

Spring 2009

HARVARD

ASIA PACIFIC REVIEW

I d e n t i t i e s *Cultures in Flux*



Issue 10.1
US \$9.95

Perspectives
Modern Geishas

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Australian Politics

HARVARD ASIA PACIFIC REVIEW

SPRING 2009
VOLUME X • ISSUE 1

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Cultural Connections Between Australia and Asian Nations: the Outlook for the Rudd Years

CELESTE LIPOW MACLEOD

Australia's neighbors in the Asia Pacific region watched with interest in November 2007 as the Labor Party won the federal elections and Kevin Rudd became Prime Minister. After nearly twelve years of a conservative coalition government led by John Howard, people in Asia wondered if change was on the way. Trade with Asian nations had been vigorous during the Howard years and the prime minister often met with leaders in various countries; but in the cultural realm his policies were tepid. Would the political climate be more conducive to an appreciation of their cultures and the formation of closer ties?

Rudd and his ministers can draw on policies that were developed by the four administrations previous to Howard's, from 1973 to 1995, a period when Australia became a multiethnic nation and embraced diversity, and when its leaders reached out to Asia Pacific nations for more than just export markets. But in one way Kevin Rudd is different from previous prime ministers: he knows more about Asia. Rudd studied at Australian National University in Canberra, graduating with honors in Asian Studies in 1981. He majored in Chinese history and language, and speaks Mandarin. After graduation Rudd worked in Australia's diplomatic service for seven years, including a posting to Beijing.

Soon after Rudd was sworn in his new foreign minister, Stephen Smith, stressed "our strong focus on Asia and the Pacific," in a speech to Australian diplomats. The region, he said, was Australia's home and also home "to many of our closest friends and neighbors".¹

Australia Becomes a Multiethnic Nation

Australia is known for the penal colony Britain founded there in 1788 and for restrictive legislation known as the "White Australia" policy, which it passed in 1901, the year the colonies became a federation of states. The driving force behind that law was the fear that if people from populous Asian nations to the north such as China were allowed in, millions of them would engulf the country.

Less known is that starting in 1947, when the country began a massive immigration program to expand its population, its immigration policies changed. Within a few decades they transformed the country into one of the world's most multiethnic nations. By the 1990s, along with the indigenous peoples (now two and half percent of the population), Australia had citizens from some 240 countries, places and ethnic groups, such as Basques, Kurds, and Tatars. Since the mid-1980s, the largest numbers coming in each year from any one area have been from Asian countries. Today more than forty percent of Australians have ethnic backgrounds other than British or Irish.²

This changeover was gradual and peaceful which explains in part why it is not better known. In 1958 the government quietly deleted the legislation known as the "White Australia" policy. By 1966 Australia was admitting several thousand "distinguished" Asians and their families each year—those —with professional degrees or other skills the country needed. And in

December, 1972, after Labor leader Gough Whitlam won on a platform that "renounced discrimination between prospective immigrants on any ground of race or color of skin or nationality," the door officially opened to immigrants from everywhere.³ They have been coming ever since.

Back in 1947 the government initially followed an assimilation policy — immigrants were urged to drop their languages and traditions and become "Australian," which then meant British-derived culture. But as the country coped with the practical problems of settling hundreds of thousands of immigrants, assimilation gave way to another approach. Several nations had found that immigrants did not in fact give up their traditions so easily and that countries benefited from an infusion of cultures, an outlook that was called "cultural pluralism." In time Australia adopted it, too. A report on immigrant settlement in 1978 concluded that: "every person should be able to maintain his or her culture without prejudice or

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disadvantage and should be encouraged to understand and embrace other cultures".⁴

The government made cultural pluralism, now called multiculturalism, official policy in 1989 with the publication of *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia*. Its opening page defined multiculturalism as "simply a term which describes the cultural and ethnic diversity of contemporary Australia." The report said that all citizens "should have an overriding and unifying commitment to Australia" and that the policies "impose obligations as well as conferring rights".⁵

Given that Australia developed a multicultural policy that sounds like a model for tolerance, what caused the ethnic conflicts that made headlines a decade later? The answer relates to another conflict that has long bedeviled the country.

