

THE WHITLAM LEGACY

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**THE COUP THAT LAID  
THE FEAR OF CHINA**

**Gough Whitlam in Beijing, 1971**

DR STEPHEN FITZGERALD AO

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Australian Government



Celebrating the 40th Anniversary of Australia-China Diplomatic Relations  
庆祝中国-澳大利亚建交40周年

Authored by

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Stephen FitzGerald began his professional career as a diplomat, studied Chinese and became a career China specialist. He was China adviser to Gough Whitlam, and Australia's first ambassador to the People's Republic of China, and in 1980 established the first private consultancy for Australians dealing with China, which he continues to run. Since the late 1960s, he has worked for policy reform in Australia's relations with Asia, and for Asia Literacy for Australians. He chaired the 1980s committee of the Asian Studies Association of Australia on Asian Studies and Languages in Australian Education, and the government's Asian Studies Council, which wrote a government strategy for the study of Asia in schools and universities. In the same year, he chaired the government's Committee to Advise on Australia's Immigration Policies, which wrote the landmark report, *Immigration. A Commitment to Australia*.

He was head of the ANU's Department of Far Eastern History and also of its Contemporary China Centre in the 1970s. In 1990 he founded and until 2005 chaired the UNSW's Asia-Australia Institute, dedicated to making Australia part of the Asian region through think-tank activities and ideas-generation by regional leaders meeting in informal discussion. He has been consultant to the Queensland and Northern Territory governments on the introduction of Asian languages to the school curriculum, consultant to Monash, Melbourne and Griffith universities on mainstreaming Asia in university studies, Chair of the Griffith Asia Institute, and Research Strategy Director of UTS's China Research Centre. He has also been a consultant on governance-related aid in China and Southeast Asia, for the Federal and Northern Territory governments, and the governments of Britain, Denmark and others. He has published monographs, reports and articles on the above topics. His current research is on change in Australia's policies and attitudes towards Asia from the 1960s to the present.

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## The Whitlam Legacy

*The Whitlam Legacy* is a series of occasional papers published by the Whitlam Institute offering contemporary insights on matters of public interest inspired by Gough Whitlam's public life and the legacy of the Whitlam Government.

## About the Whitlam Institute

The Whitlam Institute within the University of Western Sydney at Parramatta commemorates the life and work of Gough Whitlam and pursues the causes he championed. The Institute bridges the historical legacy of Gough Whitlam's years in public life and the contemporary relevance of the Whitlam Program to public discourse and policy. The Institute exists for all Australians who care about what matters in a fair Australia and aims to improve the quality of life for all Australians.

The Institute is custodian of the Whitlam Prime Ministerial Collection housing selected books and papers donated by Mr Whitlam and providing on-line access to papers held both at the Institute and in the National Archives.

The other key area of activity, the Whitlam Institute Program, includes a range of policy development and research projects, public education activities and special events. Through this work the Institute strives to be a leading national centre for public policy development and debate.

For more information about the Whitlam Institute, please visit our website: [www.whitlam.org](http://www.whitlam.org)



# Foreword

In July 1971 Gough Whitlam as Leader of the Opposition ventured to the People's Republic of China. Accompanying him on that trip was a motley crew of Labor parliamentarians, political advisers, China experts and journalists. Given that Australia did not recognise the Chinese Government, there was no diplomatic representative and no official record (at least, not on the Australian side).

Stephen FitzGerald was a key member of Whitlam's party. He was fluent in Mandarin and was a highly respected authority on China, whose frustrations with the prevailing China policy appeared to have prematurely ended his career in the Australian foreign service.

Gough described that '71 expedition as the "most exciting and most exacting" he ever made. FitzGerald, in the account you have before you, concludes that "There is nothing in Australian history to compare with that China visit".

Just why that is so becomes apparent in the pages that follow.

FitzGerald's evocative telling of the story in this 'part memoir' captures the passions and tensions, the enthusiasms and the political daring of the adventure that it was. More than this, it elucidates its historical significance. Deep within its folds you will find more than a few pointers to the challenges confronting contemporary policy-making concerning our relationship with China.

For those who went the absence of an official note-taker was off-set by the generosity at the time of veteran journalist David Barnett who was known for his proficiency with shorthand. Barnett, I am told, would at day's end transcribe his notes and distribute his meeting record to all members of the touring party including his fellow journalists.

Reading Barnett's notes today gives an immediacy to the events of over forty years ago, made all the more powerful knowing what followed. Towards the end of his notes on Gough's meeting with Premier Zhou Enlai on 5 July 1971 Barnett records this exchange:

Whitlam: *"If my party wins the next elections you will be able to see the first visit by [an] Australian Prime Minister to the Chinese People's Republic and its sole capital Peking."*

Chou [sic]: *"We will welcome it. All things develop from small beginnings. After these twenty years of struggle you will shortly be able to rise up again."*

And so it came to pass. By the end of the following year Whitlam led the Labor Party into Government after twenty three years in the political wilderness. On 21 December 1972 within three weeks of the election the new Government formally recognised the People's Republic of China. Stephen FitzGerald's career in the foreign service resumed with his appointment as Australia's first ambassador to the People's Republic of China in 1973.

I do commend this paper to you. It is the first in a package of initiatives to mark the 40th anniversary of the establishment of Australian diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China by the Whitlam Government. In this we are very grateful for the support of the Australia-China Council.

Eric Sidoti  
Director  
Whitlam Institute within the  
University of Western Sydney

# THE COUP THAT LAID THE FEAR OF CHINA

## *Gough Whitlam in Beijing, 1971*

The story I am about to tell concerns politics in the time of fear of China, and the Gough Whitlam visit to Beijing that laid the fear, and something of that visit's flavour. It's been told before in different ways, and about Whitlam and China you might say: what's new? Well, I tell it again now, part memoir, the politics as I understood them, part interpretation, of China in Whitlam's thinking, and part parable, of leadership amid the politics of fear.<sup>1</sup>

I sat with him in the two sessions of talks he had with the Chinese Premier, Zhou Enlai; the first, before we had relations, when Whitlam was Opposition Leader and I was his China adviser, and then after we had relations, when he was Prime Minister and I was Ambassador to China. And in between, I sat in his office as he directed the negotiation of our formal recognition of the Chinese Government. And later, after The Dismissal and Labor's defeat in the election that followed, I talked with him and Margaret about the delights of Beijing he had never had time to indulge, from the Guozhi Jian (the former Imperial Academy) to the History Museum, with him mining for insight and in return giving a kind of running seminar on the further history of China and its relations with Central Asia and the connections with Europe. And two days later in Tianjin after the Great Tangshan Earthquake in which we nearly died, feeling our way through the pitch-dark and the rubble and fallen masonry of the hotel split in two, and him full of that ironic self-parody for which he was known, often mimicked, often misconstrued.

What was it about, this strong interest in China? It was three things. One was independence in foreign policy, one was a different view of Asia from that of the conservative government, and one was recognition of China in the context of the first two.

I met him first in 1967 when the Vietnam War was running hot and he had recently become Leader of the Opposition. I'd resigned from the Department of External Affairs<sup>2</sup> the year before, a personal protest about China and Vietnam policy. He talked about his foreign policy views and he asked me to write a paper for him reflecting these views, and the ideas we had discussed and found in common. He had strong views about China, but he was not obsessed with it, and although it was a central concern, that was neither through political identification nor sentimental Sinophilia. And while his thinking about China was long-term, this was not because of some vision of a future China, for example of China as it is today. For him, for Australia to have relations with China was rational and logical, and self-interested. At a time when the Australian government view of China was ideological and emotional and played upon fear, he said we must accept China as a permanent and significant part of the international political landscape, whatever its colour, a view similar to that taken two decades earlier by Churchill. He had arrived at this position from a long application to twentieth century history and a rational assessment of Australia's interests, and an ability to imagine a foreign policy distanced from the politics of ideology and alignment. For him, recognition of China was a logical conclusion and good policy. And although he had a distaste for the festering government of Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan (so did Bob Menzies), it was not this distaste which fashioned his position. It was simply that to pretend Chiang Kai-shek's government ruled China and to have it represent China in the UN General Assembly and sit as a Permanent Member on the UN Security Council was irrational, and bad international policy.

