

# The Howard Paradox: Australian Diplomacy in Asia 1996-2006

Michael Wesley

A review essay by Graeme Dobell

The Howard paradox in Asia was on full display when the Prime Minister went to Vietnam in November 2006. A variety of John Howards flitted across the regional stage in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon).

At times, the cameras saw the comfortable and engaged elder statesman, now at home in Asia. Then there was a flash of the sceptical Western outsider. And in Vietnam, the Prime Minister who says Australia does not have to choose between its history and its geography, confronted one of the wounds of Australian history in Asia.

At the leaders' summit, John Howard managed to look only mildly uncomfortable during the annual moment of Asian fancy dress that has been an APEC feature since the batik moment at the 1994 Indonesia summit.

At his 11th APEC summit, Howard was easily the longest-serving elected leader on the stage. (The Sultan of Brunei holds the outright record.) Yet the Prime Minister was probably just as gratified by his separate Hanoi meeting with the US President, and the chance after the summit to go out for a private dinner with George W. Bush, accompanied by their wives.

Howard then flew south to Ho Chi Minh City and made a private pilgrimage to the Australian memorial at Long Tan.

It was a beautiful day, with the temperature in the high 20s, humid as always in Vietnam, but with a soft breeze wafting away some of the heat.

The Prime Minister, his officials and the Australian journalists, drove down a long dirt track through row upon row of rubber trees. Perhaps that dirt track reminded some of those Australian soldiers, 40 years previously, of similar tracks they had walked at home.

In the middle of the plantation stands a tall white cross, the height of a man, and the plate in the centre of the cross commemorates the battle fought amid the trees on 18 August 1966.

Standing in front of the cross, surrounded by hundreds of tall and straight rubber trees, it's as though the Long Tan memorial is permanently guarded by hundreds of sentries. The trees have the same effect as the long rows of crosses in the war cemeteries around the world, where the moment of shock is always the same – the dates on the crosses that remind you how young they were.

The moment of reverie and contemplation was quickly over. Then it was into the motorcade and back to the Opera House at Ho Chi Minh City to attend the conferring of degrees at the International University run by the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. The past and the future encompassed in an afternoon.

In a speech that night, John Howard resumed his one-sided Asia debate with Paul Keating. (When Howard goes off on

his Asia monologue, it is useful to imagine a big statue of Keating, on the receiving end of the argument, on the other side of the room.)

The Prime Minister began by taunting those who had said Asia would never deal with him. He recalled his days as Opposition Leader in 1995, when 'I was regarded as somebody who wouldn't comfortably deal with the countries of the region, and that was a view not only expressed ... by my political opponents, but also by some learned-commentators, self-appointed and otherwise.'

Then Howard proceeded to slay the old enemies one more time, ending with the claim that Australia is now 'naturally and comfortably and permanently part of this region and see our future in it.' This correspondent thought that natural and permanent line amounted to news; it became the lead for the following morning's stories for the ABC.

The PM, however, had not finished with history. The next morning as he was leaving for the plane, Howard was asked whether the Vietnam War was a mistake.

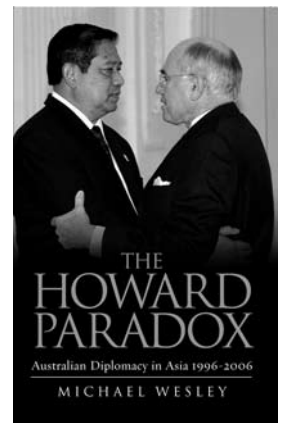
The first words of his response were emphatic: 'I supported our involvement at the time and I don't intend to recant that.' The rest of the answer danced around the shadow of Iraq, not Vietnam. And Howard ended on that Iraq note, saying he would live with the consequences of his decisions as leader: 'If I ever develop reservations, well I hope I would have the grace to keep them to myself.'

It is one thing not to have to choose between your history and your geography. But not to take lessons from history at all seems to be taking political consistency a little far.

Those few days in Vietnam exposed again the tangled elements of John Howard's approach to Australia's region. To trace Australian diplomacy over the last decade is to watch a John Howard sometimes channelling Billy Hughes, delighting in banging the table and standing up for Australia's rights. Although our current Little Digger would never have been as rude to the US President as the original Little Digger was at Versailles.

The complexities and contradictions of Howard on Asia are the focus of Michael Wesley's excellent book *The Howard Paradox*. The paradox, for Wesley, is how a government unable to resist the hubris of 'gauche self-congratulation', so 'rhetorically uncompromising', so 'tone-deaf' in talking to the neighbours, so 'openly dismissive of Asian regionalism' should have done so well in Asia. As the Howard Government often does, he points to the steady improvement to be found in a series of graphs: numbers of Asian students and migrants coming to Australia; Asian investment in Australia; and the surge in Australian trade with Asia.

