Griffith Asia Institute - Brisbane

Perspective Asia Lecture

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Australia's Place in the World

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This evening I want to talk about an intriguing result that emerged from the 2010 Lowy Institute poll on Australians' attitudes to the world.

These results surprised me because they confound what many people assume about the effect of age on regional identification: that the younger the person, the more accepting of they are of a multiracial community, and the further removed they are from identification with "civilizational" values.

This is important because public impressions count. We've seen how our politics can be distorted beyond justification by the vagaries of public opinion, especially in marginal seats.

I interpret these results in three ways. First, there is a much greater diversity of opinion in Australia about where we belong in the world than most elite discourse would suggest. The vast majority of commentary in our learned journals and news media would give the impression that there is a powerful consensus in Australia that our future lies in Asia. Those who appear to contest this are howled down as troglodytes and throwbacks.

Second, the results betray an ongoing ambivalence and uncertainty about Australia's place in the world. I have interviewed Australian Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers dating back to the Fraser government. At the end of each interview I have asked, "What distinctive quality does Australia bring to the world?"

Every one of this country's international leaders I have interviewed has struggled to answer that question. Either they have shrugged and wound up the interview, or they have listed qualities that aren't distinctive, or distinctions that aren't qualities. And if our leaders can't articulate this question – as surely no American, French, Chinese or Indian leader would be as stumped – what chance for the rest of the country?

Third, the generational differences hold an important clue to the evolution of Australia's identity and to how Australians view their country's place in the world. Karl Mannheim , in a pioneering study into the effects of generations on political opinions, suggested two basic reasons for generational differences: the formative experiences encountered during a generation's political awakening; or each generation's interests and reactions to the current era. In one explanation, if you grew up in adversity, you are frugal for the rest of your life. In the other explanation, because older generations don't have to worry about kids, mortgages and career advancement, they can afford to be more conservative towards current issues.

To my mind, both of these explanations are important to explain these charts. First, the 60+ age group grew up and came to political maturity in the 1950s and 1960s. This is crucially important to what I see as Australia's first identity crisis, and this will be the subject of the first part of my argument.

Second, the 18-29 age grouping came of political age in the mid to late 1990s, and confronts an international future that is evolving. This is crucial to what I see as Australia's second identity crisis, which is unfolding as we speak, and which will form the second part of my argument this evening.

The third part of my argument, on which I will conclude, will look at why a nation's identity is so intimately connected with its place in the world, and why there is so much at stake in our current identity crisis.

The youngest of the 60+ cohort in the Lowy Institute's 2010 survey were born in 1950; most were born in the 1930s and 1940s. This means that at the time they were born and as they grew up their sense of identification was much less distinctively with Australia than with a global British nation.

No national leader of that era would even contemplate challenging the notion that Australians were deeply British; in fact there were some who argued that it was only in Australia that the ideals of Britishness had been preserved in their full purity.

The origins of Australia's British race nationalism can be traced to the late 19th century. As nationalism surged around the world and romantics re-invented the symbols of national distinctiveness, from tartans to mazurkas to Borobadur, Australians invested heavily in their Anglo-Saxonness.

The myth of the Anglo-Saxon had been given great impetus by Darwin's theories of the Descent of Man and by romantic novelists such as Sir Walter Scott.

The myth went something like this. There is an ancient Germanic race, first observed by Tacitus, that is fiercely independent, democratic and potent. Refusing to be subdued by the Romans, it colonized Britain, where it later refused Norman impositions such as feudal servitude. It was from this fierce and independent spirit that the Magna Carta and later parliamentary democracy sprang, and from a fierce independence and ingenuity the industrial revolution was born.

Rejecting the slavish superstitions of Europe, it forged its own Protestant religion and then sprang forth and colonized continents: North America, South Africa and Australia, where it reached even greater heights of achievement and purity. Anglo-Saxons were the highest

stage of human evolution, but still felt threatened by the fecundity and industriousness of Asians.

