Chapter Two: *Facing Asia*: Changing Parliamentary Attitudes towards China 1934–1989

In the previous chapter it was observed how Australia’s Federation identity was considered to be indivisibly British; Australia was imagined as a permanent and prosperous home for a white race and a nation which would benefit from the best of British culture and tradition. Australia’s physical distance from Britain, and corresponding contiguity with Asia, gave added impetus to this identification. Federation parliamentarians considered Australia to have little in common with Asia and believed that Australia’s future prosperity would be realised through its bond to Europe and not through its proximity to Asia. By contrast, this chapter documents the critical role that China played in transforming parliamentary attitudes towards Asia throughout the twentieth century. It begins by examining an important precursor to regional engagement: Australia’s first diplomatic mission to Asia—the Australian Eastern Mission of 1934. An analysis of this landmark event is followed by a critique of parliamentary responses to the changes that occurred across Asia in the post-war years. The chapter then concludes by examining the development of the Australia–China relationship in the post-recognition years (1972–1989). In examining these three distinct periods, the chapter reveals how a self-conscious nation, which was primarily committed to pursuing British imperial interests, developed into a nation capable of making an independent assessment of its economic and strategic interests. The chapter will tell the story of how a nation, having once turned its back on Asia and its people, emerged to consider Asia critical to its future.

The Australian Eastern Mission 1934

In *Australian Foreign Relations: Contemporary Perspectives* (1998) Derek McDougall suggests that in the post-Federation period Australia had little control over its international affairs:

‘Australia’ as a political entity came into existence in 1901 following the enactment of the *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act* by the British Parliament in 1900. Although Section 51 (xxix) of the Constitution gave the Parliament of the Commonwealth power over ‘External affairs’, this meant essentially relations between Australia and the United Kingdom. Foreign policy remained under the control of Britain since it was Britain that acted on behalf of the British Empire, and Australia was a self-governing country within the British Empire. When Australia had foreign policy concerns these were normally expressed by bringing the matter to the attention of the government in London … As far as Australia’s independent status
was concerned, the passage of the Statute of Westminster by the British Parliament in 1931 was in effect a proclamation of Dominion independence, but Australia was slow to take advantage of the new situation. The Australian Parliament only ratified the Statute of Westminster in 1942, and then largely for technical reasons to do with wartime conditions, rather than as an ‘act of independence’.¹

The fact that Australia did not choose to exercise its right to Dominion independence until 1942 might suggest that Australian policy makers were largely satisfied with the arrangements under which its international affairs were managed. Australian interests were largely considered an extension of British interests and it seemed unnecessary for Australia to duplicate the administrative structures required to manage its own international relations. However here, in examining the activities of the Australian Eastern Mission of 1934, this chapter argues that Australia was more proactive in its foreign relations than this line of argument would suggest. The Australian Eastern Mission marked a turning point in the history of Australia’s external relations where a more self-confident and assertive nation began to distinguish Australian from British interests.²

During April–May 1934, the Deputy Prime Minister, Attorney-General and Minister for External Affairs, J. G. Latham, led Australia’s first mission of a diplomatic character to foreign countries. Latham travelled to seven countries/colonial territories including: the Dutch East Indies, Singapore and Malaya, French Indochina, Hong Kong, China, Japan and the Philippines.³ The declared purpose of the Mission was to develop ‘friendly relations’ with the region. Because Australia did not have diplomatic representation in Southeast Asia, the Mission was undertaken with the assistance and support of British diplomatic officials.⁴ Latham travelled with an Advisor from the

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2. Prime Minister Stanley Bruce appointed R. G. Casey as Australia’s first diplomat in 1925. Casey operated as an Australian Liaison Officer within the Foreign and Colonial Office, acting as a point of liaison for communications between Britain and Australia. Casey’s appointment did not, as such, represent the origins of an autonomous foreign policy.
3. Latham spent twelve days in China visiting Shanghai, Nanking, Tientsin, Peiping and Canton. He also spent twelve days in Japan, ten days in the Dutch East Indies, three days in French Indochina and two days in each Hong Kong and the Philippines.
Attorney-General’s Department (Eric Lloyd), an Information Officer from the Department of Trade and Customs (Arthur Moore), a Secretary (Henry Standish), an Assistant Secretary (John Ferguson), and a Stenographer (Marjory Grosvenor). Latham was also accompanied by his wife and daughter.

In reporting on the activities of the Mission to the House of Representatives on 6 July 1934, Latham claimed that the Eastern Mission was intended as ‘a Mission of friendship to our neighbours’. This message was reiterated in each country Latham visited, ‘This is not the visit of a trade delegation; it is a complimentary call for the purposes of demonstrating our goodwill and friendship’. While the Eastern Mission was unique in the history of Australia’s external relations, Latham’s speech to the House could also be considered as operating as an originating point for a different type of Australian thinking about Asia:

Our next nearest neighbours (after New Zealand), if one may use the phrase, are to be found in those countries which make up what is known as the Far East. I am glad that we are essentially a European community, and are not confronted with the problems that arise from mixed races in other parts of the world. We have adopted European phrases and the ideas that correspond to them. From our childhood we have been accustomed to read, think, and speak of the ‘Far East’. It is the Far East to Europe, to the old centres of civilisation, but we must realise that it is the ‘Near East’ to Australia … It is inevitable that the relations between Australia and the Near East will become closer and more intimate as the years pass. Therefore, it is important that we should endeavour to develop and improve our relations with our near neighbours, whose fortunes are so important to us, not only in economic matters, but also in relation to the vital issues of peace and war.

Latham communicates a respect for Empire or the old centres of civilisation, and maintains a commitment to the policies of white Australia. He also attempts to recast Asia as Australia’s ‘Near East’, a Near East which is critical to Australia’s economic and strategic future. In seeking to re-situate Asia in the parliamentary imagination, he communicates a powerfully symbolic message—Australia needed to replace British geographic descriptors with terms reflecting Australian realities. Over the course of the Mission, Latham made dozens of speeches in which he reiterated that while Australia

was a proud member of the British Empire, Australia was also ‘a nation of the Eastern hemisphere’. The *Peiping & Tientsin Times* reported:

> The declared purpose of his mission is to repair the rather curious omission so far of any official visit from the Commonwealth to these neighbouring countries … From this point of view it reflects the livelier interest taken of late by the Commonwealth in its external relations.

Yet for all Latham’s declarations of friendship there is evidence to suggest that the Mission was as much about trade as goodwill. Along with the description of the activities of the Mission that were presented to Parliament, Latham produced a series of companion documents—secret Cabinet reports which examined the opportunities for expanding Australia’s trade to Asia. These reports reveal that Latham had actively sought information about trading opportunities across Asia, entering into frequent and detailed discussions with prime ministers, foreign ministers, premiers and governors about Australia’s trading and commercial interests, custom duties and tariffs. Latham also canvassed the possibility of establishing Australian trade commissioners across Asia. Latham’s personal papers, held at the National Library of Australia, also reveal that the Mission had been motivated by two reports that had emerged as a strategic response to the Great Depression: Herbert Gepp’s *Report on Trade between Australia and the Far East* (1932) and A. C. V. Melbourne’s *Report on Australian Intercourse with Japan and China* (1932). Both reports recommended that an official economic mission visit China and Japan to determine the opportunities for increasing Australian trade to the ‘Far East’ and both Gepp and Melbourne recommended the appointment of Australian trade representatives across the region.

While Australia’s turn to Asia was motivated by economic and commercial imperatives, there are a number of reasons why Latham intended the Mission be interpreted as one of friendship and goodwill. Latham, who had clearly reflected on the

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way his visits would be received, considered it important that matters of friendship be seen to precede matters of trade. Latham made this clear in his speech to the House:

At the outset it was difficult for some to understand that any object would be served by sending a Mission of friendship to our neighbours. Hitherto, the general intercourse of Australia with these countries has been almost purely economic in character … The Western mind does not always realize that in the East there are many people who appreciate a compliment even more highly than a bargain, and who see a genuine significance in a sincere act of courtesy.\(^\text{12}\)

Beyond the diplomatic value that was attached to a goodwill Mission, Latham had another motivation for representing the tour in these terms. From 1932, Australia was bound by the imperial preferences system (later to become the Commonwealth preferences system). The British had established the imperial preferences system with Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa and India following the Great Depression, at a time when many nations had imposed protective tariffs for their domestic industries. Through inventing a system of preferential trade duties, signatory countries could increase intra-empire trade and Britain, through securing trade preferences, could maintain access to goods from overseas markets. Because of these various preference deals, which became known as the Ottawa Agreement, Australia could only enter into limited negotiations with trading partners outside the British imperial system—in this instance, the Dutch (East-Indies), the French (Indo-China), the Chinese and the Japanese.

