

AUSTRALIA'S DISTINCTIVE PRESENCE IN THE WORLD: AND WHY WINNING A SECURITY COUNCIL SEAT MATTERS

Australia Day 2012 Breakfast Address
The Australian Unity Great Australia Day Breakfast
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Thank you to Chairman Alan Castleman and Australian Unity for inviting me to address this great event – always a centrepiece of our national day celebrations. It's an enormous honour and privilege to have been asked – leaving me touched and amazed in equal proportions! And warmest thanks to all of you – a very distinguished indeed cast of community, business and professional leaders – for turning up for the occasion. I'm glad to see that it is not only the Grand Final Breakfast that can get you out of bed at this ungodly hour.

Australia Day addresses are traditionally the occasion for sonorous banalities of the kind for which I have to acknowledge my own Party has traditionally had a great fondness. The late Arthur Calwell has for long been the undisputed champion with 'We are Labor because we are Australian and Australian because we are Labor' – there's a door prize for anyone who can make any sense at all of the last phrase – but I think that even the most loyal among us would have to acknowledge that Prime Minister Gillard mounted a strong challenge for the title last year with 'This is the Australian way: we follow it simply because we are us'.

What, of course, speakers reach for on occasions like this – and I readily confess I've offered more than a few grandly obscure sentiments of my own over the years – is to convey a sense of what it means to be Australian, to have a distinctively Australian identity, to be 'us', and to be proud of it.

A crucial part of the story (and one that has consumed a good part of my own public life, working on racial discrimination and Indigenous rights and reconciliation) is *what makes us all Australians, whatever our racial or ethnic or religious or national or cultural backgrounds* – with the message here being how critically important it is that we go on working like hell to ensure that the better angels of our nature continue to assert themselves, as they largely have in recent decades, and that no Australian feels unwanted, marginalised, hated, neglected or patronised simply because of skin colour or anything else in that person's identity over which he or she can have no control.

Another part of the story is *what makes us all Australians, whatever our State identity* – as Victorians, or even worse New South Welshmen, or others beyond the pale. Working for, and then celebrating, Federation was at the core of the ethos of the Australian Natives Association – the mutual society that eventually became our hosts today, Australian Unity – and has been at the heart of Australia Day observances ever since. Again quite a lot of my own public life has been spent trying to flay and scourge those states-righters who would seek to undermine the majesty of the common weal – not least back in the early 1980s when I was a rather activist Commonwealth Attorney General (as I guess some Tasmanians in particular might remember). But tempted, or not, as I may be to relive some of those glory days – and as much as my new role as Chancellor of the Australian *National* University

might give me a little new license to revisit these themes – I think that might be a little tacky here this morning, speaking as I am in a State Parliament House, under the beady gaze of at least two State university Vice-Chancellors, and in the even sterner presence of a very State-focused Victorian Attorney-General!

What I thought I might spend some time reflecting on (not least because it has been the major preoccupation of my public life for the last 25 years or so) is yet another dimension of the national identity story – *what makes us distinctively Australian in the international arena*, or should make us so, in the conduct of our relations with the more than 190 other countries in the world with national identities of their own.

Any kind of independent Australian foreign policy – if we think of this as a desire to pursue our external interests accompanied by some independent capacity to do so – really only dates only from the Second World War. It was not until 1940 that our first diplomatic posts – apart from the High Commission in Britain – were established. From 1901 until then Australian leaders, Labor and non-Labor alike, from time to time did show that they were interested in the world outside Australia, especially on issues such as race and immigration, regional security, and relations with the US and Japan. But apart from Billy Hughes's post World War I table-thumping at Versailles on German New Guinea (at the same time as he was fiercely resisting Japan's proposal to have a racial equality clause in the new League of Nations Covenant), it was not until late 1941, when Curtin made his celebrated wartime appeal to the US, that Australia showed itself capable of addressing a fundamental issue about its place in the world other than reflexively, instinctively and dependently as a member of the British Empire.

The creation of a distinctively *Australian* foreign policy really came only with Evatt, whose most striking contribution was his internationalism – his very real commitment to the building of cooperative multilateral institutions and processes to address both security and development objectives. Whatever his other failings, which were legion, his contribution to the founding of the United Nations is the stuff of which legends are made, and rightly so – especially in his fight for the rights of the smaller powers against the great powers, and in his faith in the UN as an agent for social and economic reform and as a protector of human rights.

But the development of Australia's independent foreign policy has never been a straight line continuum, and there wasn't much left of Evatt's cooperative internationalism by the end of Menzies's and his successors' long reign, from 1949 to 1972. We did develop, particularly under Casey, cordial diplomatic relations with the emerging new nations of the region (previously evident under Labor only in the early support Evatt and Chifley gave for Indonesia's independence struggle against the Dutch); Spender's Colombo Plan made a very useful contribution to our long-term relations with Asia; McEwen deserves credit for the 1957 treaty with Japan and the optimism and foresight that went with it; and men like Hasluck, and particularly Gorton and Holt, had a quite open-minded international outlook.