So Australians of the 1930s, 40s and 50s would still have agreed with Cecil Rhodes who said in the 1890s, "to be born British is to draw first prize in the lottery of life."

But as the 1950s drew on, this world was fraying at the edges.

Anti-colonialism was in full flight, drawing on all of the moral resources provided by humanity's collective repulsion at the holocaust and the new embrace of the concept of universal human rights. The effects of anti-colonialism on Britain were profound, and British leaders and public had to search for a new sense of moral legitimacy as their own sense of national purpose crumbled in front of the anti-colonial movement.

The British backed quickly away from racial theories of solidarity with their white Dominions as quickly as they dropped any notion that their far-flung Empire was the natural expression of a racial order of things. Australians found that their intense identification with Britishness was increasingly one-sided.

The ultimate shock to Australians' sense of their place in the world was Britain's application to join the EEC. Not only did this spell the end to Australia's sense of economic security, symbolically it meant that Britain was turning its back on its Empire and embracing a regional future. This was made all the more poignant by the fact that Britain's original urge to Empire had been a consequence of a Protestant nation turning its back on a Papist Europe.

The result was an intense period of the "new nationalism", which James Curran and Stuart Ward have discussed in a really important recent book. In the 1970s Australia tried to fill the void of its vanished Britishness by creating the civic symbols of a new, homegrown Australian identity.

Everything from Australia's currency and passports, national honours system and holidays, diplomacy and cultural life, national anthem and flag, became the subject of powerful forces of reshaping and redefinition.

And yet there was always something inauthentic and contested about these episodes. Most importantly, the earnest attempts to distil the essence of Australia seemed always to be shot down by a laconic cynicism.

Take for example, Secretary of Foreign Affairs Alan Renouf's July 1974 proposal that Australian diplomats should wear a new diplomatic uniform when appearing at formal functions. To quote James Curran, Renouf's foray into the world of couture was no mere flight of fancy. Prototypes were commissioned and fashion parades held – albeit for internal department consumption only.

The suits were in the Mao Nehru style, single breasted and with high choker collars that were embroidered with golden springs of wattle. They would be in navy blue for those serving at posts in colder climates and white for those in the tropics.

Renouf spent taxpayers' money on this because Australian diplomats had, he said, become pale imitations of the Americans and British on the world stage, and because he felt that

Australian representatives should "stand out from the envoys of other nations at official functions".

The proposal was greeted with a shower of scorn and sarcasm. The *Sydney Morning Herald* likened it to the sartorial catastrophes that adorned Australian sporting teams abroad. The *Herald* did not dispute that Australian diplomats should seek to stand out but added that they would not do so "by making sartorial arses of themselves as if to say, look, I am an Australian".

Other commentators ran riot. *The Bulletin's* David McNicol was sure that the idea would be rejected by the Minister, but he wondered what might come in its place. Would there be an instruction to Ambassadors, he wondered, that they must greet arriving guests with the cry of co-ee, serve fried witchy grubs as savories at all receptions and arrange a didgeridoo recital as standard embassy entertainment.

In *The Australian* another columnist took great pleasure in proposing his own style of dinky-di dressing, in which diplomats would be issued with barbecue aprons that would be covered in witty remark motifs such as "the hostess with the mostest" or "try my meatballs".

The Renouf rig, as it came to be known, was swiftly laughed off the national stage. The prototype remained on show behind a glass display case in DFAT until the new building was opened in 1997 and it has not been sighted since.

The problem that this and like episodes came up against was that Australians were searching for the symbols of national distinctiveness in an age that had turned away from nationalism as a creed in the shadows of the holocaust and the arms race.

The other dilemma is that we as a nation simultaneously need to stress our belonging with a community beyond our shores – in reaction to our deep feelings of isolation – and to stress our distinctiveness, from the fear that we are seen as a second-hand, second-rate imitation of a more authentic society and culture.

