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Australia's International Affairs: The Labor Approach

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Mainstream thinking accepts that the main tenets of Australian foreign policy are the US alliance, engagement with the Indo-Pacific and our global interests. We differ over emphasis and approach, but we are fortunate to have broad agreement on the component parts. This is one reason why foreign policy often plays a marginal role in Australian election campaigns—elections are designed to amplify difference. Foreign policy is most often about continuity and seeking common ground. Election campaigns are built on concentrated points of contrast. Yet even if foreign policy does not shift a single vote in a single seat, Australia's place in the world deserves to be part of the national conversation.

There are differences between the progressive and the conservative traditions of foreign policy, and those differences matter. The key difference is foundational—Labor believes that good international citizenship is a critical driver to achieving a secure and prosperous Australia, while there is a tendency from the conservative parties towards isolation and insularity.

We know that Australia will not be wealthier or safer if we only seek safety and wealth inside the walls of a fortress we build for ourselves. Labor understands that, as Gareth Evans observed, “good international citizenship is no more — and no less — than the pursuit of enlightened self-interest”. The principle of good international citizenship aligns with enduring Labor values of solidarity, fairness, equality, justice and inclusion. It allows us to articulate a coherent conceptual framework behind our foreign policy.

We believe strongly that our national security and prosperity improve with greater international security and prosperity. By acting as a good international citizen, by enhancing the rules-based international order and by promoting respect for universal human rights, we are working for long-term peace and prosperity for Australian people.

Looking back

A century has passed since the start of the First World War. It has been a hundred years since Banjo Paterson declared that Australia now knew “what nations know; and feel what nations feel”. Despite the best efforts of President Woodrow Wilson and others, it took a second, deadlier, more devastating conflict for the world to learn that “total war” could only end in total destruction.

The First World War energised efforts to create a system to regulate inter-state behaviour, and resulted in the League of Nations, the first intergovernmental organisation devoted to world peace. Yet it took the Second World War, and 60 million dead, to make undeniable the need for an international system to more effectively regulate state behaviour. A century after Australians died in their thousands in the mud of the Western Front, on the cliffs of Gallipoli and in Palestine, we no longer see war as a grand adventure nor an inevitable outcome of competing interests.

We should not, however, rest on our laurels. The dawn of the twentieth century unleashed massive social, economic and technological change across Europe and North America. That transformation is being repeated at a greater speed and on a greater scale in our own region, the Indo-Pacific. With this comes unparalleled opportunities for Australia, as well as significant challenges. As Allan Gyngell has said, the challenges we face are more complicated, more interrelated and more internationalised.

The decisions that we make in this decade, and the actions we take as a global community, are writing the history of this era, and defining the years ahead. Labor recognises that achieving a prosperous and secure future for our nation demands that we look beyond our borders. This has always been the Labor way—a foreign policy tradition that sees Australia as an enthusiastic participant in establishing international frameworks: the laws, norms and international institutions that govern international behaviour.

A Labor tradition

The names, places and stories of Labor's foreign policy history will be familiar to many readers of this journal. There was Foreign Minister Doc Evatt at the San Francisco conference in 1945 – at which the Charter of the United Nations was drafted – advocating for his vision of a UN: a place where every nation had an empowered voice, not just the great powers. We can also recall Ben Chifley's decision to support the birth of an Indonesian Republic, rather than the revival of a Dutch colony.

And it was Gough Whitlam, as Opposition Leader, who left the footsteps in China for the United States to follow. Indeed, as Prime Minister, it was Whitlam who inspired a national change of consciousness in the way that Australia looked at the world and our place within it. Prime Minister Whitlam helped Australia move from the narrow to the inclusive, and from insularity to openness. He outlined his vision soon after being sworn in:

“Our thinking is toward... an Australia which will enjoy a growing standard as a distinctive, tolerant, cooperative and well-regarded nation not only in the Asian Pacific Region but in the world at large.”

This sense of national self, and Gough's staunch belief in international law, established Australia as an authoritative and independent voice on the world stage. Whitlam established the Australian Development Assistance Agency and committed to increase Australia's development assistance budget — a commitment that was continued by successive Labor governments.

Within two months of taking government, Whitlam ratified the *Non-Proliferation Treaty*, something previous governments had refused to do. Labor today remains committed to strengthening non-proliferation regimes and pursuing responsible nuclear disarmament. Our disarmament efforts have been described by the Coalition as ‘utopian’—but we believe, as President Obama said in Hiroshima during his historic visit in May this year that we need a moral revolution on nuclear weapons. We also know that we have been successful in the past. The Hawke government established the Australia Group, the Keating government launched the Canberra Commission and the Rudd government established, together with Japan, the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament. This is part of our proud and progressive tradition—Australia as an engaged member of the global community of nations, pursuing our national interest. During Australia’s previous term on the Security Council, in 1985 and 1986, Foreign Minister Bill Hayden and our UN Ambassador Richard Woolcott drove Council action on apartheid — furthering a foreign policy priority that Australia pursued over successive governments.

