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The Charteris Oration

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Australian foreign policy: does the public matter? Should the community care?

In the eccentric pattern of my professional career I've thought about, and worked on, Australia's place in the world from what feels like every available angle – as a diplomat, a policy adviser, an intelligence analyst, a political staffer, a think tanker, a sort of quasi-academic and historian.

Now I have the privilege of taking over as National President of this great community-based organisation from one of Australia's most distinguished policy-makers and diplomats, Kim Beazley. Our first national president was the man in whose honour this oration is named, A.H. Charteris.

Professor Charteris was born in Scotland and educated at the University of Glasgow. He became the Challis Professor of International Law and Jurisprudence at the University of Sydney in 1920 and held the position for twenty years.

He was a very public intellectual; by all accounts a compelling radio commentator and a regular writer for newspapers and journals, providing, among other things, prescient warnings, based on his deep knowledge of Germany, of the emerging threat from Hitler's National Socialist regime. He was a prominent early thinker about human rights law.

After his sudden death in October 1940, the Australian Law Journal described him not only as a "great scholar" but also – not a phrase you would normally expect to read in the Law Journal – as a "very lovable man".ⁱ

Charteris was one of the small but influential group of Australians – academics, lawyers, businesspeople and politicians - who, in the years after the devastation of the First World War, began to engage our country more actively in the affairs of the world.

Organisations like the League of Nations Union, the Institute of Pacific Relations and the Australian Institute of International Affairs gave them their forums. It was Charteris who chaired the informal meeting in 1933 which brought the state branches of the Royal Institute together as a national body.

It's hard to look at that world of the early 1930s without recognising some uncomfortable parallels with our own time.

A great recession had disrupted the global economy. Discontented citizens were turning away from the established elites to new groups on both the right and the left who promised change. Protectionism, nationalism and nativism were on the rise. International institutions like the League of Nations were floundering. The great powers seemed disconnected from the international system.

There was enormous uncertainty about what was coming next.

That's certainly true of our contemporary world. The international system as we've known it ever since Australia proclaimed its full sovereign identity by ratifying the Statute of Westminster in 1942 is changing fundamentally.

The war aims of the allies, set out in the Atlantic Charter, and then cemented in the creation of institutions like the United Nations, the World Bank, and the IMF, were globalising in their peacemaking and prosperity-building ambitions.

After the war the great movement of decolonisation in Africa and Asia brought scores of newly independent states into the global community. And although the Cold War was divisive and dangerous, it was defined and fought in a global context.

Then from the late 1980s onwards, the technologies of the information revolution, by reducing to near-zero the cost of transferring information around the world, made possible a massive increase in foreign direct investment and the creation of global supply chains. This unleashed economic globalisation on an unprecedented scale, bringing with it the Asian economic miracle.

By about 2010, however, the politics of western societies had been disrupted by the terrible policy failures of the invasion of Iraq and the global financial crisis. Technology which had promised to create a global village now seemed simply to sharpen divisions, including by facilitating terrorist groups and deconstructing our media environment. Millions of refugees and displaced people strained the sense of solidarity in western countries.

Uncertainty in those societies was reinforced by the shift of global power eastwards, to China in particular, and the challenge that brought to the established jobs of the developed world.

Assurances that open trade and investment would deliver growth, and that democratic systems would ensure that the fruits of that openness were equitably distributed, sounded increasingly hollow to Western voters and to workers threatened by stagnating wages, rising inequality and new technologies like robotics and machine learning.

'America First' may be the slogan of the Trump administration, but across the world from Britain to Russia, Japan, China, India and Turkey there is evidence of stronger nationalism and growing protectionism.

I don't mean that globalisation has ended. The technologies that empowered it won't be discarded or uninvented. But globalism - the spirit of the globalising norms which shaped the second half of the 20th century - is in retreat.

In my view, the post-war global order as we have known it has ended. This is a world in which Australia will not be able to rely as much on our traditional partners. Britain will no longer be an entry point for us to Europe and, after Brexit, will be less influential globally. And whatever follows the Trump administration, the United States is likely to be more focused on itself and less interested in remaking the global landscape in its own image.

China faces great economic and social challenges but it will certainly consolidate its position at the centre of the Asian strategic landscape. And its impact on Australian society will grow.

As global rule-making institutions weaken, Australia will have work harder to ensure that its voice is heard and its interests are taken into account.