He came to China policy from a view of Asia, not China in isolation but as part of a broad foreign policy idea, that Australia needed a relationship with Asia based on acceptance of it as our enduring international neighbourhood, elimination of White Australia, equality in our attitudes to and dealings with Asian countries and people, co-existence with different political systems, and a very strong commitment to achieving foreign policy objectives through diplomacy and peaceful multilateral arrangements not war. As a coherent idea for an Australian engagement with the whole region, it took issue with the conservative government's policies on many fronts, not just on China.

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<sup>1</sup> A new book on the subject by William Griffiths, *The China Breakthrough: Whitlam in the Middle Kingdom, 1971*, will be published by Monash University Press in 2012. It is by far the best scholarly treatment of this event to date.

<sup>2</sup> Now Foreign Affairs and Trade, its title was changed from External Affairs to Foreign Affairs in November 1970.

This is not to imply that China was incidental to his interests. It had a strong and abiding attraction for him. Not the politics, although he was interested in the history of the communist revolution and he was certainly more sympathetic to its socialist aims than the Liberal and Country parties, even if not uncritical or unquestioning as some on the left of his party were. But he also had the fascination of countless westerners over the centuries with China's civilisation and the differentness of its ways of living, and when he travelled to China he became absorbed with the history.

His ideas on Asia and China presupposed independence in Australian political assessment and decision-making. He saw a two-sided problem in the existing relationship with the US; Australia had become so dependent that it found it difficult even to think independently, and the US had become so accustomed to a compliant Australia that it didn't think Australia had a right to object let alone publicly dissent (a thinking he was to come face to face with as Prime Minister, over his objections to US saturation bombing of North Vietnam in December 1972). Whitlam was strong in his belief that Australia could have an independent foreign policy, even within the context of an alliance, and even if it involved difficult decisions. He also believed strongly that the more independent Australia was in its judgments, policies and deeds in respect of Asia, the more likely it was that it could influence events in the region.

It was a policy of reason, combined with idealism, for example in his commitment to a more peaceful international order, and a moral quality, for example on White Australia.

The premises of his China policy have become somewhat lost to view in contemporary Australian politics. Yet they are as important now as they were then, when, since the mid-90s, Australian foreign policy has suffered badly for want of independence, idealism, and morality, and when today we have a successor Labor government which has abandoned not only independence but rationality and leadership in foreign policy, and given itself over to the politics of fear, gullibility and a return to dependence.

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If Whitlam's China policy in the late 60s was clear, the prospects for its becoming reality were not, and I don't think he imagined it as anything other than something he would realise after becoming Prime Minister.

There was a rift in Australian society and the immediate focal point was the Vietnam War and the arguments were often emotional and angry and ideological and grossly uninformed and the politics were rough and often dirty. The first arrests of anti-war demonstrators had taken place in 1965 and by the end of the 1960s when Whitlam contested his first election as Leader, the protest marches had swollen to massive proportions. The public consensus on foreign policy was breaking down, and this was to Labor's advantage. But the anti-War movement, and Labor's part in it – even if relatively moderate although internally contested – and the extreme positions of many on the left including Communists and Trotskyists and Marxists of various kinds, excited the government to frenzied attacks on Labor as dupes of Asian communism. In the atmosphere of the time, these were not charges easily rebuffed in rational argument, and it was in many ways an ugly and threatening time in our politics. We were a democracy with elections and a free press and the freedom openly to criticise and lampoon government, but the response of the government to the anti-War movement was not always what might be called democratic best practice. A manically suspicious ASIO was loosed upon the protest movement, and swarmed over it with hole-and-corner pursuit of the blameless, games of false entrapment, and concocted stories of imagined treason and betrayal. Many of my friends in the movement were on the receiving end of their paranoia, and so was I, and many were denied employment in government. The police were also less than restrained, and when the arrested were roughed up or beaten, the police were not called to account.

Remember that for the government the Vietnam War was about what it described as an aggressive and expansionist China behind the Vietnamese and it was ultimately about China that its argument raged, and it was nasty and bitter and fearful. China was Red and Yellow and coming down – “the downward thrust of communist China between the Indian and Pacific oceans”, as Menzies had called it. Recognition of China might have been a central plank of Whitlam's foreign policy but China was a liability for Labor, and the government saw the fear of China, and the exploitation of the fear, and the tarring of Labor with the brush of communism, as serving it very well. As the unfortunate Billy McMahon was to say later when Whitlam was in China in 1971 (and so was Kissinger but the US had neglected to tell the Australian government about Kissinger): “China has been a political asset to the Liberal Party in the past and is likely to remain one in the future.”

His timing was a bit out, but it was a frank admission of the self-interested purpose for which the government had manipulated the fear of China. I don't know who among them might have privately conceded that this was largely concocted, but I believe most in the conservative government thought they were right about Vietnam, not for reasons that had anything much to do with that country but because they held an ideological position that brooked no self-examination, or because they were so US-dependent they took for granted what Washington told them or asked them to do, or mostly both. But there was another reason, which made it difficult for Whitlam and his colleagues to have an intelligent debate and which we as Asian specialists including those in the Department of External Affairs found immensely frustrating. Most members of the conservative coalition including ministers had almost no knowledge of Asia, and for that matter little sophistication in their understanding of world affairs. There had been earlier exceptions, like Menzies and Casey in their way. But looking back now at the attitudes of the Liberal and Country Party coalition in the 60s and early 70s, they are astonishing. They had by then been in power for 20 years. They had been there at the time of the Communist victory in China, through the Korean War, the defeat of the French in Vietnam, the Malayan Emergency, Indonesia's Konfrantasi against Malaysia, and the American war in Indo-China. They had seen the alignment and then the separation of China and the Soviet Union, the merger and de-merger of independent Singapore and Malaya/Malaysia, the break-up of Pakistan and the creation of the new state of Bangladesh, and the tentative steps towards reconciliation between China and Japan and China and India. They had lived through an historic change in which all of Asia but the two China Coast enclaves of Hong Kong and Macau had become independent of European colonial rule, and in which in about two thirds of the states of Asia, from Pakistan in the west to Japan in the east, there had been established, with varying robustness to be sure, some form of democratic government. They had seen on Australia's doorstep the birth of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-political, multi-state arrangement, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN, the first free association of its kind in the history of Asia, without western participation, without Australia, formed in consciousness of a common geo-Southeast Asian interest. And you might have thought that all of this would have made them interested in the region for its own sake, perhaps even informed about it, and caused them to re-think the attitudes that informed their policies and the kind of ideas about Asia they encouraged in the electorate.

To be fair to the conservatives, there had been a similar lack of knowledge and sophistication in the Labor Party. But that had been changing, and the Labor Party I knew was one of people who by one path or another had become in varying degrees internationalist in outlook, many of them through participation in international social democrat or labour or union meetings and organisations which, by definition, took an interest in social and political change. This did not make them by definition expert on Asia, but they were more aware and more sympathetic to the movements for revolution and independence that had swept the region, and in that sense they were much more 'literate' about Asia than their conservative counterparts. So while Whitlam had his internal fights about foreign policy, including over Vietnam, he had a better-informed element within his party, including among factional foes. Jim Cairns, for example, doyen of the anti-War Moratoriums and leading left personality in the Victorian branch of the Party, should not be forgotten. He's a somewhat overlooked figure now, but in a widely read book published in 1965, *Living with Asia*, he set out to inform the public and change the parameters of the debate, and over the next half decade he published another five books on Asia, Vietnam, and foreign policy. Tough in pushing his leftist views and fiery on the protest podium, in private he was softly spoken and courteous, and he was influential in developing a different consciousness of Asia among the broad anti-War movement, particularly the young Australians who made up the bulk of its participants.

