

# **‘WHILE WE WEREN’T LOOKING’: THE NEW ASIA AND HOW IT CHALLENGES AUSTRALIA**

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## **1. While we weren’t looking**

It may seem a little odd to suggest that we haven’t been looking at Asia. Resource companies certainly are. Tourists are. University recruiters are. And government ministers and officials, on everything from sport to counter-terrorism, are jumping on and off planes to Asia like performing seals. From many quarters in Australia we do appear to be looking at Asia.

So let me illustrate what I mean.

In 2005, some in the Australian government believed Australia should seek a seat at the new regional leaders meeting to be known as the East Asia Summit, in December that year in Kuala Lumpur. When told he would have to sign the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation if he wanted Australia to have a seat at the Summit, Prime Minister Howard said publicly that the Treaty is outmoded and belongs to “a mind set that we’ve all really moved on from”.

Note the ‘we’ and the ‘all’ in that sentence. Because the problem is, it was not ‘we’, Australia, who were making the pace on this initiative or even in this company, but ASEAN, and it was their Treaty not ours. And it was not even ‘all’ who had moved on, if by that he meant other non-ASEAN participants in the Summit - China, India, Japan, Korea and New Zealand. They had all signed the Treaty or indicated they would.

The 1976 ASEAN Treaty was the formalisation of ASEAN, established ten years earlier, in 1967. This instrument was a defining *political* event in modern Southeast Asia. The principles, in this Treaty between apparently vastly different states, nevertheless drew on features of a political culture the founding five members (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and

Thailand) actually had in common.. The five Southeast Asians who subsequently joined also had these in their political culture, as did also, in greater or lesser degree the three Northeast Asians who later joined ASEAN as ASEAN+3. These features include: conflict avoidance and harmony in human relations; personal relationships preceding other kinds of relationship in public life and politics and business; consensual group behaviour; and indirectness and circumlocution in communication. This is how the research of sociologists and linguists identifies these societies, and not a debating proposition about Asian values.

The incorporation of this culture into the ASEAN Treaty had a crucial political function in their relations. It kept them together when by all expectations they should have fallen apart. They had no modern-day habit of cooperation. The direction of their trade and international relations had been almost uni-dimensional, with the metropolitan homelands of European colonial powers. There were deep historical grievances and enmities, and there were the pressures of the Cold War, the Vietnam War and other external and internal crises.

But the 40-year development of ASEAN under this Treaty has been crucial in regional peace, growth and stability, in harmonising different interests, and in introducing a degree of trans-boundary, or regional, governance. The Treaty has practical relevance, and powerful contemporary meaning for ASEAN countries and for their ideas about the future. *They* have not moved on from it.

So maybe we *haven't* been looking. Or having eyes, we see not.

The government would argue, and perhaps the public accepts, that Australia is travelling excellently well in Asia. They quote export figures, state visits back and forth, security cooperation, tourism, education, and a multitude of arrangements from health to governance. That is all true. But these are the interconnections you'd expect of neighbouring countries in a multi-state system in today's world. They satisfy respective needs, and when governments change this continues because their needs and ours continue. That is to say, relations with Asia did not take a tumble when government changed in Canberra in 1996, and in all these ways they've kicked on quite a bit since. Although the government doesn't try to have a debate about Asia. And that's worth a thought.

So what's the analysis?

First, there's a general lesson in foreign policy that with any serious engagement, you need to know what it is you're engaging with – or you should do. The deeper your knowledge, the better prepared you are to act in the national interest. The less familiar you are with a country or region – historically, politically and culturally – the more you need to put into understanding it. And the more it impacts on you the more necessary this is. This doesn't guarantee good policy, but it's a prerequisite. And without it you're likely to get into serious strife.

Second, foreign policy works best in continuous dialogue with an informed public. Without an informed public, good policy is at risk, bad policy more so.