A powerful response in the 1980s and 1990s was to compensate for a sense of Empire belonging with a sense of regional belonging. Australia found an Asian destiny with a sense of messianic purpose. Partly it was a result of the figures: proximity, trade, involvements, immigration, the growth figures of the Asian tigers.

Four key government reports charted Australia's Asian destiny in the 1980s: the Dibb Report recommending a more geographically-focused and independent Defence policy; the FitzGerald Report on immigration and multiculturalism; the Ingleson Report on Asian studies in Australia; and the Garnaut Report on Australia's economic imperatives in enmeshing with a rising Asia. The common theme of each of these reports was that Australia was embarking on a new voyage of self-renewal; that taking our place in the world would require charting a new course in who we were at home.

But Australia's new Asian destination brought new anxieties.

First, there was the fear that Asia's dynamism highlighted Australia's own failings. As the Asian tigers boomed, Australia struggled through two decades of recessions, stagflation and painful reforms. Asia represented an existential challenge: either reform or become the poor white trash of Asia.

Second, there was the threat of exclusion. Asia's successes brought with them a belief among some Asian leaders that their success was based on distinctively Asian values. "Asia" was about cultural continuities, and more importantly, about common differences from the once-dominant Western cultures. Asian countries successes demanded solidarity in the face of Western dominance and jealously; only by standing together could Asian societies forge an independent path. In this discourse, Australians relived the nightmare of being pushed out of the imperial nest 20 years before. The fear of exclusion from Asia drove a powerful urge to enmesh with the region.

The third fear was that as Australia's prosperity became ever more dependent on Asia, it would be forced to choose between this and its dependence on the United States for its security. The answer was to deny there was a choice by asserting that our region was not Asia but the Asia Pacific. While Dr Mahathir could quibble with Australia's claim to be a part of Asia, not even he could argue with its place in the Asia Pacific.

[Cue slide 16]

And in the 1980s and 1990s the Asia Pacific had a powerful logic. The societies on the rim of the Pacific Ocean had fought the second theatre of the Second World War and the bloodiest conflicts of the Cold War. They had forged the major alliances in the region, and their trade and investment flows underpinned the Asian economic miracle. Australia became perhaps the most enthusiastic advocate of the Asia Pacific as a region: it not only made sense to others, it assuaged our fears about exclusion and being forced to choose.

 The Asia Pacific was the answer to our place in the world: a regional insider, an activist, creative middle power given to designing and promoting regional institutions, and a steadfast ally, active in promoting an acceptance of the United States in Asia. Here was a creative solution to the diverging logics of our culture and our location: Australia could be a bridge between East and West.

So there's my interpretation of the results for the 60+ age group. Because they grew up in the heyday of British race patriotism of the 1940s and 1950s, they were even more shocked at the collapse of the worldview that supported that identity. They keenly felt the ambivalence of the new nationalism of the 1970s, and so all the more vigorously embraced a new sense of belonging in the 1980s: the Asia Pacific region. Australia's Asian destiny would be a new odyssey for Australia, a journey in which it would remake itself, reforming its economy, its monocultural makeup and its anachronistic constitutional arrangements.

And so we turn to the 18-29 age group. This cohort was born between 1981 and 1992, and came of age politically between 1995 and 2006.

The first and most obvious explanation for their more ambivalent attitude towards regional membership of any sort, and particularly Asia is the Howard government.

Howard never denied the instrumental importance of Asia to Australia; what he rejected was that Australia's relations with Asia had self-redefining, odyssey-like implications. For Howard, Australia has enduring cultural and values differences with Asian countries, and shouldn't kid itself about the need to or possibility of changing this situation. There are enough complementarities of interests to enable Australia and Asia to interact to the benefit of both sides.

The second explanation was that Australia's fears of exclusion gradually waned in the face of the impressive record of non-achievement of Asian and Asia Pacific institutions. The 1990s were a decade of disappointments and waning interest in solidarity and collective action in the Asia Pacific. By the beginning of the new century, Australia was becoming part of a thickening web of preferential trade agreements that defied any exclusive regional membership logic.