Australia is now having to grapple with the largest change in its view of the world since the period from the Suez crisis in 1956 to the mid-1970s when we adjusted to Britain's diminished power.

But this will be harder for us. At that time, clear alternative paths were opening up. The United States stood ready to take over our strategic protection, and Japan and other Asian countries opened up new markets for our products. Not now.

Let me say something briefly about the foreign policy White Paper released last week. I am a sceptic about such documents. In classic public administration terms, governments use White Papers to set out their legislative programs for public discussion. That's easy enough if you're talking about the tax system, or health, or if you need to lay out a program of defence capability development that will spread over 30 years.

But foreign policy operates in a world of bewildering complexity; what scientists call a complex adaptive system in which individual components interact in ways that make it impossible to predict their impact on the whole. As I wrote at the weekend, if this White Paper had come out just 18 months ago it would not have contemplated a world of Donald Trump or Brexit.

I do think the drafters of the document have done the best they possibly could under the circumstances, emphasising all the way through the uncertainty of their judgements and the prospects that things might change. That, in itself, is an important message to send.

So although I personally prefer the old system when foreign ministers made regular and extended speeches to parliament, and debate followed, this White Paper will I think be the most lasting of the three such documents the coalition has put out.

It has already served a couple of other important purposes. It has encouraged the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, never the most networked of Canberra departments, to work closely with other agencies across government, including Defence and Treasury.

It has also provided a platform for ministers to reflect very broadly about the international challenges facing Australia. Anyone in the room who has had experience in government will appreciate how difficult it is to give ministers the time and space to talk about anything with a time frame longer than the evening news.

And finally the White Paper actively engaged the public in its preparation. More than 600 individuals and institutions made submissions. Since its launch it has already generated a stream of op-eds and blog discussions.

I'm not pretending foreign policy can compete with Prince Harry and Meghan Markle for the front pages, but every piece of additional coverage is worthwhile. Because as we make our way through what the White Paper calls our contested world, it will be vital to bring the Australian public along.

The AIIA's origins lie in the discussions held between British and American officials and observers at the Paris peace conference in 1919. The participants drew a clear message from the carnage of the Great War: public opinion needed to shape the conduct of foreign affairs.

The creation of 'an informed public opinion in international affairs was...one of the prime needs of the future', their principal convenor, Lionel Curtis, told them.ⁱⁱ That ambition led to the establishment of the American Council of Foreign Relations, the British, later Royal, Institute of International Affairs and its various Australian branches.

Thirty years later, after another devastating war, the need to engage the public was still clear.

'The well-being or destruction of civilisation rests precariously upon the ebb and flow of opinion and attitude among peoples torn with passion and prejudice, and with very ill-equipped knowledge', wrote Sir Richard Boyer, the Chairman of the ABC, and another of my predecessors as National President, in the first edition of the Institute's journal *Australian Outlook* in 1947.

You might well see Brexit as a very contemporary example of passion, prejudice and ill-equipped knowledge.

If, Boyer continued, 'we are to make the leadership of the democracies effective, and to arm our governments with adequate support for wise and noble policies, it is important that we recognise that international affairs are enormously involved and require more than passing thought for adequate judgement.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Academic writers distinguish between three different sorts of public opinion dealing with foreign affairs.^{iv}

The first is a collection of what they term 'issue publics' or interest groups. People who join together for a particular purpose, to advance a cause they believe in.

You can think here of groups like ICAN, the antinuclear weapons coalition that has just won the Nobel Peace Prize; of human rights groups like Amnesty International; of the scores of

aid organisations working through the Australian Council for International Development; of trade organisations like the Australia-China Business Council; or groups promoting links with a particular country, such as the Australia-US Leadership Dialogue.

A second, broader, group are the interested generalists – ‘the attentive public’ in the academic literature. These are the people who have a serious interest in the events of the world, who read the international pages of newspapers and blogs, listen to podcasts or radio programs and keep themselves informed.

A number of different motivations can propel people into this group. Concerns about particular issues can expand into a more general interest in Australian foreign policy as a whole.

Perhaps family background generates and sustains the interest. In some cases business engagement with other countries inspires a deeper desire to help shape our relationships.

Or – and this is where I came in – it’s possible simply to be swept along by the conviction that the way Australia engages with the world around it is one of the most consequential and exciting challenges our country faces.