In his speech to Parliament Latham restated Australia’s commitment to intra-empire trade, claiming that Australia’s relations with Great Britain were ‘closer than they have ever been’. He also suggested that ‘a more urgent effort is being made to maintain and extend trade between Australia and other parts of the Empire’, before gesturing towards a hierarchy of interests:

As part of the British Empire we then naturally and properly consider the interests of the British Empire and its various parts. We are then [emphasis added] prepared to make trade arrangements with the countries which trade generously with ourselves.\(^\text{13}\)

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What is less clear, however, is whether the Eastern Mission was deliberately testing the implications of the Ottawa Agreement.

In his public statements, Latham suggested that the Mission served both imperial and Australian interests; he claimed that in all his deliberations he ‘frankly put the Australian point of view’, but he was also mindful to speak of the interests of the British Empire. However, in the secret reports prepared for Cabinet, Latham almost exclusively identified Australian interests. Together these two positions suggest that the Eastern Mission of 1934 represented a transitional moment for Australia. While the Great Depression had prompted Australian policy makers to look towards Asia, and think more independently about Australia’s external affairs, Australia was still operating under the administrative umbrella of the British Empire. The transitional nature of the moment was also reflected in the qualified position Latham took on Australian representation in Asia. Latham suggested that the desirability of appointing trade commissioners in ‘Eastern countries’ was ‘almost beyond question’, but he did not see any need for recommending the appointment of Australian diplomats to the region. When in Shanghai, Latham offered the following statement about diplomatic representation:

As far as diplomatic representation is concerned Great Britain has provided for us, and at present I cannot see that any advantage would be gained by separate representation. I would stress however that Australia is a self governing country and, as such, could appoint diplomatic representatives as she so desired. But both the interests of my country and our natural loyalty to Great Britain makes it desirable that there should be unity in matters of major importance.

Nevertheless, Latham remained a strong advocate for establishing trade representation across Asia, arguing that British diplomatic and consular representatives lacked the knowledge of Australia (and quite possibly the impetus) to adequately represent Australian trading interests.

16. ‘Exchange of Australian and Chinese professors is likely in the future’, Shanghai Times, 7 May 1934, p. 4.
17. He also wanted representatives on the ground to manage any misinformation about Australia, for example, questions he encountered about Australia’s coastline being fortified by 16-inch guns.
Over the course of the Mission a number of representations were made to Latham about the administration of the *Immigration Restriction Act*. Latham’s report does not attach much significance to these representations and he implies that they were distractions from more important discussions. Each time the policy of immigration restriction was raised, Latham sought to justify Australia’s position by attempting to identify a protectionist policy employed by the government raising the objection.\(^\text{18}\) Because Latham downplayed the significance of these discussions, newspaper reports better illustrate the attention that was, in actual fact, accorded to the matter. Reports in the *Sydney Morning Herald* suggest that discussions over the *Immigration Restriction Act* dominated the meeting with Chinese Minister for Foreign Affairs, Wang Ching-wei. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that the Chinese Minister for Foreign Affairs ‘eagerly asked many questions about immigration restriction’ before suggesting:

> He [Wang Ching-wei] had hoped that the Australian Government would find means to allow admission to the Commonwealth of particular individuals, such as the sons and other close relatives of established Chinese merchants in Australia, who were dying there or past the age of continuing business and wished their heirs to carry on [sic] their enterprises.\(^\text{19}\)

It is further reported that Latham suggested to the Chinese Minister for Foreign Affairs that he was prepared to make sympathetic representations to Cabinet, noting that immigration concessions might assist in the development of trade with China.\(^\text{20}\)

In his public statements Latham noted that the Chinese Minster for Foreign Affairs had concerns about immigration restriction; however, he failed to record them. Rather, he suggested that the Chinese and the Japanese had objections to the administration—and not the *principle* of the policy—adding that the Minister’s concerns had been previously raised by the Chinese Consul-General and ‘were under the consideration of

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\(^\text{19}\) F. M. Cutlack, ‘Australian Mission: Strange Scenes in China’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 May 1934, p. 9. The significance of the Mission is further underscored by the fact that it was accompanied by two Australia journalists, Frank Murray of the *Sydney Sun* and F. M. Cutlack from the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

the Cabinet’. Latham also claimed that he advised the Minister that the ‘rigidity in administration had been the outcome of attempted deception by Chinese’. While Latham, rather self-consciously, looked to avoid the subject of immigration restriction when negotiating with foreign counterparts, it was clear that immigration restriction continued to take priority over all other policy considerations—Australia’s commercial turn to Asia did not alter the commitment to a white Australia.

The Mission presented an opportunity for the Chinese and Japanese governments to make direct representations to Australia about immigration restriction and provided early evidence that Asian nations did not consider matters of immigration and trade as isolated from one another. In spite of his public protestations, it would appear that Latham was aware that the policy of immigration restriction may have implications for Australia’s engagement with new trading partners. This is reflected in his acknowledgement that immigration concessions might assist in the development of trade with China and was reinforced by the fact that his confidential reports gave more consideration to the immigration concerns expressed to him.

Considering the unique nature of the Mission, it is surprising that the tabling of the report to Parliament inspired little debate. The few questions that were asked about the activities of the Mission would suggest that the Parliament was slow to realise its significance. One question related to the nature and names of the titles bestowed upon Latham and the members of the delegation to Japan, another related to the total cost of the Mission, a third concerned the cost of cables made by Latham to Australia. While it is possible that any potential debate may have been interrupted by the dissolving of Parliament on 7 August 1934, the fact that the report was not debated in the 11 sitting days available might suggest that the Parliament was yet to develop any significantly independent perspective on foreign affairs, and that parliamentarians considered matters of external affairs far removed from their legislative responsibilities. Yet the parliamentary reticence also reinforces the fact that Latham was a politician ahead of


22. ibid.


his time, a pioneer who sought to build a conceptual and practical framework that would develop Australian relations with the region. The Eastern Mission paved the way for Australian trade commissioners to be appointed in Shanghai, Tokyo and Batavia in 1935 and provided the impetus for an Australian Department of External Affairs, with a dedicated Minister, to be established in 1936.

The creation of a Department of External Affairs assisted in the development of a series of important bilateral relationships. In 1940 Australian legations were established in Washington (headed by R. G. Casey) and Tokyo (headed by J. G. Latham, and which was terminated with the outbreak of war), while in the following year (1941), Australia established full diplomatic relations with the Government of the Republic of China. Frederic Eggleston was appointed Australia’s first Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to China and a legation was established in the war-time capital of Chungking. Keith Waller, who served as Second Secretary at the Chungking Legation, claims the legation was established in Chungking ‘partly to balance the fact that (Australia) had just opened one in Tokyo, and partly to show some support for the Chinese Government’ who were at war with the Japanese. It was believed that it would help to build a foundation which might be of considerable benefit to Australia in the future.

25. Keith Waller, A Diplomatic Life: Some Memories, Australians in Asia Series No. 6, Centre for the Study of Australia–Asia Relations, Griffith University, p. 9. Throughout this period there was growing parliamentary concern over increased Japanese militarism during the Sino-Japanese War 1937–45. Numerous parliamentarians had expressed sympathy for the Chinese people, and for ‘China’s gallant struggle against Japanese imperialism’ (Arthur Calwell, House of Representatives, Debates, 3 February 1943, p. 257). In the incident that earned Menzies the nickname of ‘Pig Iron Bob’, waterside workers at Port Kembla refused to load pig iron bound for Japan on the grounds that it was going to be utilised to manufacture weapons for use against the Chinese. Keith Waller’s personal account of the conditions under which the legation was established in Chungking, found in A Diplomatic Life: Some Memories, makes for absorbing reading.

26. In January 1941 the Department of External Affairs presented a cabinet submission supporting the idea of establishing an Australian Minister in Chungking: ‘Establishment of a Legation at a most unfavourable time and when few reciprocal material benefits can result, will probably create a profound impression on Chinese minds, and have incalculable consequences in our future relations … To this end, it might well be regarded as a very valuable insurance premium’. As quoted in Warren G. Osmond, Frederic Eggleston: An Intellectual in Australian Politics, Allen & Unwin, Sydney 1985, p. 203.
Australia’s Cold War

On 5 March 1946, while visiting the town of Fulton, Missouri, Winston Churchill made the speech that is often considered to have signalled the start of the Cold War. Churchill’s call for the containment of the Soviet Union and the end to the communist advance popularised the term ‘iron curtain’. It also suggested that the two world powers and former allies, the Soviet Union and the United States, had become polarised. With the iron curtain drawn, communism and anti-communism became the two dominant ideologies of the post-war era. A few years after the 1946 Missouri speech, Churchill’s iron curtain metaphor was reshaped to include the spread of communism to Asia. By the time Mao Zedong stood at the Gate of Celestial Peace overlooking Tiananmen Square and proclaimed the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, on 1 October 1949, a ‘bamboo curtain’ was said to have emerged, dividing communist from non-communist Asia.