Despite the anti-War movement and the better understanding of Asia within the ranks of the Labor Party, at the end of the 60s no one would have dreamt that going to China could be a path to anything other than electoral disaster. Onto that path in 1971 stepped Whitlam. And Mick Young.

Several things had happened. First had been the US decision in June 1969 to reduce the number of US troops in Vietnam and 'Vietnamise' the war, which had encouraged Labor in the belief that its assessment was right, and strengthened its opposition to the war and public support for its position. Second was the October '69 election which Labor nearly won. This had strengthened Whitlam's power and credibility, and his confidence that the Labor platform was both right and electable, including its foreign policy. Third was the Federal intervention in the Victorian Branch to remove it from the control of the extreme left whose communist associations had made a victory for Labor at the federal level virtually impossible. The purging of the Victorian Branch drew the sting from the government's allegations that Labor was a stalking horse for communism and a dupe of Asian communist powers, and gave Whitlam greater manoeuvrability in dealing with the issues of Vietnam and China.

And fourth was the relationship between Whitlam and the new Federal Secretary of the ALP, Mick Young. The successful Federal intervention that Young steered had brought the two close and Young was now a trusted Whitlam adviser. An avowed admirer of China, he had abandoned youthful Marxist inclinations and become a centrist and political pragmatist. I'd met him in Whitlam's office and saw a lot of him in the Non-Members' Bar in Parliament House where he mixed genially with the political journalists and was liked and trusted on all sides of politics because of his openness, directness, integrity and humour, and we had become friends. He was addicted to rhyming slang, in which he took a boyish delight, and he peppered it through his conversation and made up new ones at every opportunity. But Mick Young the politician was seriously not boyish. He was a sophisticated politician.

Whitlam, intellectual, QC, voracious reader, insatiable accumulator of knowledge, frequent traveller, foreign affairs aficionado, advocate of recognition of China since 1954. And Young, no formal education beyond his teens, former shearer, union organiser, knockabout humorist and universal common man, strong tactician and shrewd political strategist with an extraordinary feel for thinking in the electorate, and long-time advocate of recognition of China since a visit there in 1957. Young loved taking the mickey out of Whitlam, and Whitlam hugely enjoyed the humour in Young. They made quite a pair. And together they took a punt.

At the ALP Federal Executive meeting in Adelaide on 13 April 1971, Young moved that they cable the Chinese Premier, Zhou Enlai, seeking an invitation for an ALP delegation to visit China. They had seen an opportunity. Quarantined from the politics of enmity and the rhetoric of fear, Australia and China had quietly had a valuable trade in wheat since 1960, worth over \$100 million a year. But the Australian Wheat Board had returned empty-handed from a contract renewal negotiation in 1970, and the Chinese government through unofficial channels and then through a British diplomat in Beijing had indicated this was because of Australia's China policy, its commitment of troops to Vietnam and its alliance with the US. Canada, which had recognised China in October 1970, had recently been told by Beijing that it would have priority as a source of China's wheat imports. This had been in and out of the news for several months and the government had been unable to resolve it. For the first time virtually since 1949, the government was in difficulty on China. The Executive's decision was made on this issue and it was proposed that the delegation be led by Rex Patterson, the Party's spokesman on rural affairs.

But Whitlam and Young had a broader discussion in mind, and the cable Whitlam sent to Premier Zhou on 14 April made no mention of wheat, or Rex Patterson, and said simply that the ALP would like to send a delegation "to discuss the terms on which your country is interested in having diplomatic and trade relations with Australia".

Given the incendiary nature of the China question in domestic politics, sending a request, from Opposition, directly to the Chinese Premier to discuss diplomatic relations was a provocation, and at a time when the ALP was travelling well in the polls towards a likely victory in the election due in the second half of 1972, it was a huge gamble. But Whitlam had also been reading the international signs and believed the Nixon Administration was about to shift ground on China. US restrictions on trade and travel had already been relaxed, and now it was known that Washington had been having private contacts with Beijing, although the substance and ultimate intention of these contacts was not known even to the Australian Government. International opinion on China was also moving. Since Canada had recognised Beijing, seven other governments had done so in rapid succession. And by now, the governments of Malaysia, Thailand, Japan, and the Philippines looked like doing the same, Indonesia was contemplating restoring its severed relations, Burma had already done so, and even India, despite its unresolved border dispute with China, was signalling it wanted an improvement. Separately, the vote on Chinese representation in the UN had been moving in Beijing's favour. The US, with Australia one of its strongest supporters, had manipulated the General Assembly to require a two thirds majority on Chinese representation. In 1970 Beijing had already obtained a simple majority for the first time, and it now looked as though it would soon get two thirds, if not in 1971 then certainly in 1972. China itself had become more outgoing than we had seen since before the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. On 10 April, 3 days before the ALP Executive's decision, the US Table Tennis Team and a party of American journalists had arrived in Beijing. It was a sensational moment internationally because it broke a 22-year freeze in US-China relations and because almost the only news out of China since 1966 had been about the social breakdown, violence, destruction and murder by Red Guards and apparent insanity of Mao's Cultural Revolution. Whitlam was convinced that Australia was at an increasingly serious disadvantage and in danger of being left behind even by the United States. For him, the gamble was one he had to take.



The politics between the sending of that cable and the day we left Sydney for China was one of the more unseemly interludes in Australian political history, which is saying something. The government saw the initiative as a fatal blunder and mounted an hysterical attack on Labor as selling out to China. But to sound credible it had to argue that China was an unconscionable enemy and fearsome threat, at the same time as it was trying to reinstate the wheat trade and, following the ALP initiative, to set up a third country negotiation with China on diplomatic relations. It affected righteous outrage but its reaction was anything but statesmanlike and, because it couldn't conceal its delight, often childish. Inside the ALP the initiative aroused serious in-fighting, some of it over whether it was political madness and would destroy the prospects for election, some of it over whether it should be about diplomatic relations or confined to the wheat issue, and not a little of it less concerned with the election or the issues but with who should be on the delegation. It was unedifying.

I was glad not to be part of it. I knew there was discussion that I might be included. But I had no claim and pressed none.

It didn't help that the days of waiting for a reply from Zhou Enlai became weeks – two, then three – and it speaks volumes for how isolated China was and how remote from it we were that no one in the ALP had a single contact in Beijing who might have been used for follow-up. And there was no one else in Australia who did, apart that is from the pro-Peking Communist Party, a channel unacceptable to Labor and one that party would not have facilitated anyway. In the event, contact was made by the French Ambassador to China, Étienne Manac'h, after an approach from an Australian at Harvard, Ross Terrill, and an invitation arrived on 11 May after four weeks of anxious waiting.

It was at this point that Whitlam made it known to colleagues that he would lead the delegation. And the next day I had a call from his office to say he would like to speak to me later. Shortly after, Mick Young rang and asked me to meet him in the late morning to have a Germaine – a Germaine Greer, a beer – and discuss some unspecified news. Eric Walsh, Chief Political Correspondent for Fairfax's new paper *The National Times* and later to become Whitlam's Press Secretary, was there. He and Young were inseparable mates. Another mate, John Stubbs from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, joined us. We met at a pub in suburban Curtin. It was not exactly where you'd think to start a journey of high political adventure, or a history. Not a place of history of any kind really, past or future. Functional, unlovely, variegated carpet to disguise the spills, walls without secrets. Young told me the party would be Whitlam, Party President Tom Burns, Rex Patterson, the great speechwriter and press secretary to Whitlam Graham Freudenberg, Young himself, and me.

Then Whitlam's office tracked me down in the pub and he came on the line and asked me, in that slightly formal way he had at such moments, and with much digression about the appropriateness of my inclusion which I supposed reflected the arguments he had had to make with his colleagues, if I would agree to go. And when I said yes of course, he added politely: "Would you mind travelling economy class?"

