Australian Institute of International Affairs

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Australia and China:  
The Fiftieth Anniversary of the Whitlam Visit to China

*Address by Peter Phillips, 30 November 2021*

Peter Phillips is a former diplomat whose career, based on an Asian Studies degree from the ANU and a Diploma of Thai Studies from the RAAF School of Languages at Point Cook, included long-term postings in Bangkok and in Beijing, as well as service as DFAT’s China Desk Officer and as the China Political and Strategic Analyst in the Office of National Assessments. More recently, he was the Director, Asia, for the leading government liaison advisory company Government Relations Australia (GRA) and served as a Director of the National Press Club of Australia for over ten years. He was appointed leader of an Australian expert team which provided strategic advice to the successful Beijing bid to host the Olympic Games in 2008.



I would like to acknowledge particularly Professor Stephen FitzGerald, Australia’s first Ambassador to China, lifelong China Scholar Extraordinaire, author academician and guide/adviser to the Whitlam 1971 mission (and more recently to the Whitlam Institute) whose recollections and thoughtful advice have informed much of my presentation this evening.

I commence this evening’s presentation by extending my respects to the peoples - including particularly the Gadigal people – of the Eora Nation, the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered, their elders, past, present and emerging. And to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be listening.

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As I considered my approach to this evening’s presentation I cogitated at length upon an introduction.

And in the end, I could come up with nothing to match the late E.G. Whitlam’s own plea – that Australia should seek to understand and to keep in account not only our own but also China’s concerns at a time when the relations between or two countries are the subject of intense strains and tensions:

*“One of the great troubles between China and the West is that we expect China to believe the best about our statements of intentions while we choose to believe the worst about hers. We expect understanding for our own fears, but we have never tried to understand hers. We have been obsessed about our own historical experience, but we scoff at China’s obsession with her own experience.”*

And so to the substance of this evening’s presentation, which I commence with a brief resume of key elements of the political history and institutions of the day, fifty years ago.

First, in Australia the Liberal-Country Party Coalition was in the twenty-second year of unbroken tenure of office: in early 1971, the late William McMahon was the Prime Minister and late Doug Anthony his deputy. But the Coalition Government was looking worn and stressed as Australian participation in the war in Vietnam added to public dissatisfaction and reservation: the Labor Party, out of office since 1949, wassomethingof a remodelled and energised forceunder the leadership of Gough Whitlam, and had run the CoalitionGovernment to a close result in the 25 October 1969 election – which had seen then Prime Minister John Gorton and his Coalition partner, the then Country Party, win 66 seats of the then 125 House of Representative seats to the Labor Party’s 59 seats (this, interestingly, despite the Labor Party actually winning the 2 Party preferred vote narrowly by 50.20%to the Coalition’s 49.80%).

(Also interestingly – for the statistically minded - is that the Coalition’s seven seat margin then is exactly the same as the seven seats which the Labor Party needs to gain in 2022 to win the forthcoming gelection and form a majority government.)

In 1966, Prime Minister Harold Holt had opened an Embassy in Taipei, the capital of Taiwan. Following PM Holt’s tragic accidental death in the maelstrom at Cheviot Beach in Victoria in December of 1967, Mr Holt’s successor, Mr McMahon, quickly and unhesitatingly embraced the Coalition Government’s stand on recognition of the Republic of China and Government of President Chiang Kai-Shek.

On 14 April 1971, Whitlam sent a cable to Zhou Enlai:

71 APR 14

CHOU EN-LAI

PRIME MINISTER PEKING-CHINA

AUSTRALIAN LABOUR PARTY ANXIOUS TO SEND DELEGATION TO PEOPLES REPUBLIC OF CHINA TO DISCUSS THE TERMS ON WHICH YOUR COUNTRY IS INTERESTED IN HAVING DIPLOMATIC AND TRADE RELATIONS WITH AUSTRALIA STOP

WOULD APPRECIATE YOUR ADVICE WHETHER YOUR GOVERNMENT WOULD BE ABLE TO RECEIVE DELEGATION.