This section of the chapter examines the Australian Parliament’s reaction to the events which signalled the start of the Cold War across Asia. It first explores parliamentary attitudes to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China and the question of recognition. It then examines two critical foreign policy speeches from the early Cold War period. First it discusses Percy Spender’s inaugural speech as Minister for External Affairs, made shortly after the establishment of the PRC and outlining the objectives of the Colombo Plan (9 March 1950). Secondly it considers Prime Minister Menzies’ first speech to the 21st Parliament, in which he speaks about the character of the communist menace and signals Australia’s commitment to the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (5 August 1954). In documenting the Parliament’s growing anxiety about the rise of Chinese communism, the discussion provides an outline of the security architecture developed to support one of the most important foreign policy commitments of the time, the policy of containing China.

Throughout 1947 and 1948 parliamentary statements about the Chinese civil war were rare. Both major parties were slow to appreciate the full implications of the war in China and were unclear how they should regard the competing forces. Towards the end of the civil war, however, there was growing anti-Nationalist sentiment in some sectors of Parliament. In December 1948, Prime Minister Chifley claimed, ‘from the point of view of the allied nations, the organization in China (the Nationalists) has not been such to inspire great confidence’. In comments more explicit in their condemnation, Labor

Senator for New South Wales, Donald Grant, spoke repeatedly about the corruption and nepotism of the Chiang regime, while the Labor Member for Hoddle, Jack Cremean, referred to the ‘ex-generalissimo’ as a ‘grafter’ and ‘the embodiment of the Chinese desire for squeeze’. Labor Member for Watson, Max Falstein, stated that ‘it is well to remember that the Chinese, being Orientals, have an entirely different conception of political morality from that of Western nations’ and called for the Nationalists to be removed from their permanent seat at the Security Council. Three months before the formation of the People’s Republic, the Minister for External Affairs, H. V. Evatt, offered an assessment of events in China, suggesting that it was incumbent on the democracies of the world not to isolate a new communist government:

Predictions about what will happen in China are always liable, perhaps certain, to be wrong. China is a country that is able to suffer tremendous cataclysms and shocks and to recover from them and absorb them, the situation becoming, after a time, completely changed. Therefore, dogmatism about the present situation in China is, in my opinion, dangerous. It is hard to see how the present Chinese Government can prevent the Chinese Communists from extending their hold over the greater part of China within the next year … I submit for consideration the view that it would be tragic if, through any failure or neglect on the part of the democracies towards the Chinese, an honourable and long-established association with the freedom-loving peoples should be abruptly terminated. If, at this stage, we were to give the Chinese Government of the north, the Chinese Communists, any ground for thinking that they can never expect international co-operation from the West in the future, that very declaration might lead them to adopt an extreme course and to sever all their traditional contacts with the democracies …

Evatt added that China could be a stabilising force in the region, but that if the Chinese communists were to become expansionary, a United Nations force would be likely to repel them.

It took eighteen days, or nine sitting days, after the formation of the People’s Republic before China was mentioned in Parliament. The aforementioned Labor Senator for New South Wales, Donald Grant, again condemned the Nationalists, while recommending to the House that Australia recognise the new government in China:


I believe that we shall have to recognize the Republican Government in China. That country presents an unlimited market for Australian trade. I do not believe that Mao and his followers will immediately establish a communist state. The task of restoring government that confronts them will take decades to complete. I know the topography of China. Rivers have to be harnessed, and for the general work of reconstruction China will require millions of pounds worth of capital goods, including machinery. If we are wise we shall cultivate the goodwill of the Chinese people. It is time that we realized once and for all that the domination of the Asiatic people by the white man is finished. The sooner we realize that fact the better it will be for us.31

Grant, who clearly foresaw opportunity attached to Australia’s recognition of the People’s Republic, also tried to dispel the myth of communism rising to a position of power in Australia.32 He was firmly of the belief that communism would struggle to survive when confronted with good democratic governance. Grant’s comment about cultivating the goodwill of the Chinese people was the only comment made in the Parliament between 1 October 1949 and the final sitting day of the 18th Parliament on 27 October 1949.

While the federal election of December 1949 took place against the background of the developing Cold War, little attention was given to foreign policy and little concern was expressed about international communism. When Menzies argued that the Chifley Government took a soft line on communism, he was largely referring to domestic communism. Throughout the campaign, Menzies exploited fears of communist influence in the trade union movement and suggested that Chifley’s plan to bring the banks under government control was essentially socialist. After eight years in office, the Labor Government would go on to be defeated at the polls, a victory which marked the start of the ALP’s twenty-three years in Opposition.

On the second sitting day for the new Parliament (23 February 1950) Labor Senator for Western Australia, Donald Willesee, was the first parliamentarian to ask whether the new Government intended to recognise communist China. Senator Willesee was told to place his question on the notice paper for the Minister for External Affairs (Percy

31. Senator Grant, ‘Estimates and Budget Papers 1949–50’, Senate, Debates, 19 October 1949, p. 1561. Scottish by birth, Grant had visited China in the 1930s and was advisor to the Minister for External Affairs, H. V. Evatt.

32. The advantages of trade would later be raised by H. V. Evatt, ‘I have to believe that if it were done (recognition) it would be an enormous advantage from a trading point of view …’, ‘International Affairs’, House of Representatives, Debates, 16 March 1950, p. 919.
On the following day, the Labor Member for East Sydney, Edward (Eddie) Ward, raised the question of recognition, asking the Minister for External Affairs directly if he had recently been involved in a dispute with Jawaharlal Nehru over the recognition of communist China. The Minister for External Affairs replied that he would respond to questions about recognition of China in his foreign affairs statement to the House.

Six sitting days into the new Parliament, Labor Senator for South Australia, Sidney O’Flaherty, described the communist victory in China as a victory for the common man over a corrupt and oppressive regime:

> China is going through a stage of revolution because the serfs and peons of China have turned on the people who were controlling them for years … A revolution has taken place and the people themselves have formed a government … We should not concern ourselves with the ideologies of other nations and such things as shadows and the Iron Curtain … The working people of the world are awakening to the fact that they can rule nations.

Labor Member for Blaxland, James Harrison, recommended aiding China as integral to any security strategy:

> Our whole approach to this problem has been wrong. Having regard for the global situation, it would be much better for us to assist the starving millions of China, irrespective of the type of government they may have established in that country, and to aid Burma and other friendly nations to withstand the onrush of communism, than an attempt to build up a worthwhile military force. We should do everything possible to assist to provide the wherewithal to keep together the bodies and souls of 200,000,000 starving Chinese, rather than prepare to send another army to France or Flanders …

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33. Senator Willesee, ‘China’, Senate, *Debates*, 23 February, 1950, pp. 36–37; Willesee asks again on 1 March 1950, ‘China’, Senate, *Debates*, p. 172 and the response was that the matter will be dealt with by the Minister for External Affairs in his upcoming statement to the House.


The question of recognition would be used by both sides of politics for point-scoring. Evatt, now speaking from Opposition, claimed that the question of the recognition of the People’s Republic of China could not be deferred indefinitely. The Leader of the Opposition (Chifley) argued that the Government ‘will inevitably be compelled to recognise some government in China’.

Typically, the Government responded to such comments by suggesting that the ALP had let pass their opportunity to recognise China. To this charge, Chifley explained why the Labor Party had delayed on the question of recognition:

> There can be no question about the mind of my Government with respect to the recognition of the government. Although honourable members opposite may not believe me, I say frankly that at the time I considered the subject to be of such importance that with a general election pending it should be decided by the incoming government.

Chifley may have considered the issue of recognition sufficiently important that it be given the full consideration of Parliament; however, he had clearly been concerned about the effect recognition would have on a domestic audience increasingly concerned about the communist influence in Australian unions. Prior to the December election, no non-communist country had recognised China and it was extremely unlikely that Australia would be the first. On the question of recognition, Australia would find itself wedged between the historically-grounded tendency to follow the British—who recognised the People’s Republic in January 1950—and the desire to establish a China policy consistent with the United States—with whom they were about to sign the ANZUS security treaty.