It was not the end of the in-fighting. Rex Patterson, miffed that he would not be leading the delegation, publicly attacked the composition, demanding that only elected members of parliament should go, not 'machine men'. Other parliamentarians joined in, trailing their own credentials. Then Young offered to withdraw, and received a very large number of telegrams from Labor colleagues supporting his inclusion, which finally put an end to the public fighting. If the Chinese knew about it I doubt they would have cared. They had a lot of fighting.

I saw Whitlam several times between then and our departure. He wanted briefing, information, context – the Cultural Revolution, foreign policy, domestic politics. He wanted dates and names and explanations, and a level of detail that was often impossible because of China's closed and secretive system. His thirst for knowledge was unquenchable and he forgot none of it. He was a great person to brief. He also worried away at the role of the Department of Foreign Affairs, speculating about how cooperative it would be when Labor was in government. He was committed to the principle of an independent public service, but he knew the Department had taken strong and often political positions in support of the government on policies the ALP wanted to change – China, southern Africa, nuclear testing, disarmament. He knew many of the senior officers from his travels as a parliamentarian over the years, and as we talked he raised this or that name, talking about his assessment of their independence and impartiality, thinking about who should be Secretary of Foreign Affairs.

There was one question about the impending visit that nagged at him. The invitation that had arrived from Beijing was not from Premier Zhou but from the Chinese People's Institute for Foreign Affairs, a specialist

arm of the Foreign Ministry dealing with opposition parties and countries with which China had no diplomatic relations. This left hanging the question of the extent to which Zhou himself was involved and whether the delegation would even see him. Although better judgment suggested it would not be otherwise – since Whitlam’s cable an Australian table tennis team and three Australian journalists had been received by Zhou – that apprehension was to remain, because if it were not to happen it would be seen as a snub to Whitlam, and a huge error of judgment on his part and humiliating failure.

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The trip began on 27 June, and proceeded with the speed of a slow symphonic poem. All eagerness to be in Beijing and meet the Chinese Premier, we arrived in British Hong Kong and came to a halt. It was here that visas had to be obtained, and we waited, five days, without any communication. We filled the time with meetings with Hong Kong officials and China watchers and at local restaurants. Labor people were always big on Chinese restaurants. And we went to a bar where a group of US servicemen on their last night of R & R before returning to Vietnam brooded over their drinks, and one wept. And an itinerant photographer came into the bar and raised his camera, and Freudenberg leapt like an acrobat from his seat and threw himself between Whitlam and the camera, and we left. And at a lunch with one of my old friends Henry Litton, now a judge on the Hong Kong Court of Final Appeal, Whitlam said: “When we win government, I’m going to send him”, pointing at me, “to China as our ambassador”. This was the first I’d learnt of it

The passports came back but the slow movement continued. China had no airline connections with Hong Kong, or anywhere in the outside world except Moscow, Pyongyang, and infrequently Hanoi. We took the Hong Kong train to the Chinese border. We were now a party of fifteen – Whitlam and his delegation plus eight Australian journalists and a Singapore cameraman for the ABC.<sup>3</sup> We carried our suitcases in the steaming heat over the bridge and the sluggish brown creek that marks the border, and took the Chinese train to Guangzhou. There’s no air-conditioning, and the train attendants offer folding fans. Tom Burns says no thanks, he won’t be seen on the front page of the Brisbane *Courier Mail* fanning himself like a sheila, and there’s a ripple of comic riposte from the journalists.

In Guangzhou we wait again. There are storms between here and Beijing and Chinese regulations require that our plane must not take off until they clear. It’s a Russian aircraft, an Ilyushin, which Young immediately dubs ‘the optical’. It was an unsettling hiatus, in China but suspended between where we had come from and where we wanted to arrive, in a kind of communication no man’s land, a cocoon of attentiveness and care but in which the Chinese officials who met us had no information on the program in Beijing or the requested meeting with Zhou Enlai. Whitlam had been on the road for seven days with nothing for the journalists to report, and in Australia the government crowded.

The relationship between the delegation and the journalists was an unusual one. Most of them knew each other well and some were close friends, and they were travelling in China almost as one party. Throughout the trip we saw few other foreigners and despite being surrounded by Chinese we had no unmanaged informal mixing with Chinese people. The effect of this was an intensified cultural resonance. It was not just that the delegation and the journalists had a common culture and broadly the same values. That is common enough with groups from one country travelling together. Here, they were as one party venturing into a sequestered and politically taboo land, and there was a kind of shared discovery and a shared response to China, and the journalists began to share also the anticipation felt by the delegation, and catch something of the nervousness about whether the visit would be fully successful in the terms Whitlam had set. This did not mean they lost their professional independence; journalists then could have friendships with politicians and still be tough on them, with civility. But they were caught up in the sense of the significance of this moment for Australia, and infected through close proximity by Whitlam’s bold idea, his intellectual curiosity and his restless accumulation of information.

When it seemed we were about to spend another night in Guangzhou, suddenly we were off, and arrived in Beijing just before midnight on Saturday the 3rd of July, and walked across the tarmac into the barely-lit airport hall with its few brown armchairs and no other passengers. Met by officials who would discuss how the next few days would unfold, the delegation’s relief was palpable and the mood overflowed and caught our Chinese hosts.

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<sup>3</sup> Allan Barnes for *The Age*, David Barnett for the Australian Associated Press, Phillip Cast, Philip Koch for the ABC, Laurie Oakes for the *Herald and Weekly Times*, John Stubbs for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Eric Walsh for News Ltd and Ross Terrill, who although not part of the delegation or the press party had arranged to be in China at the same time.

There was laughter and joking and the greetings and introductions were jovial. The affable Burns, ever positive in personal relations, was introduced to three of our hosts and introduced them in turn to Young: “Mr Hu, Mr Du and Mr Lü”, he said. “Like Donald Duck’s nephews, Huey, Dewey and Louie”. Mr Hu, Mr Du and Mr Lü, fluent English speakers all, stifled their astonishment, and smiled and nodded.

Our host was the President of the Chinese People’s Institute for Foreign Affairs, Zhang Xiruo, frail octogenarian, political scientist, Chairman of the Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and former Minister of Education, via a bourgeois education in capitalist countries with Harold Laski at the LSE and a PhD at Columbia, and president of wartime Southwest University in Chiang Kai-shek’s China. A non-communist and noted critic of Mao Zedong, I wondered how on earth he had come through the madness of the Cultural Revolution. Whitlam, listening to the softly-spoken English and responding to the obvious warmth of this Western-educated intellectual, forbore to ask, mindful that beyond the benignly illuminated circle of this civilised encounter in the airport terminal, the world of Chinese politics was still in turmoil and the anger of its past five years was not spent.

The program was discussed with Zhang’s deputy, Zhou Qiuye, a diplomat and experienced administrator who joined the revolution in 1928, and in 1976 was to become China’s Ambassador to Australia. He proposed that next day, Sunday, we should rest. Whitlam, by this stage chafing to be on with it, would gladly have sat down to discussions that night, and it was agreed we would start in the morning. We were settled in to the Peking Hotel with its empty public rooms and corridors, and the silence outside of the city, eight million people, without night life or traffic.

On Sunday morning there was a program, but no scheduled meeting with Zhou Enlai. Anxiety rose. Nor would we see veteran Foreign Minister Chen Yi, because he was ailing. Small wonder. He had a tough Cultural Revolution and his ministry was trashed along with his foreign policy. We had instead a meeting with the acting Foreign Minister, Ji Pengfei, himself no mean veteran, both of the Long March generation and in foreign affairs, in which latter he’d served at senior level since the PRC was founded in 1949. As we waited for the cars we quickly discussed how to approach this meeting and Whitlam, who felt keenly that this should not be the main event of his visit, nevertheless agreed that in case it was he should cover the ground he had intended to traverse with Zhou.

