

**Asia-Australia Young Leaders' Forum**  
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I attended the Young Asian Leaders conference hosted by the Asia Australia Institute in Hong Kong in November 1999. It was a truly invigorating experience, possibly because I also got to miss dealing with a raft of mind-numbingly complex tax bills in my "day job" as the Democrats' taxation adviser.

The conference focussed on the Internet and its impact on Asian culture, society and economy. It brought together large Australian and Chinese contingents and smaller groups from Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines, Hong Kong and Korea.

One of the things I find most interesting about conferences is the ability to think and discuss broader issues which one does not usually get the chance to do so in the nitty gritty of work. To discuss a topic as fascinating as the IT revolution with some of the leading young professionals from public and private sectors across the region was a privilege indeed. My mind came back from Hong Kong brimming with new ideas and perspectives which I look forward to further exploring.

I would like to share some of my insight with members of the Council:

1. There was a strong sense among the younger Asians that I met that there is no such thing as "Asian values", the term used by some in Australia to "apologise" for failings of Asian civil societies. If anything, there is a surprising commonality of purpose, aspiration and values across all the upwardly mobile professionals that I met.
2. It was rather unfortunate to discover that Australia is leading the region in the censorship of the Internet. The openness of the net in Asian nations has great potential to break down the dominance of the State-run media as access to the net improves.
3. Asia faces a huge task in terms of literacy and infrastructure (both physical and commercial/legal) if it is to fully take advantage of the opportunities of the net. Language is also a real barrier.
4. The net is opening up major opportunities for political discourse and campaigning which is still in its infancy in Australia.
5. Australia has a real opportunity to improve our standing in Asia by utilising our own Asian-descent minority. I met Australians of Vietnamese, Chinese and Malaysian descent all doing business in Asia, opening doors for Australian firms. And that may me feel very proud and excited.

The next Asian Young Leaders Conference is set for about two years away. I would strongly recommend that the Council send young leaders along to it, seeking to have a mix of skills and backgrounds across the delegation.