Between March and June 1950, the Menzies Government made it clear that it intended to closely observe events in communist China:

> … to ascertain to what degree the new regime in Peking intends to live up to international obligations in both its internal treatment of foreigners and its external non-interference in the affairs of neighbouring states. Several Opposition members have advocated early recognition of the new regime as the Government of China. The Government has no present intention of so doing.


Two and a half weeks after Spender made this comment about Peking living up to its international obligations, the North Korean People’s Army crossed the 38th parallel and entered the Republic of Korea. The outbreak of hostilities in Korea, which would ultimately result in Australia becoming engaged in hostilities against China, saw the Menzies government dispense with the prospect of recognition.

Up until the outbreak of the Korean War, which clearly fuelled fear about Chinese communist expansionism, the Parliament’s reaction to communism was predominately influenced by domestic factors. To this point, Prime Minister Menzies, who offered no early comment on the recognition of China, was almost exclusively concerned with domestic communism. Once he replaced Chifley as prime minister, one of Menzies’ first actions was to introduce legislation that sought to ban the thirty-year-old Communist Party of Australia (CPA) and other organisations that the Government thought to be substantially communist. The Communist Party Dissolution Bill was introduced to the Parliament in April 1950 and debated for 39 sitting days between April and October 1950. It was one of the most contentious pieces of legislation to be considered by Parliament. The Bill, which was passed on 19 October 1950, sought to render the CPA and associated organisations unlawful and members of the Communist Party were to be ‘declared’ making them ineligible for employment in the public service, a trade union or a defence-related industry. When the High Court of Australia ruled the Communist Party Dissolution Act 1950 unconstitutional, on 9 March 1951 (6 to 1), Menzies tried to change the constitution by putting the question of abolition to a

39. Some time later Menzies would state: ‘We, the Government of Australia, did not recognize Communist China. We have never recognized it … Communist China has promoted military activities against our own people in Korea and has dealt out death and injury to them … I have made it clear that the recognition of red China is simply not on our agenda paper’, R. G. Menzies, ‘Estimates 1953–54’, House of Representatives, Debates, 24 September 1953, p. 652.

40. In the days before the 1951 election Menzies exploited the perceived threat of international communism, rallying, ‘Labour leaders must take the Australian people for fools if they think that they have not read the lessons of Korea, and the threatening intervention of Communist China’, as quoted in Henry S. Albinski, Australian Policies and Attitudes towards China, Princeton University Press, New York, 1965, pp. 74–75.

41. The Communist Party of Australia was established in 1920, three years after the Russian revolution. Encouraged by the wartime alliance with the USSR and the defeat of fascism in Europe, the CPA reached its peak membership of 23,000 in 1945. Ten years later, however, its numbers had dwindled to 8,000, Alastair Davidson, The Communist Party of Australia: A Short History, Hoover Institution Press, California, 1969, p. 107.

42. Although a ‘declared’ person could appeal to the High Court, the onus of proof was reversed, making it necessary for them to prove they were not a communist.
referendum. This second attempt to ban the CPA, via referendum (September 1951), was also defeated. Following a series of allegations about espionage activity that were made by Vladimir Petrov—the Soviet intelligence officer who was granted political asylum in April 1954—the Parliament, by a unanimous vote of both Houses, passed a bill to authorise the appointment of a Royal Commission to inquire into Petrov’s allegations. Lasting fifteen months, the Royal Commission failed to reveal a Soviet spy network in Australia, yet was pivotal in determining the outcome of the 1954 Federal Election. Five years after taking office, Menzies had failed in his pledge to make communism unlawful.

A Very Great Burden of Responsibility: Spender and the Colombo Plan

On 9 March 1950 Percy Spender gave his first foreign policy address to Parliament. Occupying twenty pages of Hansard, Spender’s speech offers a detailed outline of the new Government’s foreign policy commitments. Spender began by describing foreign policy as ‘a projection of domestic politics into world politics’ before reiterating Australia’s ‘self-evident and unchanging’ foreign policy objectives—to seek the ‘closest possible cooperation’ with nations of the Commonwealth, the United States and the United Nations. The speech addressed the issue of the establishment of communist China and it represented the point at which Cold War era security concerns would begin to dominate Australia’s external relations. Beyond this, the speech offered an outline for what would later become a key instrument of Australian foreign policy,

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43. There were 2,317,927 YES votes and 2,370,009 NO votes; a NO majority of less than 0.5%; New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia had NO majorities, Ann Curthoys and John Merritt (eds.), *Australia’s First Cold War 1945–1953*, Vol. 1, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1984, p. 133.

44. The Leader of the Opposition, H. V. Evatt, became embroiled in the controversy over communist subversion when he attempted to defend Allan Dalziel, a member of his staff who was found to have supplied information to the Soviet Embassy. For a discussion of how Menzies used the recently created Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) to identify and intimidate communists see Timothy Kendall, *Ways of Seeing China*, Chapter 4, ‘Either with Us or Against Us’, Curtin University Books/Fremantle Press, Fremantle, pp. 125–159.

the Colombo Plan. The Colombo Plan represented the moment when Asia’s social well-being and national development was deemed critical to Australia’s regional security.46

Claiming that the ‘centre of gravity of world affairs’ had shifted to this area, Spender proceeded to offer an appraisal of Australia’s changing security predicament:

We could many years ago reasonably regard ourselves as isolated from the main threats to our national security. Our security, however, has become an immediate and vital issue because changes since the war have resulted in a shifting of potential aggression from the European to the Asian area, and our traditional British Commonwealth and United States of America friends have not yet completed their adjustments to the new situation. A very great burden of responsibility rests especially on us, but also upon the other British Commonwealth countries of this area.47

Spender’s central contention was that two factors had combined to alter the geo-strategic character of Asia. China had fallen under the control of a government which was communist in form and indigenous nationalist movements had emerged across Southeast Asia. In outlining the possible consequences of the communist victory in China, Spender offered a scenario in which the newly established post-colonial administrations, which he believed to be experiencing varying degrees of political instability, would fall one after another to the forces of communism. Spender spoke of the possibility of the Vietminh and Ho Chi Minh taking control of Vietnam and of the implications this would have for the new states of Laos and Cambodia. Envisaging that Laos and Cambodia would be unable to offer much resistance to communism, Spender identified Thailand as the next target of communist pressure. Communist guerrilla activity in Malaya and the Philippines; the challenge of a newly independent

46. Percy Spender, ‘International Affairs’, House of Representatives, Debates, 9 March, 1950, p. 622. The Committee was formally established in 1952. Allan Gyngell and Michael Wesley explain that ‘because of its in camera discussions and direct subordination to the Minister for External Affairs, it was boycotted by the ALP until 1967’. Making Australian Foreign Policy, p. 176.

government of Indonesia and the ‘instrument’ of millions of Chinese scattered throughout Southeast Asia, were each considered to have rendered the region extremely vulnerable to the advance of communism.

Spender suggested that the capacity for communism to spread throughout the newly independent states had created a ‘very great burden of responsibility’ and that, because Australia has special interests in Southeast Asia, it was critical that it work with these states to help them maintain their newly won independence. In turning to the central focus of his address, Spender then provided the Parliament with the outlines of the Colombo Plan. The recommendations for the plan had been drafted at a meeting of Commonwealth Foreign Ministers in Colombo in January 1950. Spender explained that while the recommendations were yet to be accepted, he believed that the plan would stimulate the productive capacities of vulnerable states. He argued that stabilising governments through bilateral aid, infrastructure projects and technical assistance programs, would help create the conditions of economic life under which ‘the false ideological attraction which communism excites will lose its force’.

Spender’s speech invoked images of falling dominos across Southeast Asia. However, while speaking of ‘the ever-increasing thrust of communism’ and ‘territorial aggrandizement’, Spender moderated his comments with statements indicating that the government does not ‘accept the inevitability of a clash between the democratic and communist way of life’. He also restated his commitment to maintaining ‘the traditional contact’ between China and the Western world. Spender reiterated that while ‘It is not for us to question the kind of government the Chinese people choose to live under’; the Government remains concerned that China will conduct itself in accordance with the principles of international law.

48. Otherwise referred to as the Colombo Plan for Cooperative Economic Development in South and Southeast Asia.

49. Despite the fact that Spender had only been appointed as Foreign Minister a fortnight before the January meeting he was one of the plan’s chief architects. Spender resigned from politics in 1951 and was appointed Australia’s second ambassador to the United States.