Third, the economic fortunes of Australia and the Asian tigers were dramatically reversed at the end of the decade, as our economic continued to grow strongly while Asian countries went into rapid declines. Indeed, the imperative for a while became to assert to financial markets that economically Australia was not part of Asia.

These impressions formed by people now between 18 and 29 years of age gave rise to a greater ambivalence about where Australia fits in the world. But I also think there is a range of contemporary forces, affecting the foreseeable future for this age cohort, that makes it skeptical about Australia's membership of any regional grouping. Without being too dramatic, I think these trends carry the makings of a second identity crisis.

The first of these trends is that Asia is changing shape. This chart shows the merchandise trade between East Asia and the Americas in comparison to East Asia's trade with South and West Asia for the first decade of this century. These lines show in dramatic fashion that the cross-Pacific trade logic that gave such authority to the Asia Pacific concept is being overshadowed by a cross-Asian trade logic.

As my colleagues Anthony Bubalo and Malcolm Cook put it in a recent article, Asia, once divided into vertical columns linked more vitally to the outside world than each other, has started to link horizontally, through trade and investment, infrastructure and energy linkages.

These developments mark the waning of the era of the Asia-Pacific and the dawning of a new, Indo-Pacific era. Indo-Pacific trade is dwarfing Asia-Pacific trade. New, Indo-Pacific alignments – between Japan and India, India and Vietnam, China and Saudi Arabia, the United States and India – are assuming a strategic significance on par with the San Francisco system of Asia Pacific alliances.

Asia Pacific institutions, such as APEC and the ASEAN Regional Forum, are relied on for less and less, while Indo-Pacific institutions such as the East Asian Summit and the Asian Caucus of the G20 are invested with high expectations.

It would be a mistake to misread or underplay the significance of these developments for Australia's sense of its place in the world. The Asia Pacific has been our talisman for close to 40 years. In it is invested our sense of belonging, our geopolitical security blanket, after the waning of the British Empire.

The Indo-Pacific era challenges Australia's place in the world in several ways.

The first is by bringing the fulcrum of world politics much closer to our shores. We have always lived in a world where the main arenas of competition and alignment were in the north Atlantic and north Pacific. But now, as the vital sinews of trade, investment, energy and security grow around Asia's eastern and southern coasts, the main arena of power competition will move towards our own hemisphere and longitudes.

The second is by resurrecting the tension between our alliance with the United States and our trade dependence on Asia. This dilemma has been sharpened within the last year as China has become our major trading partner. We are now in the same situation as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan – all of whose major trading partner is their ally's main strategic competitor.

The third is by challenging Australia to develop a continental foreign policy. We are the only continental nation without a continental foreign policy tradition. The United States, Canada, China, and to a lesser extent Russia, each balance the perspective on the world developed by their eastern provinces with the perspective of their western provinces.

Here in Australia, where over 90% of our population has always lived along our Pacific coast, our view of the world has always been a lopsidedly Pacific perspective. The Indo-Pacific era will challenge us to develop a vibrant west coast foreign policy tradition to inform and balance this Pacific perspective. A west coast perspective will need to think afresh about Australia's interests in South and West Asia, and how best to protect and advance these interests.

But perhaps the most profound challenge will be the need to rethink ourselves and our sense of where we fit in the world and what we bring to the world.

We have come to a stage in our history in which our both our civilizational and our geographical moorings no longer locate us. The decline in the significance of our civilizational moorings began with the unraveling of the British Empire and its justifications. They were salvaged for a few decades by a new values-based identification, the West.

But the meaning of the West is also eroding in the face of the power shifts we are seeing. The West's liberal democratic, free market creed is no longer a rallying cry in a world where communism is dead and societies experiment with different mixes of market and command economics and liberal and authoritarian politics. The West's self-confidence in its developmental and governance template has been badly shaken by the North Atlantic Financial Crisis and the deep malaise of governments in the face of high sovereign debt and resurgent financial sectors.

