

# Enlargers, Straiteners and the Making of Australian Foreign Policy<sup>1</sup>

Gareth Evans

All of us remember Manning Clark loved to draw grand, sweeping rhetorical contrasts, in often slightly archaic but wonderfully intense language, between ‘life affirmers’ and the ‘life deniers’, between ‘mourners’ and the ‘mockers’, between Henry Lawson’s ‘old dead tree’ and ‘young green tree’, and—my favourite—between ‘enlargers’ and ‘straiteners’.

Given life’s complexity and variability, any classification of human instincts or behaviour in starkly bipolar terms runs the risk of sliding into parody. I can remember an Oxford philosophy tutor of mine long ago solemnly—and absolutely incontestably—declaring that ‘there are two kinds of people in the world: those who wear nightcaps to bed and those who don’t’. Just as they say about there being two kinds of social scientists: those who divide things into two and those who don’t.

But I also can’t help thinking, as I look at the way in which policy-makers and decision-makers address most of the public policy issues with which I have been concerned over my own professional life, that our oracular professor was on to something. There does seem to be a mindset that is basically open, embracing, inquisitive, adventurous and positive, and another that is narrow, confined, cautious and negative. Most people do seem to line up, instinctively or intuitively, on one side of this line or the other. And when they are influential in policy-making, it really does matter which side they choose.

International relations theory does not have very much to say about ‘enlargers’ and ‘straiteners’ or perhaps—to practically minded sceptics—anything much else at all. But it does offer at least one comparable distinction, the oldest and most familiar of all in the discipline, between Idealists and Realists. It’s not too difficult to get a handle on what is involved here. It’s rather similar, after all, to the distinction I’ve always made between the two basic motivations that tug for attention in every politician I’ve ever known: idealism and megalomania. Everybody in the business believes in at least something they want to achieve while they are there, and all but the impossibly naive have some kind of tolerance for the sordid business of acquiring and wielding the power needed to do so, but in terms of what really gives polities their jollies, the proportions vary wildly from one to another.

But Idealism v. Realism is much too simple for the professionals these days. You can forget about tenure track unless you can confidently draw out the distinctions between classical, post-classical, neo-, defensive and offensive realists; and on the other side between idealists and liberals, and then between a miscellany of neo-,

institutional and other-hyphenated subspecies of the latter. It's no surprise to me that among those who seem to be most at home in this discipline are my fissiparous colleagues on the far Left, who (as well explained in that excellent documentary film *The Life of Brian*) have long absorbed themselves in cosmically significant ideological differences indistinguishable to the less sensitive.

Cutting across the Idealist–Realist axis is another one, which might look to those outside the academy rather indistinguishable but that I am patiently told is really quite different—because it's methodological more than ideological. This is the division between Constructivists at one end of the scale, who are primarily moved by the notion that norms and ideas really matter, and Rationalists, who are not so persuaded. And then of course, out in a corner of space of their own, are a miscellany of Post-Modernist and related world views of varying degrees of impenetrability, which my late and dear friend Tony Judt has sweepingly, but I suspect not entirely unfairly, described as 'narcissistic obscurantism'.

All these, it will be appreciated, are just the mainstream labels: one wouldn't want to know how many other eddies and pools, and whole inland seas, there are in international relations theory. When I asked a Melbourne University colleague the other day, in a genuine spirit of enquiry, which one of them fitted *me* best, I was consoled to be told that whatever other surface manifestations I may have displayed over the years of everything from institutional liberalism (in my idiosyncratic passion, for example, for trying to make the UN and regional architecture work better) to very hard-nosed realism (in my negotiation of Timor Sea boundaries or peace deals with the Khmer Rouge), that did not make me, as I thought I might be, a candidate for 'Analytical Eclecticism'—that new theoretical school recently identified as a home for the intellectually sluggish and disreputable who are too ill-disciplined and ignorant to fit in anywhere else.

On the contrary, I was informed, given my other idiosyncratic passion for spending vast amounts of time participating in commissions and panels trying to change international behaviour by starting with the way in which policy-makers *think* about tough issues—for example, how to react to genocide and mass-atrocity crimes (that 'responsibility to protect' principle that seems at last to have some real traction in the response to contemporary horrors in Kenya and Libya)—I was clearly, deep down inside, a Constructivist. I was rather chuffed by this, feeling rather like Molière's bourgeois gentleman on whom, it will be recalled, was bestowed when he woke up one morning the thrilling revelation that for the last forty years of his life he had been speaking prose.