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The idea of containing the spread of communism through an economic and development assistance scheme to bolster the resistance of the vulnerable ‘free’ countries was given broad parliamentary support. There was an understanding that Australia, as a nation of the Asia-Pacific, had a clear role to play and it was agreed that the economic and social benefits of such a program would help Australia meet its strategic and geopolitical objectives. While there was occasional concern about the cost of development aid, such concerns were accompanied by statements, noting with pride, the leading role Australia was taking in ‘Pacific’ affairs. In 1955, some four years after the introduction of the Colombo Plan, the Liberal Member for Robertson, Roger Dean, would claim:

Visitors from countries which benefit from the Colombo plan have been taken to various parts of Australia and have been entertained in the homes of the people, and by small groups and organizations of people. In that way, they have learned to know us much more easily. There is need for us to encourage greater numbers of people from South-East Asian countries to visit this country so that the flow of people across the bridge to Australia may be greater … If it were possible for people in the countries to our near north to visit Australia, a greater number of South-East Asians would have the opportunity of seeing democracy at work in this country.

In Dean’s terms, the Colombo Plan had contributed to the flow of people across the bridge. This had allowed those from ‘our near north’ to see democracy at work and provided an opportunity for them to learn to know us much more easily. In seeking to insulate Southeast Asian nations from communism, the Colombo Plan represented the origins of Australia’s soft power diplomacy; the Menzies Government would project its foreign policy objectives and promote the values of democracy through cultural, political and educational programs.


55. The father of Australia’s first ethnically Chinese, overseas born Minister, Senator Penny Wong, was a student of the Colombo Plan. In her first speech to the Parliament Senator Wong related: ‘One thing my father always told me was this; “They can take everything away from you but they can’t take your education”. For him the opportunity to study that he was given, particularly the Colombo Plan scholarship to Australia, defined his life. It gave him opportunities he would never otherwise have had and enabled him to climb out
Because the educational scholarship programs which became integral to Australia’s Colombo commitment were not intended to result in the permanent settlement of participants in Australia, the program of *seeing democracy at work* did not interfere with the objectives of white Australia. In fact, rather than representing any diminution of the policy of immigration restriction, the Colombo Plan resulted in its rearticulation. When Spender was in Jakarta, en route to the conference of Commonwealth nations at Colombo, he was asked at a press conference whether there was to be a more liberal administration of the white Australia policy, to which he replied: ‘there could be no compromise upon the white Australia policy by this or any other Australian government … No alteration of the Immigration Act is contemplated’. That Spender stated that there *could* be no compromise, implied a lack of choice, or even, a state of impossibility.

However, in spite of this renewed commitment, Australia’s changing security predicament had begun to alter the way some parliamentarians viewed immigration and calls were made for Australia to recruit large numbers of Europeans to help Australia defend itself. Senator Grant argued:

> I emphasize that Australia is in a precarious position by reason of the fact that as a white people we are surrounded by Asiatics. Therefore, we must increase our population as quickly as possible. I believe that if we fail to increase our population to the maximum within the next twenty years we shall lose this country altogether … It is our duty to welcome migrants and to educate them to the Australian way of life so that, should the necessity arise, they will be prepared to fight alongside us. We must get the best people of the world to migrate to this country.

The expression ‘populate or perish’ was first used by the longest-serving member of the Australian Parliament, W. M. (Billy) Hughes, before being revived after the Second World War by the Minister for Immigration, Arthur Calwell, when there was increased incentive to grow the Australian population.

In developing the metaphor which would come to govern Australia’s experience of the Cold War, Spender outlines a strategy for preventing the dominos from falling across Southeast Asia, opening-up a communist path to Australia. While Spender’s speech

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offered a new metaphoric template for speaking about the Cold War. Australia’s Cold War anxieties would find fuller expression in Menzies’ speech of August 1954. In what follows, we can observe the way Australia’s fight against communism became not just an economic, but a spiritual undertaking.

A Battle for the Spirit of Man: Menzies, SEATO and the Communist Menace

At 8:00pm on 5 August 1954, the second sitting day of the 21st Parliament, Prime Minister Menzies gave one of the most important speeches on international affairs that the Parliament had heard in years. The speech identified a number of the key international events which had occurred during the interregnum and provided an outline of the new government’s foreign policy commitments. Fighting in Indo-China had resulted in Ho Chi Minh’s Vietnamese communists overtaking the French stronghold of Dien Bien Phu (7 May 1954). This had in turn led to the Geneva Conference of 21 July 1954, at which it was settled that Laos and Cambodia would remain independent and sovereign states while Vietnam would be divided allowing for communist administration in the north and non-communist administration in the south. Menzies reported to Parliament that the increased communist presence in Southeast Asia had made Australia’s problems of security ‘more visible and acute than before’, rendering Australia, ‘a democratic nation vitally at risk in these seas’. Menzies’ attention then turned to the political conference which had been planned to establish a ‘Southeast Asia defence organization’. While Menzies did not elaborate at any great length on the character of the organisation which would become the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), or John Foster Dulles’ commitment to expanding America’s

58. E. G. Whitlam claimed that the government had not permitted parliamentary debate on foreign affairs for more than three years, or during the period of the 20th Parliament. Whitlam suggests that the last debate of any length on foreign affairs occurred on 10 July 1951 and occupied 2 hours 40 minutes. On 6 May 1952 a statement made by Casey was debated for 18 minutes. After noting the lack of debate on matters of foreign affairs, Whitlam advocates for the recognition of China—at a time when there was far less support than there had been—and points to the anomaly of claiming the government of Formosa as the real government of China, ‘International Affairs’, House of Representatives, Debates, 12 August 1954, pp. 272–276.

59. The previous Parliament was dissolved on 21 April 1954.

military presence in Southeast Asia, he gestured that a multilateral organisation for collective defence would be created in order to oppose further communist gains.61

Menzies used the opportunity of the speech to distinguish between the character of democracy and the character of communism. Democracy was identified as ‘the noblest system of government yet devised’, because it promoted the ‘significance and well-being of the individual’. Beyond this, Menzies suggested that democracy is correspondingly ‘complex’, for it required a citizenry with ‘educated intelligence, self-discipline, a community conception, and a capacity for selection and judgement’. It is for this reason that Menzies believed that it is ‘idle’ to suppose that communities with ‘high levels of illiteracy’, ‘primitive civic organisations’ and ‘little acquaintance with the art and science of democracy’ can be readily transformed into democracies.

Menzies proceeded to highlight the differences between the two political philosophies through distinguishing the ‘materialist’ from the ‘spiritualist’ tradition:

Communists, wherever they may be grouped, are confessed and clamant materialists. The conceptions of the rights and spiritual dignity of man which inhere in the genuinely-held religions of the world, and which feed these noble aspirations which have led to democracy and national freedom, have no meaning or reality in the Communist mind. That is why Communist aggression uses cunning or bloodshed, fraud and fury, with callous indifference to all moral and spiritual considerations. The one objective is the enlargement of the boundaries of dictatorial and materialist power. All of us who live in free countries, lifted to noble issues by religious faith, will forget these grim truths at our peril … It is desperately important that the world should see this as a moral contest; a battle for the spirit of man.62

In suggesting the war had become a moral contest between the ‘noble’ spiritualists and the ‘dictatorial’ materialists, Menzies had begun to develop a political language more

61. The Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty or the Manila Pact was signed on 8 September 1954. The formal institution of SEATO was established at a meeting of treaty partners in Bangkok in February 1955. The United States, Great Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, Pakistan, and the Philippines became the member states. The treaty committed signatories to the collective defence of one another. Labor Member for Dalley, Arthur Greenup, would later suggest, ‘Events in Indo-China during the last three years have caused grave concern to Australians. That unhappy country is the gateway of South-East Asia, and the successes of the Communists at the Geneva conference opens up for Mao Tse Tung and Chou En Lai a vista of further conquests that could include Australia, possibly after the subjugation of Indonesia and New Guinea’. House of Representatives, Debates, 11 August 1954, p. 193.

forceful than anything he had used since the outbreak of hostilities in Korea. In claiming a spiritual dimension to ideological conflict, Menzies developed an evangelical rhetoric that spoke of ‘faith’, ‘moral revolution’ and of converting the workers chained by their communist masters, back to truth.63

