

AUSTRALIA TO THE UNITED STATES
17-31 July 2004

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Introduction

The twenty first Australian Political Exchange Council (APEC) delegation to the United States of America, as guests of the American Council of Young Political Leaders (ACYPL), occurred between 17 and 31 July, 2004.

The delegation comprised the following members:

Mr Ron Wilson (Delegation Leader)

Chief of Staff to the Leader of the Opposition, Victoria

Ms Catherine Fitzpatrick

Media Adviser to the Minister for Defence and Leader of the Government in the Senate

Ms Rachel Howard

Public Affairs Officer, Association of Independent Schools of Victoria

Mr Graham West MP

Member for Campbelltown in the New South Wales Legislative Assembly, Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasurer and Minister for State Development

Mr Simon Finn MP

Member for Yerrongpilly in the Queensland Legislative Assembly

Ms Adele Young

Deputy Chief of Staff and Principal Political Adviser to the Chief Minister for the Northern Territory

Mr Darren Chester

Executive Officer, Champions of the Bush

Ms Daele Healy

Senior Media Adviser to Senator Andrew Bartlett, Leader of the Australian Democrats

Mr John Edge

Secretary, Australian Political Exchange Council

The delegation's itinerary commenced in Washington DC then travelled west to Salt Lake City in Utah before returning to the east coast and, specifically, to Boston in Massachusetts. The thirteen-day itinerary was impeccably organised and gave the delegation a valuable insight into the American political system. The delegation wishes to record its sincere appreciation to both Mr Quentin Lide and Mr Brad Minnick (Executive Director) of the ACYPL for not only the outstanding program they developed but for the time they dedicated to travelling with the delegation. Their patience and humour was appreciated and much valued by the delegation.

Further thanks are extended to officers of the Australian Political Exchange Program (APEC), Maree Drury and, in particular, Jody Chapman, for their hard work and organisation of the delegation's visit. Organising the travel, passport/visa and other administrative necessities for eight people is no small task and all members of the delegation were impressed by the professionalism and efficiency of the APEC officers. The delegation would also like to extend its gratitude to the Secretary of APEC, Mr John Edge, who travelled with the delegation throughout the United States and offered outstanding assistance to the Leader and all members of the delegation.

FREE TRADE AGREEMENT

The arrival of the delegation in the United States only days following the passage of the US/Australia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) through the U.S. Senate provided an exciting backdrop to the Washington segment of the exchange. Following the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), linking Canada, the U.S. and Mexico in 1987, the US/Australia FTA is only the fourth FTA in America's history. The significance of such an Agreement was palpable during our stay and gave rise to an understandable degree of animation with those we met, particularly in Washington.

The overwhelming support for the FTA, particularly within the Congress was a testament to the close political, social and economic ties between the two countries. During the course of our discussions, there was considerable interest from Americans, at a political and bureaucratic level, regarding passage of the Agreement through the Australian Parliament. Since returning to Australia, the response of the non-government parties has been documented. The opportunity to meet with senior US Trade Department officials at the White House Executive Building was of significant advantage and the delegation was pleased to receive a briefing at such a senior level. The delegation wishes to place on record that, on a number of occasions, American officials made specific mention of the outstanding work of the staff of the Australian embassy in Washington to the successful conclusion of the free trade negotiations.

Whilst representatives of both the Australian and American governments presented strong cases in favour of the Agreement, there were nonetheless other views within the US Congress, the Australian Parliament and indeed amongst the delegation.

During the debate, the Australian Government articulated the benefits of the Agreement including elimination of tariff duties, improved Australian access to US agricultural markets and access to American government procurement markets. Opposition in Australia included issues relating to the *Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme*, local media content and the potential impact on manufacturing. In the US, opposition was expressed in particular by representatives of the beef and dairy industries.

The impact of the US free trade agreement on Australian-US relations and trade will be of interest to members of the delegation into the future.

SECURITY

The delegation was very interested to have a briefing at the new US Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This Department was created in March 2003, with the coming together of 180,000 personnel from 22 organisations with one objective – to make America more secure. DHS is a significant part of the Administration's response to 9/11. The delegation was pleased to have discussions regarding the Patriotic Act, border control and other matters associated with the defence and security of the United States. During discussions, members of the delegation raised concerns regarding the visa process between Australia and the United States and our comments were openly and warmly received by DHS officials.

EDUCATION

Australia's public education system, whilst arguably among the world's best in terms of quality and accessibility, continues to attract criticism for its alleged failure to provide a structure for national benchmarking and accountability. The delegation's meeting with a senior officer of the US Department of Education was therefore enlightening in terms of assessing the American approach to such issues and to gain an understanding of the similarities and differences between our two countries in finding solutions to these challenges in a federal system of government.

