

CAIXIN ONLINE

July 20, 2010, 7:49 p.m. EDT

The APC is a dead parrot

Commentary: Australia's regional engagement live on, despite reports

By Andrew Shearer

SYDNEY -- Discussion of the Rudd government's late and largely unlamented Asia-Pacific Community proposal reminds me increasingly of Monty Python's famous dead parrot sketch. It is pretty clear that arch-realist and Rudd nemesis Julia Gillard can see this particular parrot won't fly: One of her first foreign policy acts as prime minister was to put it out of its misery.

So it is left to a dwindling band to perpetuate the myth that no one -- in Canberra or beyond -- was talking about Asia-Pacific regional architecture until Rudd "started the conversation."

This is typical of a view of Australian foreign-policy history that airbrushes out anything that does not fit the painstakingly crafted fictional narrative: that Australia's engagement with Asia is exclusively a far-sighted Labor mission rather than a decades-long bipartisan endeavor; and that only Labor governments have been involved in the grand project of building Asia-Pacific institutions.

The facts are more mundane. Engaging Asia has long been fundamental to Australian international policy and a priority for both political parties (albeit with differences in emphasis and approach). So too has ensuring that Australia is fully involved in regional arrangements that have the potential to influence our economic, political and strategic interests.

Hence it was the Hawke government that conceived APEC, Keating who elevated it to the leaders' level, and John Howard and Alexander Downer who succeeded in gaining Australian entry to the East Asia Summit.

In as early as 1996, as I have written elsewhere, Howard privately challenged the U.S. secretaries of State and Defense and their Australian counterparts, meeting for annual AUSMIN talks, to consider how the two countries could work together to develop and shape regional security architecture.

In January 2005, the Australian Embassy in Washington (a disclaimer: I was posted there at the time) co-hosted a major seminar with CSIS, one of America's leading think-tanks, on "Regional Structures in the Asia-Pacific." It was attended by approximately 150 government, academic and business participants from the U.S., Australia and Asia.

Today, the seminar papers make for interesting reading. They noted the development of new regional institutions and frameworks and asked whether they were appropriate to address the strategic and economic issues the region would face in the next 20 years and how regional arrangements should be shaped to meet emerging challenges. Sound familiar?

The participants list is a who's who of former and serving U.S. and regional heavyweights: Stephen Hadley, Paul Wolfowitz and Mitchell Reiss, all senior officials in George W. Bush's second administration at the time; Kurt Campbell and Richard Holbrooke, now serving President Obama in senior Asia-related roles; and internationally respected intellectuals of the caliber of Francis Fukuyama and Robert Kagan. Among their sensible conclusions: "that no single institution could address all of the region's security and other needs."

Let's get real. This is not a new conversation. With a lot more forethought and preparation -- and a lot less hubris -- the Rudd Government could have joined in and contributed another constructive chapter in a long and, until now, mostly distinguished bipartisan record of institution-building in Asia. [See this commentary on Caixin Online.](#)

This item was originally published on 'The Interpreter', the blog of the Sydney-based Lowy Institute for International Policy.