Sir Edward ‘Weary’ Dunlop Asialink Lecture (2005)

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It is a privilege to receive the 2005 ‘Weary’ Dunlop Asialink medal. Indeed, I cannot think of a more illustrious or more humbling privilege. This is because the medal is awarded for a commitment to improving Australia-Asia relations and because it carries the name of one of the greatest of all Australians, a hero to his closest friends.

It is the first time that this award has gone to a media representative and that represents a fine judgement. The media is pivotal to Australia’s relations with Asia - it is involved in all of the failures and in all of the success. Media performance is a contested arena not least within the media itself. The media is like the currency market – it always accentuates the current trend – and it does so with Asia. There is, however, one guiding star for the media and that is to follow the Asia story in its intellectual, cultural, political and economic complexity. This is the challenge that matters and the path I have tried to follow as a journalist and newspaper editor.

In addition to recognising the contribution that Asialink makes to Australia’s ties with the region I want to recognise the Lowy Institute, not just for hosting this function, but for the impact the Institute is having on Australia’s role in the world and our relations with Asia.

Sir Edward ‘Weary’ Dunlop belongs to the generation of my parents, the generation that I revere as the greatest generation. We stand on their shoulders. There is no greater figure from that generation than ‘Weary’ Dunlop – doctor, soldier, prisoner-of-war, humanitarian, athlete, diarist, surgeon, community leader and visionary in terms of Australia’s role in Asia. It was a generation that accepted its duty with a philosophical resolution. Beaten, tortured and facing what he believed was a certain execution ‘Weary’ Dunlop confessed a burning hatred of his Japanese tormentors. Yet he emerged from the ordeal an enhanced human being, aware as he said, that “all men are equal in the face of suffering and death.’’ In the introduction to his War Diaries, he wrote: “Surely some increased understanding should emerge from a tragic conflict in which when all is said and done, Japanese losses vastly exceed our own.’’ If not, he said, quoting Macbeth, then life was meaningless.

This should be an enduring template that Australia brings to Asia. If ‘Weary’ Dunlop, after all his pain and tribulation and after being told at one point he had 10 seconds before his execution, chose the path of greater human understanding then, surely, it ill behoves any other Australian to abandon Weary’s path and his example of such moral courage. After his post-war years of involvement with the Colombo Plan and work in Thailand, Sri Lanka and India, ‘Weary’ Dunlop said he was convinced “that all the races of mankind bear some special mark of God’s tenderness, some unique contribution to human kind.’’ These are the universal values that underpin Australia-Asia ties.

The other enduring template from 'Weary' Dunlop was his optimism – he saw that strength and generosity were companions. He emerged from his tribulations an optimist, not a pessimist. It is this optimism that is so important in the way Australia approaches Asia. At some stage in Australia's history after World War two the nation underwent a change of mindset – the cast of optimism prevailed over the cast of pessimism in our approach to Asia. We can debate when that happened but it was a turning point.

My message in this speech is that Australia has reached a new threshold in its approach to Asia. Engagement with Asia is no longer a national dispute; it is a permanent national project. We have been deeply involved with Asia for half a century but over the past 15 years there has been a cultural dispute between Paul Keating and John Howard over the meaning of engagement, over whether our policy was Asia "only'' or Asia "first'', over how much Australia should change itself to succeed in Asia and to whom in this country Asian leaders might talk. This was associated with another debate between the 'three cheers' and 'black armband' schools of Australian history. This is the debate that we had to have – but I suspect and I hope that this debate is over.

Political and policy differences will continue. But the continuity between the Keating and Howard polity in Asia is far more conspicuous than their differences. This perception, once in doubt, is now obvious. The investment that John Howard has made, personal and political, in our relations with China, Indonesia, Japan and Singapore – to name just four countries – is reminiscent of the commitment, personal and political, that Paul Keating made to our relations with many regional nations. The word 'engagement' is Keating's word and it implies an intimacy; a process of the heart not just the head. Yet engagement is a joint project today. It belongs neither to the Labor Party nor to the Liberal Party but to the nation.