The US Department of Education has a budget exceeding \$54 billion with 4,800 employees with a stated mission to “*establish policies on federal financial aid for education ... distributing ... and monitoring those funds, collecting data on America’s schools and disseminating that research; focusing national attention on the educational issues it prioritises; prohibiting discrimination; and ensuring equal access to education.*”

The National Assessments Governing Board (NAGB) determines the mandate for the National Assessment of Educational Progress and provides for the continuous and detailed analysis of the achievements of American students across an array of subject areas. Not limited to the vital and primary areas of literacy and numeracy, this program covers fields such as history, science, geography and the arts. Studies undertaken provide vital information for policy makers at both the state and federal level to track the achievements and progress of the nation’s students, allowing them to be responsive to the needs of students as dependent on a range of important factors. The NAGB, under the direction of the Commissioner for Education Statistics, is an excellent example of the great success of bipartisanship with its membership including: governors; state legislators; local and state school officials; educators; business representatives and members of the general public.

Building on this comprehensive system of benchmarking and monitoring of student progress, is the Bush Administration’s program *No Child Left Behind*. This federal program seeks to ensure that every high school student graduates and is ready for the workplace, or, if they so choose, college. Given that in Australia almost 25% of year seven and eight students will not complete their secondary education, let alone consider tertiary education or training, the U.S. programs provided a useful basis for comparison.

With new 2005 budget initiatives amounting to almost \$800 million and a purported increase to financial aid of \$30 billion since 2001, the *No Child Left Behind* program appears to have received mixed reaction from various government sectors. The Federal Government is fulsome in its praise for the program and insists that it is having a positive effect on the creation of opportunities for America’s high school students. On the other hand, various state administrations - whether Republican or Democrat - have expressed various concerns that the program does not deliver the outcomes sought and promised. One consistent concern raised by state administrations was whether the level of federal determination in curricula and benchmarking would be to the detriment of established state-based systems. Members of the delegation reflected upon contemporary and historical debates between state and federal governments in Australia and noted the similarities. Having been implemented only two years ago, the delegation will view with great interest the long-term success or otherwise of the *No Child Left Behind* program.

Harvard University

The delegation’s visit to the 368-year-old Harvard University was a highlight of the itinerary. Members of the delegation were very interested in the discussion concerning funding formulas and challenges for universities and the university’s relationship with the local Boston community. The difficult issue of an expanding university in a city environment raised similar planning and environmental concerns that are experienced by universities throughout Australia. The discussion regarding the changing composition of Harvard students provided information and an insight of Harvard, which was not previously known by most members of the delegation.

INFRASTRUCTURE

The delegation was delighted to have the opportunity, albeit brief, to inspect what has been described as America's largest and most ambitious public works projects in history. The *Central Artery/Tunnel Project*, better known as the 'Big Dig' will replace the six-lane elevated highway in downtown Boston with an eight to ten lane underground expressway. In addition the highway will be extended and a fourteen lane, two bridge crossing constructed. The sheer magnitude of the excavation and construction works we were able to view was of a scale unlike anything seen in Australia.

Given the fact that more than 285,000 people in more than 190,000 vehicles, utilise this freeway to get to and from work each day, the challenge to maintain accessibility to the City of Boston, whilst undertaking somewhere in the vicinity of \$3 million worth of construction *each day*, has been an immense challenge.

The enormity of the project is only partially illustrated by: the 118 separate construction contracts, the 26 geo-technical drilling contracts, the 150 project-wide cranes and the 5,000 workers on site during peak production periods. This project should be a compulsory case study for all major infrastructure projects being/to be built in Australia. The delegation noted that the cost of the project had exceeded \$US15 billion but also observed that less attention was paid to the Australian political imperative of such projects being *on time/on budget*.

The delegation was struck by the goodwill shown toward the project by Bostonians, despite its size, cost and the inconvenience of living/working near a construction site for over a decade. Those involved with its creation seemed focussed on the revitalising effects it will have on Boston in terms of better transport, economic and environmental outcomes.

In addition to increasing the safety and efficiency of the existing road structure, the *Central Artery/Tunnel Project* is intended to rejuvenate the open space landscape of the city. Instead of concrete slabs and steel cables, Bostonians can look forward to enjoying more than 260 acres of new parks and open space as a direct consequence of the project. The balance that the project seeks to achieve in relation to amenity and liveability are analogous to Australian design imperatives – seeking to improve and/or protect our urban environs while not compromising functionality of major infrastructure projects.