The professor is not interested in throwing academic rocks at Howard; he wants to see how the trick has been performed. The result is a tightly constructed book with some astute asides and much insight. Wesley manages the difficult



trick of writing about foreign policy but also writing well. Chapter one begins with a quote on winning from that leading strategic thinker, Steve Waugh, 'You have to know when to retreat and stem the damage and when to up the intensity as you sense weakness in your adversary.'

Michael Wesley is the director of the Asia Institute at Griffith University. In an earlier incarnation, he was an assistant director-general in the Office of National Assessments. He has worked inside the Canberra engine and knows the icy imperatives of bureaucracies (personalities can trump policy, and planning takes place in between the episodes of crisis).

Wesley's book keeps its momentum by not delving too deeply into the workings of the Canberra machine; that dimension is covered in what is almost a companion work, the earlier book he wrote with Allan Gyngell in 2003, *Making Australian Foreign Policy*.

The familiar complaints from the early years of the Howard Government are laid out – Howard's failure to confront 'Hansonism', the Prime Minister's apparent original comfort with the description of Australia as a US deputy sheriff in the days after Australian troops went in to East Timor (the description 'deputy sheriff' was repeatedly put to Howard in an extended interview by the senior journalist Fred Brenchley), and the Howard threat to take unilateral action against neighbours that might harbour terrorists but not do anything about it.

In broader terms, the book is about whether Australia's alliance with the US advances or undermines relations with Asia, and the impact on Australia's regional relationships of Howard's 'vigorous identification with the West rather than Asia.'

Alexander Downer features with his espousal of Australia's interest in 'practical regionalism' not 'emotional regionalism'. In his introduction and again in Chapter 4, Wesley quotes the Foreign Minister's speech in 2001 giving ASEAN a big kick in the central orthodoxies of Southeast Asian regionalism. Downer argued that the ASEAN way had not achieved any practical changes in the way the ten states interact, nor had it adequately dealt with sensitive regional issues: 'ASEAN has a culture of working around problems rather than confronting them. The limits of this approach have been exposed by the financial crisis and by the way in which expansion [the new members: Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Burma] has increased ASEAN's political and economic diversity.'

Such blunt speaking, verging on diplomatic rudeness, does not seem to have done any long term harm to the Howard Government or Australia's national interest. If nothing else, Wesley concludes, Howard proves there is more than one way for Australia to conduct its relations in Asia: 'The Howard paradox not only shows that many of Howard's critics may have overestimated the damage done by certain statements and actions, it also challenges the supposed rules that many assumed governed the success or failure of Australia's relations with Asia. The Howard government has succeeded despite breaking most of those rules.'

So far, so self-congratulatory. We have heard similar words from the Prime Minister and from the Foreign Minister. Wesley, though, goes on to show how the times suited the government's 'hard realism', and significant moments where Canberra did bend to Asian sensibilities.

The financial crisis a decade ago and the rise of China mean Asia has not had much time for Oz bashing. And then there is the dismissive jest often attributed to the former Indonesian Foreign Minister, Mochtar Kusumaatmadja: 'Australia is like your appendix, you only ever think about it when it hurts.' Or as Wesley puts it: 'Contrary to the popular assumption, most Asian societies rarely focus on Australia, and Canberra's tactlessness seldom resonates further than the circles of English-speaking elites.'

To get what it wants in Asia, however, the Howard Government has sometimes showed great tact, and has bowed to the 'ASEAN way' derided by Downer. The most notable version of this was Howard backing down and agreeing to sign the ASEAN Treaty of Amity, in order to win a seat at the East Asian Summit.

Australia also trimmed its triumphalism to get progress on the tough issues of illegal immigration and terrorism. In both cases, Australia partnered Indonesia to create new regional processes. The regional conference on people smuggling met for the first time in Bali in 2002, and was followed by other conferences in Bali on terrorist financing and counter-terrorism.

Wesley goes into some detail to describe these Bali processes as an unacknowledged success of Australian foreign policy. Instead of ranting about boat people coming via Indonesia into Australian waters, Canberra used careful and sustained Asian diplomacy to turn its preferences into regional best practice. Negotiation transformed issues from confrontation to collective management.

The essential features in each case were the same: 'co-chairing by Australia and Indonesia, informality, carefully planned agendas and tactful quarantining of distracting or divisive issues. The 'Bali process' has developed into an identifiable and highly successful model of transnational diplomacy.' As with the Cambodia peace process a decade before, Australia found that partnering Indonesia and using ASEAN norms delivered impressive returns.

Australia still has options in how it approaches what Wesley calls, 'a region of stability-obsessed, development-minded and intensely pragmatic states.' But in an Asia where China may eventually set the rules instead of the United States, Australia has a fundamental interest in thinking about 'how new concepts of regional order and society may look, and how they will affect Australia and its regional interests.' ♦

*Michael Wesley, 'The Howard Paradox: Australian Diplomacy in Asia 1996-2006', ABC Books, Sydney, 2007, Softback, 264 pp., RRP \$A27.95.*

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