

## **Travel, Tourism and Diplomacy: Is the Australian Government a ‘Smart Traveller’?**

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### **Executive summary**

- Australian perceptions of Asia have undergone significant changes since the Pacific War, and ‘ordinary’ Australians are increasingly comfortable within the region.
- This article outlines the political influence of travel and tourism, arguing that Australian perceptions of Asia have been progressively shaped by a growing number of personal experiences of the region.
- Taking this into account, it goes on to analyse the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s system of Travel Advisories.
- It calls for the Australian Government to recognise travel and tourism as political acts that shape the nation’s diplomatic relations with Asia, and devise a more complex policy that acknowledges Australians’ overseas travel habits are more than a simple consular matter.

Today’s politicians and journalists (and, indeed, some historians) continue to believe that Australia’s foreign relations are directed by a number of important individuals making considered decisions at the highest levels. The story of Australia’s postwar diplomacy is typically traced from Evatt through Menzies to Whitlam, and from Hawke and Keating (with Evans’ input) to Howard and Rudd. Although it makes some efforts at cultural diplomacy, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade conceives of Australia’s diplomatic history in this way. This article calls for DFAT to reappraise its view of how and why Australia’s relations with Asia have developed to take account of the role played by people-to-people contacts. In particular, it suggests DFAT revise its system of Travel Advisories so that they serve a dual function as part of the nation’s diplomatic policy as well as a consular service.

As diplomatic historians, particularly those working in the American context such as Akira Iriye, Emily Rosenberg and John Dower have recognised, policy is not created in a vacuum. While they may aim to devise rational policies which best advance the ‘national interest’, politicians, public servants and diplomats are themselves shaped and influenced by broader

society's norms and conventions. Such 'culturalist' readings of foreign policy are becoming accepted in even the most conservative of historical circles, including the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, and their scholarly organ *Diplomatic History*.

The history of Australia's relations with Asia also must be seen within its broader social and cultural context. Historically, official policies have been shaped by many of the same preconceptions, stereotypes and experiences that structure a great deal of wider Australian 'knowledge' about Asia. As historians including David Walker, Lachlan Strahan and Robin Gerster have shown, Australians have developed a long and complex archive of images, tropes and stereotypes about Asia and Asians. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries these were largely (although not exclusively) negative, portraying Asians as diseased, dirty, immoral – all in all, racially inferior – but also as hardy and able to withstand great hardships, and as such a threat to Australia's empty north. These images underpinned government policies such as the White Australia Policy and early defence policy, which aimed to keep 'threatening' Asia at bay by fostering closer co-operation with the region's European colonial powers.

This image began to change in the postwar period, as Australians gradually developed a more complex understanding of the societies and cultures to their north. The Orientalist genre, premised on a collective rendering of Asians as 'the Other', has been steadily losing currency over the past fifty or sixty years. Australians progressively began to imagine Asia less as a forbidding place populated by inscrutable characters, and instead came to conceive of the region as a much more knowable, everyday place. No longer does common parlance refer to a supernatural Oriental 'mind'; instead Asians, like Europeans or Americans, are typically imagined in a more realistic way as individuals influenced by a range of motivations. There are many complex causes for this shift such as the progress of international politics – including wars, terrorist acts and independence movements – as well as immigration and trade links. And other forms of representation including literature, art and a globalised popular culture all have impacted on broader attitudes to Asia. In an era defined by the increasing regularity of movements across borders, however, travel and tourism are particularly important (though often ignored) elements contributing to the cultural context sustaining official relations between Australia and Asia.

Australians have long been inveterate travellers. In the *Oxford Book of Australian Travel Writing*, historians Ros Pesman, David Walker and Richard White have argued that travel has been 'essential to the experience of living in Australia', as generations of young (and not-so-young) Australians set off to discover 'civilisation' elsewhere. As enthusiastic initiators of the new consumer culture, Australians were keen participants in the postwar travel boom. During the 1950s, the tourism industry underwent its first real boom, with the number of international tourists around the world growing by 10% each year. Initially, most Australians set their sights for destinations that were rather like home – New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. These choices signified their strong sense of connection with nations sharing their values and 'way of life'; or, in the parlance of foreign relations, Australia's 'history'.