The trouble is that none of these labels, in my experience, seems to get close to describing the way in which those in this business behave. Even the most adventurous of us, most passionately committed to human rights and universal values and norms, know

that in the real world that crowds in upon us good ideas and values sometimes carry the day but often they don't; realities constantly intrude, and compromises constantly have to be made. It is certainly discomfiting in the extreme to sit across the table from *génocidaires*, as I did in the Cambodian negotiations, generating howls of indignation from the Pilgrims of this world as a result. But engaging with those for some or all of whose behaviour you feel the utmost distaste is not the same as endorsing that behaviour. Without being able to draw that distinction, diplomacy, and with it any kind of capacity to maintain stability in international relations and find solutions to problems and conflicts, would grind to a halt.

But the fact that compromises of this kind have to be made does not mean that there are no choices to be made. On the contrary, they arise everywhere, both in reacting to events and opportunities and in trying to set new agendas: the United States didn't *have* to go to war in Iraq, and Australia didn't have to join it; we don't have to give aid to Africa, or run for the Security Council, or participate in any peacekeeping operations; we didn't have to try to change the architecture of economic and security policy-making in the Asia-Pacific; we didn't have to try to lead the way in making peace in Cambodia; we don't have to accept any particular number of refugees; we don't have to try to influence the global debate on climate change or nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament.

One of the most interesting treatments I have seen of the way theory relates to practice in the real world of international policy-making was an article in *International Security* a few years ago entitled 'The Future of US-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?' by the Princeton academic Aaron Friedberg, who did a stint in Vice-President Cheney's planning office during the Bush administration. Taking as his starting point the three main camps in contemporary international relations theorising—Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism—he argues that what really matters most in determining their adherents' attitudes and prescriptions on the China-US issue is a more fundamental, cross-cutting, division between Optimists and Pessimists.

So optimistic Liberals believe in the utility, and possibilities, created by interdependence, institutions and pressure for democratisation; optimistic Realists believe that China's power will remain relatively limited and its aims constrained, and play down the security dilemma its actions create for other players; and optimistic Constructivists believe that China's engagement in international institutions of various kinds will lead to shifts in its strategic culture and in the norms of international behaviour accepted by its leaders. On the other hand, pessimistic Liberals see the Chinese leadership as struggling with political change, and prone to hyper-nationalist assertiveness, and too much internally driven US democratisation and human rights pressure as potentially counter-productive; pessimistic Realists see China's power as growing, its aims expanding,

the security dilemma this poses as intense, and the need as a result for maintaining a firm competitive posture very strong; and pessimistic Constructivists worry that an excessively competitive approach by the United States will result in a hardening of Chinese leadership mindsets.

For optimists of all other theoretical stripes and colours, what matters, above all else, is believing in and nurturing the instinct of cooperation in the hope and expectation that decent human values will ultimately prevail; pessimists, on the other hand, see conflict of one kind or another as more or less inevitable, and either embrace enthusiastically or accept with resignation a highly wary and competitive approach to the conduct of international relations. And that is probably as about as close as one gets, in the literature, to Manning Clark's enlargers and straiteners.

In translating this into an Australian foreign policy-making context, it would not be a stretch—and should not be taken as crude partisanship—to describe over the broad course of history, at least since we have had something resembling an independent foreign policy, the approach taken by ALP governments as essentially optimistic and that of the Coalition as essentially pessimistic. But not all Labor governments—or Labor governments in waiting—can be described as enlargers, and by no means all Tories have been straiteners.

