

Engagement With Asia Revisited

Rawdon Dalrymple, *Continental Drift: Australia's Search for a Regional Identity*, Ashgate, 2003, 250pp, £45.00, ISBN 0 7546 3446 9

Reviewed by A.D. McLennan



Trained in philosophy at Sydney University and a Rhodes Scholar, Rawdon Dalrymple wrote *Continental Drift: Australia's Search for a Regional Identity* after a distinguished diplomatic career capped by postings as Australia's ambassador in Jakarta, Washington and Tokyo. His approach is academic in the sense that evidence is carefully weighed, and excessive advocacy of engagement with Asia dismissed. But the idea of engagement catches Dalrymple's sympathies, he regrets its failure as policy and reaches political conclusions about the course Australia should follow—or implies them. Not all will agree. Dalrymple reveals his feelings too, calling into question Australians' attachment to national military and sporting prowess without mentioning the provincial shortcomings of much intellectual life.

Dalrymple's views represent those of progressives ('educated elites') who were among the foremost advocates of Australia's engagement with East Asia, the strategy of the Hawke-Keating governments. Its impetus has since diminished, reflecting the change of government in 1996, and the small effect on Australia of the regional financial crisis that followed. At the same time, international security developments have emphasised the breadth of Australia's interests. Some advocates would like to renew the policy, although Dalrymple thinks it is unlikely to succeed.

Engagement proved out of line with majority opinion in Australia and lacked appeal in East Asia. That engagement became government policy reflected the disproportionate influence of elite opinion, which is both articulate and politically oriented. Mass opinion is otherwise—usually inchoate and focused more on personal

interests than social-political goals. Politicians respond to elite opinion because they hear it and believe that accommodation will increase their power. Elites are disposed to social engineering and naturally seek political influence. Wider opinion is usually too diverse and unfocused to attract countervailing interest, except when it cannot be ignored. The republic referendum was an example. Its foremost proponents attributed loss of the referendum to the majority's wish to retain the Queen of England as Australia's head of state—some sincerely and others rationalising—a view evidently shared by Dalrymple. The referendum invited opposition on several grounds. One was attachment to the monarchy, which influenced some voters but not all. The most telling slogan contra damned the proposal as 'a politicians' republic'. Nothing to do with the crown, it rejected the political structure offered by the referendum. Failure at the polls showed that elites—unlike the majority of voters—were prepared to see the Governor General's reserve powers circumscribed even though they are the ultimate check on the Commonwealth's behaving illegally. The uncomfortable truth for the referendum's advocates was that they needed to make a better offer.

Misleading was the claim that Asian neighbours would react against the referendum's failing. The thought that they cared about Australia's constitutional forms, or any

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other country's, was a conceit. Indeed, several were themselves monarchies, including Japan, Cambodia, Thailand and Malaysia. Indonesia was the exception, considering its republic more up-to-date than Australia's monarchy—or Malaysia's. The few countries that Australia's opting for a republic would have been affected were Commonwealth ones—Britain itself, nearby Pacific Island states, Canada most of all.

Engaging Asia

Dalrymple observes that years of effort went into urging Australia towards close engagement with its East Asian neighbours. True, there were differences among those who favoured the idea as to how far it should extend. Dalrymple mentions Foreign Affairs Secretary Wilenski's claim that Australia was already an Asian country—a view that would have registered oddly with the Japanese who, seeing themselves distinct from the rest of Asia, may have wondered what they were hearing. Few advocates of engagement shared such a view, which irritated regional opinion. Yet while seeing this view as mistaken, Prime Minister Keating claimed a unique status for Australia that did not add up. The advocates of engagement favoured limpet-like attachment to Asia as the means of best advancing Australia's economic and security interests. Their willingness to make concessions to 'Asianisation' to achieve this aim helped it fail.

Proximity to Asia was the reason for proposing this massive change in posture and outlook, which Dalrymple endorses as reconciling Australia's history with its geography. The argument runs that Australia's origins as an isolated, wealthy European society occupying a large, mostly empty continent make for insecurity. Economic takeoff in nearby East Asia and the development of regional institutions offers the solution to Australia's problems should it identify with East Asia as closely as possible. This would oblige Australia to make more concessions than would its Asian partners. But trade and economic flows, growing immigration and education links, even (as Dalrymple noted and Paul Dibb advocated) changes in Australia's defence policy towards greater self-reliance were laying the basis of association.

Questions and certitude

This seductive argument invites questions on at least two grounds:

- one is the consequences for Australia of abandoning its past and identity to attain such a radical goal; and
- the other, the worth and feasibility of doing so.

Implicit in such questions is whether Australia could

hope to win acceptance by its neighbours as one of their number; and whether doing so would indeed strengthen its wealth and security.