Third, a foreign policy has to ask what are the underlying premises of engagement with a country or region. There are of course many aspects to this, but the one that is relevant here is that which asks how open you are, or how closed, to an intimate relationship with that country, and in particular to a country that has not in the past been an intimate of this kind, and whose culture and political culture is removed from yours and unfamiliar.

Fourth, the current Australian policy view of regional developments is cast overwhelmingly in 'economic' and 'security' terms. But the current election reminds us that policy decisions by politicians are, well, political. They may have economic form, or social or humanitarian, but they are political (what we do about Darfur, for example, and what we do about Aceh are political decisions). That means we should be focussed on the political in what is going on in our region. Not the more obvious, like political parties or changes of government or a political spat, but the political meaning *for them* behind such events and, because all politics is rooted in culture, the political culture of these states and what's coming up in the way of a regional political culture.

And what's coming up, in fact, is what's referred to here as a 'new' Asia.

Good public policy has to be informed, effective, sustainable, long-term in perspective, and in foreign affairs to maximise the national interest. The question is: how good is our foreign policy in relation to this 'new' Asia?

## 2. The 'New' Asia

I don't want to make too much of the term 'new Asia'. It's a description not a patent. It didn't emerge suddenly, and some of its key ingredients have been there for a very long time. From 1967 ASEAN had gradually established itself as a stable regional platform. But the 1990s greatly expanded and strengthened this platform, because by its sustainability and successes it had acquired a power of attraction. The non-member Southeast Asian states sought to join, and by 1999 all of Southeast Asia was in. And in 1998 it was ASEAN that was the platform for joining Southeast Asia formally with the three Northeast Asian powers, China, Japan and Korea, in ASEAN+3. ASEAN also became the platform for other regional initiatives, for example the ASEAN Regional Forum.

Meanwhile, through the early part of the 90s, influential ideas people in the region began to argue that 'Asia' was not an abstraction, but a region that had a lot in common, and they began to explore ideas about shared history and affinity and common purpose.

Its important for our analysis to see that there was this internal dynamic at work, over a period when we were busy – a lot of the time – denying it, or dismissing it as the spoiling agenda of Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir. We related to ASEAN as dialogue partners and in other ways, but we didn't see the political import of what was happening underneath.

Since the 1990s this has accelerated to the point where today the politics are quite different, and new for the following reasons:

- i. there is now a serious 'Asian community' in train, not just talked about, and its not APEC or the East Asia Summit and it doesn't include Australia;
- ii. for East Asian countries, its development is the main event in the regional relations between them;
- iii. it has various concentric and overlapping circles of association, but its total shape is presently ASEAN plus China, Japan and Korea (ASEAN+3). The action, however, is currently centred on ASEAN and China where there is the greatest momentum;
- iv. Korea and Japan are, however, for important purposes part of the circle that defines the identity and political culture of the community;
- v. this new Asia is not concerned with being 'anti' anyone. However in the manner of Asian social behaviour, whether someone is inside or outside

the group is a hugely important determinant in what attitudes and codes of behaviour apply;

- vi. and finally, this Asia, by analogy to ‘nationalistic’, is increasingly ‘regionalistic’ in outlook.

The explicit goal is based on the ASEAN goal of an ASEAN community, or three interrelated communities: an ASEAN Security Community, an ASEAN Economic Community, and an ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. An ASEAN Charter is under negotiation and is scheduled for signing later this year. The various bits and pieces of these processes move at different pace, but the sights are set on 2020. China, Korea and Japan are all in discussion with ASEAN about docking arrangements, and the joining of China with ASEAN in 2002 in the ASEAN-China FTA joins it directly to the community goal. Given the strained and difficult history of China-Southeast relations from 1950 to the 1980s this is a serious shift in regional political affairs.