We now see the Keating-Howard era with a deeper historical perspective. The differences between them were real and I do not wish to deny that or minimise those differences. But in these remarks I want to focus on the shared objectives of Keating and Howard. It is because the terms of our national debates are defined by political leaders and the media accentuates this trend, that the common approach is downplayed in the cause of partisan differences. Yet Keating and Howard were united in the same quest – taking Australia into deeper, broader and more complex ties in its own region. Just as Keating sought to integrate our links with the United States and with the region, so Howard now seeks to integrate our links with the United States and the region. The differences between the Howard Government and the Beazley Opposition over Asia policy are about emphasis and priorities but not principle.

The national perceptions that Australia requires to manage its ties with Asia are within the realm of a bipartisan national strategy. Let me list some of them.

First, we need to stay positive at a time when the media accentuates the voices of doom. Asia poses many daunting challenges – it is, however, a huge opportunity for Australia. During the age of terrorism we need to hold to this vision. Asia is witnessing the rise of China and India, the emerging giants of the coming century, the transfer of global economic and political power from Europe to Asia and increasing competition within Asia itself.

Former European Union Commissioner, Chris Patten, said recently: "We are used to living in a world which has been shaped and led by the trans-Atlantic community, by America principally but also Europe – and I just think we should sometimes consider how much longer that is going to be true.''

Australia has benefited enormously from the rise of Asia over the past 50 years. That opportunity will only be enhanced in the coming 50 years. We need to be geared to these opportunities and beware of those who favour retreat, introspection or protectionism. When I was recently in India one of its senior economic advisers, Montek Singh Ahluwalia told me that China's success had been good for India because people now asked "why can't we do that here?'' In short, living in the world's most dynamic region will be good for Australia.

Second, Asia won't adapt to Australia – it is Australia that has to adapt to Asia. This has been our lesson from the past half century yet many in Australia's intellectual class have not grasped the point. Many intellectuals seem to find their frame of reference from the past rather than the future. Australia cannot just cling to the old economic orthodoxies. Far too much of the current Australian debate seem oblivious to the transformation now occurring in our part of the world.

Adjusting to Asia doesn't mean changing who we are – as Paul Keating famously said, we can only go to the region as we are, as Australians. But it does mean being flexible and adaptable and wary of dogmatism. That somewhat dogmatic leader, John Howard, has just given us an example. Howard backed down and signed the region's Treaty of Amity and Co-operation. For somebody who doesn't back down often, it is illuminating. Howard changed his mind because of the national interest – it was the price necessary to win Australia a seat at the inaugural East Asian Summit. This should be seen as common sense not weakness.

Australia has to be careful about the values debate as it applies to Asia. As a democratic non-capital punishment society with a free media and deep legal tradition, Australians think their values are best. That doesn't mean we denigrate or patronise other societies at different stages of development with different traditions or values. We need to strike the balance between defending the interests of our citizens and respecting other sovereignties whose values differ from our own.

Frankly, we must do better here in relation to Indonesia. Orchestrated media campaigns such as that for Shapelle Corby assist neither the defendant nor Australia-Indonesia relations. It is not acceptable to have talkback radio jocks on the main radio station in Sydney saying "The judges don't even speak English, mate, they're straight out of the trees…they do look like the three wise monkeys.'' Given Australia's racist past there is no place for the injection of racist overtones into our popular debate about Asia.

Third, engagement with Asia means a permanent relationship, in good times and in bad. Australia cannot afford to be a fair weather friend or a friend just involved for economic gain. We are in the region for the long haul – and that means the good and the bad. I think we have made real progress here as a consequence of the East Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s. Australia and Japan were the only nations involved in the three bail-out packages to the region during this crisis. For a while the idea of

Asia as an economic miracle surrendered to the idea of Asia as an economic problem – and psychology of Australia's regional engagement was also changed.

Our neighbourhood consciousness was on display with John Howard's support for Indonesia during the tsunami early this year. This saw not just a substantial financial commitment but a personal commitment that was impressive. There is no substitute for this personal commitment from Australia's Prime Minister, as Howard and Keating have periodically demonstrated. The recent regional alarm about avian flu is another example of the need for Australia to make a decisive regional contribution. The generic point is that Australia has many technical, professional and administrative skills to bring to the region. This is how a partner thinks; a genuine partner prepares for all seasons, fair and foul.