Australian foreign policy—if we think of this as a desire to pursue our external interests accompanied by some independent capacity to do so—dates only from the Second World War. It was not until 1940 that our first diplomatic posts, beyond the High Commission in Britain, were established. From 1901 until then, Australian leaders, Labor and non-Labor alike, did show from time to time that they were interested in the world outside Australia, especially on issues such as race and immigration, regional security and relations with the United States and Japan. But apart from Billy Hughes' table-thumping at Versailles on German New Guinea (at the same time as he was fiercely resisting Japan's proposal to have a racial equality clause in the new League of Nations Covenant), it was not until late 1941, when Curtin made his celebrated appeal to the United States, that Australia showed itself capable of addressing a fundamental issue about its place in the world other than reflexively, instinctively and dependently as a member of the British Empire.<sup>2</sup>

The creation of an Australian foreign policy really came only with Evatt, whose most striking contribution was his internationalism—his very real commitment to the building of cooperative multilateral institutions and processes to address both security and development objectives. His contribution to the founding of the United Nations is the stuff of which legends are made, and rightly so—especially in his fight for the rights of the smaller powers against the great powers in the respective roles of the General Assembly and the Security Council, and in his faith in the UN as an

agent for social and economic reform and as a protector of human rights. No previous Australian leader had anything like Evatt's passion for cooperative internationalism, nor anything like his success in creating practical foundations for it.

But there were aspects of Evatt's world view, shared by the Labor Party of the time, which were not remotely enlarging. Right up until the Whitlam era, White Australia and the prejudices that nourished it, and the perception of the world (and particularly our own region) as a dangerous place from which Australia needed to be protected, were very strong strands in the party's thinking. The early support from Evatt and Chifley for Indonesia's independence struggle against the Dutch was perhaps the closest we came to understanding the new forces at work in our region, and our need to reposition ourselves accordingly. This didn't become, however, a sustaining or dominant theme in our foreign policy at the time, and it certainly did not become one in the conservative era that followed, from 1949 to 1972.

There wasn't much left of Evatt's cooperative internationalism by the end of Menzies' and his successors' long reign. It is true that with the Cold War rendering the UN more and more impotent, and multilateral processes generally more and more sterile, there wasn't much to pursue—other than a regional extension of alliance relationships. And true it is that we developed, particularly under Richard Casey, cordial diplomatic relations with the emerging new nations of the region; that Percy Spender's Colombo Plan made a very useful contribution to our long-term relations with Asia; that John McEwen deserves credit for the 1957 treaty with Japan and the optimism and foresight that went with it; and that men such as Paul Hasluck, and particularly John Gorton and Harold Holt, had a quite open-minded international outlook.

But against all this there has to be weighed Menzies' excruciating Anglophilia, the maintenance until the late 1960s of the full vigour of the White Australia policy, the stridency of our support for Verwoerd's South Africa, the intensity of our antagonism towards Communist China, the totality of our dependence upon the United States, and the ultimate comprehensive misjudgement of our intervention in Vietnam. All this combined to reinforce the image, and the reality, of an Australia largely isolated and irrelevant in its own region, deeply unsure of its identity, utterly pessimistic about its ability to be a force for change in its own right, and in any event wholly unclear about what kind of change it would want to pursue if it could.

The Whitlam government well and truly broke this mould, undaunted by Cold War constraints and showing a great capacity, as Evatt had done, to match Australian foreign policy to the mood and needs of the time. Recognising China, bringing home our last troops from Vietnam, finally burying the White Australia policy, taking France to the World Court for its nuclear tests in the Pacific,

and accelerating Papua New Guinea's independence were just some of the decisions in that tumultuously active 1972–75 period that set Australia on a new path. There was a confidently optimistic internationalism about it all, combining a strong commitment to process (especially international treaties and international law, Gough's obsession with which is the stuff of legend) with a particular sensibility to the then relatively new agenda of decolonisation and North–South dialogue.

The brief tenure of the Whitlam government meant that it did more initiating than consolidating (although I suspect that somewhat Rudd-like disposition might have continued even had it stayed in office ten years). While the Fraser government, which followed from 1975 to 1983, was more than happy to re-embrace Cold War verities, and all the East–West division of friends and enemies that went with it, it is to the considerable credit of Malcolm Fraser that on the issues that mattered most for Australia's long-term capacity to advance its interests, especially in the region, Whitlam's policies were not only continued but reinforced. In particular Fraser and his foreign minister, Andrew Peacock, both understood as many in the Coalition for a long time did not—and perhaps in some cases still do not—the critical importance of abandoning government-legitimised racism in any form whatsoever, at home and abroad, not least in their embrace of Vietnamese refugees, in fact less reluctantly than Whitlam. This undoubtedly helped foster closer links in our region and saved Australia from becoming the international pariah it would have been had opposition to apartheid and manifest discomfort with decolonisation persisted.