There is also a new self-assurance, internally and in relation to outsiders. This began – ironically, given what most political leaders in Australia said about it at the time - with the 1997 Asian financial crisis. There was a region-wide sense following the crisis that the region would have to find its own salvation, in self-reliance and collective engagement. This bred a new kind of political confidence – quite different from the earlier exhilaration at the world’s acclamation of the so-called Asian economic miracle – a confidence that the region can manage its own affairs and provide its own leadership.

Alongside this is a sense that the balance of leadership is shifting to Asia, regionally and even globally. This was fuelled by US distraction with the war on terror and the invasion of Iraq and its accompanying and obvious neglect of Asia. But there is also a perception in and out of the region that the aggregate of Asia’s human and other resources gives it a new clout in international affairs. And there’s the fact that in East Asia Asians are not making war on each other or on other parts of the world. This gives the collective region a new influence and power. This also is political. And this, we should realise, is a feeling these countries share when they sit down together.

Essential to the new Asia is an ideas process, through the activism of Asian think tanks. This is now a structural element of Asian regionalism. Think

tanks have had a unique influence in the development of regional collaboration in Asia. From repeated and often intensive rounds of brainstorming and research meetings in each other's countries over many years, they have developed into a sustained colloquium that is regional or 'Asian' in character and collegiality, rather than a dialogue of separate parts. Its function in regionalist thinking is instructive. It develops and tests ideas, stakes out and debates the conceptual and policy territory for cooperation, engages with government (some think tanks are government owned or funded), and charts the course for next stages in deeper state and non-state collaboration. It functions as an ideas incubator for Asian regionalism.

There is also a greatly expanded scale of multilateral collaboration. There are now multiple arrangements and forums, from more formal high-level ones like the Chiang Mai initiative for financial cooperation to regional forums for police forces or water resource management, that cover every policy domain. Some are more productive than others, but all contribute to an incremental movement towards a community. For the governments of the region, from ministers down to mid-level bureaucrats, multilateral and regional relations occupy a greater part of their energies and policy attention than bilateral, and the standing ministerial, official, working group and other meetings that rotate throughout the year already function as a form of regional architecture and regional governance.

Fifth is of course China. China came lately to regionalisation. This is important because it's not China's idea initially and China comes in to an already institutionalised process, significant terms of which have already been brokered between the ASEAN states. The crucial political tipping point was China's adoption of a multilateralist foreign policy. This is also important to understand, because it was not cooked up for anti-US or short-term reasons. It is part of an emerging philosophy of China as a global power, and politically its implications are fascinating to observe in Southeast Asia. Before the so-called 'rise' of China, up to the late 90s, you couldn't go to a conference in Southeast Asia, Korea or Japan without someone giving a paper on whether or how China would be a threat to its neighbours, notably those in Southeast Asia. That has now all but disappeared, reflecting widespread acceptance of China's new power and influence. Attention has turned to bringing it in to the region's multilateral arrangements. There is a widespread expectation in the region that China's participation in the regionalist movement will be cooperative and benign, not coercive.

China transforms utterly the potential for Asia to realise the goal of an Asian community. In several respects its 'arrival', and the nature of its participation in Asia, is in modern times very new. But it is also very old, and there are political and cultural dimensions to that which will challenge every country that engages with the Asian region. I think there's a kind of familiarity, or congeniality, about this new old relationship between China and Southeast Asia that raises the comfort level. Be that as it may, China's diplomacy and geniality have won it support where once there was suspicion.

What happens next is a subject in itself, but one point deserves mention. The western approach to institutional formation in international affairs has tended to be an idea followed by a formal agreement then an institutional arrangement under which substantive or functional cooperation is developed. In Asia, it tends to be the reverse. It begins with functional cooperation, proceeds through building high-level personal relationships, works on substantive cooperation and lower level issue-based agreements, leading ultimately to a more explicit goal and high-level institutional formation. China and Southeast Asia are now well into this progression, somewhere between the third and fourth stages, with the first low-level building block being their Framework Agreement of 2002 for an FTA.

