most of the members were located in East and Southeast Asia. It was not, as alleged by some critics, some new version of a 'white person's club', but really an essential vehicle for countries like Australia to lock into regional economic growth and development, with both big and small Asian regional players. By the early 1990s, Australia's commitment to regional free trade and an economic 'level playing field' was second to none. No government was more pleased when, at the APEC leaders' meeting in Bogor, Indonesia, in November 1994, the 18 major regional economies pledged themselves to achieving free and open trade and investment no later than 2010 in the case of industrialised members, and no later than 2020 for the others. For Paul Keating, former treasurer and Bob Hawke's successor as prime minister in 1991, Australia's future as an engaged, multicultural Asia-Pacific nation was beyond dispute. It can fairly be said that Mr Keating, and his foreign minister, Gareth Evans, devoted full energies to the achievement of this future—Keating in his wholehearted support for APEC and development of close personal ties with key regional leaders like President Suharto of Indonesia, Senator Evans in his painstaking efforts to broker a lasting peace settlement out of the tragic civil war in Cambodia.

The dramatic end of the Cold War in 1989 afforded Australia the opportunity to further its security interests on a regional, rather than global basis. In July 1994, after lengthy, painstaking diplomatic effort by Senator Evans, Australia was able to join the many other countries in the ASEAN Regional Forum, a process of regular multilateral dialogue on strategic and security matters. In December 1995, the Keating Government announced the successful negotiation of a formal agreement on joint security between Australia and Indonesia.

## Hurdles along the path

Australia, in its path of regional commitment, nevertheless encountered a number of hurdles. Bob Hawke's infectious enthusiasm for the modernisation of the People's Republic of China took a profound and personal blow in June 1989, when the Chinese government sought, by use of military force, to silence its dissident youth. The crackdown in Beijing (see Chapter 25) provided a stark reminder to the rest of the world that China was not an open society, nor likely to become one, despite its determination to grow and prosper with the help of international capital investment. Stephen Fitzgerald has commented how Australian leaders of the 1980s had 'some kind of illusion of China in mind, some fantasy of our own creation. ... part Shangri-la, part gold rush', a perception that led to 'deference, breathless admiration, and even sycophancy'.<sup>25</sup> Bob Hawke's sense of personal betrayal by the Chinese leadership was manifest when he broke down and wept in public over the young Chinese dead, and some 19 000 Chinese students and their dependants then residing in Australia were granted refugee visas to remain safely by the Federal



Labor government. The coolness that dramatically entered Australia's relations with the largest country in the Asian region lasted for the better part of two years.

The robust and curiously anti-Western Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, also sought to spoke Australia's regional wheel with his own proposal for an East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC), an Asians-only grouping that would rival APEC. Much to the chagrin of the Malaysian leader, neither Japan nor the United States would wear EAEC, nor in these circumstances, would his fellow members of ASEAN. Dr Mahathir's hostility to APEC only intensified when Paul Keating, in an unguarded moment of frustration in November 1993, described his Malaysian counterpart as 'recalcitrant'. Australian political leaders often have difficulty distinguishing the language appropriate to domestic and international discourse, and Malaysian wrath at Mr Keating was considerable, even though the substance of bilateral cooperation between Australia and Malaysia in defence, education, trade, and investment continued unabated, and Malaysia continued its wary participation in the APEC forum. Malaysia did, however, continue to veto Australia's request to participate in the ASEM (ASEAN-Europe Meeting) of March 1996.

By far the most difficult and insidious hurdle to Australia's regional commitment came from within, after the Liberal-National Party coalition led by John Howard won its massive federal electoral victory in March 1996. The Liberal Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, was at pains to stress the continuity of Australia's Asian engagement, and the National Trade Minister, Tim Fischer, a Vietnam veteran, was renowned for his enthusiasm for Australia trade and investment with Asian partners. However, one of the successful new Independent Members of Parliament, Pauline Hanson from the working class seat of Ipswich in Queensland, delivered a maiden speech which was roundly critical of both Asian migration to Australia and provisions for Aboriginal welfare. Australia, she suggested, was being 'swamped' by Asian people. Official hopes that Mrs Hanson would be a temporary phenomenon turned to alarm, as the subsequent formation of her One Nation Party showed her giving voice to the fears and alienation of a minority of Australians at a time of unacceptably high domestic unemployment and job-shedding by both government and industry. Noted for his caution, Prime Minister Howard took some time to distance the Australian Government from Mrs Hanson's views, though the Australian Commonwealth Parliament did manage to carry a bipartisan resolution against racism in late 1996. Unfortunately, Mrs Hanson's status as a federal parliamentarian and extensive coverage of her views in the Australian media gave her negative and extremist views extensive and unwarranted status in Asian countries. Unfortunate memories of the old, ignoble 'White Australia' were still there to be rekindled, and reports abounded of a significant drop in the numbers of tourists and students wanting to come to Australia from Asian sources. So pervasive was the Hanson effect that, in August 1996, the Australian government established a special diplomatic unit in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to help repair the damage to Australia's image overseas.