There was general bipartisanship expressed about the gravity of the events in Southeast Asia and both sides of politics supported Menzies’ arguments for a defence and security organisation. However, in suggesting that the Cold War was no longer a contest between two economic systems—but that it had become a war of faith—the speech became an originating point for a new political vocabulary about the threat of communism. Menzies’ speech inspired a new type of anti-communist rhetoric and an avalanche of religiosity. The Liberal Member for Bennelong, John Cramer, claimed that Menzies’ sentence about ‘the battle for the spirit of man’ was one of the most important he had spoken (and that Menzies’ address was the most important he had heard in his four and a half years as a member of the House). Cramer then drew upon Menzies’ spiritualist metaphors to claim that communism ‘takes away the soul of man and destroys his relationship with God’.64 Menzies’ rhetorical flourishes also inspired the Country Party Member for Moore, Hugh Leslie, to identify communism as ‘something that comes from hell’:

Communism is the worst evil that the world has ever known. It will undermine Western civilization, unless it is checked, because it will take from us the things upon which our civilization is founded, such as our religion, our family life, and our belief in a Supreme Being. Communism is not a political ideology. It is something that comes from hell itself for the purpose of destroying the world, if it possibly can. This is how I regard communism, and, because it is so evil, I believe that any means are justified to scorch it out, or to make certain that it does not gain a footing here.65

While Menzies spoke of the communists’ ‘cunning or bloodshed, fraud and fury’, others would employ tidal metaphors to describe China’s ‘descent into darkness’, the territorial ambitions of the ‘communist commandos’ and the ‘creeping, dangerous, insidious flood’ of communism throughout the world.66 Yet it is within the climate of

growing parliamentary hysteria that the Labor Member for Wilmot, Gilbert (Gil) Duthie, provided prescient comment on the lasting effects of European colonialism across Asia:

We sowed the wind, and we are reaping the whirlwind of communism. What have we done in Asia over the last 200 years to entitle us to claim its allegiances and cooperation in the present crisis in that vast area? For centuries we have dominated its economy. We have ruled it politically through reactionary governments ... We have exploited Asia’s richest resources, not for the benefit of Asia, but for our own benefit. We have failed to lift the living standards of the Asians, we have suppressed their attempts at self-government, and we have secretly despised their colour. We have given no encouragement to education or the improvement of the standard of health. Yet now we are astonished that Asia is going Communist.67

Menzies’ speech remains one of the most significant of the early Cold War period. It did not simply generate a new political rhetoric for describing the Cold War but it was delivered on the eve of a period of significant political tumult—the ALP split. In promoting the battle against communism, as a battle for the spirit of man, Menzies had pitched his comments to those anti-communist Catholic voters who would soon desert the ALP for the vehemently anticommmunist Democratic Labor Party (DLP). That Menzies’ speech was the first of its kind to be filmed for television made the communication of this message that much easier.68

The former Labor Member for Fremantle (1994–2007), Carmen Lawrence, testifies to the power of the anti-communist message through her memories of the early Cold War period. Recalling the way that the Parliament had inspired her childhood fear of Chinese communism, she relates her nocturnal battle with slanted-eyed communists who cut the tongues from priests and pierced the eardrums of nuns—with chopsticks:

Wilfrid Kent Hughes, claimed ‘No great wisdom was needed to forecast that the guns on the Yangste in 1949 were blowing out the lights of China and would soon throw Indo-China into darkness.’, ‘International Affairs’, House of Representatives, Debates, 10 August 1954, pp. 132–133.

67. Gilbert Duthie, ‘International Affairs’, House of Representatives, Debates, 12 August 1954, p. 279. Much of this sentiment had been expressed in a speech on 23 March 1950 in which Duthie talks about the death of imperialism and colonialism and the emergence of self-governing nations. Here, Duthie also advocates the fight against communism be conducted through Protestant and Catholic missions.

One of my earliest memories is of a recurrent dream: a vivid ‘night terror’ I often had when I was about eight years old. I would wake in fright—although actually still deeply asleep—to see a large man looming in my bedroom door; a uniformed figure, complete with red-starred cap and slanted eyes, brandishing a knife. This was my childish construction of a Chinese communist, a figure our teachers taught us to fear because they tortured nuns and priests, cutting out their tongues and piercing their ear drums with chopsticks. While we were almost inured to the Blood of the Martyrs pantheon having heard the gory details of their suffering so frequently, the Chinese communist bogey was especially potent because it was contemporary and so closely linked to the political fears of the day—the ‘yellow peril’ and the ‘red menace’. These weren’t ancient stories; they were happening in our time.

That I was somewhat precociously aware of the threat from the north is testament to my father’s activism in the Liberal Party and his enthusiastic support for Menzies. We would listen to Parliament on ABC Radio and often heard the grown-ups talk politics. The anti-communist rhetoric became increasingly hysterical as the Cold War escalated. In the 1954 election campaign, Menzies’ Liberals spoke of the ‘communist conspiracy’ … Images of maps bleeding the ‘communist menace’ from China, the Petrov Commission paranoia … For years, I could not sleep with my back to the door lest I be stabbed by a Chinese communist.69

Such memories reinforce the way Parliament has operated as a site, even an originating site, for shaping popular understandings of China.

The ‘Other’ China

Before examining the moment, some decades later, when Australia softened its anti-communist stance, it is worth noting two significant acts of Cold War diplomacy: the visit of a parliamentary delegation to Formosa (Taiwan) in 1956 and the establishment of an embassy in Taipei in 1966. An Australian Goodwill Mission, composed largely of federal parliamentarians, travelled to Formosa in 1956. The Mission was led by J. G. Latham and included eight federal parliamentarians (three from Opposition), one state parliamentarian, an academic and a former military officer. The Mission took place at a time when both Chinese governments were busily courting Western visitors.70


70. From 1956, the mainland government had begun to invite Australian delegations to visit China. These delegations included journalists, doctors, religious leaders, scientists, academics and members of the Australia–China Society and it was hoped that participants would return to Australia to speak sympathetically about what they had observed in China. Cabinet responded to these invitations by adopting the position, as of April 1956, that ‘it was undesirable that any government official or any officer of a government instrumentality should be a member of a group visiting (PRC) China’, see National Archives of Australia, A1838, 3107/38/12/2, Part 1.
Nationalists were actively engaged in developing sympathetic ears in the West and the Goodwill Mission became part of this effort—at a time when the Australian government was attempting to restrict, even prevent, contact with communist China. While the Mission sent a strong message of support to the Nationalists, Latham sought to temper the significance of the visit claiming: ‘We did not represent any party or organisation or government. We were simply a small group of actively interested individuals’. Despite Latham’s declarations, the delegation had access at the highest levels, and on 9 August 1956, Latham met with President Chiang for an hour-long conference. The active diplomacy that was being exercised by the Nationalists during this period helped foster a number of sympathetic voices within the Parliament. ‘Friends of Taiwan’ included the unofficial head of the Taiwan-lobby for much of the 1950s and 1960s, Liberal Member for Chisholm, Wilfrid Kent Hughes, as well as: D. J. Killen, K. E. Beazley, W. C. Wentworth, Stan Keon (who had abandoned the ALP for the DLP) and John Gorton.

The other significant event reflecting Australian Cold War attitudes to China was the establishment of an Australian Embassy in Taipei on 11 June 1966. In his history of Australia’s Taiwan policy, Gary Klintworth claims that Australia’s decision to establish an embassy in Taiwan was based on strategic considerations that arose as a result of the alliance with the United States and Australia’s continuing fear of communist China. Yet, while the establishment of the Embassy may have been a demonstration of Australian loyalty, Klintworth argues that it proved to be of little strategic or economic benefit. The establishment of an Australian Embassy in Taipei was made possible by Robert Menzies’ retirement. Menzies, who is described as having ‘harboured great personal contempt for the Kuomintang (and) strongly disapproved of Australia


73. In 1955, Kent Hughes, who referred to China as the dragon under the red bruin (‘International Affairs’, House of Representatives, Debates, 10 August 1954, p. 134), became one of the first federal parliamentarians to visit Taiwan. During this visit Kent Hughes criticised Menzies’ Taiwan policy, which resulted in him losing his seat on the front bench. Kent Hughes had spent much of World War II as a prisoner of war on Taiwan, working in the gold mines for the Japanese.

establishing an embassy in Taipei’, retired in January 1966, allowing for the new Prime Minster, Harold Holt, to change the government’s policy.75


**Prelude to Australia’s Recognition of China**

The prelude to Australia’s recognition of the People’s Republic was Gough Whitlam’s visit to China as Leader of the Opposition in July 1971. Because of the antipathy many Australians still felt towards China, Whitlam’s trip to Peking represented a substantial political risk and had the potential to derail his 1972 election chances. As the Whitlam-