If you look at the documents and the statements, you will see that there is much that is left open or ambiguous about how the region will take shape and its longer term structure, a cause for scepticism, dismissal and even derision in some Western capitals. But this is characteristic behaviour. It leaves the way open for many options.

Whatever the options, regionalism is rapidly coalescing around China and Southeast Asia. Quite apart from the ASEAN-China FTA, there are some thirty other ASEAN-China arrangements that have been put in place in recent years. This is the platform that will function for the next stage in somewhat the same way as ASEAN did in the 90s, although the power equation is of course very different.

### **3. What are the Challenges for Australia?**

Put simply, the challenges are not just to look at Asia but to find, and to ensure we have policies that position Australia to best advantage in what we find; to have an open mind on how far our engagement with Asia might go; to be prepared to move out of a narrow comfort zone into a political culture that is different and challenging, but also exciting and rewarding - bringing

with us and without compromising that which is different, challenging, exciting and rewarding about us; and to have the intellectual equipment and skill and diplomatic dexterity to be able to do so.

But there are big questions over the sustainability of our present Asia policies, because these are not locked into or even very much focussed on this inner, political Asia. They also exhibit an incapacity to see deeply into the region and denial of a national need to do so, and the premises of our policies do not seem open to intimate engagement.

And this is where the contention that Asia policy under Howard is doing as well or better than it was under his predecessors comes unstuck.

In Australian governments from Whitlam to Keating there was a common thread that could imagine intimacy with Asia. It grew in part out of the global political upheavals of the 1960s that challenged traditional European views of non-European peoples, particularly in Asia. Out of that came an argument that Asians (and others) were part of a common global humanity and heritage, just as we were. This idea proposed no limit to personal relations, and in theory no limit to the possibilities in state relations. Until then, Australian policy was not open to the idea that we could have a close relationship with Asia like we had, for example, with New Zealand or the US, and even ridiculed those who thought otherwise.

Gough Whitlam, two days after his election in December 1972, told a group of startled senior Foreign Affairs officials that our 'neighbours' were the countries of the third world. This was a radically different idea, which contemplated an affinity with countries that were not Western. This was the premise of his engagement with Asia.

Whitlam also believed that an essential condition for successful engagement was to have intellectual curiosity about the neighbours, for leaders to make a mental effort to understand them, and to have a well-informed public.

Whitlam himself personified this approach. And while his tenure was short-lived and too distracted by domestic problems to give great effect to this idea domestically, he did so across the board in foreign policy and in many important initiatives and not just China. The broad political and cultural objectives of the Nippon Australia Relations Agreement (NARA) are an example.

Fraser may be thought to have been less committed, but it was Fraser who completed and signed the NARA agreement, who established the Australia-China Council (which we had recommended from the Beijing Embassy to open up a deep national cultural engagement), who admitted to Australia large numbers of Vietnamese refugees leading to the much more open application of post-White Australia immigration policy, and who elevated multiculturalism - which is an equivalent domestically to being open to close engagement with other cultures externally - to a national policy which came to embrace and celebrate difference in our midst. And on how far you might go in state relations, it was Fraser who once mused over the possibility of China as an ally.

Hawke, who had and has many close Asian friends, took the whole idea further and introduced 'enmeshment' with Asia as the goal. And Keating embraced the idea of the personal in state relations in a way that was almost Asian, and intimate engagement with Asia was one of the three big ideas with which he chose to signpost his prime ministership.

It is critical to our understanding of the premises of current policy, to recall that a central tenet of Asia policy over this period came to be the need to bring Australia up to speed on understanding the region. The result, in the 80s and early 90s, was an enormous upsurge on this front. There was public discussion on a scale that had not been seen before and has not happened since. There was a birth and growth of policy relevant conferences and think-tank forums, frequently attended by government ministers and opposition frontbenchers. The government funded an Asian Studies Council and put money into all levels of education for the study of Asian societies. It funded centres like the Asia Research Centre at Murdoch University. It supported Asialink, a centre for community-oriented and public education. ...and there were many others.