By the late 1990s, Australia had reached the point of no return in its comprehensive engagement with the Asian and Pacific regions. There was the undeniable economic imperative, of course. Each year, the member countries of APEC took more than 75 per cent of Australian exports, valued at some A\$58 billion in 1996, and supplied nearly 70 per cent of its imports. Japan and Australia continue to complement each other's economies in a mutually dependent way, and Japan, China, and South Korea alone were likely to be Australia's three main trading partners by the year 2000. Forty per cent of inbound tourists to Australia came from Asian countries each year. With some 43 000 Asian students in Australia at any one time, Australia's provision of full-fee-paying higher educational places for Asian students was now worth more than \$1 billion in export revenue annually, and offered a vital margin of survival for many of Australia's fund-strapped universities. There were nearly 800 000 persons of Asian birth living in Australia by 1995, representing 4.5 per cent of the total population, a figure that was expected to

rise to 7 per cent by the year 2010. More young Australians were learning Japanese than any other national group outside of Japan. Even tiny Singapore relied on Australian space and facilities for the deployment and training of its air force. Above all, people from Asian countries and Australia still had much that was positive to learn from each other.

In August 1997, the Australian Government released *In the National Interest*, a White Paper on likely directions in Australian foreign and trade policies over the next 15 years. The White Paper affirmed the centrality of the Asia-Pacific region to Australia's national interests and Australia's commitment to the principle of racial equality. Indonesia, Japan, and China were identified as three out of the four key bilateral relationships for Australia in the short- to medium-term future.

East Timor, which had long been a thorn in the side of Australia-Indonesia relations, erupted in crisis in September 1999, with Australia leading a United Nations peace-keeping force there. The crisis cast a serious blight over the bilateral relationship, and even caused Indonesia to cancel the December 1995 joint security agreement mentioned at the end of the previous section. However, there could be no diminution of Indonesia's importance in Australia's external relations.

## Guide to further reading

The most comprehensive history of Australian foreign policy remains Millar, T.B., *Australia in Peace and War: External Relations 1788-1977*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1978; also see Evans, G. & Grant, B., *Australia's Foreign Relations: In the World of the 1990s*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1991; Boyce, P.J. & Angel, J.R. (eds) *Diplomacy in the Marketplace: Australia in World Affairs*, Vol. 7, 1981-90, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1992; and Cotton, J. & Ravenhill, J. (eds) *Seeking Asian Engagement: Australia in World Affairs, 1991-1995*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1997.

The late Gordon Greenwood attempted a substantial overview of Australian policies towards Asia in his *Approaches to Asia*, McGraw Hill, Sydney, 1974, and achieved a readable and useful collection of documents and commentaries.

Former senior diplomats who have written on Asian issues which affect Australian security include Malcolm Booker in *The Last Domino: Aspects of Australian Foreign Relations*, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1978, and Alan Renouf in *The Frightened Country*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1979.

Readers interested in the human dimension of Australian involvement in Asia should refer to the excellent Australians in Asia Series of papers published by the Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations (CSAAR) at Griffith University in Brisbane. The same centre also publishes the series Australia-Asia Papers, which are both topical and empirical in focus.

Peter King has edited a lively collection of essays on Australia's controversial involvement in the Vietnam War, entitled *Australia's Vietnam*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1983, while more recent analyses of Australia's Asian policies are to be found in Mediansky, F.A. (ed) *Australia in a Changing World: New Foreign Policy Directions*, Maxwell Macmillan, Sydney, 1992; Mediansky, F.A. (ed) *Australian Foreign Policy into the New Millennium*, Macmillan Education Australia, Melbourne, 1997; and Robison, R. (ed) *Pathways to Asia: The Politics of Engagement*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1996.

Relations with particular countries have been reviewed in books such as Mackerras, C. (ed) *Australia and China: Partners in Asia*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1996; and Brown, C. (ed) *Indonesia: Dealing with a Neighbour*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1996.

Serials produced under the auspices of the Australian Institute of International Affairs, such as *World Review* and the *Australian Journal of International Affairs* (formerly *Australian Outlook*) often carry articles of Australian-Asian interest, as does the *Current Affairs Bulletin* published by the University of Sydney.

Current statements of Australian government policy towards the various Asian countries are published by the Commonwealth Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in a serial, *The Monthly Record*, available on subscription from the Australian Government Publishing Service.

Since 1994, a yearbook called *The Asia-Australian Survey*, edited by Russell Trood and Deborah McNamara on behalf of the Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations (CSAAR), has been published through Macmillan Education in Sydney. It covers Australia's relations with the great majority of Eastern Asian countries, as well as some topical chapters.