Bob Hawke and Gareth Evans initiated the APEC forum and furthered economic co-operation across the Pacific Rim. Foreign Minister Evans spearheaded the Cambodian peace process, bringing far greater stability to the region and returning normality to a people who were devastated by genocide and civil war. And Prime Minister Paul Keating made APEC a leaders’ forum, and urged Australia to look for its security *in* Asia, and not *from* Asia. Foreign Minister Stephen Smith worked to have the United States included in the East Asia Summit, expanding US engagement in our region. Bob Carr brought to a successful conclusion our campaign for a seat on the Security Council. Hopefully, it is now uncontroversial that Labor’s Security Council bid was in the national interest—an accepted piece of bipartisan wisdom that Australia can show leadership at a global level.

Labor is also very proud of Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s legacy in establishing regular and formal leader-level dialogues between China and Australia. This foreign policy achievement will only grow in importance over time; there is no more important foreign policy consideration for Australia today than the rise of China as a prosperous, peaceful and stable world power.

Our three pillars

The emergence of China as both a regional and global power represents tremendous opportunities and benefits for Australia. We must effectively and independently engage with China and with our other partners in Asia. This commitment to the region, and to further developing our relationships with its major actors, does not, however, mean that our commitment to the alliance with the US is any way diminished.

Greens leader Richard Di Natale has rejected Australia’s alliance, describing it as “stifling”. It is an odd choice of word — seemingly designed to create a headline without really advancing an argument. It is drawn from a sense of impotence that does not exist in the frank, honest friendship at the core of our relationship with the United States. Labor values the opportunity Senator Di Natale’s comments provide to reiterate the value that we place on the US Alliance, and the strategic and economic benefit that it has long delivered, not just for Australia, but for our region too. In addition, our ability

to be positive and assertive in our engagement within our region is bolstered by the confidence and security provided by our alliance with the United States. The Greens want Australia to shun the world's leading democracy but have not provided a coherent narrative for our place in the world. This is a pattern common to their foreign policy—the search for righteous indignation and the embrace of false binaries.

The Greens oppose the current military campaign against Da'esh in the Middle East, without providing any credible alternative to prevent that organisation from murdering, raping, and enslaving men, women, and children, and from urging attacks in Australia.

Australia under Labor will continue to be a reliable ally to the United States, but we will disagree with our ally when it is in our interest to do so. As Kim Beazley said, we want an alliance, not compliance. Our value as an ally increases when we are prepared to speak up, question, analyse and act thoughtfully. We should have disagreed in 2003, as the decision to invade and occupy Iraq was such a terrible mistake with such long-trailing consequences.

While acknowledging the conspicuous flaws in the current system, Labor supports the United Nations and other multilateral institutions as key instruments in our foreign policy. We understand that some of the most pressing and serious challenges facing us cannot be solved unilaterally, bilaterally, or even regionally—they require truly global action. The international system provides a platform from which we can project our voice and our national interests well beyond the comparative size of our economy and our armed forces. This is why we pursued a seat on the Security Council, securing a spot on the world's foremost decision-making body for the first time in a generation. The Coalition sneered at us when we embarked on our bid, threatening to cancel it during the 2010 election. And yet, as John Langmore has pointed out, Australia realised much during its term: on Syria, on MH17, on small arms and on human rights in North Korea.

Labor recognises the interdependence of nations — the interdependence of global opportunities and global challenges. We should not forget nor minimise the contribution the United Nations and its associated organisations have made to the modern world. Because of the UN, smaller states have an international voice, and countries like Australia can demonstrate global leadership.

In our region, successful Australian interaction with the countries of the Indo-Pacific will be achieved by meaningful engagement, grounded in strong bilateral relationships, and real commitment to multilateral processes and rules-based norms. A Shorten Labor government would promote cooperative and mutually beneficial relationships with our key regional partners. At the same time we will pursue closer engagement with key regional institutions — including ASEAN, the East Asia Summit and through the APEC meetings.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd emphasised the need for strong and effective regional institutions to account for the rebalancing of global economic power currently under way, ensuring these institutions steer the region towards peace, security and prosperity. The London G20 conference lessened the impact of the Global Financial Crisis and it was under Labor that Australia played a key role in building up this institution, reflecting the changes to the global economy that have occurred since the

Second World War. Australia must be part of shaping new institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. We should have been a founding member, not a hesitant, last-minute participant.

The Gillard government launched the “Australia in the Asian Century” White Paper to ensure that Australia’s engagement with Asia was promoted at every opportunity; methodically, consistently and over the long-term. We established a whole-of-government approach, building people-to-people links that would support a genuine place for Australia within Asia. The electronic book burning that wiped the Asian Century White Paper from departmental history was petty, short-sighted and typical of a small-minded approach in so many of the big questions.