The AIIA – and almost certainly all of you in this room – are part of the attentive public.

The final group is the general public. It’s true that short of wars, terrorist threats and high-profile consular cases, most voters have little interest in the technicalities of foreign policy. That’s not surprising. Foreign policy doesn’t lend itself to clear storytelling. Much of its work is elusive and incremental and happens behind closed doors and over time. It’s the work of persuasion.

Communiques? Credentials? Conferences of the Parties? Eyes glaze. In any case, most Australians have no need to master the fine details of territorial claims in the South China Sea, or factional disputes in Lebanese politics.

But the influence of this group on Australian foreign policy is nevertheless deep and important.

John Howard, for example, writes in his memoirs that a change in the public mood was the reason his government shifted its position on climate change.

With one big exception, which I’ll come back to, the story of Australian attitudes to the outside world has been positive. Prime Minister Howard also used to say that Australians wanted a foreign policy that was ‘practical and realistic’, and all the data suggests he was right.

For thirteen years now the Lowy Institute has been delivering us an invaluable survey of the way Australians think about foreign policy, allowing us to chart its changes.

That polling shows that we are a pragmatic people, more confident about the world than many other western societies, although anxiety is rising here as elsewhere, as the latest Scanlan Foundation Survey shows. In 2017 nearly 80 percent of respondents believed that

globalisation was ‘mostly good’ for Australia. Nearly 70 percent believed that free trade was good for their own standard of living and for the Australian economy.

Eight in ten of us feel safe overall. True, almost the same number are dissatisfied with ‘the way things are going in the world today’ but that seems a pretty sensible judgement to me.

63 per cent of Australians agree that migrants make us stronger and more than 80 per cent think that multiculturalism has been good for Australia.^v

Public consultations conducted for the preparation of the foreign policy White Paper found very similar results. ‘Australians are resilient and optimistic, not easily frightened by the prospect of change in the international environment’, but they anticipate a ‘complex and potentially volatile world’, the government reported.^{vi}

The public’s views can be subtle. For example, Australians have long drawn a distinction between their attitude towards the United States alliance and what they think about particular American presidents. In the Lowy poll, 77 percent of respondents think that the alliance is important or very important to Australian security, a proportion which has stayed remarkably consistent. But six in ten – seven in ten of those under the age of 45 – say that President Trump causes them to have unfavourable views of the United States.

And although apprehension about China is growing, most people see China as more of an economic partner than a security threat.^{vii} A recent IPSOS poll found that 67 percent of Australians agreed that we ‘have enough common values with China to be able to cooperate on solving many important international problems’, the highest share among the ten advanced western countries in the survey.^{viii}

If there is a downside to all this positivism, though, you find it in our neighbourhood. Indonesia remains the biggest anomaly. Little more than one quarter of Australian respondents agree that Indonesia is a democracy, a five point fall from 2015. That is a very large and worrying knowledge gap which reflects an long history of ignorance and suspicion.

Yet, in the end, the importance of the general public for Australian foreign policy stems not so much from what they think about particular issues in the world but from what they think about Australia.

Are they confident about their country or worried? Do they think we should be open to the world or closed? How do they imagine themselves?

The way Australians answer these questions can either support or undermine the complex foreign policy framework that sits on top. Governments can, have and should lead public opinion, but that leadership has to embrace these large questions of identity. Every Prime Minister knows that, and you’ve seen it most clearly recently in Keating, Howard and Abbott. It’s there again in the Turnbull Government’s White Paper.

‘Our support for political, economic and religious freedoms, liberal democracy, the rule of law, racial and gender equality and mutual respect reflect who we are and how we approach the world. They underpin a strong, fair and cohesive society at home and are a source of influence for Australia internationally’, the White Paper states.

Those identities – which can often coexist – have changed greatly over the years. At various times, Australians have seen themselves as builders of the British Empire, representatives of a beleaguered white race in a sea of Asians, a pillar of the West in a global cold war against communism, a loyal American ally, a successful multicultural society seeking its future in Asia, or a model international citizen.

I can personally remember the free bags of lollies distributed by the Mother's Club at Ashburton State School to help us celebrate our place in the British Empire on Empire Day.