## Notes

- 1 Stuart, F., *Towards Coming-Of-Age: A Foreign Service Odyssey*, Australians in Asia Series No. 2, Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations (CSAAR), Griffith University, Brisbane, 1989, p. iii.
- 2 *ibid.*, p. vi.
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# AUSTRALIAN IMAGES OF ASIA

Australia's relations with Asia have been revolutionised since World War II. To begin with, in 1939 the economy was heavily dependent on Britain. By the end of the 1990s, more than half of Australia's exports were to Asia and the Asian share of Australia's imports was over one-third. Japan had become the single most important source of trade. In the area of defence and foreign policy, Australia's foreign policy largely reflected that of Britain in 1939, and Australia was a loyal member of the Empire. By the 1980s, Australia had developed more independent foreign and defence policies, increasingly directing its material and intellectual resources to Eastern Asia. In addition, immigration patterns had changed radically in favour of Asians (see Chapter 43).

## Images of Asia to the early 1970s

The Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia shattered Australians' insularity. For decades, many Australians had written and spoken about the Japanese threat. In the 1930s, Australians who read newspapers, listened to radios or saw Movietone newsreels at picture theatres must have begun to develop an awareness that their country was geographically located at the foot of Asia and that Japan was a growing military threat. But the Dutch, the British, the French and the Americans were firmly in control of their Southeast Asian colonies and Singapore seemed an impregnable fortress which would protect Australia against any southward thrust. On 15 February 1942, Singapore fell to the Japanese with 22 000 Australian soldiers becoming prisoners of war. On 19 February, Darwin was bombed for the first of many times. Over the next three and a half years, hundreds of thousands of young Australians fought the Japanese in New Guinea and Southeast Asia. Australian images of Asia could never be the same again.

Many Australians had bitter experiences of the Japanese during the war. Those who were prisoners had good cause to hate the Japanese—Changi and the horrors of the Burma Railway are well remembered by Australians. One-third of Australian prisoners of war under the Japanese died and others were mentally and physically scarred for life. Thousands died fighting on the plains and in the jungles. A whole generation of Australians was intimately affected by the war with Japan. They personally fought, a husband or a child fought or, at the very least, a friend or relative did so. What else could be expected at war's end but widespread distrust, dislike and even hatred of the Japanese? Memoirs of prisoners of war and soldiers, along with war novels published in the late 1940s and early 1950s, expressed some of these emotions and consolidated negative images of the Japanese. Public opinion polls in the early 1950s confirmed these residual

emotions. Not until the 1960s was there a cooling in emotional reactions to the Japanese and even in the 1980s seemingly insignificant events could trigger emotional responses drawn from wartime memories.

Australia's preoccupation in the immediate postwar years was the creation of a Pacific security alliance. The southward expansion of Japan had confirmed long-held invasion fears. The emergence of independent nations in its region was a dramatic break with the past. The communist victory in China, the conflict in Korea, the Malayan 'emergency' and the unresolved war in Vietnam between the French and the communist-led Vietminh added to feelings of insecurity generated by the Cold War in Europe. There were widespread fears in the West that a third world war between communist and anti-communist forces might be imminent. In this atmosphere, it is not surprising that Australians reacted to the dramatic political changes in their region with deep feelings of unease and insecurity. Reflecting this mood, the Australian government strongly supported continued British political and military involvement in Malaya and Singapore, and encouraged greater United States involvement in the Pacific. The ANZUS alliance, the SEATO treaty and the arrangements with Britain whereby Australian and New Zealand forces bolstered British forces in Malaya and Singapore were at the core of Australia's search for security from Southeast Asia in the 1950s and 1960s.

Australia's foreign policy in the 1950s and 1960s reflected the unease and uncertainty of a conservative government—and a conservative people—trying to come to terms with a decolonised Asia. The newly independent countries to Australia's north were seen as highly unstable and susceptible to communist subversion. It is easy in retrospect to be critical of Australia's foreign policy in the two decades after the war. It was lacking in vision and unable to comprehend the dynamics of the newly independent nations, as its critics argued at the time. But given Australians' perceived images of Asia, the almost total lack of knowledge of Asian societies in the 1950s and the immensity of the changes suddenly wrought by the Pacific War, it is not surprising that Australians reacted in the way that they did.

Postwar Australians inherited a set of images of Asia. Most were conditioned reflexes, absorbed from folklore, consolidated by educational curricula which barely noted the existence of Asia and which were strengthened by the trauma of the war. Dominant images of Asia were negative ones. Asia was huge, populous, impoverished, casting envious eyes on the vast empty spaces of Australia. Asia threatened Australian prosperity and the continuation of European civilisation in this continent. The Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia and its direct threat to Australia breathed new life into old images. Australians' worst fears had almost been realised. They had fought off an Asian invader. The immediate problem in 1945—and indeed through to the 1990s—was to work out how a white, prosperous, European culture could come to understand the non-white and generally less prosperous Asian cultures it bordered, with whom it shared few social and religious mores and little common historical experience.