GOUGH WHITLAM, LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION PARLIAMENT HOUSE CANBERRA

This initiative was at the original suggestion of the Labor Party’s then Federal Secretary (and later member for the South Australian House of Representatives seat of Port Adelaide and Hawke Government Minister) the late Mick Young – a suggestion Young made in the light of strong indications that China might be on the point of a decision not to renew its contract for purchases of Australian wheat.

Zhou Enlai’s response to the Whitlam message came 26 days later – on 10 May – from the Chinese People’s Institute for Foreign Affairs (CPIFA), responsible for dealing with non-recognising countries such as Australia. The CPIFA said they would welcome an ALP/Australian delegation “in mid-June or the later part of June”. Whitlam replied on 12 May but requested “early or preferably mid-July”, because the ALP National Conference was scheduled in the latter half of June.

So a cable came from the CPIFA confirming the invitation for the “first week of July”.

At this point it is, I suggest, it is important and acutely relevant to note the issue of timing: at Premier Zhou’s direction, Whitlam’s preference for mid-July was disregarded and instead the ALP visit was directed to occur in the first week of July. History has subsequently indicated, I suggest, precisely why he did his:

Students of history – and especially of sporting history – will recall the curiously-termed “ping-pong diplomacy”, a phenomenon of the early 1970s when China was still mired in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

China, in another clearly Zhou-inspired initiative, invited an American ping-pong team engaged in a tournament in Japan in April 1971 to visit China; which they did. And on 21 April, Zhou Enlai – specifying he was doing so on behalf of Chairman Mao Zedong – passed an invitation through the ping-pong conduit to US President Richard Nixon to visit China. On 10 May (the same date, remember, as the date on which Premier Zhou sent his invitation to Whitlam) Nixon accepted in principle. But he requested “a preliminary secret meeting” between Zhou and President Nixon’s National Security Advisor Dr Henry Kissinger, to discuss and set in place the detailed arrangements for this epoch-shaping event.

Why is this of such import? Well, history (and the Chinese arrangements) suggest very strongly that clever, shrewd Zhou Enlai saw that a visit to China at this time by a prominent leader and possibly the next head of government of a country which was a strong ally of the USA and a co-participant in the Vietnam war – still raging away to China’s south – could have an effect on the thinking of President Nixon. And so Zhou ensured that Whitlam’s delegation would visit in the first week of July (as it happened, from 02 to 09 July), and that Dr Kissinger should arrive in Beijing on 09 July.

Here I drill down a little into the minutiae:

The Labor Party delegation comprised the following:

* The Hon E.G. Whitlam, Member for Weriwa and Leader of the Federal Opposition
* Tom Burns, Federal President of the ALP
* Mick Young, Federal Secretary of the ALP
* Dr Rex Patterson MP, Member for Dawson and Shadow Primary Industries Minister
* Mr Graham Freudenberg, Whitlam’s speech-writer
* Dr Stephen FitzGerald (my opening comments refer)

Again interestingly, *The Sunday Australian*  newspaper, clearly at that time somewhat differently disposed towards China and the notion of a formal Australia-China relationship than is its successor publication today, undertook to meet the fares and travel costs for Mr Freudenberg, in return for a series of three feature articles by Mr Whitlam – a condition which Whitlam accepted with alacrity in order to ensure that his emanuensis, Freudenberg, was on the China mission team.

The fulfilment of the *Sunday Australian*’s condition was seen in Mr Whitlam’s feature articles on Sunday 04 July, Sunday 11 July and Sunday 18 July 1971. These feature articles, quite fascinatingly in the context of the current state of the Australian China bilateral relationship, readily and robustly stand the test of fifty years of time. I take this opportunity to quote one particular paragraph:

*“There is nothing within my power I would not do to help reduce the risks of war between China, Japan or the United States. The prevention of such a war – needless, inconceivable, cataclysmic – is the central task of statesmanship in our region.There is no issue involving China and the United States which is incapable of settlement given a minimum of commonsense and goodwill.”*

This mission was an historic exercise in common sense.