I have not been to a meeting before or since with an official so laid back, literally. After the introductions he went to the low couch, sat, and slowly sank into a semi-supine position, in his shapeless grey cotton jacket almost as though he’d only just finished the Long March, and remained there for most of our morning-long meeting, eyes half and sometimes quite closed, mouth barely moving when he spoke, almost expressionless, except from time to time for a chuckle and a broad grin that totally broke up his lined face and showed a missing front tooth and the smile of a lot of laughing at life. But he was only relaxed, not somnolent, and his discussion was sharp. And Whitlam was in intellectual motion, clearly delighted at finally engaging with the substance of the visit. He didn’t take it as a game, like chess, or use contrived feints and manoeuvres as with an opponent, and there was no inhibition of the ideology and history that lay between us. He approached it as a civilised discussion of policy objectives, for which he had long been preparing, and he was politically focussed, listening as much as he talked.

They didn’t come immediately to normalisation. There was Vietnam, which was not an issue because the ALP had opposed the war and been committed to troop withdrawal since 1966, and a long discussion on China’s objections to military alliances and Australia’s involvement in them – SEATO, ANZUS and the Five Power Arrangement. On these, there was an openness to argument we had not expected. Ji conceded Whitlam’s point that SEATO was ineffective and had fallen apart, and in response to Whitlam’s arguments that ANZUS was defensive, he said China would not take a position of blanket opposition to all defence arrangements and would take on board the points Whitlam had made. This was a political win for Whitlam, not against China but for his bid for an independent foreign policy and for the stormy debate at home. It showed that having a relationship with China did not mean selling out the alliance with the US, a proposition being argued loudly by his opponents at the time.

The discussion on normalisation was brief, business-like and conclusive. Whitlam said the ALP in government would recognise the Government of the People’s Republic of China as the sole legal government of China on the same terms as the formula established by the Canadian government; that is, while taking note of the Chinese

Government's claim to sovereignty over Taiwan, the ALP regarded this as an internal matter which Australia could neither challenge nor endorse since it was not for Australia to impose solutions to the internal affairs of other countries. Ji accepted this position, and the discussion moved on. In the afternoon, Whitlam spelt out for Zhou Qiyue and other Foreign Ministry officials what an ALP government would do upon normalisation. The logic of its one-China policy meant it would not support 'two-Chinas' in the UN or anywhere, it would support a UN resolution which had been introduced by Albania every year since 1960, requiring the People's Republic to replace the Kuomintang in the UN as the sole government of China meaning also that the Kuomintang would cease to have UN representation, and it would withdraw the Australian embassy from Taiwan.

We finished the day with an official banquet, at which Zhang Xiruo talked of everything but the Cultural Revolution, helped me to shiny pieces of Peking duck skin, spring onions and sweet bean sauce, and, looking across at a table where the journalists sat, asked of Laurie Oakes: "Is he Chinese?"

Next morning we had a meeting with Trade Minister Bai Xiangguo and no news of Zhou Enlai. Bai was in military uniform. He was late Cultural Revolution, a time when Mao was forced to put his broken China back together again with the army in every institution and 'revolutionary committees' of workers, peasants and soldiers but always with soldiers in command. Bai was Chairman of the Revolutionary Committee of the Ministry, and Trade Minister, and he'd been in the ministry and the job less than a month. He joined the army in 1937 when he was nineteen, and didn't seem ever to have been overseas or involved in trade. Not tall, he came to just above Whitlam's shoulder, but he stood so straight you felt you should be straightening your own shoulders. You couldn't imagine him slumping in a sofa like Ji Pengfei. Whitlam left the running to Rex Patterson, partly to assuage Patterson's annoyance at the way the delegation had been put together and the fact that trade was no longer the centerpiece of the visit. But it was also a reflection of the way Whitlam saw trade in this relationship, as a function of the politics, and to advance the relationship in trade he had to be talking politics.

As Patterson worked through the issues with Bai it was clear that we'd have a lot of assurances to take home about trade. But Whitlam, while he had achieved the policy objective in the talks the day before, was fretting about meeting Zhou Enlai. It was one thing to resolve the policy issues with Ji Pengfei and his officials. But Zhou was the commanding historical figure and strategist of foreign policy since even before the Communist Party came to power, whose reputed intellect and diplomatic charm had made him a legend even on the anti-communist side of the Cold War, who would be Whitlam's opposite number if he became Prime Minister.

We return to the hotel for lunch, and the theatre with which Chinese officials manage meetings with the most exalted levels of Chinese government begins. We're told we should remain in the hotel and there will be an event in the evening. The Institute official can't say what, but suggests it's "an interesting film". And we should wear suits. We believe this must be Zhou Enlai, but the afternoon wears on without further information, which builds the sense of anticipation, until finally, at the end of the day, we are told we will see the Premier this evening. Several more hours pass, however, before we are taken to waiting cars, driven across the empty square, walk up the steps of the Great Hall of the People, along a corridor and into a vaulted reception room where Zhou greets us, one by one. The Australian journalists are already here, and a larger number of people from the Chinese media. We sit in a U-formation, with Zhou and Whitlam at the top, the Australians down Whitlam's side and Chinese ministers and officials down Zhou's.

Now the theatre takes an unexpected and somewhat alarming turn. We have photographs and pleasantries, after which I had expected the journalists to leave, but it seems that Zhou has invited them to remain through the meeting. It is to be on stage – with an international audience via the assembled media. I can be thankful only for two things. One, that it's Whitlam in dialogue with Zhou Enlai and not any of the other Australian leaders I can think of, government or opposition. Once through the initial shock, he has the intellect, skills and knowledge to play opposite Zhou. And two, this is not a negotiation. We've already covered the bilateral issues and reached agreement the day before.

And Zhou? He's enjoying himself. Foreign relations must be so much easier than domestic politics, in China still ridden with the most fearful factionalism and personal hatreds, which transfix the system, disable the workings of government, and make every decision a tortuous mediation between people who've denounced or been denounced and have no trust. He's a marvel to watch. Courtesy, naturalness, confidence, warmth; the qualities everyone who's met him remark on. But what rivets most is the palpable authority of someone who doesn't just know the history of the past fifty years but is part of it. I've never seen someone so totally,

easefully, in charge. And this meeting he runs like a current affairs program, effortlessly, with him doing his own direction, scripting, interviewing, and commentary. He does it with charm. And above all intelligence and fluency of thought. What to make of him? He's been part of this system since the beginning, the best of it and the worst of it. He's been there through the inner-Party fights and the political excesses, the purges, the hounding of intellectuals, the persecution of dissidents, the cruelty of the Cultural Revolution. Is he just a cynic? He seems so reasonable, accessible. There is probably not one of the Australians in the room who would not think you could trust this man. Some Chinese say he has stuck with Mao to try to curb him, to have good government, save what he could of what Mao was destroying, and there are countless parables about him, the benign, the human face, with his good looks almost the romantic, more the upright official, not the tyrant. But there is a different view, that he is two-faced, complicit in the worst abuses of the ruling Party and responsible for not a few on his own part. I look at him as he duels lightly with Whitlam with a grace and delicacy that challenges but does not seek to corner, and wonder, with all that history, what else is going on in his head.

And I wonder what this meeting will mean for Australia's foreign policy. The exceptionality of it is not so much its content as its very normality, its civility. The Cold War is still in full swing, and for Australians China has been branded a more sinister threat than the Soviet Union, and an Asian one at that. And China itself is barely over the Cultural Revolution. Most Australians would not have thought a conversation with a Communist Chinese leader could be like this. But as Whitlam and Zhou work through the issues there is no arguing, there are no ideological perorations, not even any differences standing in the way of relations, just a *tour d'horizon* in which views and policies and differences are being explained and clarified. Vietnam is raised but not dwelt on, because the two already agree US, Australian and all foreign troops must be withdrawn. And when Whitlam says a resolution at the June ALP Federal Conference calls for troop withdrawals in general and specifies a number of other places including Czechoslovakia and Korea but not Taiwan, Zhou doesn't press him. As they move through the discussion it's clear he is seeking to reassure: China accepts that we have different views on many things but these need not get in the way of relations; China "will not interfere in your internal affairs"; when we have diplomatic relations the problem of wheat sales "can immediately be solved"; China's foreign aid is for development assistance and not for domination. It is so reasonable. He apologises for us having been delayed in Hong Kong on our way to Beijing, and even suggests that Hong Kong is a place to get good information about China.