Public opinion polls from the mid-1940s onwards have consistently shown that for large numbers of Australians the major threat to Australian security was seen to come from Asia. Different Asian countries were thought to threaten Australia over the years. In the immediate postwar years, a majority of Australians saw Japan as posing a continued threat to their security. The communist victory in China and the outbreak of the Korean War changed all that. For the next 20 years, China was seen as the major threat. As late as 1970, about 30 per cent of Australians still saw China as the major threat to Australia. Since the resumption of diplomatic relations with China in 1972, Australian images of China have mellowed. Indonesia has taken over as the major threat in the Australian mind. In the late 1990s, public opinion polls still showed that Australians saw Indonesia as the major threat to their security—fears of invasion or of social and political chaos leading to a flood of refugees were still strong in Australian minds.

There was a strong moral—verging on moralising—tone to Australian government attitudes to Asia in the 1950s and 1960s, along with unrealistic perceptions of Australia's importance in the region. As late as 1969, External Affairs Minister Gordon Freeth described Australia's role in Southeast Asia as like that of a policeman on a beat. It was part of the colonialist ethos with which Australian governments were imbued. In a scathing article in 1961, William Macmahon Ball, Professor of Political Science at Melbourne University and a strong advocate of reshaping Australian attitudes and policies towards Asia, quoted from speakers' notes prepared by the Australia Day Council. In them the Council stated that:

To our north, such neighbours as Malaya, Indonesia, Burma, Siam, Indo-China and Borneo look to Australia—the only great Western nation from Suez to San Francisco—for a lead, and for protection from the menace of subversion, terror and oppression which threatens and hovers like a dark storm cloud over Asia.

Macmahon Ball asked whether, with views like this, there was any hope of a meeting of Australian and Asian minds.<sup>1</sup>

### *The media*

Images of Asia projected by the major newspapers and magazines in the 1950s and 1960s generally reflected concern about the spread of communism and the instability of Southeast Asia. Most articles focused on wars and communism—the Korean War, the Malayan 'emergency', the conflict between Vietnam and France, and later the struggle for control of South Vietnam, were all discussed largely in strategic terms. Travel articles describing newly discovered tourist areas in Asia were increasingly featured. And, of course, space was always found in the more popular magazines for stories of the exotic or the bizarre. Overall, before the Vietnam War, the space devoted to news from Asia was quite small. There was little serious analysis of the societies about which Australians were supposed to be so concerned.

Australian newspapers were almost entirely reliant on international news agencies for news on Asia in the 1950s and early 1960s. Occasionally a staff reporter was sent to an Asian country on short-term assignment. The Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) was the exception. In 1956 it established a permanent office in Singapore, its first in Asia. Others quickly followed in Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, New Delhi and Tokyo. In its news, current affairs and background programs, the ABC steadily increased its reporting on Asia. However, it was not until the commitment of Australian troops to the Vietnam War in 1965 that Australian newspapers put significant resources into collecting news from Asia. Vietnam, of course, dominated all media, but when the war ended in 1975 the major metropolitan newspapers had realised the growing importance of Asian countries to Australia, and responded by devoting greater space to them, generally providing better background stories on political events, particularly in Southeast and East Asia. Reporting still tended to be crisis-driven (which was perhaps unavoidable in the media) but there was strong and generally high quality coverage of events such as the race riots in Malaysia in 1969, the Indonesian invasion of East Timor in 1975, the fall of Marcos in the Philippines in 1986, the Chinese government's crushing of student protest in 1989, and the Asian financial crisis of late 1997 and 1998.

There was a greater diversity in analysis of Asian societies and Australia's relations with Asia in the smaller magazines and journals. They were much less widely read than the daily newspapers, but were central to shaping the debate on how Australia's relations with Asian societies might change. The weekly *Nation*, begun in 1958 in part to challenge the White Australia policy, was particularly important. Until its demise in 1972, *Nation* probably did more than any other single

publication to reorient Australians' consciousness towards Asia. Other magazines, such as *Meanjin*, the *Australian Quarterly*, *Overland* and *Quadrant*, also devoted increasing space to analyses of Asian societies and Australia's relations with Asia. New books on Asia and on Australian foreign policy were reviewed and there were regular articles from a small group of academics and journalists committed to changing Australians' images of the world. Church publications also slowly devoted increasing space to Asian countries. The *Catholic Weekly* in Melbourne and the *Anglican* in Sydney, as well as publications of the Australian Council of Churches and those of many individual dioceses, were important vehicles for shaping Australians' images of Asia. Their major concern, of course, remained the local scene, but there was a growing realisation that Australian churches must develop closer relations with churches in Asia and that to do this they must first develop a greater understanding of different cultures and histories.