For generations two opposing factions in Australia have been fighting for dominance. One side sees their country as a Western nation, displaced in the East by historical happenstance, which must cling to its British and Western heritage. They feel threatened by large numbers of people from different cultures living there. Those on the other side see Australia as part of the Asia Pacific region and want to participate in its affairs. They take pride in the country's record of absorbing immigrants from many places. Over the past sixty years leaders from one faction or the other have come to power periodically. The bully pulpit their office provided enabled them to convince a large swath of the populace to support their views as long as they were running the country.

During the years that governments favoring cultural diversity were in power, a large supportive network of services, organizations and institutions developed, and still exist, such as "Saturday Schools," where children from different backgrounds can go to learn the language and culture of their ancestors. Run by ethnic groups themselves using volunteers, they belong to the state Ethnic Schools Associations. Another service, Migrant Resource Centres, is set up throughout the country in places where newly-arrived immigrants cluster. They offer practical information about how to tap into services that help with basic needs such as finding housing, jobs, and schools for the children.⁶

A large non-governmental umbrella organization, the Ethnic Communities Councils (ECC), operates in every state; its main membership is comprised of several hundred ethnic organizations from diverse backgrounds, many of them community centers or religious-affiliated groups. The ECC help these groups solve problems and meet needs, and works with them to apply for government grants for specific projects.⁷

The Special Broadcasting Services (SBS), which has radio, television and on-line content under its umbrella, is another part of the network. SBS Radio has programs in sixty-eight languages including English; some are daily, others are weekly hour-long broadcasts put together by a volunteer who came from the country featured. SBS Television, which went commercial in 1991 to survive financially, has programs in sixty languages. Its broadcasts vary by location—in Melbourne in 2008, a typical day started with eleven newscasts from overseas: Japan, Hong Kong and mainland China news, followed by Filipino, Italian, German, Spanish, French, Russian, Greek, and Arabic news. The rest of the day was a mixture of dramas, documentaries and other programs, both Australian-produced and from abroad, with English subtitles for those in other languages.⁸

Australian National University in Canberra was founded soon after the Second World War in part to facilitate research on Asia and to enable Australian students to learn more about the region. Its College of Asia and the Pacific offers a number of programs, including intensive language study in Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Indonesian, Japanese, Javanese, Korean, Lao, Persian, Sanskrit, Thai, Urdu, and Vietnamese. Also

The government sponsored a **Global Cultural Diversity Conference** in Sydney in 1995 with participants from around the **world**. But the next year a new government came to power and **no more** was heard officially on this subject.

at ANU is the Centre for Immigration & Multicultural Studies, a research center that publishes *The Australian People: An Encyclopedia of the Nation, Its People and their Origins*. Professors in Asian studies and language programs at universities throughout the country have developed cultural links with their counterparts in the countries they study, with teaching exchanges on both sides.

Several retired diplomats once posted to Asian countries have become advocates for stronger ties with Australia's neighbors. Best known is Stephen Fitzgerald, who became Australia's first ambassador to the People's Republic of China in 1973. In his book, *Is Australia an Asian Nation*, Fitzgerald wrote that engaging with Asia "involves, while maintaining the integrity of our own political and social system, coming to terms intellectually with Asia and Asians. Not on American or 'Western' ground, but on our ground and on Asians' ground...taking account of their cultural and historical backgrounds".⁹

When UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali visited Australia in the early 1990s he was so impressed at how the country had absorbed immigrants from many places without violence that he suggested it hold a conference on the subject. The government sponsored a Global Cultural Diversity Conference in Sydney in 1995 with participants from around the

world. But the next year a new government came to power and no more was heard officially on this subject.

The Howard Years

John Howard was squarely in the faction that identified with the West. He was happy to establish trade and security ties with countries in the region but his heart was in Washington and London. At home he favored assimilation and loathed multiculturalism. But he couldn't say so publicly. Eight years earlier he had spoken out, and damaged his political career.