But against all this there has to be weighed Menzies's excruciating Order-of-Merit-earning Anglophilia; the maintenance until the late 1960s of the full vigour of the White Australia policy (of course until towards the end, strongly embraced by Labor as well); the stridency of our support for Verwoerd's South Africa; the intensity of our antagonism toward China; the totality of our dependence upon the US; and the ultimate comprehensive misjudgement of our intervention in Vietnam. All this combined to reinforce the image, and the reality, of an Australia largely isolated and irrelevant in its own region, deeply unsure of its identity, utterly pessimistic about its ability to be a force for change in its own right, and in any event wholly unclear about what kind of change it would want to pursue if it could.

The wheel did finally turn with the Whitlam Government in 1972, which matched Australian foreign policy to the mood and needs of the time by, among many other things, recognising China; bringing home our last troops from Vietnam; finally burying the White Australia policy; taking France to the World Court for its nuclear tests in the Pacific; and accelerating Papua New Guinea's independence. The brevity of its term meant that this government did more initiating than consolidating (although I suspect that, given the personalities involved, that somewhat Rudd-like disposition might have continued even had it stayed in office for a decade or more...).

Interestingly, under the Fraser Government which followed from 1975 to 1983 Whitlam's policies were not only continued, but reinforced. While Fraser was more than happy to re-embrace Cold War verities, and all the East-West division of friends and enemies that went with it, he and Foreign Minister Peacock certainly understood, as many in the Coalition for long did not, the critical importance of abandoning government-legitimised racism in any form whatsoever, at home and abroad, not least in the embrace of Vietnamese refugees. This undoubtedly helped foster closer links in our region and saved Australia from becoming the international pariah it would have been had non-opposition to apartheid and manifest discomfort with decolonization persisted.

The Hawke and Keating Labor Governments that took us through the next thirteen years, from 1983 to 1996, renewed that spirit of activist, optimistic adventure, which had so characterized the Whitlam period, but – at least as I remember it! – in a rather more focused and systematic fashion. Within the niche role that is inevitably assigned to middle and lesser powers, we were able to achieve a great deal during those years, including helping create the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum and other new, cooperative, regional economic and security architecture; advancing some major chemical and nuclear weapons elimination objectives; playing a central role during the Uruguay Round trade negotiations; building a strong coalition to save the Antarctic environment from mining and oil drilling; being a key player in crafting the financial sanctions strategy which finally brought down apartheid in South Africa; and helping reshape ideas about how the UN could be more effective in the post Cold War environment.

A core sustaining theme for us, and one of the innovations of which I was most proud as Foreign Minister, was the concept of *good international citizenship*. The basic idea is very simple. Instead of thinking of national interests in just the two traditional bundles – security and economic interests – think of the commitment that the country can make to the achievement of *other* goods and values (like responding to climate change, refugee flows, weapons proliferation and human rights atrocities) as amounting to a relevant and vibrant third category, viz. a country's national interest in being, and being seen to be, a good international citizen. The argument is a hard-headed, not sentimental one: by being seriously committed to cooperative action on these issues, national self interest is advanced two ways. First, through reciprocity: my help for you today in solving your drugs and terrorism problem might reasonably lead you to be willing to help solve my environmental problem tomorrow. And secondly, through reputational benefit: the perception of being a country willing to take principled stands for other than immediately self-interested reasons does no harm at all to one's own commercial and wider political agendas.

When the Howard Government came to office, one of its first products, in 1997, was – disappointingly but perhaps not surprisingly – a foreign policy white paper which reverted to the traditional duo of security and economic interests, completely abandoned the concept of good international citizenship, and which by way of compensation restored to centre stage, as a third guiding light, 'national values'. Not universal values, but *national* ones, explicitly

described as reflecting our ‘predominantly European intellectual and cultural heritage’ . Howard was the quintessential pessimistic realist: focused on hard rather than soft power, deeply comfortable in following the US alliance lead wherever it took us, unadventurous in seeking global or regional policy change, and profoundly uninterested in the UN and the whole idea of transnational problem-solving by creative multilateral cooperation.

Although it might be thought that, with its emphasis on national rather than international values, the Howard Government was doing more, rather than less, to give Australia a distinctive identity on the world stage, that is not the way the rest of the world tends to react. Just as Canada in recent years, by abandoning the liberal internationalism that was the essence of its identity for decades under both Liberal and Conservative governments there, seems to have lost any kind of policy-influencing traction on the wider world stage, so too was that becoming a real problem for Australia.

In both countries the explanations for foreign policy courses taken have had more to do with the personalities of the leaders concerned than anything inherent in their party ideologies. Certainly in Australia there have always been senior Coalition figures with a much more open and genuinely internationalist cast of mind; just as there are have always been those on the Labor side less ready than their colleagues to optimistically embrace the region and the world, and more ready to pander to populist sentiment.