### *Voices for and against change*

While conservative politicians, journalists and political commentators were pessimistic about the changes taking place in Asia, particularly in Southeast Asia, other voices challenged this view of political developments in Asia. Some, like Macmahon Ball, had been involved in the Australian Institute of International Affairs in the late 1930s. Most were from a younger generation, postwar university graduates deeply influenced by the end of the Empire. They were excited by post-colonial nationalism and optimistic that the social, economic and political problems faced by the new nation-states would be resolved. They prided themselves on seeing Asia as Australians, believing that this gave them a different perspective from Britons, Europeans or Americans. They wanted to rid Australia of its slavish attachment to all things British and of its Eurocentric view of the world. They believed that Australia's future did indeed lie in Asia and that Australians should be sympathetic to the ideals and aspirations of the new nation-states.

Those who wanted to revolutionise Australia's relations with Asia saw the White Australia policy as the major impediment. It was not just that it was the one thing that middle-class Asians knew about Australia—and were aggrieved and offended by—but that as long as it continued, Australians would not be able to throw off images and attitudes inherited from the colonial past. Most of those who urged the abolition of the White Australia policy did so not simply from a sense of justice and universal brotherhood, but, equally importantly, because of what its existence did to Australians themselves. They were convinced that if Australia was to come to terms with its geography and develop closer connections with Asian countries, then the White Australia policy had to be abandoned.

But those who wrote and spoke about Australia's Asian future in the 1950s were a small minority. Australians were preoccupied by postwar reconstruction. They were enjoying greater prosperity than ever before. The postwar migration from Europe had yet to make a significant dent in Anglo-Saxon society. Assimilation was the official policy. Most Australians' mental map of the world centred on London, and Asia simply did not impinge on the consciousness of most Australians, except as a vaguely perceived threat. School curricula ignored Asia and the universities had made only tentative moves towards incorporating the study of Asian societies and languages. International travel was still for the few, and when Australians did travel overseas they invariably first made for London.

However, many Australians who were neither racists nor extremists were uneasy about what they perceived as the beginning of a movement towards the diminution of the European basis of their society. On 22 January 1950, the *Bulletin* angrily took Minister for Foreign Affairs Percy Spender to task for daring to suggest in parliament that Australia would in future have a very close association with Asia. It argued vehemently that: 'We are a European people who look to Europe for our origins and our culture. Our religious faith and our national philosophy, and our whole way of life are alien to Asia.' A writer in *Nation* in 1961 forcefully made the same argument:

Australia is Australian. It is not Asian and under no circumstances should we say it is. This is no claim of superiority but a mere statement of fact. Australia has been peopled by Europeans and its culture is merely a regional variant of general European culture.<sup>2</sup>

Many Australians in the 1950s and 1960s were unsettled by the steady shift in trade and investment patterns, the pressures for Asian migration and the insistent arguments that their Anglo-Saxon society must change as it became more involved in its region.

Australia's Asian future and its implications for a hitherto predominantly European society was a fundamental debate. It was to become even more so by the 1980s as Asian countries became more important sources of trade and investment, and as there was a significantly increased presence of peoples from Asia as tourists, business people, students and migrants.

### *The war in Vietnam*

The White Australia policy had been the great moral issue for some Australians in the 1950s and early 1960s. But most Australians probably remained indifferent. From 1965 the Vietnam War became the major moral issue. This time few Australians were indifferent. The commitment of Australian troops to Vietnam and the nature of the war itself aroused great passion among both opponents and supporters of the anti-communist cause. The war was played out on Australian television screens night after night for nearly ten years. Barely a day went by without it being on the front page of most newspapers. Australian media coverage of the war relied heavily on international news agencies, complemented by periodic reports from Australian news teams sent to the region. Most reporting of the war in the Australian media showed an understanding of the war itself, but very little understanding of Vietnam.

Australia's military involvement in Vietnam was explained in imagery the public well understood. Deep-seated insecurity about being located at the foot of Asia and fear of eventual Asian invasion were linked to a widespread fear of communism. The domino theory had been a constant metaphor in Australian politics since the 1950s. Australia was portrayed as the final domino in a row headed by China. With the fall of China to the communists it was essential that the next domino in the row, Vietnam, be maintained as a bulwark. In this emotionally charged atmosphere it was difficult for Australians with less alarmist views to be heard. When they were heard, they were invariably dismissed by conservative governments and by most of the major newspapers as at best dangerous idealists or at worst communist stooges.