Zhou moves on to the geopolitics of the Pacific, and the US alliance arrangements of which Australia is part. He starts with the ANZUS Treaty. He is intrigued by Whitlam's statement to Ji Pengfei that it was defensive, and about Japan, not China; "This is a fresh approach to us". And Whitlam the historian and almost-pedant with historical facts, tells the story, about Australia and New Zealand with memories fresh from the Pacific War and fear of a resurgent Japan, the bipartisan concern about the US intention to sign a peace treaty with Japan, and the US entering into the ANZUS Treaty to reassure them. "It has never been used as justification for operating in Vietnam". Now he is beginning enjoy himself. He raises SEATO, which by contrast has been used by the Australian Government to justify its military commitment in Vietnam, and Zhou interrupts, saying with a grin "You cannot call SEATO a defensive treaty!", and the room laughs. But it's like a cue for Whitlam, and in a few sentences he dismisses SEATO, as he's done a dozen times in the debate in Australia. "It is moribund!", he says, his definitive dismissal.

But it's not definitive for Zhou, who wants to stay on the subject. Australia might see these two treaties the way Whitlam has described, but the common link in these and others in the region is the US, and it can't be denied that the US intent behind them has been to encircle China. Whitlam: Yes. Warming to the point, Zhou gives a strategic overview of how this encirclement seems to China. It had had a treaty with the Soviet Union in 1950, the first article of which was to prevent resurgence of Japanese militarism, more explicit than the ANZUS Treaty. But now this "so-called ally" the USSR is cosying up to Japan and talking warmly with the US about nuclear disarmament. At the same time, the US is stepping up military cooperation with Japan and according to Zhou supporting revived Japanese militarism, as a principal component of the Nixon Doctrine, seeking to turn Japan into a vanguard in the Far East and "using Asians to fight Asians or Austrasians to fight Asians". China is now threatened by both the US and Japan.

So we feel that our ally is not very reliable. Is your ally reliable?...That is a matter for your consideration, for your reference. You see they have succeeded in dragging you into the Vietnam battlefield. How is that defensive? That is aggression.

Zhou is trying to draw him towards equating Australia's position, and his strategic view of the US in the Pacific, with China's. Whitlam refuses to be drawn, and as they continue on the politics of Asia and the Pacific, and even amid a certain amount of agreement on the US, Whitlam is intent on maintaining the very real distinction between his view and China's:

I must say with respect I see no parallel between the Sino-Soviet pact and the ANZUS Treaty. There has been no similar deterioration in relations between Australia, New Zealand and the US as there has been between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union.

And later, "Yours has been a bitter experience and I understand your feeling. But may I put this qualifying argument on behalf of America". He has faith, he says, in the American people and the fact that they can destroy a President, and have destroyed one, who has unpopular foreign policies such as the one on Vietnam.

He is also at pains not to be drawn into endorsing Zhou's views on Japan. Having said earlier that none of us has any doubt about the seriousness of "China's fears of a revived Japanese militarism", he now emphasises: "There is one thing about Japan that we do appreciate. It is the most wealthy and developed country which will not have anything to do with nuclear weapons. We think this is reassuring". And immediately Zhou says in English "No!", and goes back over his arguments, and predicts that Japan's economic 'expansion' into Southeast Asia will be followed by a military expansion as it moves to protect the security of its 'life-line', pushed by the US. I have read a lot of this in the *People's Daily*.

Listening to Zhou there is no doubt that he means what he says about the threat to China from these three powers, and not from ideology or paranoia. It's how he reads the signs. There are in fact enough signs in US policies and behaviour to have caused mass protests in western democratic countries, as in the US itself. And the Soviet Union has a track record in wanting to control other communist countries and successfully controlling many and has threatened China with nuclear attack, and is making overtures to the US. And Japan also has form in its past occupation of China, and it is true both that it has recent security understandings with the US and that there are right-wing Japanese who want it to re-arm. Sitting in Beijing and looking at it from the point of view of responsibility for China's foreign policy and security, it would not be difficult to come to Zhou's conclusions.

As he talks, I begin to think that it's not, after all, only an attempt to draw Whitlam into making statements that support his view, but a plea to try to see it, to understand it, from China's point of view. There is a forceful determination to get this strategic assessment of China's position across to Whitlam, and through the journalists to the world at large. He's too hardened a diplomat to allow anything like desperation, but he keeps returning to the twin issues of the US and Japan and his demand for withdrawal of all foreign forces, and behind his sometimes defiant words about how China can look after itself you can see his sense of China's vulnerability and an urgency to break open its perceived encirclement.

They come back to bilateral relations, with a somewhat light-hearted exchange on the McMahon government's China policy; having initiated private talks with Chinese officials in several third-country locations after the announcement of the ALP delegation, McMahon has apparently now announced in Canberra that diplomatic relations are far off, and Zhou, presumably from his knowledge of what has gone on in these talks, says: "They do not want to establish diplomatic relations. He seems to be quite confident". Whitlam replies that if there are no relations by the time of the election, there will be as soon as we can achieve it afterwards, and Zhou tells him "we look forward to when you can take office and you put into effect your promises".

And when it's all done and he's put his seal on diplomatic relations and said he'll welcome Whitlam to visit as Prime Minister, and he's walking us to the outer doors of the Great Hall and he and Whitlam chat about history and he recalls how US Secretary of State Dulles refused to shake his outstretched hand at the Geneva Conference in 1954, I know that even if Labor were not to win the election in 1972, there can be no going back. The foreign policy discussion in Australia can't be the same. The fact of the meeting happening and what was discussed, the fact that Zhou has not only been flexible and reasonable but has not even tied diplomatic relations to a Labor government, will be more potent in Australian politics than the arguments for trying to keep China in isolation. It is a symbolic and a psychological break with Australia's past.

Back at the hotel the mood is high. Whitlam is ebullient. Not so much triumphant as vindicated. He's already talking about his next step in foreign policy which is to meet the Japanese Prime Minister in Tokyo, straight

from this meeting with Zhou Enlai where he has defended Japan. There is a lively 'post mortem' on the discussion, checking impressions, particular statements examined for how they will play at home and with Australia's friends. There is the light-headedness of tension released, and fatigue. There is also some anxiety about the press having been present throughout and what they will write, until they begin telephoning, asking for comment from different members of the delegation, who in return ask for theirs. It's clear from what they are saying that the news in Australia tomorrow will be at the very least spectacular. But the journalists are also positive. About Zhou – surely part of the hosts' intention in having them remain there – his urbanity, his openness and reasonableness, his willingness to accommodate even Whitlam's argument on the ANZUS Treaty. But they also have a positive take on Whitlam and his performance, in what must have been one of the most challenging face-to-face encounters in Australia's diplomatic history. Their reports from Beijing will do more in a couple of days to shape a constituency for change in China policy than a dozen press conferences by the delegation once back in Australia. Mick Young, election strategist, feels he can relax. He calls for an Aristotle.

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For the next three days we indulged an interest in China. The Beijing weather was oppressive. The heat built across the North China Plain, with no thunderstorm to break the pressure and lower the temperature, and we went about in open-neck shirts and some in shorts. We went from factory to commune to school to the Friendship Store for foreigners, and walked around to try to get some feel for this flat city, silent, with horse-drawn carts on rubber tyres, and a million noiseless bicycles and the occasional trolley bus and seemingly no cars, and the great red southern gate to the Forbidden City and in front of it the near-empty square where three years before I had spoken with teenage Red Guards leaving Beijing for remote parts of the country. We went to the Great Wall and we were the only people on the wall except for three officials from the Institute for Foreign Affairs and a couple of distant PLA soldiers. We went to the Ming Tombs, and Mick Young dubbed them the Nuggets – the Nugget Coombs. And Alan Barnes of *The Age* returned from a meeting with a resident correspondent, got out of the grey-green Shanghai sedan that served as a taxi, paid the driver and said, quite unselfconsciously, "Thanks, China". And standing watching on the hotel steps waiting for our cars, everyone laughed.

