

Reviews

Australia Finds Home—the choices and chances of an Asia Pacific journey

Graeme Dobell, ABC Books, Sydney, ISBN 0 7333 0885 6, 2000, 398pp

Lining a corridor in the Australian Embassy in Manila are the portraits of Ambassadors who ran the mission since post-war bilateral relations with the Philippines began. They provide a sense of continuity, of collective experience, which may be reassuring to new heads of mission as they arrive at the post, especially those who have not served there before.

But newly-assigned Australian diplomats in Manila, or indeed anywhere else in Asia, seldom have the time or inclination to meet their predecessors, and their collective experiences are not passed on. To contextualise bilateral relations, they have to rely instead on what they can absorb from the files, the regional literature, the press, and from long-serving Australian based and local staff.

Occasionally a new work emerges that does some of the contextualising for them. Graeme Dobell's rather awkwardly titled *Australia Finds Home* is such a book. An ABC correspondent for 25 years, the last 15 of them focused on Southeast Asia, Dobell records his own detailed perspective of the major events in which Australia has been engaged in the region. Although his observations go back to the beginning of the de-colonisation process which began after World War Two, his main starting point is around the end of the Vietnam War in 1975.

Drawing on his own meticulously kept files and reports, and writing with a clear anecdotal style, Dobell covers all the major events. He traces the origins of APEC, and how Prime Minister Keating, not a previously enthusiastic Asianist, embraced the concept without a backward glance to its creator, Bob Hawke. He describes the rise of ASEAN, the reactions of a succession of Australian governments to it, and the present

unhappy situation in which Australia, largely through the machinations of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed of Malaysia, has been virtually excluded for the time being from ASEAN councils and their off-shoots.

He deals with Australia's reluctantly assumed role of superpower in the Pacific, and the cycle of neglect and rediscovery that has marked its approach to India, Pakistan and the Indian Ocean littoral. He looks at the development of Australia's relations with China and Japan, and gives accurate historical context to the Australian defence debate. He shows how Australian policy has progressed from the hopeless and mendicant belief that Australia could never defend itself from any determined neighbour, to a sophisticated strategic mix of constructive engagement, independent defence and United States alliance.

When he launched Dobell's book at the National Press Club in Canberra in October, Alexander Downer said that the author was known for fairness and impartiality, and that this was reflected in the book. So it is, although his impartiality has not, to his credit, prevented Dobell from making a number of accurate and hard-hitting criticisms. One concerned Howard's unproductive and negative post-East Timor triumphalism. Another focused on the egregious way in which both Keating and Howard wrecked Australia's capacity to project an Australian perspective into the Asia Pacific region—Keating by dismantling the International Public Affairs Branch in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Howard by selling Radio Australia's transmitters in Darwin to a British-based fundamental Christian group.

Dobell also offers some trenchant comment about how successive Australian governments, especially Howard's, have tailored their foreign policies to suit domestic agendas, and dismantled or belittled previous foreign policy initiatives on bipartisan or parochial political grounds, no

Reviews

matter how worthy they may be. The short-lived Agreement on Maintaining Security with Indonesia gets a special mention.

Throughout his account Dobell maintains a high standard of historical accuracy, and an informed reader seldom if ever feels the need to disagree or correct. Indeed only one such urging crossed this reviewer's mind—Dobell could have commented more about the lack of unanimity Australia faced from ASEAN opposition in its fence-mending diplomacy with Vietnam in the 1980s. ASEAN countries were reported to have presented a seamless front, but in fact because of their predominant fear of China, the Indonesians privately encouraged Australian endeavours to strengthen and legitimise Vietnam and its policies, including its occupation of Cambodia.

Despite all the twists and turns in Australia's Asian diplomacy he generally so well describes, however, Dobell's main point is a positive one—how Australia has matured considerably in self-image in an astonishingly short time—a country that was convinced that it was an isolated and defenceless European outpost in an Asian sea has become a vigorous and self-assured multi-ethnic nation with legitimate claims to being a part of its neighbourhood, and with many places where it is at home.

Not that the growth in awareness and assurance has been linear or uninterrupted. There have been fits and starts. One such fit occurred in 1988 when the historian Geoffrey Blainey claimed that Australia had to slow the rate of immigration from Asian countries or risk losing its national identity, a claim taken up the same year by a Liberal member of parliament, John Howard, who lost his Leadership over it. The claim then by and large lost its profile until 1996, when the newly-elected independent member for Oxley Pauline Hanson claimed in her maiden speech in Parliament that the Asian hordes were not assimilating in Australia, and should be sent home.

Hanson's arguments appealed more to conservatives in the Australian National Party than they did to mainstream Australians, but they earned immediate and prominent attention in Asian countries. The Hanson perspective immediately became the most notorious aspect of Australia's image there. White Australia was not and had never been dead, it was asserted across the media of Asia. This unfortunate perspective was allowed to exist and grow without challenge as Prime Minister Howard delayed his rebuttal of Hansonism, whilst seeking domestic political advantage from Australian conservatives and racists, until it was almost too late.

And there are still echoes in the corridors of DFAT and parliamentary select committees about Australia's comparative decline relative to Asian countries in defense technology or economic development.

But as Dobell concludes, Australia has come a huge distance. Anyone who should doubt its legitimacy as having a legitimate home, or a plurality of homes in Asia should read this book. And professional Australian diplomats on assignment to new and untested Asian posts and harassed by more and more demands in a down-sized and dumbed-down Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, should take heart. Here is a book that will remind them of the context of their assignments, a linear account that may do as much as several hours of briefing by former colleagues. Graeme Dobell is to be congratulated for his efforts.

Richard Broinowski
Honorary Professor
Department of Communication and
Education
University of Canberra