76. National Library of Australia, Manuscripts 1009, Series 75, Box 110, Folder 13, Item 220.
led ALP delegation met the Premier Zhou Enlai in Peking, Whitlam was lampooned in the Australian press:

Mr Whitlam has not hesitated to seek Chinese smiles of approval at the cost of Australian interests … Examples of Mr Whitlam’s servility are rife … If Mr Whitlam thinks that this wholesale selling out of friends to gain a despot’s smile is diplomacy, then Heaven protect this country if he ever directs its foreign policy.77

Whitlam would go on to be dubbed the ‘Manchurian candidate’ and was accused of betraying the national interest.78 Prime Minister McMahon, attempting to draw political capital from Whitlam’s China visit, told 400 cheering Young Liberals in Melbourne: ‘In no time at all, Mr Zhou had Mr Whitlam on a hook and he played him as a fisherman plays a trout’.79

The McMahon Government continued to reassert its commitment to the policy of non-recognition. However, while so doing, it was unaware that Australia’s major ally was preparing to enter secret talks with the Chinese. On 11 July 1971, while the ALP delegation was in Shanghai celebrating Whitlam’s 55th birthday, US presidential adviser Henry Kissinger flew from Pakistan to Peking to commence discussions with the Chinese leadership. On 15 July President Nixon announced on national television that Kissinger had just returned from Peking where he had discussed the possibility of establishing diplomatic contact between China and the United States. This represented a substantial setback for McMahon, who only hours before, had addressed a Liberal Party National Conference in Tasmania and restated the importance of containing China. Very quickly Whitlam’s trip to China had become a huge domestic political success as Prime Minister McMahon was left flatfooted, defending a position—the isolation and containment of China—which the Americans were abandoning.

77. Sydney Morning Herald, 14 July 1971. The Labor delegation included Mick Young—Labor Federal Secretary (who had first proposed the plan to go to China), Tom Burns—Federal President of the Labor Party, Rex Patterson—Shadow Minister for Agriculture, Graham Freudenberg—Whitlam’s Press Secretary and Stephen FitzGerald—China specialist from the ANU.

78. Bob Santamaria used the expression ‘Manchurian candidate’, he was alluding to the novel and Hollywood film, The Manchurian Candidate, in which an American prisoner of war becomes ‘brainwashed’ by the Chinese communists during the Korean War.

Never had an Opposition exerted so much pressure on foreign policy. When Parliament resumed in August, after the winter recess, Whitlam challenged the McMahon Government to recognise China:

> It is open to any Australian Government, even the McMahon Government, to normalise relations with China. We do not have to wait until after the elections but it can only be done if the McMahon Government is willing to put our national interests above what the Prime Minister believes to be smart, short-term political ploys …

However, the government remained steadfast in their criticism of Whitlam. Whitlam was criticised for bargaining away Taiwan, and for trying to buy the votes of those in Australia with wheat interests.\(^81\) He was accused of kowtowing to Chairman Mao and was parodied for his alleged obsequiousness, labelled a ‘performing monkey in Peking’ and ‘the Chinese candidate for the next Australian election’.\(^82\) Three months after Whitlam’s visit to China, the United Nations General Assembly decided by a two-thirds majority to recognise the People’s Republic of China. This resulted in the Republic of China being supplanted by the People’s Republic at the United Nations in October 1971.

**Recognition**

On 5 December 1972, Whitlam held his first press conference as Prime Minister. Whitlam announced that he had instructed Australia’s Ambassador in Paris, Alan Renouf, to open negotiations with his Chinese counterpart, Huang Chen; Australia’s Ambassador to Taiwan was also recalled. On 21 December, Australia recognised the People’s Republic and signed the Joint Communiqué or *Paris Agreement* stating:

> The two Governments agree to develop diplomatic relations, friendship and cooperation between the two countries on the basis of the principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence … The Australian Government recognises the Government of the People’s Republic of China as the sole legal Government of China, acknowledges the position of the

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81. In early 1971 the Chinese Government failed to renew its contract with the Australian Wheat Board because Australia did not recognise China; China was Australia’s biggest wheat market.

Chinese Government that Taiwan is a province of the People’s Republic of China, and has decided to remove its official representation from Taiwan before 25 January 1973.  

10. Prime Minister Gough Whitlam at ‘Echo Wall’, Temple of Heaven, Beijing, 1973. Named for its acoustic property, a whisper spoken at one end of the wall can be heard from the other, National Archives of Australia, A6180, 14/11/73/209.

Whitlam’s recognition of China quickly developed into a source of national pride. The Fairfax papers ran articles celebrating Australia’s independence in international affairs and Whitlam’s ‘new course in Asia’. However, statements were still being made in Parliament which warned about the dangers of recognising China. The Liberal Member for Balaclava, Raymond Whittorn, suggested that Whitlam had accepted 23 conditions imposed by the People’s Republic as the price of securing recognition. Whittorn suggested that Australia had to *toe the Peking line* and agree to conditions more stringent than those accepted by other states.

On 31 January 1973 Whitlam sought to clarify Australia’s diplomatic arrangements with China:

> It is nonsense to suggest that we have been discriminated against by the Chinese and forced to accept a variety of pre-conditions. The negotiations in Paris covered only questions relating to the recognition of China and the status of Taiwan. There was no secret agreement or understanding on other matters. The wording of the published joint communiqué in which we acknowledged the position of the Chinese Government that Taiwan is a province of China is very similar in its wording to the Canadian and British formulas. The Maldives’ formula, which has been described as softer than ours was, in fact, harder, as the Maldives ‘recognised’ Taiwan as an ‘inalienable part of the territory of the People’s Republic’.

Whitlam had rejected the Cold War template for distinguishing allies from enemies, claiming that the binaries that had determined Australia’s foreign policy for the past twenty-five years had been replaced by a ‘more complex and variable web’ of relationships that cut across ideological barriers. Whitlam spoke of a new era of regional cooperation, and granted diplomatic recognition, not just of communist China (1972), but the Democratic Republic of North Vietnam (1973) and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (1974). He resolved that there would be less emphasis on military pacts and withdrew Australian military personnel from Vietnam, Cambodia and Singapore; he curtailed Australia’s colonial policy by establishing a timetable for Papua New Guinea’s independence; and in the week before Christmas 1972 he denounced President Richard Nixon’s decision to bomb Hanoi and Haiphong, making it


clear that the Australian government would no longer offer unconditional support for U.S. actions in Indo-China. When in Manila in 1973 Whitlam announced that the white Australia policy was now ‘dead’ and that if someone would hand him a shovel he would publicly bury it. While H. V. Evatt, Percy Spender, R. G. Casey and Paul Hasluck had all attempted to develop a distinctive foreign policy, the election of the Whitlam Government was something of a watershed. Whitlam acted on the presumption that Australia had its own interests and could make an independent assessment of what those interests were. He spoke not only of a new course in Asia but also of the emergence of a distinctively Australian view of the world. In December 1973, after a year in government Whitlam declared to Parliament that Australia had changed:

We are no longer a cipher or a satellite in world affairs. We are no longer stamped with the taint of racism. We are no longer a colonial power. We are no longer out of step with the world’s progressive and enlightened movements towards freedom, disarmament and cooperation. We are no longer enthralled to bogies and obsessions in our relations with China or the great powers.

Post-Recognition

After recognition Australia’s China policy assumed a bipartisan quality. When the Liberal-National Country Party coalition was elected to office in 1975 Malcolm Fraser pledged to continue to build the new relationship and forge closer political, economic

86. Bill Hayden, ‘Australia’s China Policy under Labor’, Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs, Number 11, January 1984. After a review of the non-European policy in March 1966, Immigration Minister Hubert Opperman, announced that applications for migration would be based on the suitability as migrants and not on the basis of race, colour or creed.