On these informal occasions, there was always this light accompaniment of humour; rhyming slang, comic observations, plays on words, and a species of rolling joke, with a single quip repeated and varied and elaborated often over several days. And the Australian propensity to see the comic and the ridiculous, and laugh at themselves and each other. Taking the piss. This puzzled the Chinese and there were attempts to explain it, often to their even greater puzzlement. Whitlam himself sometimes entered into this badinage. He found it funny and diverting, and delighted in the inventiveness of Mick Young, and Eric Walsh, in making rhyming slang on any occasion, and he laughed about it for years afterwards.

A travel addict, Whitlam revelled in the instructional tourism that took us to a commune, a factory, a petrochemical plant, the Imperial Palace, the Sports Institute, a 'revolutionary' movie and a film on the anti-Japanese war. There was nothing that was not interesting to him, and his curiosity was difficult to keep up with. He could have been an historian. He had the ability to imagine the past, to people the streets and houses. And he read. And read. Everything on China I had brought for him – books, journals, magazines, official Chinese publications – and everything anyone else happened to have with them. He became near-expert, and used to grill me, from his growing expertise like an examiner almost.

We flew to Shanghai and there was more. We stayed on the Bund in the 1929 Cathay Hotel, renamed the Peace but externally, internally, and in its furnishing and fittings not much changed since its glory days in the 30s and 40s. And faded, naked of people, dark. Typically, Whitlam was fascinated by its founder, Victor Sassoon, descendant of a family of Sephardic Jews from Baghdad via India and massive wealth from the pernicious opium trade, and Victor himself, British-born, later knighted. There was other history, which he pursued in the narrow Shanghai streets, at 6'4½" almost a foot above the heads of the softly moving blue-clad masses. On 11 July we celebrated his 55th birthday in the Peace. Zhou Enlai had ordered this and a birthday cake and, with his special wishes, long-life noodles. The food was the delicate, sweet but savoury-sweet of Huaiyang cuisine, crispy clean freshwater eels, 'dumpling' too stodgy a word for the variety of steamed, poached, baked and light-fried stuffed delicacies that came between almost every course, aged black vinegar from Zhenjiang up the Yangtse. Did Zhou suggest the menu? He came from not far south of Shanghai, in Zhejiang. It was his kind of food.

Whitlam left next day for Tokyo and Young and I, with Walsh, Oakes and Terrill, flew to Nanjing, one of the 'great furnaces' of China, and there was no air-conditioning, and in the steaming heat, even doing nothing we were running with sweat. Conversation was elliptical. Young spoke often in rhyming slang. He said "I think I'll go and put on the Chairman's" – the Chairman's Thoughts, meaning shorts. The demand for ice-cold beer was very high.

We took a furnace of a train to Wuxi, an ancient town and now textile centre at the edge of Lake Tai. The guest house had a swimming pool, they said. We were stirred from our torpor, out of the train into the waiting cars, thinking of the pool.

And in the cars Chinese radio announced that Henry Kissinger had been in Beijing while we were in Shanghai, and President Nixon had addressed the world saying he will go to China. A celebration was announced, and we were given a banquet which excelled in complexity and delicacy even the Whitlam birthday banquet in Shanghai.

Whitlam learnt of the Nixon announcement on arrival in Tokyo and in a press release said: "This is a good day for China and America. It is a good day for Australia and Japan. It is a great day for all who wish to see the peaceful development of our region...". He forbore to say it was also a good day for the ALP, the 1972 election, and the prospects for a fundamental makeover in Australian foreign policy. And a very good day for Gough Whitlam.

For McMahon it was not a good day at all but an awful humiliation, and he was furious that Washington hadn't informed him in advance. He was already angry at the generally positive media reporting on the Whitlam-Zhou meeting, and even instructed the Department of External Affairs to try to change the editorial stance of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, apparently with success, because between 8 July when it wrote that "Australia will be foolish if it does not make every effort to establish the relations in which this informal dialogue can be continued formally",<sup>4</sup> and 14 July it changed its tone: "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...In his most offensive passage about the United States Government, he declared that President Nixon would be destroyed by the United States people if he did not continue to withdraw his forces from Vietnam...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 ever he directs its foreign policy."

And McMahon launched his own attack:

It is time to expose the shams and absurdities of his excursion into instant coffee diplomacy. We must not become pawns of the giant Communist power in our region. I find it incredible that at a time when Australian soldiers are still engaged in Vietnam, the Leader of the Labor Party is becoming a spokesman for those against whom we are fighting...By accepting Peking as the sole capital of China, he is abandoning Taiwan...In no time at all, Mr Chou had Mr Whitlam on a hook and he played him as a fisherman plays a trout.

And:

What an impertinence to the leader of the United States, and it is not likely to be forgotten by the American Administration.

It was in that speech also that he said China was likely to remain a political asset for the Liberal Party, and next day there was the bombshell from Nixon. Bewildered by what had happened, he announced: "The President's purpose of normalising relations with China has been the publicly announced policy of the Australian Government for some time". And ignoring the irony that he had been kept in the dark about the Kissinger visit by Washington, he said: "It makes an awful farce of Whitlam's visit. Whitlam did not even know that Kissinger was there. That's how much the Chinese trust him. It makes a mockery of the man". And in Wuxi one of our Chinese hosts, who carried a fan and was given to clever one-liners, quipped: "Who's being played like a trout now?"

<sup>4</sup> This and the following quotes on this page are from Graham Freudenberg's biography of Whitlam, *A Certain Grandeur* (Macmillan, 1977. pp.208 et seq), from Laurie Oakes, *Whitlam PM* (Angus and Robertson, 1973. pp. 224 et seq), and from Stephen FitzGerald, *Talking with China: The Australian Labor Party Visit and Peking's Foreign Policy* (ANU Press, 1972).



That was the end of the China question in domestic Australian politics.

It was to take until the election of the Labor government in December 1972 for formal relations to be established. But for almost the next four decades, China was not a contentious issue, until the recent past, when it has once more become an issue, with a contemporary version of arguments similar to those which predated the Whitlam visit and to the issues he debated with Zhou Enlai: China as potential threat, Australia siding with a US in contest with China and committing itself to a military alliance aimed at China, a China bristling with indignation at US alliances directed against it, and even an Australia happy to take the economic money but not to return that with a political investment commensurate with the importance of bilateral economic ties and China's regional pre-eminence and global power.

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There is nothing in Australian history to compare with that China visit. It was not a changing of a policy by a government, a cabinet sitting together to deliberate, a sending of an official delegate, a cabling of instructions to an ambassador to get in touch with a Chinese counterpart in a third country. It was a personal commitment to the fray, from opposition not from government, an expedition, of great bravado and exposure, but great political judgment and luck. It was a journey to the unknown because no one knew what would come of it or who Whitlam would meet. It was personal diplomacy of great political sensitivity.

And it became a foreign policy executed from Opposition because it forced the government's hand. After the ALP's announcement and before we set off, McMahon had rushed to announce that he would recognise Beijing, a position his government had rejected and attacked until that point. That this was for domestic purposes and at that stage not serious was reflected in Zhou Enlai's comment to Whitlam. After the Whitlam visit, recognition of China was accepted by McMahon's colleagues as government policy and the government ceased its attacks on China, although it stumbled around for eighteen months until its defeat at the 1972 election, trying to negotiate a two-Chinas policy, a proposition flatly unacceptable to Beijing, and to Taipei. Whitlam's pre-emptive move effectively committed Australia to abandoning a China policy that had been in place for two decades. As a political finesse, it was a work of art.