The Hawke and Keating governments that took us through the next thirteen years renewed that spirit of activist, optimistic adventure which had so characterised the Whitlam period, but—at least as I remember it!—in a rather more focused and systematic fashion. I was fortunate enough, as foreign minister for more than half that period, to have been left some major legacies by my predecessor Bill Hayden: in particular his success in redefining our relationship with the United States (albeit in what might be described sometimes as creative tension with the PM); developing a real role for Australia in the international peace and disarmament movement; and having us accepted as a responsible and knowledgeable voice on Indochina, which helped me enormously when I took on the Cambodia challenge early in my own tenure.

Within the niche role that is inevitably assigned to middle and lesser powers, we were able to achieve a great deal during those Labor years, including helping create the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC) and other new cooperative, regional economic and security architecture, all within a frame of reference, which Kevin Rudd later made his own, of an 'Asia-Pacific community' (in the Chinese literal-translation sense of 'big family' rather than the capital 'C' European sense of economic

integration); securing the conclusion of the Chemical Weapons Convention and advancing some major nuclear weapons objectives; playing a central role during the Uruguay Round trade negotiations; building, with France, a strong coalition to save the Antarctic environment from mining and oil drilling; and in being a key player in crafting the financial sanctions strategy that finally brought down apartheid in South Africa. We also played a very visible role in reshaping ideas, although not with anything like the success in implementing them I would have liked, about how the UN should be reformed to more effectively carry out its role in the post-Cold War environment.

Throughout our term we embraced wholeheartedly the optimism and new cooperative spirit that was abroad with the end of the Cold War. And we had a sustaining model of what kind of country we wanted to be, and be seen to be: essentially an *enlarger* on the international scene, a middle power with a strong Asia-Pacific orientation, pursuing confidently and actively—at global, regional and bilateral levels as appropriate—clearly defined geopolitical interests, economic interests and what can and should be described as good international citizenship interests.

In many ways one of the innovations of which I was most proud as foreign minister was just this concept of ‘good international citizenship’, which I spelt out in a speech in December 1988, just a few months after I was appointed, and which remained for me very much a sustaining motif. The basic idea is very simple. Instead of thinking of national interests in just the two traditional bundles of geopolitical and strategic interests, and economic and trade interests, think of the commitment that the country can make to the achievement of *other* goods and values as amounting to a relevant and vibrant third category: a country’s national interest in being, and being seen to be, a good international citizen.

At the heart of the concept is the notion that every country has a major interest in seeing the achievement of global public goods, or—putting it less technically—the resolution of what Kofi Annan used to describe as transnational ‘problems without passports’, which are by their nature beyond the capacity of any one country, however great and powerful, to deliver or resolve. They include a clean and safe global environment; a world free of health pandemics, out-of-control cross-border population flows, international trafficking of drugs and people, and extreme poverty; a world without cross-border terrorism; and a world on its way to abolishing all weapons of mass destruction.

In a sense these various goods are what international relations professor Hedley Bull used to call ‘purposes beyond ourselves’. But there’s more to all this than disinterested altruism. It’s the harnessing of values and principles to very practical, and indeed self-interested ends, bringing together—if one wants to put it that way—the perspectives of enlargers *and* straiteners.



The argument is that, by being seriously committed to these objectives, national self-interest is advanced in two ways. First, through reciprocity: my help for you today in solving your drugs and terrorism problem might reasonably lead you to be willing to help solve my environmental problem tomorrow. Second, through reputational benefit: the perception of being a country willing to take principled stands for other than immediately self-interested reasons does no harm at all to one's own commercial and wider political agendas—as the Scandinavians in particular seem to have long well understood.

One of the Howard government's first products, in 1997, was—disappointingly but perhaps not surprisingly—a foreign policy white paper, *In the National Interest*, which reverted to the traditional duo of security and economic interests, completely abandoned the concept of good international citizenship as a third category of national interests and by way of compensation restored to centre stage, as a third guiding light, 'national values'. Not universal values, but *national* ones, explicitly described as reflecting our 'predominantly European intellectual and cultural heritage'—although, to be fair, when listed they did go a little beyond the rule of law and 'commitment to a "fair go"' to include racial equality and building support for human rights institutions.