87. See, for example, an editorial in the Age, 4 January 1973.

88. E. G. Whitlam, ‘Whitlam Government’, House of Representatives, Debates, 13 December 1973, pp. 4729–4732. A few months earlier Whitlam became the first Australian Prime Minister to visit China. He was received with great fanfare and met with a range of senior officials including Chairman Mao Zedong. Keith Waller, Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs between 1969–1973, travelled to China with Whitlam in 1973. Waller describes Whitlam’s response to China in the following way, ‘In China, I think he [Whitlam] was taken in by the machine. As in so many of these socialist countries, they have a very elaborate system of pageantry to welcome the visitor—the pom pom girls at the airport, the troops lining the road, the cheering crowds and so on—and although we had been warned that all of that would happen and that this was standard treatment, he felt that it had never happened before.’, Waller, A Diplomatic Life: Some Memories, pp. 49–50.
and cultural ties. Perhaps the greatest measure of how parliamentary attitudes towards China had transformed in the period after recognition was the Parliament’s response to the passing of Mao Zedong on 9 September 1976. Following Mao’s death both Houses passed bipartisan motions of condolence stating:

That this House records its sincere regret at the death of Chairman Mao Tse-tung, expresses to the people of China profound regret and tenders its deep sympathy to his family in their bereavement.\(^8\)

Tributes spoke of Mao’s achievements—unifying a divided and weak state, liberating China from warlords, feudalism and foreign domination and establishing China as a self-confident member of the world community. The Labor Member for Reid, Tom Uren, described Mao as a ‘brilliant revolutionary thinker, a great military strategist’. Whitlam spoke of his ‘gifts as a writer and interpreter of Chinese philosophy’. The Leader of the Government in the Senate, Senator Reginald Withers claimed:

Unlike the armies of the Chinese leaders before him, his armies did not loot, pillage or rape. He organised great land reform and just government. He was a poet in the classical style and a humane head of a government which was the biggest bureaucracy on earth …\(^9\)

Liberal Member for Mackellar, William Wentworth, was one of the few dissenting voices. He spoke of Mao’s ‘dreadful legacy’, labelling Mao a mass murderer:

… Mao murdered a thousand times as many of his own countrymen as Mussolini ever did and destroyed ten times as many of their freedoms. He made a prison and called it peace … Maoism has subjected the Chinese people to an alien ideology and has denied them their traditional life and culture … Will the Chinese people now have the wisdom and courage to abandon these moronic aspects of Maoism and reassert their historic values?\(^9\)

\(^8\) Malcolm Fraser, ‘Death of Chairman Mao Tse-tung’, House of Representatives, Debates, 14 September 1976, p. 955. The Senate’s condolence motion was identical but added Mao’s title as Chairman of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China.


When the House stood to honour Mao in silence, Wentworth stormed out of the chamber exclaiming: ‘Mr Speaker, Mao was a murderer’.  

Whitlam, now speaking from Opposition, used the occasion of Mao’s passing to point out that five years ago it would have been ‘unthinkable’ for a condolence motion such as this to be offered by the Australian Parliament:

It says much for the changing attitudes of Australian politicians as it does for the greatness of Mao himself that we are paying tribute in this place to a man and thus to a nation and a people who until a short time ago were the objects of widespread hostility and suspicion in this country.

The Fraser years coincided with radical change in China, for the death of Mao would open the way for a comprehensive change in foreign policy and the introduction of a program of substantial economic liberalisation. After Hua Guofeng’s brief period of leadership, Deng Xiaoping came to power and instituted the policies of modernisation and economic liberalisation which would ultimately result in China’s radical transformation. Deng replaced ideological purity with a program of economic development, announcing his intention that China become a developed economy by the year 2000.

‘Special Relationship’

After the election of the Hawke Labor Government the Australia–China relationship developed quickly. After his first trip to China as Prime Minister in 1984, Bob Hawke returned to Australia enthusiastically endorsing the reformist leaders Premier Zhao Ziyang, General Secretary Hu Yaobang and paramount leader Deng Xiaoping. Hawke spoke of reducing Australia’s economic reliance on Japan and claimed that China would provide an immense market for Australian raw materials and manufactured goods. Hawke declared that ‘power would be derived from the benefits of economic liberalism and not, as Mao had put it, from “the barrel of a gun”’.  

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During Question Time on 19 April 1985 the Labor Member for Lowe, Michael Maher, asked the Prime Minister a ‘dorothy dixer’ about the significance of Hu Yaobang’s recent visit for the Australian economy. In his reply Hawke spoke of a ‘special relationship’ that was developing between Australia and China. After a meeting with Deng Xiaoping in the following year, Hawke would confirm that Australia and China now shared ‘a very special relationship’. In promoting the Chinese reforms, Hawke suggested that Chinese values, ideas and forms of government were becoming compatible with our own: ‘More and more, the Chinese system and its philosophy are becoming compatible with our sorts of values’.

Optimism about the Australia–China relationship spread through government, business and educational sectors. Australians tried to build China into whatever they did: China became almost obligatory for government ministers, China business seminars proliferated, tertiary institutions signed up for exchanges with China, PhD scholarships were offered to people from China with no degree at all. Politicians spoke repeatedly about the prospect of selling a sock to every Chinese and every Australian was urged to understand China in order to take advantage of the new opportunities China presented. Australia’s first Ambassador to China, Stephen FitzGerald, claims that even ‘the most conservative anti-communists and covert racists could not stay away from China’.

When the Chinese Communist Party used military force to silence protestors in Tiananmen Square during 4–5 June 1989, Hawke’s vision for Australia–China relations came unstuck. In a service at the Great Hall in Parliament House on 9 June, commemorating the lives of those killed, Prime Minister Hawke wept as he quoted from an Australian embassy cable which described the events in detail. Calling it ‘the saddest and the most compelling duty I have had to perform as Prime Minister’, Hawke claimed:

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97. For an account of the China hysteria that had embraced the Parliament see Stephen FitzGerald, Is Australian an Asian Country?, pp. 26–7.

… our optimism was shattered as we watched in horror the unyielding forces of repression brutally killing the vision of youth. Unarmed young men and women were sprayed with bullets and crushed by tanks. Innocent people were shot and beaten in the streets and in their homes … Thousands have been killed and injured, victims of a leadership that seems determined to hang on to the reins of power at any cost—at awful human cost.99

This was followed by a motion in which Parliament expressed:

… its outrage at the massive and indiscriminate slaughter of thousands of unarmed Chinese pro-democracy demonstrators and bystanders by units of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army in Beijing on 4 and 5 June 1989.100

In the following weeks Cabinet downgraded the relationship and suspended political contacts, ‘severely’ constrained official contacts at the senior level, cancelled all party and parliamentary visits and put on hold technical cooperation projects, but did not introduce economic sanctions.101 In each instance contact was suspended rather than terminated and could be seen to represent a ‘symbolic’ rather than an ‘instrumental’ response.102

The Hawke Government also committed to extending the visas of thousands of Chinese students in Australia.103 Noting the ‘horrifying abuses of human life and human rights which have occurred in China’, Prime Minister Hawke took the opportunity to reassure


100. R. J. Hawke, ‘People’s Republic of China’, House of Representatives, Debates, 15 June 1989, p. 3523. While there was bipartisan support for the motion, the Labor Member for Prospect, Richard Klugman declared: ‘Totalitarian governments behave in certain ways. Many of our people on both sides of the political fence will never learn. Some 11 or 12 years ago this House almost unanimously, with my disagreement, passed a motion of condolence for the well loved Chairman Mao’, Richard Klugman, ‘People’s Republic of China’, House of Representatives, Debates, 15 June 1989, p. 3526

101. For a full list of sanctions, which totalled twelve, see Kim Richard Nossal, The Beijing Massacre: Australian Responses, Australian Foreign Policy Papers, The Australian National University, Canberra, 1993, p. 38.

102. This suggestion is made by Nossal, op. cit., p. 51.

‘Chinese students and their Australian friends that the Government of Australia will keep their situation under close and sympathetic review’. No Chinese students would be returned to China ‘in its current state’.\(^\text{104}\) The Tiananmen Square incident would not only see matters of human rights become critical to the bilateral relationship, it ultimately resulted in the permanent settlement of more than 40,000 PRC Chinese in Australia.\(^\text{105}\) The year 1989 simultaneously embodies the Parliament’s fears and hopes for China: it is the year in which the ‘Garnaut Report’, \textit{Australia and the Northeast Asian Ascendancy}, laid the foundations for Australia’s policy for economic engagement with Northeast Asia and it is the year the Australian Parliament awoke to the reality of engaging with a system that was not going to change in the way some policy makers had wished it to.\(^\text{106}\)

This chapter has offered an account of the profound transformation that took place in Australian self-perceptions from the 1930s. The type of Australia that was imagined in the first decades after Federation—racially pure, separate from Asia and committed to pursuing imperial interests—was gradually replaced by an Australia which began to imagine Asia as part of its future. For a nation emerging out of the experience of the Great Depression, Australian policy makers looked upon Asia to help drag the nation out of economic depression. After this initial period of engagement we have observed the various shifts that took place in parliamentary perceptions of China during the post-War period. ‘China’ was variously imagined as both a threat to Australian political sovereignty and a place of great economic opportunity. The next chapter examines a different type of Australia–China relationship, a relationship that developed under the Howard Government and was predicated upon broad economic complementarity.