One enduringly interesting and intriguing element of the 1971 Whitlam/ALP China Mission was the composition and the role of the accompanying media party. Comprising a total of ten correspondents, the media party included stand-out professionals of long experience and accumulated wisdom – and with views from across the political spectrum:

* Eric Walsh from the Australian Financial Review (later to become Whitlam’s Senior Press Secretary)
* John Stubbs from the Sydney Morning Herald in the august Fairfax stable
* Ken Randall from the Australian (and later, for 23 years the President of The National Press Club of Australia
* David Barnett from Australian Associated Press - AAP
* The late Allan Barnes from the Melbourne Age
* Phillip Koch from the ABC
* Laurie Oakes from the Melbourne Sun
* Philip Cast; and
* Willie Phua, photographer and cameraman

A pause here to note that, in addition to the role subsequently taken on by Eric Walsh as Prime Minister Whitlam’s Press Secretary, David Barnett was later to become Press Secretary to Whitlam’s nemesis and conqueror Malcolm Fraser – and later to write, in partnership with his partner and wife Pru Goward, a landmark biography of Prime Minister John Howard.

But for the purpose of this evening’s exercise, it was of great importance for the Whitlam mission – and remains so for the historical record – that Barnett was a fine example of the “old-school” journalist who, amongst his other talents, was an expert shorthand writer; indeed a craftsman in that art once so vital to the mastery of the trade of journalism. And why was this of such importance to the Whitlam-China mission? Well, the centre-piece engagement was the evening of Monday 05 July when the visitors – official delegation and media party – were advised by their hosts that they should dress in suits for that evening’s engagement, which was to be attendance at the screening of a film. Some film! The group was driven along Chang-AnDajie – the Boulevard of Eternal Peace - to the Tiananmen Square where they were ushered into the Great Hall of the People – and into the presence of Premier Zhou Enlai – for that epoch-making meeting between Whitlam and the Chinese Premier.

Those familiar with this genre of exercise will recognise the format: initial exchanges of pleasantries, hand-shakes, and smiles for the cameras and for the media – who are then ushered from the room to leave the principals to get stuck into the substantive dialogue and exchanges.

Except that, on this occasion, no ushering out of the amazed and incredulous media-men, who remained for the two hours plus worth of history in the making. Which is where David Barnett came into his own, for Barnett, the razor-reliable and punctilious shorthand writer, took a verbatim record of the Whitlam-Zhou exchange - which to his eternal credit he later shared with his media colleagues.

The net result of all this was not only a story of unimaginable magnitude, but also an enduring and indelible example of the better angels and the robust skills which characterise the Australian national media corps when it is – as it was on that July day in 1971 – at its best: so unlike so much of what today masquerades as informed and serious reporting and analysis by unqualified amateurs eager to join a pile-on.

But back to the actual chronology which makes for interesting reading and reflection:

* 02 July: Whitlam enters China from Hong Kong via Guangzhou
* 03 July: Whitlam arrives Beijing
* 04 July: Whitlam meets Chinese Ministers Ji Pengfei and Bai Xiangguo
* 05 July: Whitlam meets Zhou Enlai
* 09 July: (Whitlam’s 55th birthday) he leaves for Shanghai (and a birthday celebration – and a cake from Premier Zhou)
* 09 July: Kissinger arrives in Beijing from Pakistan
* 11 July: Kissinger departs for USA
* 15 July: Nixon’s world-wide television broadcast announcing he would visit China before May 1972.

At this point in the recollection and in the narrative, interest grows quite sharply.