Multiculturalism, Howard told the National Press Club in 1988, is "a rather aimless, divisive policy, and I think it should be changed." A week later he put forth the idea of "One Australia," essentially the assimilation argument. He also said immigration from Asian countries should probably be slowed. In the climate of the time his poll ratings went down and he was dropped as leader of the Opposition Liberal Party, a position he regained only in 1995.¹⁰

The four previous prime ministers had promoted the benefits of cultural diversity. Howard waged an indirect fight against diversity, cutting funds and closing offices that supported it where he could, and projecting a strained but disapproving silence. Six months after he took over, Pauline Hanson, newly elected to Parliament as an Independent, came out forcefully against both Asian immigrants and the Indigenous people (the latter, she said, had special treatment). After she received widespread publicity, Hanson started a new political party, One Nation, which won one state election in Queensland in 1998.

Asian nations were alarmed. The *Jakarta Post* expressed the fears of many: "For Asians in particular, the rapid rise of One Nation...could forebode a return to that continent's old and antiquated White Australia policy".¹¹ In fact the triumphs of Hanson and One Nation were brief. A few months later she lost her seat in Parliament. By the time of the next Queensland election, all those who held seats for One Nation had either resigned or switched parties. The party was plagued by constant infighting: Pauline Hanson had skills as a demagogue but not as a leader.

In August 2001, a boatload of Afghans and Iraqis headed for Australia to seek asylum but the prime minister refused to let them land on Australian soil. Saying that the country was being "swamped" by refugees, he had those on board put on the small island of Nauru while their claims were processed, an arrangement that became known as the "Pacific Solution." The 9/11 attack on the US, which happened in the midst of this controversy, strengthened his hand. Fear of Islamic terrorism replaced the historic fear of Asia. By assuring the public he would protect them against attack, How-

ard won an election that polls a few months earlier had indicated he would probably lose.¹²

In 2005 he reported that the government had uncovered a terrorist plot among young Muslims in Melbourne and Sydney. Five weeks later a riot broke out on Cronulla Beach south of Sydney between young white surfers and young Muslims, mainly Lebanese Australians whose parents had fled the civil war in their country many years earlier. A number of people were injured that day but no one was killed. In a poll taken soon after the riot, more than eighty percent of those contacted said they favored a multicultural policy.¹³

Outlook for the Rudd Years

Changes have already begun and seem likely to continue. Soon after taking office the Rudd government ended the Pacific Solution, closing the camp on Nauru. In July, 2008 it announced that Australia will no longer put all boat refugees into camps while their requests for political asylum are investigated. Only people thought to pose a security threat will be held in camps: they will be offered legal help and their cases will be reviewed every three months. Other boat refugees, including all children, can live in the community while their claims are processed. And the new government supports the network of services for immigrants described earlier.

Cultural interchanges with Asian nations in the region, however, will almost certainly increase. The government has already announced plans to encourage teaching more foreign languages in schools and universities, with Asian languages forming a strong component. During Rudd's first five months in office he was already busy making changes, taking a seventeen-day trip around the world, with a five-day stop in China.

In February, Foreign Minister Stephen Smith visited Japan to assure the country that Australia's close relationship with China did not mean it would neglect Japan. "I want to highlight our strong commitment to the relationship with Japan — both now and into the future," he told the Japan National Press Club. He mentioned the large number of Australians studying Japanese and the 18,000 Japanese students studying in Australia.

Cultural interchanges with Asian nations in the region, however, will almost certainly increase.

"These figures bode well for the future of our friendship".¹⁴ Six days later in Perth, he hosted a lunch in honor of Indonesian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dr. Hassan Wirajuda. Smith pointed out that in 1947 an earlier Labor government in Australia "went to the UN Security Council to obtain international support for Indonesia's independence" and "the labor movement...imposed trade bans and blockaded Dutch shipping during Indonesia's war of independence." Speaking of their two countries, he said it was "very important that more young Australians and Indonesians study and work in each other's countries and build the long-term personal links which will bind

