Conclusion

This monograph has explored the historical, political and cultural foundations of the Australian Parliament’s dealings with China. In so doing, it has offered an account of the profound transformation that has taken place in the way Australian parliamentarians have viewed ‘China’. The anxieties about economic competition and genetic corruption that prompted the first Parliament to pass legislation that sought to exclude the Chinese and other non-Europeans from Australia, was eventually replaced by one in which ‘China’ emerged as an indispensable economic and strategic partner, positioned near the centre of Australian’s foreign policy. The monograph has sought to account for this transformation by exploring a series of landmark events in the development of bilateral relations, among them: J. G. Latham’s visit to China in 1934, the Parliament’s reaction to the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949, the Whitlam Government’s recognition of China in 1972 and Hu Jintao’s address to the Australian Parliament in 2003.

The full extent of the change in parliamentary attitudes towards China can be evidenced by contrasting the material that appears at both ends of the monograph. At Federation, one of the nation’s first parliamentarians spoke of eschewing contact with the Chinese, for fear of electoral loss. Just over one hundred years later, the then Leader of the Opposition demonstrated his credentials—as a new generation leader and future prime minister of Australia—by addressing a visiting Chinese head of state in a Chinese language. Similarly, while Federation parliamentarians proclaimed that the more educated the ‘Oriental’, the worse man he was likely to be, education has grown to become Australia’s largest service export to China with some 90,000 Chinese nationals currently studying in Australia. Chapters Three and Four also demonstrate stages of development in Australia’s relations with China that would have been unimaginable to the members of the first Parliament of Australia. They do this by considering the two addresses by the President of the United States and the President of the People’s Republic; the commitment of the Australia–China Parliamentary Friendship Group to strengthening bilateral relations; the inquiries of the committees of the Parliament; and the recent initiatives that have created linkages between the two national legislatures.

Beyond seeking to examine the way the bilateral relationship has been advanced through the processes, practices and outputs of the Parliament, the monograph has located the changes in parliamentary attitudes within a broader social, political and national context. It has identified the role the Parliament has played as an important
knowledge producing institution, one which has variously come to reflect and affect community understandings of China. The study has also documented the role China has played, in both times of fear or friendship, in Australia’s domestic politics. The calls for the containment and isolation of China which dominated Australia’s experience of the Cold War; the spectre of international communism which helped consign the Australian Labor Party to decades in opposition; and the role that the recognition of the People’s Republic played in the Whitlam Government’s reformist policy agenda, each testify to the place accorded to China in Australia’s post-War domestic politics.

The second half of the study has outlined some of the social, economic and political transformations that have recently taken place within China. Chapters Three and Four have documented the way that such transformation has been accompanied by suggestions that China has altered the way it manages its external relations. Former Ambassador Madame Fu has been quoted suggesting that China has ‘moved on’ from the 1970s; that it is no longer ‘behind the bamboo curtain’, and that China has developed new ways of dealing with points of view with which it disagrees. Such comments have been supported by the former Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, who suggested that China has become a responsible international citizen which listens to members of the international community: ‘This isn’t the China of old. The China of new is a China that listens to its friends and its neighbours, and listens to them a lot’.89

By contrast, however, the monograph has also suggested that this transformation is not as complete as these comments suggest. It has observed the way Chinese officials have attempted to influence the Australian media and transgress international standards of diplomacy by attempting to influence the operations of the Australian Parliament. Added to this have been examples of how the Chinese Government responds to statements made in the Parliament about the Republic of China (Taiwan); a critique of the way that the Chinese Government seeks to ‘duchess’ Australian parliamentarians; and the extraordinary reaction of the Chinese to protests against the Olympic torch relay in March–April 2008.

There is broad agreement across the Parliament that China will continue to change and change quickly. However, there is less certainty about the character of this change. Some parliamentarians interviewed for this study suggested that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will embark upon a program of major liberal political reform.

89. See discussion in Chapter Four and specifically footnote 31.
Some suggested that without liberal political reform the CCP may go into crisis. Others were more circumspect about predicting China’s future political character. However, in spite of this divergence in opinion, there was agreement that managing the Australia–China relationship would continue to be something of a balancing act for Australian legislators.

When asked how they would like to see the bilateral relationship change or develop in the future, parliamentarians surveyed for this study made the following suggestions:

• increasing cooperation between the two nations to reduce the adverse impacts of climate change and the environmental impact associated with China’s development;

• improving the capacity of Australian educators to understand the needs of Chinese students;

• using ‘sports diplomacy’ to facilitate deeper cultural and business links;

• formalising the role of the Australia–China Friendship Group to involve the Group in matters of policy (possibly through developing specific sector-based study tours that focus on matters such as trade, education or the environment);

• increasing parliamentarians’ knowledge of China (this may be done through sending an annual delegation to China, possibly when the National People’s Congress is meeting; or through encouraging parliamentarians to visit areas outside Beijing, Shanghai, Xian and Guilin);

• giving ‘adequate’ attention to alleged human rights abuses taking place in China;

• developing more exchanges between the two legislatures and other policy makers; and

• establishing a ‘more realistic’ approach to China which does not result in the neglect of other North Asian relationships.

In closing, it is also worth returning to J. G. Latham’s caution to the House of Representatives in 1934. While Latham’s comments are confined to matters of trade, they gesture towards developing a specialised knowledge which would facilitate Australia’s engagement with China:
It has been usual in Australia to regard China as offering great potentialities for the marketing of Australian goods. This arises, no doubt, from our habit of thinking of China in terms of China’s population … But perhaps no other market offers more difficulties, and no other market requires such specialized knowledge of local conditions and sales procedure. It can also be said that in no other eastern market is competition so keen, or is there such a concentration of international commercial representation, both business and official. Most countries have recognized the necessity for official trade representation, and the trade representatives are, generally speaking, men of extraordinary ability and acumen.⁹⁰

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