As the tourism industry expanded in reach, however, Australians increasingly travelled to Asia, signifying an increasing comfort in and sense of connection with their nation's 'geography'. During the 1950s and 1960s, most Australians in Asia chose Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan as their destinations. Singapore and Hong Kong still were officially part of the British Empire (Singapore remained so until 1963; Hong Kong until 1997) and the foreignness and difference of Chinese and Malay culture were tempered by the imprints of Britishness – statues of monarchs and prominent colonists, luxurious colonial hotels, official buildings built in European styles – which punctuated these cities. Japan had never been a European colony, and indeed the recent wartime past had taught Australians to fear the Japanese with a new vehemence; yet, during the 1950s, Japan was politically, economically and culturally reshaped by the US Occupation, in which Australian soldiers played their part under the banner of the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces (BCOF). These three destinations bridged European heritage with Asian geography. They also were firm allies in the Cold War, presenting a common front with Australia against the perceived Communist threat from the Soviet Union and China. As such, they were the ideal destinations for the timid, first-time visitor to Asia.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, this middle-class tourism was augmented by a new style of travel as droves of young people set off on the 'hippie trail' across Asia towards Europe. Born into the postwar world, many baby boomers had had less exposure to negative images of Asia than their parents. Fed up with the conformity of Western living, some were attracted and excited by the difference of the East. In particular, many were fascinated by the more exotic and strange aspects of 'Eastern' religions and cultures. They sought the 'experiences' on offer in Asia – meditation, drug-taking, surfing – as much as the sights, and encoded a new range of places including Kathmandu, Goa and Bali as must-see destinations. The hippie trail phenomenon opened the way for a wider range of Australians to gain some personal experience of Asia. It also helped institute travel to Asia as a rite-of-passage for young Australians, an adventure which allowed them to enjoy themselves and explore the world, at little cost.

The most significant travel trend of all developed around the same time as the hippie trail. Mass tourism to Southeast Asia took off in a big way from the 1970s. At this time, the increasingly sophisticated tourism industry began to bulk-buy flights and accommodation, and passed on the (often significant) discounts to consumers through all-inclusive package deals. Australian holidaymaking to Asia began in earnest as prices fell. The number of Australian visitors to Indonesia, for example, soared from 18,017 in 1974 to 214,200 in 1994 – a rise of almost 1200% in twenty years. During this time, the number of Australians nominating Indonesia as their primary destination on airport departure cards was doubling every five years. In 1984, the Redgum hit 'I've been to Bali too' expressed a new truth: travelling to Asia had become part of Australian culture, a key ingredient in the nation's 'way of life'. By 1998, Indonesia had overtaken the traditional kinship destinations of Britain and the United States to become Australia's second-most popular travel destination after New Zealand. This trend has continued into the twenty-

first century, even as a series of crises including terrorist attacks, high profile drug-related arrests, and several epidemics threatened to take the shine off an Asian holiday. The year 2009 saw a record 550,000 Australians visit Indonesia, and all indications suggest that this figure will see another dramatic rise in 2010. Similar growth has been replicated across Asia, with many more Australians travelling to Thailand, Vietnam and China, alongside other Asian destinations, over the past decade.

By the end of the twentieth century, tourism had become a dominant mode of Australian interaction with Asia, and this has shaped the way in which the region is perceived at all levels. Individual insights have built upon each other, and collectively have been responsible for several shifts in mainstream Australian perceptions of Asia. Although some Australian holidays in Asia have turned sour, overall tourism has offered Australian visitors a benign introduction to the region. The tourist industry is predicated on showcasing foreign destinations in a non-threatening way. Places where visitors congregate tend to spawn a tourist-friendly atmosphere, with English-speaking guides, international restaurants and the presence of fellow-tourists mitigating any significant sense of threat. Further, tourists are primarily consumers, and ultimately retain a sense of control and agency over their experiences. Anxieties about Asia have been hard to sustain alongside happy snaps of sun, sand and surf, or of a rite-of-passage backpacking trip. Of course, not all travel experiences have been positive, and negative images of Asia as dangerous, poor, dirty, corrupt and morally ambiguous continue to resonate with some Australians, reappearing in debates about immigration or foreign ownership of local industries. The inequalities which structure relationships between first world tourists and third world hosts also impact on Australians' views about Asia. As hundreds of thousands of personal experiences turned into millions, however, Asia became recast as an almost banal entity: Australia's 'pleasure periphery' rather than the 'threatening north'.