our countries together into the future".¹⁵ Australians of Asian ancestry made up 10.5% of the population in 2006.¹⁶ There are signs that they are having an impact on the country, as one election showed. In Sydney, the electoral district of Bennelong had been held by the same man for more than three decades: John Howard. One part of his district had changed in recent years, however, with increasing numbers of non-English speaking, Asian-born immigrants living there. When journalist Maxine McKew ran against the prime minister, the Labor Party "clinically targeted" this group of voters, sending in a "crack team" of "Chinese-and Korean speaking twenty-somethings" to campaign for McKew. Two of those twenty-somethings had been in the news a few months earlier when they married because the bride, Jessica Rudd, was the daughter of Kevin Rudd. The groom was Albert Tse, who had emigrated from Hong Kong as a child. The week before the election McKew took them with her when she visited a Chinese Senior Citizens Club. Albert Tse gave a speech in Cantonese, Jessica Rudd gave one in Mandarin. The Chinese-language newspa-

per Sing Tao ran a story about the visit on its front page. When the final votes were tallied Maxine McKew had narrowly won Bennelong.¹⁷ The historic conflict over where Australia belongs continues but it is losing its bite. Inter-marriage, long a salient characteristic of the country, continues to increase, rising from 22% in 2001 to 35% in 2006.¹⁸ For growing numbers of citizens born in the 1950s and beyond, living in a country that has both Western and Eastern elements seem normal. Kevin Rudd, born in 1957, is one of them. He is ambitious, seeing Australia as "a nation of creative middle power diplomacy — both in our region and in broader international forums," but his heart is in Australia.¹⁹ He feels comfortable with his country's location at the tip of Southeast Asia and has a keen interest in Asia and its peoples.

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Endnotes

- 1) The Hon Stephen Smith, MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs, "Speech Notes for the Annual Diplomatic Corps Christmas Party," December, 2007, Canberra.
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- 2) Celeste Lipow MacLeod, *Multiethnic Australia: Its History and Future*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishers, 2006) pp. 113-127.
- 3) David Pope and Peter Shergold, *ASEAN-Australian Immigration and the Demise of White Australia* (Canberra: ASEAN-Australia Joint Research Project, 1985) p. 14.
- 4) James Jupp, *From White Australia to Woomera: The Story of Australia Immigration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.87
- 5) *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia—Sharing our Future* (Canberra: Office of Multicultural Affairs, in Prime Minister's Office, 1989) pp.vii, 3,7, 57-60; MacLeod, *Multiethnic*, pp.121, 127.
- 6) MacLeod, *Multiethnic*, Saturday Schools: pp. 5, 120 (photo caption) 122, 124; Migrant Resource Centres: pp.134, 193.
- 7) Ibid., pp.122-23.
- 8) SBS website: www20.sbs.com.au/sbscorporate/print.php?id=1201.
- 9) Stephen FitzGerald, *Is Australia an Asian Country?: Can Australia Survive in an East Asian Future?* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1997) e-book edition, p.14.
- 10) Jupp, *White Australia*, pp. 110-11.
- 11) Owen Brown, "Asian Press Laments Hanson's Rise, AAP, reprinted in the *Melbourne Age*, June 15, 1998.

12) MacLeod, *Multiethnic*, pp. 172-76.

13) Ibid., pp.196-99.

14) The Hon Stephen Smith, MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs, "Speech Notes for the Japanese National Press Club," February, 2008, Tokyo. www.foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2008/080201_tokyo.html

15) The Hon Stephen Smith, MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs, "Speech Notes for lunch in honour of Dr. Hassan Wirajuda, Indonesian Minister for Foreign Affairs." February, 2008, Perth. www.foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2008/080207_wirajuda.html.

16) The 10.5 percent figure, based on the 2006 census, includes: Chinese (3.4%), Indian (1.2%), Vietnamese (0.9%), Filipino (0.8%), other Asian countries (2.3%), and those of mixed ancestry (1.9%). It does not include people from Middle Eastern Countries or from Pacific Islands. "1301.0 – Year Book Australia, 2008. 14.42, POPULATION, By self-reported ancestry," pp.8-9.

17) Phillip Coorey, "How Labor's Machine won Asian votes for McKew," *Brisbane Times*, December 13, 2007; Margot Saville, *The Battle for Bennelong: The Adventures of Maxine McKew 50 Something* (Melbourne, Melbourne University Publishers, December, 2007).

18) About intermarriage: see note 16 above, "POPULATION, by self-ancestry," p.9, paragraph below the table.

19) "Australia 2020 Summit: Australia's future in the region and the world." www.australia2020.gov.au/topics/future.cfm

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