State governments became involved. Here in Queensland, the government led the field with a mandatory foreign language program in schools, and three of the five languages were Asian. The Northern Territory government had a policy for all its public servants to learn Indonesian.

The universities expanded teaching of Asian languages and several had strategies to spread Asia content across disciplines outside Asian studies or

language departments. Asia research programs flourished, and politicians and business leaders took an interest and sought to be associated with them.

Business interest grew. There were times over this decade and a half when barely a week went by without a conference for business on one or another Asian country. Business people went to seminars to learn about Asian politics and society and communicating across cultures. Business provided sponsorship for Asia education programs and Asia institutes and centres. The Australian media joined in, giving greater coverage to Asia and stationing more correspondents in Asia than had ever been. Features, opinion, and special supplements tried to delve beyond the day's events or the Asia of sensation, death and disaster

In retrospect this was a remarkable period in Australia's intellectual history. It was a period of genuine debate and contest of ideas. You could even argue with ministers, and you didn't get traduced if you dissented. It was also part of a broader national discussion about values and the future and what it meant to be Australian in a changing and intrusive outside world, but it was a seminal part. And it was not an excess of Asia but a correction, for what had not been there before.

Did this always make for effective and sustainable policy? No. For example I think APEC became a serious diversion. It arose from an idea of an *Asian* regional formation, but it quickly transmuted into a trans-Pacific formation that included the US and totally changed the politics, albeit with the laudable objectives of heading off isolationism in the US and working for trade liberalisation.

The APEC Leaders' Meeting may have value as the only forum in which the heads of 20 of these 21 governments meet, but its not Asian regionalism or an Asian community. It was initiated by non-Asians, it contains the dominating presence of the US, and it now stretches east from the Baltic two thirds of the way around the globe to the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico and down to the southern tip of South America, an expansion which Paul Keating called an act of international vandalism. A lot of Australian policy, energies, resources and diplomacy (and egos) have gone into APEC that might have gone into engagement with Asian regionalism.

Nevertheless, in this pre-1996 period Australia shifted the whole basis of its relations with Asia, and did develop ideas for ways forward that had the

potential to join us organically and intimately with Asian regionalism. Towards the end of the Keating government, Keating and Evans saw what was coming. Evans concluded that we had to try to join that process. To do this we had to join the ideas part, with the aim of extending the concept of region to enable them to accommodate Australia in a way that was acceptable to them, and to us. He came up with the idea of an 'East Asian Hemisphere', which had begun to attract some interest when the Keating government was swept from office in 1996 and this line of thinking slowly went into reverse.

We *had* been looking, and then slowly we stopped.

Not immediately, but as Prime Minister Howard took over control of foreign policy from Alexander Downer. While foreign policy was still largely Downer's, in collaboration with Tim Fischer, there were apparent continuities with the Keating/Evans Asia Policy.

But from the very beginning Howard was different. He was not so open to having relationships with Asia like we had with the US or New Zealand, or indeed open at all. He attacked enmeshment and the premises that underlay it. He was obsessive about Keating's Asia policy and kept returning to it, to differentiate his policy from Keating's, which he kept attacking long after Keating had gone and labelled an 'Asia only' policy. Which it was not. But his attacks were also heavily loaded coded messages.

The late summer of 1997 was a watershed. The Asian financial crisis hit in July. In late August Fischer and Downer released their Foreign Policy White Paper, with its extraordinary rejection of racial discrimination as "not only a moral issue, (but)...fundamental to our acceptance by, and engagement with, the region where our vital security and economic interests lie", and its position that Australia had four most important relationships – the US, Japan, China and Indonesia. In early September Pauline Hanson rose in the Senate to attack Asians, and aboriginal Australia. It was at about this time that Howard began to take control of the issues of foreign policy.

