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Much ado about relations with Asia

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FOR Australians these days, Sydneysiders more than most, events Asian is commonplace. The New South Wales State capital has the highest concentration of people from Asia.

Thus it was across the city the other day, 12 hours apart, that the Prime Minister, John Howard, and the leader of the Opposition, Kim Beazley, were reinforcing the bipartisan goal of Australia's engagement with Asia. Not that that came out of any orchestrated intent.

Howard was launching the AustralAsia Centre of the New York-based Asia Society. Beazley was launching a book by one of Australia's foremost Asian specialists, Is Australia an Asian Country? They were signal events, pressing on issues of the day. They made the predictable headlines.

Howard used the occasion to condemn Pauline Hanson. That was what many Australians had been waiting to hear from the Prime Minister since the divisive race remarks of the independent MP in her maiden speech to Parliament last September.

In the time of Howard's prevarification, the Hanson prejudice has ballooned into a movement that launched Pauline Hanson's One Nation party.

The headline that came out of the Beazley launch at the Museum of Sydney did not make the front pages, but it was no less clarion: "Asianise or atrophy".

Some observers wished the cut and thrust of politics allowed for a better co-ordination of effort to work towards a bipartisan goal.

Howard, in his most comprehensive denunciation of the views of Hanson, accused the independent MP of seeking to exploit fear and instability without offering solutions or hope.

Of the people drawn to Hanson, Howard reserved "the most sensitive understanding", and promised a "serious and effective" response to the insecurity and uncertainty of Australians at the pace of change.

If there was any solace from Howard, from the ballroom at Sydney's ANA Hotel in the black-tie company of the captains of industry and the top end of town, it was undermined by the simplistic message that came out of the museum surroundings that Beazley presided over.

Asianise or atrophy - in the view of Dr Paul Monk, the affront to identity that such an injunction provokes was one of the factors in the rejection of the former Prime Minister Paul Keating in the last elections.

It certainly is a factor in the rise of the One Nation movement that last week prompted the heads of 11 churches that made up the National Council of Churches to issue a pastoral letter calling on Australians to reject "voices that call forth resentment, racism and hate".

Monk is head of research at a Melbourne-based private consultancy, the International Business Institute.

As a former China specialist in the Office of National Assessments, the intelligence-gathering unit in the office of the Prime Minister, he views with alarm the thrust of that message attributed to Professor Stephen Fitzgerald, author of Is Australia an Asian Country?

Fitzgerald, a former Ambassador to China, is chairman of the Asia-Australia Institute in the University of New South Wales and one of Australia's most distinguished scholars on Asia.

His was a book "destined to be one of the important books of the decade", in the reading of Paul Kelly, the international editor of The Australian.

FitzGerald in his book castigates Australia's elites across the board for a cultural and intellectual gap that has failed to prepare them and the country adequately for the rise of Asia.

FitzGerald contends that Australians cannot succeed in Asia without changing their thinking, behaviour and responses. He condemns both sides of politics in Australia for failing to provide the leadership needed for this change.

As Kelly puts it: "If Asia is the most important foreign priority of this country, why, after 40 years of substantial engagement, don't our elites possess in numbers Asian languages or even a basic knowledge of the history, geography and culture of the region with which they deal?"

FitzGerald spares none of the elites in laying the blame. As he notes in his book:

"In the whole of the Australian Parliament there is still only one person who is fluent in an Asian language.

"There has never been a permanent head of the Australian foreign service fluent in an Asian language, or, for that matter, of any other Australian Government department.

"The same goes for the vice-chancellors of all the Australian universities, the general editors of our major newspapers and magazines and heads of television stations, the general staff of the defence forces, and the head of our major and most of our minor corporations."

FitzGerald puts forth an intellectual argument widely promoted in reviews of his analysis. Reduced to the trite glibness of a newspaper headline, critics such as Monk wonder about the efficacy of the message.

As Monk writes in a commentary in *The Australian*: "As with so many matters of public policy, so in this case, a strategy that will achieve its end must seek prudent and steady change, not some dramatic, almost panic-stricken great leap forward or cultural revolution."

Monk has the Hanson One Nation movement very much in mind, as he tells the *New Straits Times*. The sentiment Monk expresses resonates with the magnanimity and prudence called for previously by leaders such as Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and Singapore's Information Minister George Yeo against projecting the success in Asia in triumphal terms.

Monk directs his biggest criticism at the suggestion that Australians should jettison their European heritage.

"There is every reason for Australia to deepen its knowledge of Asia... but the idea that we must 'Asianise' lest we 'atrophy' is, at best, a conflation of our need to look soberly to our interests in the region with the highly questionable prescription that we should jettison our European heritage and adopt 'Asian' ethical, political and cultural norms," he says.

"The reality is that we would atrophy, dwindle and vanish if we did abandon a robust sense of our freedoms and our distinctiveness in Asia and try to blend meekly into the surrounding landscape."

Monk expresses in Australian terms a desire articulated by Anwar and Yeo, shared by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, for relations between peoples open to the possibilities of the cross-fertilisation of cultures without the imposition of any one on another.

Just as Monk questions FitzGerald's assumption bordering on immutable truth of an Asia dominated by China, Dr Mahathir before Monk has dismissed as myth the impending dawn of the Asian Century.

The imperative is for cultures to engage in dialogue. FitzGerald may be right in his summation of Australia's elites but an oversimplification of the imperative may well provoke a backlash of repudiation manifest in the Hanson phenomenon.

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