As popular attitudes began to change, they created the space for governments to implement policies designed not to insulate their nation from Asian influence, but instead to increase Australia's contacts with Asia. Even the hardest-headed realist admits that a foreign policy which runs against the broader society's values and beliefs is not sustainable in the long term; and this is particularly so in a participatory democracy such as Australia's. The positive attitude to Asia encouraged by travel and tourism allowed the diplomatic tropes of engagement and enmeshment with Asia to flourish from the 1970s, leading to the ever-greater regional co-operation which marks contemporary Australian diplomacy. As such, travel and tourism are explicitly political acts, which determine the discursive boundaries within which policy can be formulated.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade nonetheless fails to take account of the political and diplomatic impact of travel and tourism. Instead, it conceives of Australians' proclivity for travel primarily as a liability, the potential for which is managed by DFAT's consular services branch. Its major activity in this direction is the maintenance of a range of Travel Advisories widely disseminated under the Smart Traveller banner. Travel Advisories currently are in place for 170 countries, extending from Afghanistan to

Zimbabwe. They cover threats including terrorism, political instability and crime, and provide regular updates on natural disasters, pandemics and other crises. To make the Travel Advisories easy to understand, DFAT distils all the intelligence from its own staff and from the National Threat Assessment Centre into an overall rating, ranging from Level 1: Be Alert to your Own Security through to Level 5: Do Not Travel.

Australian federal governments had attempted to manage citizens' overseas movements, usually through the issue of passports and visas, since World War I. A number of occasional travel bulletins and advisories were released from the 1980s, and a review of its consular branch in 1999 saw DFAT update and expand its system of issuing Travel Advisories. Their dissemination remained decentralised, however, and few travellers were aware of DFAT's advice. The use of passenger aircraft as weapons in the 11 September 2001 terrorist bombings cast a shadow on tourist travel, which was further darkened by the subsequent SARS pandemic of 2002-03. Most important in the Australian context were the Bali bombings of 12 October 2002, in which 88 Australians lost their lives alongside 114 others. Following the Bali bombings, questions regarding the extent of the government's responsibility for Australians overseas took on a new urgency. DFAT was criticised for not publicising intelligence about the potential terrorist threat to foreigners in Indonesia. One article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 19 October 2002 summed up the sentiment with its headline: 'Why didn't they tell us what they knew?' The Senate's Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee instigated a report into *Bali 2002: Security Threats to Australians in South East Asia*, which found that 'probably not one' Australian in Bali at the time of the bombings was aware that DFAT advised the deferral of non-essential travel to Indonesia, including Bali.

DFAT reacted strongly to the criticism. Travel Advisories became more institutionalised, and their scope was expanded to cover a wider range of issues. DFAT also took control of their propagation. At the forefront of the change was the website, [smartraveller.gov.au](http://smartraveller.gov.au), launched with a \$9.7 million publicity campaign in August 2003. After this time, Australians could access Travel Advisories on the internet, by a fax-back system, through email subscription, through posters at DFAT offices and Australian consulates, and on touch-screen kiosks in major Australian airports. Advertisements on television and in print media promoted the Smart Traveller website as 'a must see destination'. With the launch of the [Charter for Safe Travel](#) – a partnership program between DFAT and the travel industry – travel agents undertook to dispense the latest travel advice to tourists as they made their bookings. Travel articles in the mainstream and specialist press also began to feature text-boxes detailing the current Travel Advice for featured destinations. The widespread publicity brought DFAT's Advisories into the public sphere. By 2004-05, the [smartraveller.gov.au](http://smartraveller.gov.au) website was recording 217,000 page views per week, a 32% rise on the previous year.