The Vietnam War focused Australians' attention on their region and aroused greater awareness of Australia's geographic locality. Supporters and opponents of Australian involvement in the war all stressed the nearness of Vietnam to Australia. Even the most Eurocentric Australians were forced to realise that Australia's future lay in Asia. Harold Holt, who succeeded Menzies as Prime Minister in 1965, held very different views on the importance of Asia to Australians. The Holt government was as strongly anti-communist as its predecessors, but had a greater grasp of the importance of the region to Australia. It was the Holt government that began the process of dismantling the White Australia policy. After a visit to Asia in April 1967, Holt told parliament that 'geographically we are part of Asia and increasingly we have become aware of our involvement in the affairs of Asia. Our greatest dangers and our highest hopes are centred in Asia's tomorrows'.<sup>3</sup> Such sentiments were inconceivable for Menzies, and were indicative of a significant shift in government attitudes. Holt's successors, John Gorton and William McMahon, both in their own ways shared these views.



## Changes in thinking about Asia in the 1970s

The 1972–75 Whitlam Labor government marked the beginning of a new era in Australia's relations with Asian countries. Even though it lasted only three years, it broke the conservative grip on foreign policy and introduced a much stronger note of optimism about Australia's Asian future. The Liberal–Country Party coalition government that succeeded Whitlam in 1975 was very different from the Liberal governments of the 1950s and 1960s. The remarkable growth of Japan's economic power, and the slower but equally remarkable economic growth in Singapore, Taiwan and Korea, forced Australian governments to pay greater attention to Asia. By 1971, Japan was taking 27 per cent of Australia's exports and Australia–Japan trade was being widely seen as the major force behind Australia's economic growth. Southeast Asian nations did not collapse after the triumph of the communists in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. On the contrary, the ASEAN states entered a period of sustained economic growth in the 1970s, opening new opportunities for Australian trade and investment. Southeast Asia appeared more stable politically in the 1970s and 1980s than at any time since the Pacific War. Only the chaotic final years of the Marcos regime in the Philippines and the emergence of conflicting groups competing for power disturbed the political stability of the region.

So much of the debate on how Australians should relate to Asia was concerned with national identity. What would it mean to be an Australian in 20, 50 or 100 years if, as the pundits predicted, Australia was much more closely integrated into Asia? At a symposium on 'Australia: A Part of Asia?' in 1968, a prominent Australian historian described the theme as just another of the meaningless slogans which littered Australian history. Australia, he asserted:

... is not, and has not for 60 million years, been part of Asia geographically. Australia is not, culturally or ethnically, part of Asia. Australia does not share common social institutions, religious attitudes, or styles of political behaviour with most Asian countries ... [Australia was] founded as a Pacific outpost of Europe. It is still an outpost of Europe, a true Hesperia, a land looking west.<sup>4</sup>

This argument may have been somewhat over-stated, though the basis of what was said was not disputed by other speakers. Those who had been advocating a closer integration of Australia with Asia, not only economic cooperation, were clearly a long way short of convincing Australians of the need. A *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial for Australia Day 1969 spoke approvingly of moves to increase teaching about Asian countries and Asian languages in schools, but cautioned those who would try to go too far. Under the heading 'Eurasia?' it argued that 'we are not an Asian country and never will be—unless of course we drastically change our immigration program. We should not try artificially to create a culture which is a superficial mish-mash of Asian cultures superimposed on a European base.'<sup>5</sup>

## Living with Asia in the 1980s and 1990s

The normalisation of relations with China in 1972, the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, and the emergence of Japan as a major economic power in the Asia–Pacific region kept the issue of Australia's Asian future in the public eye. Inherited Australian images of Asia—poverty, paddy and peasants—were no longer adequate in the light not only of Japanese technological and economic power, but also of the growing economic power of Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and some of the ASEAN states. Closer Australian involvement with Asia became publicly debated.

In 1980, Australian Frontier brought together 120 people from different walks of life to think about future options for Australia. One of the desirable scenarios debated was that of Austrasia. It was argued that:

An Austrasian future will not be comfortable, and our choices are limited. The size of population in Asia, combined with resource scarcities yet impressive economic growth, promise an expanding market. Yet the trends are towards increased political and military strength in Asia. Australia must become a multicultural Asianised society or face conflict, isolation and a stagnating economy.

The scenario postulated increased trade, investment and tourism between Australia and Asia, increased migration from Asia, greater cultural exchange, acceleration of Asian language teaching in schools and an emphasis on the development of Australian skills to service the Southeast Asian region.<sup>6</sup> Other speakers referred to the necessity of Australia becoming more closely involved in the Southeast and East Asian regions if it was to avoid becoming an isolated and insignificant white enclave.