A Labor government will revive and redouble our efforts to build Australia’s relationship with Asia through exchange and cooperation across every sector of the economy and our community. Thriving in the Asian century—seizing the economic opportunities and managing the security challenges—requires an understanding of the history, cultures, societies and languages of the nations to our north.

Looking forward

I began by looking back at the development of the international system in which we now work. Looking forward, the centre of global economic activity will continue to track towards our region. The growing economic power of our Asian neighbours is reflected in their expanding diplomatic influence and foreign policy aspirations. These nations will test Australia’s economic influence, as well as our diplomatic influence, both regionally and globally. Passing this test will demand more of our national energy and imagination, and we cannot hope to play the role of quiet observer in the shifts in power occurring on our doorstep. We will not prosper in the Asian Century by retreating into the Anglosphere, any more than we will enhance our reputation in the region by seeking to shirk our obligations as a prosperous nation, opting to pass by on the other side of the road.

Both major parties often say that the first responsibility of a government is to ensure the security and prosperity of its citizens. In the same breath, we should state clearly that Asia’s peaceful and prosperous rise is critical to us meeting this responsibility. This demands that Australia be a consequential and confident actor in our region, and in the international system more broadly; a country that can influence global and regional institutions and can shape the Asian strategic environment. We need to pursue creative diplomacy that will ensure that our values and interests are protected for the long-term.

The rules-based international order has brought so much benefit to our country, and we should act to maintain and support that system. But we cannot expect other nations to adhere to a system we do not ourselves uphold. On whaling, on the settlement of international trade and maritime disputes, on French nuclear testing in the Pacific, we have insisted others play by the rules. On the overlapping maritime claims in the South China Sea, we urge all parties to abide by both the terms and the spirit of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Australia has a good record of acting in defence of this system, but not a flawless one.

Australia's key role in securing independence for East Timor was a proud moment for our nation. But we have allowed the maritime boundary dispute to poison relations, and Labor will change this. We announced earlier this year that a Labor government will intensify efforts to conclude good faith negotiations with Timor-Leste to settle the maritime boundaries between our two countries. If we are not successful in negotiating a settlement with our neighbour, we are prepared to submit ourselves to international adjudication or arbitration. It is in the national interest of both countries that we do so.

It is also in our national interest to proactively combat climate change, both domestically and internationally. Domestically, Labor would adopt ambitious and achievable targets and measures that set a common sense pathway to a low pollution economy. Far from the world of global summitry, climate change is an existential threat to some of our neighbours in the Pacific. I saw this first hand when Bill Shorten, Richard Marles and I visited Papua New Guinea, the Marshall Islands and Kiribati last year. We should be amplifying the voice of our Pacific island neighbours — as several of their leaders have asked us to — ensuring that the world understands the plight facing these low-lying, small island countries. Yet both the current government's Immigration Minister and Foreign Minister have publicly joked about the existential threat posed to some Pacific countries.

We are currently under-doing engagement with our Pacific island neighbours on climate change, but also on broader questions of security and economic development. And when we withdraw from our near region, others may take our place. Australia has a proud history of engaging with our Pacific island neighbours — through the Pacific Patrol Boats, institutional development, education exchange, technical assistance and RAMSI. There is a fear, however, that this is being lost as a result of aid cuts, indifference and because our own bureaucracy undervalues the strategic importance of our Pacific neighbourhood.

We should be looking at the next steps in co-operation, particularly regarding climate change adaptation. We should also be exploring, with our friends in the Pacific, ways to prepare for a future where some parts of their countries become uninhabitable. Some of these countries are making their own contingency plans — and we should be supporting them.

Conclusion

More than six decades ago, Prime Minister Ben Chifley defined the Labor mission in a phrase that no-one has been able to better. He spoke, of course, of the “light on the hill” — the moral duty to work for “the betterment of mankind not only here but anywhere we may give a helping hand”.

This duty was expressed in our recent aid announcement. Labor supports a strong aid program because, as a good global citizen, Australia has a duty to help reduce poverty and inequality, and respond effectively to humanitarian crises. Labor supports a strong aid program because it helps keep Australia safe, by working to tackle serious diseases and violence in our region, and across the world. Labor supports a strong aid program because it benefits Australia's economy when countries go from being aid recipients to trading partners.

We believe that there is much more that Australian ideas and values can offer in shaping a better world — Australia can have a more creative and more confident presence on the world stage. The Labor party stands apart from any other party on the Left or the Right with its coherent articulation of the conceptual framework behind our foreign policy. We stand apart from any other party with a clear vision at the core of our foreign policy. We believe in being good international citizens, because it's our moral duty, but also because it better serves our long-term national interests.

Good international citizenship is a principle worth emphasising. It is a priority for which we are proud to advocate, and an idea at the heart of our plans for the future of Australia and our place in the world. Here — and anywhere — where we may give a helping hand.

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