Sino-Australian Relations

Thursday, 11 October 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Ms PARKE (Fremantle) (16:44): Madam Speaker, I add my congratulations on your elevation to high office. In the last week of September it was my privilege to attend and participate in the 2012 Australia-China Futures Second Track Dialogue, whose governing theme was 'The Australia-China relationship at forty: building a pathway for the future.' Held in Beijing, the second track dialogue was co-sponsored by Griffith University and Peking University and supported by both the Australia-China Council and the Queensland Government. I would like to thank Griffith University, particularly Vice Chancellor Professor Ian O'Connor and Professor Andrew O'Neil, director of the Griffith Asia Institute, for the opportunity to participate in this dialogue.

The dialogue provided an opportunity to examine the evolution of Sino-Australian relations over the four decades that have passed since the establishment of formal diplomatic relations by the Whitlam government in 1972 and, most importantly, to consider the opportunities and challenges that we share in the Asian century ahead. I was pleased to meet Yi Wang of Griffith University, the author of a recently published book entitled 

Australia-China Relations post 1949 — Sixty years of Trade and Politics.

China's growing strategic importance not only in our region but globally raises the issue of how Australia as a creative middle power positions itself in the Asia-Pacific and the world vis-a-vis China and the United States, and I note that this is the subject of considerable expert commentary at present. But the more popular sense of the relationship between Australia and China tends to be a relatively narrow and simplified version of a much broader and more complex reality.

Australia's resources sector is connected to and relies upon the appetite of the growing Chinese economy. There are the questions of how sustainable Australia's reliance on China as an export market for commodities is in the long term and what should be done to diversify Australia's economic relationship with China, and, further, how China and Australia relate to one another outside the lens of economics and the trade relationship. How do we diversify and broaden our engagement through our own distinctive yet evolving cultural and political frames, recognising that differences do exist, being prepared to discuss even difficult issues with the respectful honesty that is built upon a foundation of friendship?

The second track dialogue was especially thought-provoking and refreshing because of the chance it provided to consider aspects of the Sino-Australian relationship that are less commonly part of how we think about the connections between our countries but that will be increasingly important in framing our future. Most of all I appreciated the emphasis on the importance of people-to-people links as essential to building trust and understanding. During the first session of the dialogue, regarding cooperation and higher education, it was noted that, while there are some 97,000 Chinese students studying in Australia, there are only 3,000 Australian students studying in China. The critical need to develop interest in Asian culture and language among Australia's young people and the wider community was discussed. There is the sense that despite Australia's growing intellectual understanding of our place in Asia, our personal and official attachments are still skewed to the West. If we look at Australia's diplomatic representation, Australia is significantly under-represented in Asia compared to Europe. In my own electorate I have observed that most schools teaching languages other than English are teaching European languages such as Italian, French or German despite their more limited relevance to Australia's present and future.

The dialogue also addressed emerging areas of closer cooperation in science partnerships and engagement, and disaster management. Both China and Australia have embraced R&D as necessary to their futures. China has become one of the largest investors in R&D and sources of scientific publications while Australia is one of the most prolific producers of scientific publications per capita. China has established collaborative partnerships on science and technology with 152 countries. I was encouraged to learn of the strong partnership that has developed between Australia's CSIRO and the Chinese Academy of Sciences since 1975. China is now Australia's third most significant partner in research and development. Our joint projects include medical research, biodiversity, food security, water conservation, wireless communications and renewable energy.
On the issue of disaster management, it was noted that the Asia-Pacific is the world’s most natural disaster prone region and that the frequency, cost and impact of natural disasters is only going to increase with population growth, increased urbanisation and climate change. Experts expressed the view that Australia’s disaster management planning assumptions have historically been too narrow, focused on past events, and that Australia needs a permanent fund to prepare for and respond to emergencies so that the government is not dependent on emergency appeals and ad hoc levies imposed after the event.

On the eve, as it were, of the release of the government’s timely white paper on Australia’s place in the Asian Century, I am very grateful to have had the opportunity presented by the 2012 second track dialogue to participate in discussions of some of the most interesting developing aspects of the Australia-China relationship. There is no doubt that our common future, as nations and as regional participants, will be made healthier and safer, and that the lives of our respective citizens will be made more prosperous, free and sustainable, by our cooperation in such future planning.