The Smart Traveller system was the result of ad hoc decision making, rushed into effect following international crises, rather than considered policymaking taking account of the complex role of travel and tourism in Australian diplomacy. Developing in reaction to

criticism following major crises overseas, DFAT's travel advisories function in a largely defensive capacity. Following the Bali bombings, John Howard stated that 'our first responsibility is the safety of Australians'. Travel Advisories serve to warn travellers of any and all potential threats in order to shield the government from responsibility or liability in the event of their death or injury overseas. As journalists Daniel Ziffer and Bill Bingley noted in *The Age* in early 2008, 'Smart Traveller paints a dim, dangerous picture of the world beyond our shores'. The *Sydney Morning Herald* travel columnist Ben Groundwater recently satirised Smart Traveller as 'Scared Traveller'.

The Australian Government does not release the specific intelligence that leads it to set its Advisory levels, and so it is impossible to judge whether they are set at justifiable levels. Several critics (including high-level diplomatic representatives of foreign nations) have noted that Travel Advisories appear imbalanced, privileging Australia's historical allies in Europe and the United States at the expense of nations in Southeast Asia. Indonesian, Malaysian, Singaporean and Thai leaders have repeatedly protested that DFAT's Travel Advisories are exaggerated, and encourage perceptions that are out of proportion to actual risks. They have pointed to the fact that several Western nations with long histories of major terrorist attacks – including the United States and the United Kingdom – attract lower DFAT Advisory levels than Southeast Asian nations with no such track record. This apparent imbalance continues to the present day. After a terrorist plot targeting freight and passenger aeroplanes reportedly heading to the United States via Europe was discovered in late October 2010, the United Kingdom's Home Office assessed its domestic threat level as 'Severe' (the second-highest level) and warned that 'a terrorist attack is highly likely'. The United States' Department of Homeland Security assessed its threat as 'Elevated', with all domestic and international airports facing a 'High' threat – also the second-highest on its five-level system. Yet, as of 1 November 2010, the DFAT Travel Advisories for both nations remained at Level 2: 'Exercise Caution', with no mention of the updated situation. By way of contrast, the Travel Advisory for Indonesia was at Level 4 – 'Reconsider your need to Travel' (at which level it has remained since 2001) with a detailed description of all significant terrorist-related activity in the nation over the past decade – a feature which is notably absent in the Advisories for the United Kingdom and United States.

In spreading negative images of foreign countries – and particularly those in Southeast Asia – DFAT's consular policy contradicts and undermines the Department's efforts in other areas, and particularly in cultural diplomacy. Although the history of Australian travel to Asia shows that Canberra does not, and cannot hope to, control 'ordinary' Australians' images of Asia, it does intervene in the creation and management of perceptions in several ways. While never as active in the field of cultural diplomacy as the United States, Australia has developed and devised a number of educational and cultural exchange programs. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade supports organisations and programs including Asialink, the Australia Awards, the Asia-China Council, and the Australia-Indonesia Institute – to name just a bare few – in order to foster positive mutual perceptions between Australia and Asia. Clearly, DFAT's consular

and cultural diplomacy offices are working at cross-purposes, pursuing policies that contradict and undermine, rather than support and buttress, each other. This fundamental contradiction between diplomatic rhetoric and consular policy has led to friction in Australia's relations with several Southeast Asian leaders over the past decade.

Policymakers would do well to take account of the 'cultural turn' in diplomatic history. A recognition of travel and tourism as a key element in Australia's foreign relations would see the formulation of Travel Advisories that balance the need to keep Australians informed about the risks of travelling overseas with the importance of travel in the formation of Australian perceptions of foreign (particularly Asian) nations. As a result, Travel Advisories could serve a dual function, as part of the nation's diplomatic policy as well as a consular service and thus overcome some of the contradictions that plague the Smart Traveller policy as it currently stands.

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