There's another complication with this. The people making these decisions about our identity are continually changing, and now more rapidly than ever. The proportion of Australia's population born overseas is higher than it has been for 120 years. Six million of us.^{ix}

If you include people with one parent born overseas, the number is nearly one in two of us. That makes our recent preoccupations with section 44 of the Australian Constitution less surprising.

A million of us are living, working or travelling abroad at any one time.

One and a half million Australians were born in Asia. Mandarin is the second most frequently spoken language in Australian homes.

So the debate about our identity, and therefore our foreign policy, will now be conducted by a very different Australian society. A new generation of policymakers, whose experience and memories don't go back much before the turn of the century, and who have never known an unconnected world, will soon be in charge.

The millennials and the migrants will understand the past – and therefore imagine the future – in new ways. They will be less inclined to see geography as predicament and less given to thinking about themselves as regional outsiders. They need to be drawn into the discussion.

That gets back to the point this Institute began with more than ninety years ago: how we encourage the active involvement of an informed public in the formulation of Australian foreign policy.

By the way, James Cotton notes that the first time that phrase, 'Australian Foreign Policy', appears in the title of a published work, was a collection of papers delivered at a conference organised by the Queensland branch of the AIIA in 1934.^x

In some ways, the job of informing the public is getting harder as the media environment splinters. Mainstream newspapers, radio and television stations are cutting back ruthlessly on overseas correspondents and specialist journalists while social media algorithms deliver us the reinforcing views we apparently crave.

But on balance the news is good. The same technologies provide members of the attentive public like us with opportunities far greater than anything available to Charteris or Boyer to

access and retrieve information about what is happening in the world and explore its dimensions.

As you might expect, I've been thinking a good deal recently about the Institute's role and contribution.

The Australian Journal of International Affairs is the pre-eminent forum for the academic study of international relations in Australia. The series *Australia in World Affairs* has been chronicling changes in Australia's world and our response to it for nearly seventy years. And in a range of other publications, including our *Australian Outlook* blog, conferences and dialogues, the Institute is helping to shape the Australian debate.

I believe that everything Australia wants to do as a country - everything - from maintaining our health system to protecting our security, depends on our ability to understand the world outside and to act in it in ways that protect our interests and our values. Our objective is to ensure that Australia is never forced or coerced along particular paths; that in the constant flux of global change, choices are always available to us.

The most important role of the AIIA in this endeavour is as a transmission belt, linking the community to the decision-makers in government. With our 1,500 members in seven branches, our 200 annual events, we bring together an unparalleled range of knowledge and experience.

I was told before I stepped into this job that state-based, federated organisations with venerable histories can sometimes be hard to manage. But they have an overwhelming advantage in this time of fragmentation: they are close to the communities they serve.

So our next challenge is to make sure that we continue to represent that whole community, to draw new members of the Australian public into our discussion; to turn more members of the general public into the attentive public. I will be talking to our state chapters and as many of our members as I can about how we do that.

The AIIA is precluded by its charter from saying what should be done. That is one of our strengths. But we have a heavy responsibility, in the words of Richard Boyer in the *Australian Outlook* article I quoted earlier, to leave our mark 'to some good purpose on the actual turn of events'.

The need has never been greater.

ⁱ Douglas Hassall, Professor A.H. Charteris and the study of International Law in Australia, *Australian Yearbook of International Law*, 1997. <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/AUYrBkIntLaw/1997/5.html>

ⁱⁱ PG Edwards, *Prime Ministers and Diplomats: The Making of Australian Foreign Policy 1901 to 1949*, Oxford University Press, 1988 p. 94

ⁱⁱⁱ RJF Boyer, Foreword, *Australian Outlook*, 1:1, 3-5

^{iv} See, for example, Allan Gyngell and Michael Wesley, *Making Australian Foreign Policy*, 2nd edition, Cambridge University Press, 2007 p.160

^v http://scanlonfoundation.org.au/research_surveys/2017/

^{vi} Foreign Policy White Paper Public Consultation Summary Report <http://dfat.gov.au/whitepaper/report/ministerial-foreword/index.html>

^{vii} Lowy Institute Poll 2017 <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/2017-lowy-institute-poll>

^{viii} Matt Wade, 'Australians support engagement with international issues', Sydney Morning Herald, 26 November 2017.

^{ix} <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/lookup/3412.0Media%20Release12014-15>

^x James Cotton, The Australian School Of International Relations, Palgrave Macmillan 2013 p.11