In a speech to the Melbourne Young Liberals on 10 July – interestingly, at the very time that Kissinger and Premier Zhou Enlai were meeting in Beijing to discuss and finalise the foundations upon which the new China-USA relationship would be based – PM McMahon said:

*“It is time to expose the shams and absurdities of this excursion into instant coffee diplomacy. We must not become pawns of the giant Communist power in our region. I find it incredible that at a time when Australian soldiers are still engaged in Vietnam, the leader of the Labor Party is becoming a spokesman for those against whom we are fighting. By accepting Peking as the sole capital of China, he is abandoning Taiwan. In no time at all, Mr Zhou had Mr Whitlam on a hook and he played him as a fisherman plays a trout”.*

Immortal words…

And the following day, Prime Minister McMahon doubled down by asserting:

*“China has been a political asset to the Liberal Party and will continue to be an asset for some time”.*

How gloomy it is, then, to be presented again today some fifty years and five months later with unchanged fare.

Lessons of the past un-learned or ignored or rejected out of hand, as those responsible for the setting of our policy directions and the means and processes of their pursuit and implementation compete with one another in their eagerness to demonstrate determination ”to tell it like it is” or to “refuse to take a backward step” when confronted with “Chinese aggression”.

And to sum up:

The tale just told led into a five-year period of sometimes turbulent rule by a Whitlam-headed government – which in determined manner “returned to Asia”, ended our involvement in the terrible wastage and draining of the Vietnam war, recognised the Peoples Republic of China and opened Australia’s Embassy in Beijing in 1973, and charted new courses in engagements elsewhere in Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. But the Whitlam adventure was waylaid and demolished and in 1975 was succeeded by another towering presence in the form of Malcolm Fraser. Forebodings to the contrary notwithstanding, Malcolm Fraser “got it” in relation to Australia’s dealings with and presence in Asia: and especially in China. Not long after taking office and affirming his legitimacy of tenure in a smashing electoral victory over a shattered and demoralised Labor Party in 1975 Fraser, accompanied by Foreign Minister the Honourable Andrew Peacock MP, led an official Australian Government mission to China early in 1976: Australia’s engagement with Asia, Fraser was signalling, is not going away; indeed, it is not about to diminish

And nor did it: Fraser was succeeded in 1983 by Hawke and he then in 1991 by Keating, both of whom set their personal and political – and Australia’s economic developmental – seals on Australia’s continuing development of a wide-ranging and interdependent relationship with China over the years from 1983 to 1996.

And when John Howard succeeded Keating in 1996, he quickly rebutted the colourfully dismissive Keating observation that “Asia is what Coalition leaders fly over on their way to England”, and re-affirmed Australia’s acknowledgement of the vital and ongoing importance of Asia to Australia’s future. And as Prime Minister, Howard backed this acknowledgement with multiple official visits to and exchanges with key Asian region countries – including especially China.

And then, for gloomily despondent supporters of the Labor Party, came what then appeared to be the wondrous miracle of Kevin ’07: “My name is Kevin. I come from Brisbane. And I am here to help you”

So what went wrong? Australia China relations reached a high-water mark when on Friday 24 October 2003, then Chinese President and GeneralSecretary of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China, Hu Jintao, stood and formally addressed a joint sittingof the House of Representatives and the Senate of the Parliament of Australia (just two days, by the way , after US President George W Bush had performed an identical ritual before an identical audience in exactly the same forum – i.e. on Wednesday 22 October).

And we sustained and matched this high water mark right through to June 2010 when then Chinese Vice-President Xi Jinping was the honoured guest in major ceremonies in the Australian Parliament and bilateral agreements with the Australian Government.

And so I can but repeat, WHAT WENT WRONG?

What has reduced us and our relationship with China to the sorry and tattered state in which we find it today?

Is it that China has grown?

Or is it that China has changed?

Or is it that China has always been as it is now – but it has taken us until now to recognise this?

Or are there – heaven forbid – shortcomings which have somehow crept into our capacity to recognise the importance – indeed, the imperative – of a steady, stable, workable engagement with China?

Whatever, I suggest that these and related considerations must continue to be focal preoccupations of the Institute. I welcome any opportunitywhich might arise to tease out further these matters during the Q and A session and I look forward also to the presentation by Chinese Deputy Consul General Zhao Wenfei.

Thank you.

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