Founded as a British colony of settlement, Australia accepts immigrants from around the world in much the same way as does North America. The recent origin and growth of such societies in response to immigration frees them from the past's dead hand more than most countries, and underlies their unusual social mobility. Australia's naturally speaking English conveys huge advantages, including ready intimacy with other English-speaking societies. Its political and economic traditions, even institutions, stem from those developed in the British Isles. So, much history distinguishes Australia from its Asian neighbours and links it with the more distant societies it resembles. At the same time, these links are changing to reflect the emergence of the United States as most influential among the English-speaking countries.

American dominance causes resentment in like societies that are less influential, as did British dominance in 19th-century Australia (and America). It is especially evident among the educated elites. Some even see McDonald's as a manifestation of American cultural imperialism, not a business calculation. Such thinking illuminates the pressure for Australians to reject their past and turn to Asia, while overlooking McDonald's great appeal in Kuala Lumpur, Shanghai and elsewhere.

Elite opinion mostly reflects aspirations towards identifying with Asia. Elites tend to think differently from other Australians, to harbour distinct values and believe they possess superior understanding of society. This says a lot about value formation and is odd in a society so raw. There is no need to visit the bush to find out how raw for it is evident in the manifestations of higher culture. Much of today's sophistication will be cause for cringe in 100 years—nationalising history and literature, for example, so as to disguise Australia's inheritance. Indeed, their desire for Australia to be accepted as part of Asian tells us how elites do not want to be seen.

Multiculturalism and racism

Multiculturalism makes sense in an immigrant society. A tolerant place, Australia has a good record of accepting diverse minorities without authority much needing to preach (though it's true that 'New Australian' became an expression of contempt comparable to 'refo' which it was meant to replace). Non-European immigrants who find integration difficult mostly stand apart because of their distinctive values. By contrast, Chinese immigrants

blend into Australia's society almost invisibly, although their presence and numbers will make the greatest difference over time.

The risk of multiculturalism is the way it becomes destructive by loony extension. Yet political life encourages this to occur because practitioners believe that concessions to shrill minorities are cost-free—at least until they are bitten, as by Pauline Hanson's One Nation. Operating outside the normal rules, One Nation was damned in the blackest terms, partly from fright but mostly calculation. Hanson displayed no great skills but touched a nerve among those who felt politically disenfranchised (with reason, their being the wrong age, living in the wrong place and told that majority Australian culture was but one among many equals). Their alienation reflected a political process that progressive opinion exploited to strengthen solidarity and confuse enemies, including shamelessly by export tarring Prime Minister Howard with Pauline Hanson's brush in Asia and eliciting sympathetic responses for domestic replay. This effect was achieved to the delight of progressive opinion, including the sympathetic media. The event harmed Australia abroad but did its proponents no electoral good at home because its purpose was transparent and underlined the division of opinion within Australia.

As has the issue of illegal immigration and border control. Crooks in nearby countries traffic in desperate would-be refugees. A lax system encourages those who reach Australia to press their claims through every channel, supported by determined voices who assert that inhumane treatment affords illegal immigrants the right to stay. Procedural complexity is at the heart of the problem, making lawyers rich and enraging the majority who see self-selected immigrants as queue jumpers taking advantage of our hospitality, and expect Australia's government to keep them from our shores. Importantly, among those who object to illegal entrants are immigrants who have come to Australia in recent years by following the rules.

Another example of domestic argument replayed from East Asia with negative consequences for Australia was the response to Prime Minister Howard's explaining—not for the first time—that in extreme circumstances Australia would pre-empt a terrorist attack on Australia. Critics claimed that his remarks disdained the sovereignty of neighbouring countries. Dr Mahathir had a field day, attacking not just Australia but Singapore (as 'bananas'—yellow on the outside, white inside—an old gibe against Lee Kuan Yew that took on new meaning directed to a Malay audience). Spokesmen in some other ASEAN countries were hostile too, although reaction across East Asia, including China and Japan, varied in keeping with

national interests. The prime minister's critics at home risked giving the impression that they accorded less weight to citizens' interests in life and security than abstract notions of others' sovereignty.

Nearby Southeast Asia

Association with ASEAN no longer advances Australia's interests. That Dalrymple does not advocate Australia's joining ASEAN shows sensible understanding of the association's character. As formed, ASEAN was very important for Australia, especially in resisting Hanoi's occupation of Cambodia under Soviet aegis. But post-Cold War, an enlarged ASEAN has become a means for Southeast Asian states to accommodate China's power, an interest that Australia does not share. ASEAN's rejecting Australia as a dialogue partner in dealing with Europe economically (ASEM) and not wishing to include Australia with the East Asian powers in economic exchanges (ASEAN+Three) was painful for symbolic and political reasons. Its practical importance, however, depends on how Australia's interests are defined.

Everyday dealings underline how different we are from neighbours and that Australia's natural affinities are with culturally similar countries. These facts do not prevent us developing relations with Asian neighbours on the basis of common interests, but it means that Australia will fool no one at home or abroad by pretending to be something it is not and won't become. Frantic efforts by ministers and officials not so long ago to assert Australia's Asian identity both pointed to its absence and demeaned us. Interests not sentiment are the reliable guide to policy.