In response to the Asian crisis the government, echoed by many in business and elsewhere, said that it put paid to the idea of an Asian economic miracle and Asian values, and assumed that the project of Asian regionalism was dead in the water.

In response to Hanson, Howard said this was simply a manifestation of the electorate's opposition to political correctness and "not any more racist than you or I", and then declined for 9 months to criticise her views, letting the issue run. This was taken as an appeal to sentiment against Asians in Australia and to the old Australian fear of Asia. It is difficult to find a more plausible explanation. Alexander Downer said at the time that the Hanson view of Australia was rejected by 95% of Australians.

Since then Howard has explicitly rejected in a quite definitive way the White Paper position that China, Japan and Indonesia stood with the US as our most important relationships. And a series of landmark decisions have moved Australia well away from the premises of engagement of pre-1996. Some examples. After East Timor in September 1999, he announced that Australians just had to be Australian in Asia – indicating that we didn't need to go out of our way to understand the region or make any adjustments to living with it, we'd just behave in what way we thought fit. In tandem with his East Timor statements, he also introduced an idea that has recurred throughout his prime ministership, that Australia's role in Asia is one of leadership of the region. This was greeted with astonishment by Asian governments at the time. In 2002 the government put the axe into the idea that the study of Asia and its languages were essential to the national interest by axing funding for the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools strategy. In 2002 also, Howard announced we could launch pre-emptive strikes against any Southeast Asian country where we thought there was a terrorist threat, again to the astonishment of Asian capitals. By 2005 he was deriding as outmoded the single most important all-Asian multilateral agreement in our region, the ASEAN Treaty. And since 1997, the unequivocal language of the White Paper that linked anti-racism to our fundamental national interests in foreign policy has never reappeared. The idea of a complex Australian identity has been replaced with attacks on multiculturalism, and the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs has recently been given the (somewhat Orwellian) title of Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

Had those ideas of Tim Fischer and Alexander Downer in the White Paper survived, Australia's Asia policy would have been significantly different. You can argue about Downer's style (most people don't), but I believe that if he had remained Leader of the Opposition and become Prime Minister there would have been much more continuity than contest with the ideas that went before.

It is difficult to know where John Howard thinks we'll end up in the long term in Asia because he doesn't talk about it, which is itself a concern. As far as one can guess, the thinking seems to be that if we have a bilateralist policy that is economically utilitarian or instrumentalist, and cooperates on security and other utilitarian and functional issues, without getting involved in Asian agendas, and if we don't get drawn into being part of Asia and all that would be implied by this in accommodation to the region, we'll be alright.

But we won't.

Australians are vaguely aware of the importance of the emergence of China, although from things like resources and tourism rather than through education and public debate. But the seismic potential of the *political* shift within the region and between these states is not reflected in government policy or engagement. This new Asia is not just Asia but a Sinic, or Chinese-influenced Asia. Some might think it's alright to dismiss the need to learn Indonesian or Thai or Vietnamese. I wouldn't, and I suggest we do that at great cost to our long term interests. But from Australia you have to be mad to dismiss the import for us of a Sinic Asian community dominating our region, and our economy, and our security. I mean this not in the old fear and threat sense, but in terms of the dominant influence on our world of Chinese language and ideas and political culture (not the Maoist or communist but the traditional political culture in its contemporary mode).

If we think being global means we can just be Anglo global, and perhaps Euro global, we're in for a big shock.

First among our specific challenges is that a bilateralist foreign policy won't work for us. It does not have the capacity to deliver a good outcome for Australia in the new Asian regionalism, and the more the regionalist project proceeds the less effective it will be. Being an Asia-sceptic is barely a policy, and the points where we do engage, with the ASEAN plus movement and the East Asia Summit, as Malaysian Prime Minister Badawi has said, are not for the Asian community but simply for dialogue and cooperation. Yet it is increasingly in this developing Asian community that critical decisions will be made. Knocking on bilateral doors to ask individual governments to plead our case in that community may not even deliver us *second* best. We are already outside a critical decision-making caucus on our doorstep that affects

us more than any other except, for now, or perhaps already including, the United States.