This was a radical scenario in 1980. Few Australians thought it desirable. By 1990 it was far less radical and was beginning to be taken more seriously by an increasing number of Australians. Economic growth in many Asian countries and the dominance of Japan in the Australian economy were forcing changes in Australian perceptions of Asia. Over the decade politicians, journalists, academics and business people had taken up the theme of Australia's Asian future with a growing sense of urgency. Major newspaper articles assessed the booming economies of Southeast and East Asia, even raising the spectre of Australia becoming 'the poor white trash of Asia' in the next century. In January 1985, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a feature article headed 'An Asian Australia?' in which it quoted recent statements of prominent Australians. Prime Minister Bob Hawke was quoted from his 1984 election speech in which he stated that 'Our destiny lies in the Asia-Pacific region'.

It is remarkable how the 1980s debates on Australia's Asian future echoed views advanced for more than 100 years. The crucial difference was that those advocating them in the 1980s were in central positions in politics, government, business and the media. What had been a debate largely carried on at the periphery of Australian society had moved to its centre. A broad consensus was steadily emerging that Australia's future did indeed lie in Asia, with talk of Australia becoming an 'Asia-literate' society. Trade, investment and tourism were all dependent on Asian countries as never before. The impact of Asia on Australia could no longer be ignored.

However, while it could not be ignored, its implications were not necessarily accepted. In March 1984, Geoffrey Blainey, Professor of History at Melbourne University and one of the country's foremost Australian historians, questioned the direction of Australia's immigration policy which, he asserted, resulted in too many Asian immigrants, particularly from Vietnam and Cambodia. Blainey quickly moved from criticism of immigration policy to a broader criticism of the direction in which Australia was moving in its relations with Asia. He revived the debate over cultural identity that had been fundamental to the debate about Australia's Asian future since the 1940s.

The essence of Blainey's argument was that Australia was a European, and predominantly Anglo-Saxon, culture and should be neither defensive nor ashamed of wanting to stay that way. He was particularly critical of the sloppiness of those who used the popular slogan 'Australia is part of Asia':

Australia is part of South-East Asia, but it is even more part of Oceania. Above all, culturally and politically and economically, it belongs to the European civilisation and shares the achievements of that civilisation.<sup>7</sup>

For about 18 months, the Australian media gave unprecedented attention to the issues raised by Blainey. It was a debate about immigration, but also about how Australians would cope with the new, more prosperous Asia. Australians had found it difficult enough to cope with their geographic

location when Asian countries were poor, technologically backward and dominated by Europeans. How could they now cope with Asian countries that were technologically more advanced than Australia, wealthy enough to be significant investors in land, buildings and industries and prominent as the new wave of tourists?

Despite all the changes that have taken place in Asia since the end of World War II, and despite the greater involvement of Australians in Asia, the essential relations between Australia and Asia have been either economic or strategic and defence-related. The cultural basis of these relations has barely begun to be built, leading many commentators to worry about the long-term consequences. Despite the efforts of governments, and despite the very real gains made in teaching about Asian countries and languages in schools and universities, few Australians have any real empathy with Asian countries. Images of inscrutable orientals and impenetrable cultures remain strong. Despite the popularity of Asian restaurants and the presence of increasing numbers of migrants from Asia, in cultural terms, most Australians remain Western-oriented.

In the late 1980s, the then Australian Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, confidently predicted an Asian future for Australia. Almost daily, ministers urged Australian business leaders to reorient their vision towards the booming economies of Asia. Policies were being put into place to dramatically increase the number of Australians learning an Asian language and to increase Asia content in curricula. All this was barely imaginable in 1945. However, by no means all Australians shared this view. In 1988, the centenary of European settlement, alarmist headlines were commonplace about Japanese, Hong Kong and other Asian money forcing up Sydney house prices. On the Queensland Gold Coast, a public meeting to protest against Japanese land ownership attracted about 1300 people. Rhetoric such as 'We are again facing a threat of invasion' and 'People now realise the Japanese are taking us over' was greeted with applause.<sup>8</sup> All this was a warning of an underlying unease about Australia's Asian future. To the old Australian fears of invasion by land-hungry billions was added the new fear of the economic power of Japan.

When Paul Keating became prime minister at the end of 1991, he pushed forward the theme of Australia's engagement with Asia, including its potential to become 'part of Asia'. The peoples of Asia should become more and more relevant not only to Australia's economy and society but to its education system. In February 1994, the Council of Australian Governments, consisting of the Prime Minister and all state premiers and territory chief ministers, actually adopted a report which urged a massive increase in the learning of Asian languages and cultures in Australian schools and put forward a concrete timetable and plan to achieve that end. Considering that the great majority of the premiers and chief ministers belonged to conservative parties, while Keating was Labor, this decision signalled just how bipartisan the need for Australia to engage with Asia had become. There was still opposition to such plans in the community, but it came more from non-Asian ethnic lobbies than from the traditional Anglo-Saxon conservatives.