This applies in particular to relations with Indonesia where nostalgia and attachment to past policy run deep, qualities apparent in Dalrymple's views. He sees the successful development of Australia's relations with Indonesia as *the* test of our regional standing. But we cannot turn back the clock. The critical factor was President Soeharto's removal from power, from which other events followed, including those in East Timor. It is unsurprising that Indonesians resent Australia's efforts under UN auspices to drive them out. This is another strand in the history of relations with which the two countries are obliged to live. Better to face the fact that stress and strain between them is usual. Pretending that Australia is becoming more like Indonesia will not diminish the real differences, and Indonesia will not feel any need for change to accommodate Australia. Neither will wider Australian society accept the reverse. Moreover, Australia's relations with Indonesia have little bearing on how rest of Asia sees us.

Indonesia's population vastly outnumbers Australia's and the discrepancy continues to grow. The same is true of Bangladesh—and does not mean much. The notable change since 1965 is that Australians no longer see the Indonesian state as a threat. Those who urge unilateral concessions seem to think that we should. Developments that so eased tensions between Australia and Indonesia reflected the policies of the now despised Soeharto dictatorship. Appreciating that restraint served national interests better than raucousness, it behaved in ways that suited Australia and to which we were able to respond.

The reinstatement of democracy in Indonesia has been a mixed blessing. Democracy means the rule of professional politicians who in Indonesia represent the tribes that elect them, so forcing the resolution of differences to the highest levels with paralysing influence on government performance. This was evident in the inability to tackle Indonesia's terrorist problems, leading to pernicious denial. The Bali bombing brought home the way that terrorism threatened Indonesia's national unity, even the president's life. It also gave rise to bilateral cooperation that underscored what Australia and Indonesia could accomplish working together on the basis of shared interests. Contemporaneous friction with Indonesia over Australia's travel advisories shows what happens where interests are at odds, with both governments responding to domestic imperatives.

Australia enjoys practical cooperation with Malaysia too on security issues (as with Singapore), common interests offsetting Dr Mahathir's visceral dislike. Happily for Australia and its allies, Dr Mahathir's and UMNO's domestic political enemies are not soft on the kind of radicalism that fosters terrorism. So we can strive in the same direction as Malaysia without the need to make spurious cultural concessions.

Politeness, care and restraint are especially important in relations with sensitive neighbours who are culturally different from us. That is why we have diplomats. We do not need to seek acceptance by compromising interests, a confusion to which some Australians are prone. Serious countries are not. Too often, ministerial ego has driven Australia's diplomacy into mindless activism that both detracts from national reputation and fails to achieve sensible goals.

Defence and security

Least satisfactory is Dalrymple's treatment of Australian security interests. Strengths are the author's pointing to the difference between East Asia and the Asia-Pacific region, the first a natural association and the second not, and his appreciating that Australia's security

association with the US could hamper relations with China. Unexplained is how close engagement with East Asia would strengthen Australia's security, though by implication it would. How Australia should cope with tensions among the major powers of East Asia is not mentioned and the regional hierarchy of power is ignored, as is the relationship between the Asia region and broader international security, now underlined by terrorist threat and the deployment of Australian forces to operations in the Middle East in recent years both by Labor and Coalition governments even though they disagree as to the conditions under which such a step should be taken.

Missing above all in Dalrymple's analysis is assessment of the importance of the US alliance to Australian security and its grounding in nuclear deterrence. He does not go beyond loose endorsement of Dobb's 'little Australia' approach to security that artificially restricts threats and so interests to the nearby region. Dalrymple's holding out relations with Indonesia as the acid test of Australia's foreign policy also confuses proximity with importance. His treatment of security issues suggests that policy preference (what ought to be) has taken precedence over basic facts (what is).

Asia lost?

Proximity and sound policies will ensure that Australia does not 'lose' Asia. But it will not gain Asian acceptance by imitation and deference. Some of the qualities that Asians most admire reflect Australia's character, and that Australia has adapted adroitly to changed political and economic circumstances. Some actions and policies reflect Asia's proximity and the influence of developments there but many have not. Adaptation to the global economy's demands for greater efficiency spared Australia the 1997 Asian virus. Both events nearby and those more distant affect Australia's security and economic welfare.

The disjunction most evident in respect of East Asia is the way that parts close to Australia are becoming less consequential than the distant powers, especially China and Japan. Geography and proximity are important, but so is GDP, technology and military strength. We can expect Southeast Asian dependence on the distant powers to grow. To be noted too is the US role in the economic and military affairs of East Asia, where America's power and influence will ensure that it remains a major actor although in fast changing circumstances. All the more reason for Australia to ally itself with the United States, and appreciate that association with both America and East Asia are complementary interests. Australia does not need to choose between them.