We have to make the mental effort, and with some urgency to try as Evans did to join up with the ideas part, in the hope that its not too late.

A multilateralist policy will put us inside the tent. But we can't be in a multilateral arrangement without some compromise. Multilateralism requires adjustment to commonly agreed rules and behaviour that can deliver a common good. It means everyone has to compromise at one time or another. I have heard on more than one occasion certain people in the Australian government say "we're not going to be dictated to by Asians". Well, that has to go. Maybe not dictated to, but at times having to accept a consensus we didn't vote for. That keeps everyone in. That's where our real economic and security future lies.

Another specific challenge is that if we have any chance of being a real partner in an Asian community we have to be open to the idea of enmeshment, and relaxed about accepting a lot of things that go with it – ideas, symbols, culture, adjustment, and being mixed up with Asians in Asian societies where their influence may often be dominant. As I've suggested, there's a continuum between the policy of being open to living with Asia and the policy of being open to Asians in our midst and against racial discrimination on both fronts. The celebration of a multicultural society was a huge plus for Australia in overcoming negative legacies in the region, and a return to that is a necessary condition for a secure place in an Asian community.

There's a domestic challenge, however, that is now formidable because of the way in which domestic resources have been run down. Over the period since 1996, the lead and the messages and the specific policies of the Howard government have had a dramatic impact on the nation's *capacity* to be successfully engaged with an Asian community. The idea that Australia had to become 'literate' about Asia vanished from government policy and the expression all but disappeared from public discourse. And while business didn't necessarily agree with the more negative government messages, many reverted to the idea that they didn't need to make an effort – or support the effort in universities and research institutes. The previous enthusiasm for seminars and conferences on Asia waned. Funding support for Asia-related initiatives declined. Public opinion turned off, and student enrolments in

Asian language and studies programs dropped so sharply that some have ceased to exist. Disturbingly, there was no revolt of the universities, no line in the sand by state governments, and little complaint from those in government or business who might have challenged these trends had they chosen.

Most of us don't speak any of the languages of Asia, and no one does in the Australian government. The few Asian language courses that still exist in our universities are full of native-speaking international students doing a soft option and many universities don't do anything about it. Most of us have no idea about what goes on in the thinking in Asian countries. Most know nothing about the historical, cultural or social forces that influence this thinking, or how these influence policy choices that affect us. We could have gone a long way towards that over this decade but we have gone backwards.

It's a major task but the challenge is to re-ignite the public interest and positive excitement that was there until the mid-90s, to re-charge public discussion and the contest of ideas, to rescue and adequately fund the study of Asian languages and societies,

There's another challenge which is to confront the institutionalised complacency that has grown up about ourselves in relation to Asia over this decade. It's an attitude you run into it among many young Australians as you move around the region. It's an attitude of 'I go, therefore I know'. It's in institutions as well as individuals.

I was asked not long ago by a major Australian university (not Griffith, which I regard as exceptional) to look at its new international strategy for Asia. This said: we are 'targetting' X university (one of the top universities in China). Fine, I said, and have you gone round the other side of that curtain and researched what is their thinking, and their international strategy and their 20-year goals, their priorities and who they might be 'targetting', and where in all that there is a place for you? No, I was told, why should we? And no one did.

Whether university, or resources company, or government, earning in Asia does not equate to learning in Asia. Nor does the fact that I go make it a fact that I know. And the reason I quoted that remark by Prime Minister Howard about the ASEAN Treaty (i.e. that it belongs to "a mind set that we've all really moved on from") is that it is so self-referencing, so wanting of

curiosity and comprehension. Australia can't afford this. It was not the way of Tim Fischer or the earlier Downer. Australia has the wit to be otherwise and it must now rediscover it.