It was Whitlam's achievement. Of course, he had the support of the Labor Party and he could not have succeeded without that, and the anti-War movement was important in the politics of change. There were others in the Party who saw themselves as potential candidates for leading the delegation. But there was no one in the Party who had given such forensic attention to the question of China as he had, and for so long, or who understood the politics, the diplomacy and the technical issues as he did. And I don't believe there was anyone with the diplomatic skill he displayed under pressure in that meeting with Zhou, in which he contrived to defend Australia's alliance with the US, give a short seminar on ANZUS, defend Japan against Zhou's charge of revived militarism, reject Zhou's attempt to draw him into identifying with the Chinese view of the world, and walk away with the understanding on diplomatic relations intact and an invitation to visit China as Prime Minister. Cairns might perhaps have seen himself as a contender. He was Shadow Minister for Trade and had a professed interest in Asia. But I don't think he could have done it. I saw him subsequently on several occasions in discussions with the Chinese and, strangely, he could be tough on the podium but not in a face-to-face. He didn't have Whitlam's diplomatic skills, and he didn't have the kind of strategic framework that enabled Whitlam to sustain the parry and thrust with Zhou Enlai. And his position on the far left would have made the politics tricky on several fronts, domestic and in China.

If Vietnam was the catalyst for the first major shift in public attitudes to Asia since Federation, Whitlam's breaking of the political embargo on relations with China was the central and symbolic beginning of Australia's coming to terms with it.

Australia did, of course, have relations with Asia before this point, across a wide front. We had trade. We had an aid program. We also had Asian countries in the Commonwealth, we had SEATO, we had military relations, and we interacted with Asian countries in a variety of political contexts. We had diplomatic representation throughout the region in all but the communist countries, and in our diplomatic service we had a number of knowledgeable, sympathetic and committed diplomats. But the question was one of attitude and commitment. It is not uncommon for countries to have relations when they remain distant or even hostile, and our relations with Asia had not meant that we ourselves had changed or that as a people we were committed to it.

The images Australians had of Asia were of poverty, instability, revolution – and inferiority. The White Australia policy, despite some small modification by Harold Holt, remained largely in place when Whitlam came to power, and White Australia was an inescapable statement of what Australia thought about Asians. Australians in general did not accept Asians in the way they accepted Europeans and North Americans, and even Europeans were a bit suspect, as witness the need for the affirmative policy of multiculturalism that came later. The centrepiece of the aid program, the Colombo Plan, individual constituents for Australia though it undoubtedly created, was conceived as an instrument to fight communism and executed with the discriminatory provision that Colombo Plan students could not remain in Australia. And the good work of individual Australian diplomats was often frustrated by a patronising culture in the faux ‘British’ Department of External Affairs. The most intense engagements we had had in Asia since 1945 had in fact been in war – Korea, Malaya, Vietnam – fighting communism, fighting someone else’s wars, fighting Asians.

Fear had of course been an enduring stream in Australians’ thinking about the outside world, pre-eminently Asia, an anxiety captured in many narratives, and I think most powerfully in David Walker’s *Anxious Nation*. Australian political leadership, including it must be said Arthur Calwell, had done nothing to change that or encourage more positive emotions about our neighbours. And the conservative government, through its ramping up of the fear of China and of other Asian communists with the idea that they were headed for Australia, had fed this broad anxiety, openly and directly, and by what is now called ‘dog whistle’ politics.

What makes a watershed between the Whitlam approach to Asia and the conservatives’ is that in that China visit he not only challenged the policy, he took on the fear, head on, by an act of personal leadership: the fear of China, the fear of Vietnam, the fear of Asia that underlay the White Australia policy, but also the fear of being independent, of offending the US, of taking issue with it on foreign policy. He didn’t exactly articulate the visit up-front in this way, but he believed that to change the relationship with Asia in substance there had to be a change in the way Australians thought and felt about it, from negative to positive. Not positive about communism, but certainly positive about acceptance of Asian states with different social systems. In China, he began that process by offering leadership in a different direction, towards a more open, accepting and committed view of Asia. It was only a beginning, and as he said with perhaps uncharacteristic modesty after the Nixon announcement, because of the Labor Party visit “Australia as a nation looks less flat-footed, less ignorant, less obscurantist, less imitative ..... than she would have otherwise.” The ‘more’ to that ‘less’, however, still did not come from the McMahon government. It had to wait until Whitlam became Prime Minister.

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I sat in his office two days after his election in 1972, when he stunned and displeased a group of senior Foreign Affairs officials by asking them how ‘the neighbours’ would vote on forthcoming resolutions on South Africa and Rhodesia in the UN, and then explained that by the neighbours he meant all of the countries of the Third World. It was a pointed message about common interests and views, and for that most conservative of Australian institutions an entirely new and not entirely welcome one, and with reluctance and some continuing resistance, they mostly listened.

And a few months later, when as Ambassador I made introductory calls on other ambassadors in Beijing, Asian and other Third World countries, ambassadors, without exception, commenting on Labor’s foreign policy said it had changed the way their governments viewed Australia, a break with the past which they believed reflected an understanding of their issues and offered prospect of better relations and close bilateral and international cooperation. And not a few Second World ambassadors as well.

And China? The Chinese government had of course welcomed the China policy when Whitlam was in China in 1971, and in conversations in Beijing when I was Ambassador they made it clear that they appreciated the significance for Australia of the change in foreign policy and the domestic political culture Whitlam had inaugurated. And they had a very high regard for Whitlam, and continue to have to this day, not only because he undertook to recognise China and followed through on that undertaking, but because he took an independent foreign policy position against considerable opposition and resistance, and with considerable import for the international politics of the region, which China saw also as generally favourable to its interests. From the time of the meeting with Zhou Enlai, China has understood and accepted the relationship Australia has with the United States.

The United States, for its part, has not always understood and accepted an independent Australia. And the nexus Whitlam broke between being a close friend and a client state has now been re-joined. China's 'rise' has of course made it a serious economic rival to the United States, but it now also asserts a political role commensurate with its security interests and its status as a great economic power. It is also a nationalist power, with its own brand of exceptionalism. This is an entirely unfamiliar experience for the United States, and it has responded with the Obama 'pivot to Asia', which seeks in substance "to reinvigorate the 'hub and spoke' alliance system constructed during the Cold War..."<sup>5</sup> The hub and spoke strategy was about containment of China, and in the discussion of American commentators, the pivot is increasingly referred to openly in strategic/military terms and as being about China. In Beijing, it is seen as a new policy of containment, an attempt to deny China a legitimate role as a great power. Some in Washington also discuss it in terms of containment.

So there is now a rivalry and a contest for supremacy between two great powers. It is potentially volatile, and dangerous. Australia has no such rivalry with either, or economic, political or military contest. It has a vital stake in continuing strong relationships with both. Its national interests dictate that it avoid being caught up in their rivalry and their contest, by staying clear of commitment to the power interests and impulses of either one, and by using its bilateral relations with each to encourage them towards a stable long-term accommodation.

But the Australian government has committed to the reinvigoration of the US alliance system, agreeing to a new US military presence in Australia including the Darwin Marine base, and in other ways. This puts it into the contest on the side of one, against the interests and in the face of the displeasure of the other, its major economic partner and recent economic lifeline, China. Even without a major escalation of tension or serious miscalculation, it is neither necessary for the maintenance of our relations with the US nor in our national interests to take sides in this struggle for advantage between the two powers of most importance to us.

China and the US may manage their relations into a stable long-term accommodation and they may not. The potential for volatility lies not in the rational calculation of the leaders of the two militaries. It lies in the exceptionalist thinking which at different times and in different ways can push what they decide in their foreign relations, and that is not always a rational calculation. When there was one such power, the decision could not always be predicted or the consequences for other states foreseen. And now there are two.

It will take the imagination, fortitude and leadership of a Whitlam for the Australian government to step back, and break open again the nexus between friend and client of the United States, as surely it must if it is to properly protect the national interest.

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5 Jing Huang, Kanti Bajpai, Kishore Mahbubani, "Rising Peacefully Together". Foreign Policy, August 1, 2012.



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