The delegation was also fortunate to visit a number of the venues for the Salt Lake 2002 Winter Olympics. Members of the delegation were most impressed with the sporting facilities constructed or redeveloped for the Olympics and noted the ongoing value of the facilities for recreation and the resultant boost to tourism. The delegation noted the similarities between the success of the Salt Lake Games to the success of Sydney 2000 and, hopefully, the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne.

HEALTH AND SCIENCE RESEARCH AND SERVICES

Stem cell research

The delegation was privileged to hold discussions at Harvard University regarding the very contemporary and contentious issue of stem cell research. The possibilities for cell-based therapies for the treatment of disease along with the practical, scientific and ethical implications of such use were thoroughly canvassed. The delegation was interested to hear about the proposed legislative responses in the United States and noted that while the philosophical, theological and scientific issues were similar in both countries, Australia's legislative response was, for the time being at least, concluded by the passage of the Commonwealth's *Research Involving*

Human Embryos Act 2002 and the *Prohibition of Human Cloning Act 2002* and complimentary legislation in the states and territories.

It was with great interest that the delegation observed that the issue of stem cell research was raised at the Democratic Party's convention in Boston by Ronald Reagan Junior, son of the former Republican President, Ronald Reagan. Reagan argued that theological opposition to the funding of embryonic-stem-cell research constituted a cruel punishment to sufferers of illnesses that may benefit from stem cell therapies. The Bush Administration implemented restrictions on federal funding for stem cell research in 2001, limiting the number of stem cells able to be used for research. Democratic Candidate, Senator John Kerry, has been vocal in his support of less restricted funding and research suggesting that ethical questions should be resolved using good will and good sense.

Cancer Research

In Salt Lake City, the delegation was very interested to visit the Huntsman Cancer Research Centre. The delegation was pleased to learn of the significant advances in the study of human genetics being achieved by researchers at the Huntsman Centre and noted that the research was being conducted in a private hospital in tandem with medical and scientific researchers at the University of Utah. The delegation also noted the very generous private donations received by the Huntsman Centre, reflecting the strong philanthropic tradition in the United States.

POLITICAL OBSERVATIONS

Discussions with members of the national congress, state legislatures and party operatives were key features of the delegation's itinerary. The fact that the delegation was visiting the United States during a presidential election year only served to heighten the interest in America's political system, personalities and elections.

Whilst in Washington it was of great value to meet with Mr Scott Douglas, Political Director of the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC). Mr Douglas is charged with the responsibility of overseeing the election and re-election of Republican members of the House of Representatives. The delegation noted that in 2002, over 90% of incumbent members (Republican and Democrat) of the House of Representatives were re-elected and both political parties anticipate a similar result in the 2004 elections.

Delegation members of all Australian political parties were interested in the discussions and briefings regarding campaign techniques and trends and no doubt much of the knowledge gained through these meetings will now filter into the practices of Australian parties.

Several people with whom the delegation met expressed interest in key aspects of the Australian system including compulsory voting, the combined Executive and Legislature and the differences in policy responsibilities of federal and state governments. Some key aspects of the US system of interest to the Australian delegation included the importance of 'Get Out The Vote' campaigning, donation and financial disclosure legislation and the role of the courts in law making.

The delegation was also privileged to meet with office bearers and professional political operatives of the Utah Republican and Democratic parties. The delegation noted the similarities between Australia and the US in terms of the relationships, co-operation and tensions between state and national divisions of political parties.

The delegation would particularly like to record its appreciation to the ACYPL for its organisation of the political elements of the itinerary. While in the United States,

the delegation visited the White House, Capitol Hill, the Utah and Massachusetts state legislatures as well as meeting with a number of US senators and congressmen, state governors and legislators and numerous officials of the Republican and Democratic parties. Such opportunities were of immeasurable value to members of the delegation and will hopefully contribute to closer political understanding and ties between Australia and the United States.

DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION 2004

For most, if not all, members of the delegation, the highlight of the itinerary was the attendance at the 2004 Democratic Convention in Boston. The Convention was a uniquely American experience for the Australian delegation. Members of the delegation were impressed by the magnitude of the Convention and the level of interest in the proceedings – and not limited to those attending the Convention. Whilst delegation members mixed mainly in political circles, all were impressed by the interest shown by “ordinary Americans” to the happenings in Boston – a phenomenon we would not expect to experience in Australia.

The delegation would like to record its appreciation to the members of the Utah Democratic Party who facilitated our entry to the Convention.

CONCLUSION

The delegation applauds the goals and work of the Australian Political Exchange Council and its counterpart the American Council of Young Political Leaders. The exchange programs sponsored by these organisations give young political leaders in both countries invaluable experiences and insights and will do much to further closer political, economic and social ties between Australia the United States of America.