Foreign policy was dominated throughout Howard's long term, to 2007, by the prime minister himself—not by my long-serving successor, Alexander Downer, who I always suspected was instinctively an enlarger rather than a straitener: someone who, given his head, would have been just as comfortable in maintaining basic continuity with the Hawke–Keating agenda, particularly in the Asia–Pacific and the UN, as Fraser was in continuing Whitlam's, but soon had that squashed out of him. Howard was and remains the quintessential pessimistic Realist: too focused on hard rather than soft power, deeply comfortable in following the US alliance lead wherever it took us, unadventurous in seeking global or regional policy change, profoundly uninterested in the UN and the whole idea of transnational problem-solving by creative multilateral cooperation, generally inward-looking and, until the wheel turned back a little in the last part of his term, manifestly uncomfortable with the whole idea of our primary relationships having to be in our own region, with geography trumping history.

Since the Labor government was returned in 2007 the wheel has turned again. Kevin Rudd as prime minister, though he knew everything about everything, was manifestly most comfortable, and successful, with foreign policy, and did unquestionably—with such help from his colleagues as they were allowed to muster—achieve the return of confident optimism to centre stage in the conduct of our international relations. That was most evident in his work on climate change (for all the domestic horror that issue generated for him), in building the role of the G20 in global economic management



and potentially on a wider front, in creating (albeit after a few diplomatic slips along the way) important new regional architecture in the expanded East Asian Summit, in trying to win back a seat at the table for Australia in the UN Security Council, and in trying to give serious content and energy to a new global debate on nuclear disarmament. Julia Gillard has, understandably enough after a professional lifetime absorbed in domestic issues, taken a little time to find her feet internationally—and perhaps to discover her inner enlarger. But there still seems enough of that spirit to go round with the role that Kevin Rudd is still so actively playing as foreign minister.

If Labor has reverted to traditional type, so too has the Opposition, which has not shown any sign under Tony Abbott of anything other than being very straitened indeed, with dog-whistling about race, religion and refugees not totally absent from its collective repertoire. But there are clearly now, as there always have been, senior Coalition figures with a much more open and genuinely internationalist cast of mind; just as there are, as there always have been, those on the Labor side who, no doubt for the best electoral reasons, are rather less ready than most of their colleagues to embrace optimistically the region and the world, and more ready to pander to populist sentiment.

I will resist the temptation to plunge any further into the reeds and weeds of current policy debates. This may be found disappointingly and uncharacteristically timid, but it is because I do have a view that—however afflicted by relevance deprivation syndrome—those long departed from the partisan fray should not try to restore their youth by rejoining it.

I am tempted, however, to make one last bipartisan plea to government and opposition colleagues: please think hard about restoring, as a central guiding theme in the conduct of our international relations, the concept of good international citizenship, not just as an optional add-on for the soft-headed and charitably inclined, but as the third key pillar of our national interests. It is not a matter of left or right ideology, but simply of recognising that, in this interdependent world of ours, with the multiple stresses that confront it, if civilisation as we know it is going to survive and thrive, then we have to recognise that we are all in this together.

Manning Clark, as he did in so many other ways, instinctively got this right. Asked to comment in 1971 on the impact on Australia of Britain joining the Common Market, he said on the ABC, in a talk quoted by Mark McKenna in his forthcoming biography of Clark: ‘We have a chance to grow up, and stop being boastful about things Australian with a snarl on our lips for the rest of the world. We have a chance to become citizens of the world.’ He recognised clearly, as we should now, that the future not only of this country, but this planet, lies not with the pessimists but the optimists, not with the life deniers but the life affirmers, and not with the straiteners but the enlargers.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The substance of this essay was presented as the 12th Annual Manning Clark Lecture at the National Library, Canberra, on 3 March 2011.

<sup>2</sup> This and subsequent paragraphs have been largely drawn from Gareth Evans, ‘The Labor Tradition: A View from the 1990s’, in David Lee and Christopher Waters (eds), *Evatt to Evans: The Labor Tradition in Australian Foreign Policy*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1997.