That dynamic continues to this day, under the Labor governments since 2007. Kevin Rudd as Prime Minister, and now as Foreign Minister, for all the things that have gone less well than he would have liked on his watch – more than a few of them attributable to his unique personal style (although that’s not a criticism to which others have been immune, as I for one can testify) – has done much to return confident optimism, and a strongly cooperative good international citizenship mindset, back to centre stage in the conduct of our international relations. And this has borne immediate fruit in a much higher level of recognition and respect for Australia internationally than has been the case for some time.

This has been particularly evident in his work on climate change (for all the domestic horror that issue generated for him); in building the role of the G20 in global economic management and potentially on a wider front; in creating (albeit after a few diplomatic slips along the way) important new regional architecture in the expanded East Asian Summit, particularly aimed at defusing emerging tensions in the region between China and the US, and avoiding Australia being plunged into a debilitating zero sum game of choice between them; in a hugely creative and energetic effort to claw back a seat at the UN Security Council table in 2013 after an extraordinary 27 year absence, the issue on which I will conclude this talk; in trying to give serious content and energy to a new global debate on nuclear disarmament; in playing a leading role in disaster and humanitarian response, and global poverty alleviation; and in putting in place a humane and internationally defensible system to deal with asylum-seekers.

It has also been evident in Rudd’s efforts, so far not completely successful, to recalibrate Australia’s position on the Israeli/Palestinian issue, so as to not only demonstrate total support for Israel’s real security needs, as we always have done, but also to achieve a breakthrough on the peace process – an early end to the debilitating occupation of the West Bank and the realization of Palestinian statehood, in the context of the long-agreed-in-principle two state solution which remains hugely in Israel’s interests to bed down as soon as possible.

But not all these efforts to reposition Australia on the global stage have had the support they have needed, and will continue to need, from his most senior government colleagues, either

because their inherent importance has not been fully appreciated or because domestic political considerations and pressures are seen as having priority. And, unhappily, practically none of them have had any support at all from the current Opposition leadership, which has so far adopted an almost Newt Gingrich-like parochialism, indifferent to the point of hostility to cooperative internationalism and the institutions, above all the UN, that go with it.

The litmus test for Australian foreign policy and Australia's standing in the world in the year ahead is our campaign, now coming to a head, to take our rightful place next year on the Security Council. It is important for the most senior members of both the Government and Opposition to appreciate that periodically taking a rotational seat at the apex of the global system for maintaining peace and security is not some kind of optional icing on the cake, likely in fact to be more trouble than its worth, but absolutely in Australia's national interests, however conceived. Our troops operate in East Timor and Afghanistan under Security Council mandate. It is the only body legally able to mandate the use of force. And it imposes sanctions we are obliged to implement, in North Korea, Iran and elsewhere. A country like Australia not only benefits from the global system but has a responsibility, in our own interests as well as everybody else's, to ensure that it works effectively.

The outcome of the membership vote in October will really show whether we are seen by others as being the kind of decent and committed international citizens we like to think we are (independent minded with a real egalitarian streak, neither sucking up to the powerful nor kicking down at the powerless), or whether we are just another also-ran country, doing our best to look after our own interests, narrowly defined, and not really caring much about the wider world we live in, and deserving to be treated accordingly.

We started late, other deals have been done, and it's not going to be easy. But we have a formidable story to tell, of which we should remind ourselves on this Australia Day. We are the 12th largest economy in the world, the 6th largest by landmass and with the 3rd largest maritime zone; we are a creative middle power with global interests and a long – if not unbroken – record on both sides of politics of active and effective diplomacy; we are one of the most multicultural countries in the globe; we have a strong commitment to our Indigenous people, as the whole world applauded with our apology to the stolen generation; we bring to the table a unique perspective bridging our European history and our Asia-Pacific geography; we have had a long demonstrated national commitment to the UN system in all its security, social and economic justice and human rights dimensions; Australian peacekeepers and individuals working in international organizations, both official and non-governmental overwhelmingly have outstanding reputations; and we have had a strong and longstanding commitment to a rule-based global and regional order in which no-one has a monopoly on global decision-making.

These are the factors which make us an absolutely distinctive presence on the global stage, and should be positioning us to make a major new contribution over the next two years to making the world a safer, saner and more decent place for all its peoples. We can be very proud of our country for everything we stand for and have achieved internally, but also very proud indeed of what we have achieved – and are capable of achieving – externally.

Let's just hope that our political leaders on both sides can recognize, once and for all, what good international citizenship is about, and act in an intelligent, thoughtful and above all united way in the year ahead to do everything possible to secure our membership of the Security Council. Let's not blow the opportunity to take our rightful place at the heart of world affairs, and to show to the wider world once again what we all know to be the case: that this Australia of ours really is a wonderful country.

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