Fourth, Australia must be alive to the diversity of the region, its growing rivalries and its ancient tensions. These links between past and present will only become more important. Australia has to think of Asia as a collection of different nations in addition to thinking of Asian as a region. We can only be an effective operator by being aware of the complex tensions between and within countries. They underpin many of the regional challenges – China-Japan relations, Japan-Korea relations, the centrality of Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia, the rise of nationalism across most of the region and the secessionist strains within Indonesia.

One reason Australia won entry to the new East Asian Summit was because of regional manoeuvring over the rise of China – countries such as Japan, Singapore and Indonesia decided that they wanted a wider regional forum that included India and Australia to provide a better balance with China. National and cultural differences will only become more prominent – and this is a challenge as well as an opportunity for Australian diplomacy.

However Australia's commitment to the study of Asian languages and culture is inadequate for a nation that takes its engagement with Asia seriously. One of our finest Asian scholars, Stephen Fitzgerald said years ago that Australia must interpret engagement as an intellectual endeavour. We need to revive this element in our approach. It means reversing the steady decline in the study of Asian languages in our schools and universities and equipping ourselves far better to operate within the region. This point sounds elementary and it is elementary – yet this cause has been lost and it needs to be re-discovered.

Fifth, Australia needs to beware of false choices – one of the favourite means of discussing public issues these days. There are many false choices – that we have to choose between America and China; that we have to choose between high immigration and environmental sustainability; that we have to choose between economic growth and a fair society. Australia doesn't face any of these choices; the true of leadership lies in exposing such fallacies. Issues are presented as phoney trade-offs by partisans trying to achieve a particular objective. The art of good public policy is to reconcile national interest aspirations, not to eliminate them.

It is difficult to imagine a likely scenario in which Australia has to choose between America and China. It is one thing to be realistic about the risks but it is a mistake to base policy on worse case scenarios. We should remember that the US has enduring

interests in Asia and in China and these interests will only grow along with inter-dependence between America and China. War between these two giants is not a likely event.

As a rich nation in Asia, Australia must stay the course as a high immigration destination and a multicultural society. We live in a different environment to Europe and should avoid the zero population malaise that will afflict many European nations along with rising inequality and low growth linked to this option. Australia's mindset should be suited to a far more dynamic region. This means environmental policies geared to our national objectives – not having our national objectives subverted by environmental policy. There would be no greater folly for Australia than erecting new barriers between ourselves and the region by becoming a nation of low growth, population stabilising and increasing insularity.

Australians should remember that a successful economy and a successful society go together. There are no successful modern societies with failing economies. The more successful our economy the better equipped we are to provide a worthwhile society via sound public policy. The market-based economy that Australia began to embrace in 1983 is an opportunity to create a better Australian society. Nothing has been more important for Australia's standing in Asia than its contemporary success over the past 20 years as an economic and social model.

What conclusions should we draw overall?

It is apparent that Australia's engagement with Asia will be ongoing, since it is founded in national self-interest. Australia's ability to relate to the region will be instrumental in shaping its security and its economic future and the prosperity of its people.

Asia is diverse and doesn't think with one mind; engagement doesn't always mean that Australia will succeed in Asia; engagement does not exclude Australia from taking decisions that might alienate certain nations in Asia; Australia should think as a partner within the region, not as an outsider operating on the region; and success in engagement does not mean the compromise of Australian values, thought it does depend upon a cultural adaptation within Australia. This adaptation is the true test of commitment. The core requirement is a bipartisan vision of Australia as a regional partner, and the more this vision is realised outside the realm of government (and politics), notably in business, finance, education, NGOs, and people-to-people links the greater the benefits. The responsibility, however, remains with government to serve as an intellectual innovator on how and in which directions engagement can best be pursued.

Engagement is a living concept that will be interpreted by each generation. It will remain the central theme, but not the defining paradigm of Australian foreign policy. It is best, however, to see engagement as more than a foreign policy. It is a national project that has no end, a project that demands patience as well as resolution, and a project that is always under consideration because it is incomplete.