It's hard to be passionate about a set of values when the main target of your opposition strides from strength to strength, and is your main lifeline of economic vitality…

… and when the main exemplars of your values are increasingly an ineffectual, disputatious rabble.

And our sense of geography no longer locates us. The "Asia" that Dibb, FitzGerald, Ingleson and Garnaut wrote about 25 years ago was internally diverse, but had a basic coherence.

It was East Asia – ASEAN, Japan, greater China and Korea – a vertical belt of countries that had been strongly influenced by Chinese civilization and colonized by the Japanese, and that had remarkable similarities in terms of governance and development models. Unlike in Britain, "Asian" in Australia has always meant East Asia.

But that Asia is vanishing. The attributes that once distinguished it from the rest of the continent – the outstanding economic success, the stability of developmental

authoritarianism, the trade, investment and security linkages with the Pacific that far outweighed those with the rest of Asia – have waned.

The Asian economic miracle has now spread to South Asia and perhaps West Asia, chaotic democracy and quasi-democracy have emerged, and trans-Asian linkages are growing faster than trans-Pacific linkages.

The project of Asian engagement for Australia consequently has less and less meaning. We no longer fear exclusion because the chances of a coherent, effective exclusive Asian regional bloc forming have receded. We now have as many trade agreements with Asian countries as they have with each other.

And as Asia becomes more plurilateral and diverse, Asians who once denied Australia was an Asian country have begun to factor Australia into "regional" considerations as a matter of habit. Arguably people who came of age in the past decade have watched these shifts and contemplate their implications in the future, and are less anxious about a regional membership that is increasingly meaningless.

But this does not by any means solve the challenge of our identity or our place in the world. This is an uncertain and fluid world we are entering, in which we will no longer be able to depend on a single powerful protector and a set of institutions sponsored by that protector.

I think we are on the verge of a new phase of national identity debate, a debate that is stimulated by the deep geopolitical shifts in the world around us, as our last phase was. I believe strongly that the two are linked – that our sense of our values and who we are at home must arise from, and be informed by, our sense of our place in the world. A purely value-free pragmatic foreign policy is a route to disaster. A country that stands for nothing will fall for anything.

This phase of self-questioning will be different from the last. The civic symbols that were central to the new nationalism of the 1970s are now established and accepted. Even the unresolved issues, the republic and the flag, aren't burning causes in this country.

Nor will it be much about nationalism.

The anxious musings of Australia's elites about our sense of identity has been replaced by a confident, emotional nationalism, particularly among a younger generation. When I was going to music festivals, no one would be seen dead wearing and Australian flag. Now it's as de rigeur as tattoos and face piercings.

I think our new phase of self-questioning will be about civic values, about what we stand for and what we won't stand for at home and overseas.

It will be about the value we place on our prosperity in a world in which our biggest customer may not like our freedoms; in a world in which our per capita rates of carbon emissions stand out for all to see; in a world in which some of our closest neighbours sink deeper and deeper into abject poverty and chaos.

It will be about how we choose to exploit the resources that we have in abundance and the rest of the world wants, and about our willingness to take responsibility for the consequences of how those resources are used.

It will be about the value we place in our freedoms that were handed to us by others and largely protected by others, but which in the future may be seen as irritating or threatening by the powerful.

It will be about how we – who have lived in the security of an island continent all our own – choose to be connected, and disconnected, from the rest of the world.

Our sense of our distinctiveness in the world will need to move away from our natural environment and our collective quirks.

It will need to take seriously what makes us distinctive as a society. A country thought of overwhelmingly in terms of mines, beaches and golf courses won't be taken seriously for long.

It's a conversation I look forward to. It will have its fair share of farce and humour, it will have its ugly and pompous sides and more than a few bizarre twists. But it will also show our best side, as a diverse and vibrant society that cares deeply about its place in the world.