At the end of the 1990s one is less certain about the changes that have taken place in Australian images of Asia since World War II. The Labor government which had ruled Australia since 1983 was replaced at the beginning of 1996 with a conservative Liberal-National Party government. While the rhetoric of engagement with Asia continued under the new government, there was less enthusiasm about it and a stated concern to restore 'balance' by reinvigorating the relationship with the United States. Public opinion polls throughout the 1990s consistently showed that the political and intellectual elites were considerably ahead of broader opinion in their enthusiasm for engagement with Asia. The financial crisis that gripped much of East Asia in late 1997 confirmed the views of many that Asia was unpredictable and a difficult area for Australia to come to terms with. In the late 1990s, Australian direct investment in Asia remained very small, with the overwhelming part of funds invested overseas flowing to Europe and the United States, as they always had. Indeed, while politicians and business leaders lamented the adverse impact of the Asian financial crisis on the

Australian economy, many large companies were quick to assure shareholders that Asia had never been a major priority. Continuing high rates of unemployment in Australia and uncertainty about Australia's economic future in an increasingly globalised economy saw the emergence of a right-wing political party, One Nation. While claiming to be neither racist nor anti-engagement with Asia, its rhetoric stressed the need to control immigration, reconstruct protectionist fences and regroup as an essentially Anglo-European society. Its emphatic presence in Australian political life encouraged others to publicly argue for a retreat from engagement with Asia.

Australians have been preoccupied with 'living with Asia' in a way that has few parallels in other nations' relations with their immediate neighbours. At the core of this preoccupation has been an ambivalence about, and at times an overwhelming desire to suppress, the geographical and potential cultural reality of Australia's proximity to Asia. Images of Asia in the 1990s reflect the continuing difficulty Australians have in relating their history to their geography. The process is far from concluded, the result far from certain.

## Guide to further reading

*Australia in World Affairs* is a series of volumes published every five years by the Australian Institute of International Affairs. Volumes published cover the years 1950–55; 1956–60; 1961–65; 1966–70; 1971–75; and 1981–85, 1986–1990 and 1991–1995. Each volume contains a number of articles on Australia's relations with Asia. As a whole they are an important source for the study of Australia's relations with Asian countries since 1950.

*Australian Cultural History*, vol. 9, 1990.

This is a special issue on the theme 'Australian Perceptions of Asia' and contains a number of articles on different aspects of the ways Australians have conceived Asia since the late nineteenth century.

Betts, Katherine, *Ideology and Immigration*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1988.

The issue of immigration from Asia has been central to the ways in which Australians have thought about Asia since the mid-nineteenth century. This book describes the issues involved from the mid-1970s, a time when debate on immigration policy focused heavily on Asia.

Brawley, Sean, *The White Peril: Foreign Relations and Asian Immigration to Australasia and North America 1919–1978*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1995.

This book is an excellent study of how the foreign policies and relations of Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States were affected by their desire to exclude Asians, and how the importance of good relations with the nations of the Asia-Pacific eventually forced a major rethink of immigration policy.

Broinowski, Alison, *The Yellow Lady, Australian Impressions of Asia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1992.

This is the foremost treatment of its subject. It traces the history of Australian perceptions of Asia, including a focus on the arts. It argues that Australians' images of Asia have been based far too much on ethnocentric attitudes.

Milner, Anthony (ed) *Australia in Asia. Comparing Cultures*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996.

This book provides an analysis of the cultural differences that exist between Australia and the various countries of the Asian region. It includes chapters on business ethics, human rights, education, labour relations, democracy, national security, the media, citizenship and government.

Robison, Richard (ed), *Pathways to Asia: The Politics of Engagement*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1996.

This is a collection of articles which addresses the images of Asia held in Australia and analyses the costs and implications of engagement with Asia.

Walker, David, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850–1939*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1999.

This excellent book, the first in a proposed series, covers such topics as multiculturalism, Asians in Australia and immigration from Asia, in the period leading up to 1939.

Walker, David, & Ingleson, John, 'Impacts of Asia', in Meaney, Neville (ed), *Under New Heavens*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1989, pp. 288–324.

This article analyses the broad impact of Asia and people from Asia on Australia since the first European settlement. It focuses on the idea of Asia in the Australian mind over 200 years and the continuities and changes in the images of Asia held by Australians.

## Notes

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- 3 Quoted in the *Age*, 10 July 1967, p.2.
- 4 Crowley, F.K., 'Australia: Outpost of Europe', in *Australia: A Part of Asia?*, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 1968, p. 20.
- 5 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 January 1969, p.2.
- 6 *Future Directions 1980 Conference Report*, Melbourne, 1980, p. 29.
- 7 *Herald*, Melbourne, 23 May 1984, p. 3.
- 8 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 May 1988, p. 1.