Beyond the Cringe

Alison Broinowski wonders what, if anything, lies behind Paul Keating's rhetoric about 'coming to terms with Asia'.

For a few weeks after his election as prime minister in December 1991, Paul Keating was almost silent, apart from urging his ministers to get out into the 'real' world of electoral Australia. When he returned to the fray it was to stress, and link, two themes—Australia's national identity and its relationship with Asia. In February he declared himself in favour of an Australian Republic. Then followed a series of statements about Australia's future in Asia, culminating in his first visit abroad to Indonesia in April where he told his hosts that Australia needed a new flag. In June, he asserted that Asia would not be Australia's security blanket substitute for the British Empire.

At the beginning of April a Saulwick poll asked 1,000 voters whether they thought of Australia basically as separate from Asia or as part of Asia, and what they imagined Asians thought about the same issue. The result showed close to 70% opting for 'separate from Asia' for both questions. What is surprising, in view of the repeated exhortations we hear about Australia's need to 'come to terms' (whatever that means) with 'Asia' (whatever that is), is that over a quarter of the respondents thought that we are already part of Asia, and just under a quarter that we are already seen as such by Asians.

Nevertheless, the poll was widely interpreted by the media as proving that Australians rejected the prime minister's Asia initiatives. If a survey of 1,000 respondents proves anything, that was not what the poll proved. The prime minister had talked about Australia's growing engagement with Asia in trade and investment, defence, and peacekeeping—what we are doing. The Saulwick poll talked about national identity—who we are.

The two are by no means identical, yet they run together in Australia like tram tracks. Mr Keating crossed from one to the other in his speech to the Australia-Asia Institute in Sydney in April, when he said that Menzies-style Anglophilia was holding Australia back from realising its destiny as an Asia-Pacific nation. In his remarks about the flag in Jakarta, he implied that republicanism was a means of gaining acceptance in Asia. In a speech to the Hong Kong Australia Business Association, he said that Australia could not ride on Asia's back as once, by means of preferential access for Australian primary commodities to British markets, it had ridden on the sheep's back.

At this, the chattering of the classes who follow the national identity debate rose to a crescendo and logic and clarity were largely lost. The loudest to urge 'coming to terms' with Asia are those who have not done so and don't intend to do so themselves. Our lack of Asia-facility is often bemoaned by those who have never learned an Asian language and won't employ those who have. Our ineptitude in Asia is harped upon by people with a renewed cultural cringe.

On the other hand, those with professional and cultural umbilical cords tied to Europe strongly resist transferring them to Asia. They rationalise their distaste and disguise their ignorance, as Professor John Passmore of ANU did in June, by stating that Australians are the heirs of a superior civilisation. A more sophisticated rationalisation came from Professor Claudio Veliz at a Shell seminar in Melbourne in July when he argued that we should be offering to...
Australianise Asia, not vice versa, since Australia was an inspiration for many Asians, a society which they would admire more the less it sought to be like their own.

For all Keating’s new rhetoric much of this debate is familiar. Australia has had pro-Asianists in every generation since 1788, people who wanted to merge with the region through trade, colonisation, missionary efforts, migration or study. Some did so. While the Australian colonies were part of the British empire in the far east, interchange of this sort was freer than after 1901, when determination to keep the protective tariff and White Australia meant excluding as many Asian goods and people as possible. Those who urged trade with newly industrialising Japan were called traitors by The Bulletin. Gradually, the Japanese exploratory missions which had visited Australia in the late 19th century seeking complementary trade got the message and desisted.

Even so, James Murdoch and A L Sadler, who established Oriental Studies at Sydney University, spoke often of the need for Australians to know more about China and Japan. One of their lecturers was Miyata Mineichi, who also tutored the young Hermann Black in Japanese and who later advocated renewed efforts on Australia’s part to take its place as a southern Asian country.

When Australia found itself critically short of Japanese speakers during the Pacific War, Black, because of his German ancestry, was not used. W McMahon Ball, the Australian representative on the Allied Council in occupied Japan had no knowledge of Japanese history or language. Nevertheless, in his later radio talks he became a lone voice calling for politicians to stop ‘relying on a Western military presence to keep Asia away from us’.

A few politicians, like Sir George Pearce as early as 1922, were prepared to admit that ‘whilst racially we are Europeans, geographically we are Asiatic’, adding that events in Japan and China were of more importance to Australians than those in Belgium and Holland. Australia’s first foreign service posts were chosen on that realistic assumption, even though until well after World War Two there were more votes in defence and in restricting Asian immigration than in ‘coming to terms’ with Asia. Nevertheless, once it became clear that the era of European colonial domination was over, talk about helping Asians less fortunate than ourselves, about defending those who valued freedom (anti-communists), and about being neighbours of Asians ‘whether we liked it or not’ became common in parliament.

Mr Keating’s assertions about Menzies and Britain notwithstanding, it was Menzies who, as early as 1939, declared:

We will never realise our destiny as a nation until we realise that we are one of the Pacific Powers...we are not subordinate; we have no secondary interest in the Pacific; we have a primary interest in it.

Nevertheless, talk about the Western Alliance persisted into the post-1983 Labor years, and Australia’s position became increasingly bifurcated, with one foot, that of defence and foreign policy, in the North Atlantic and the other, of trade and investment, increasingly planted in the Western Pacific. When the Asia-Pacific Economic Council (APEC) was born in 1989, by self-interest out of economics, a brief scramble took place among the godparents about whose baby this was. The North Atlantic won the day, and the United States and Canada joined the christening party. Although Whitlam had insisted on Australia joining the Asian group in UNESCO, at the United Nations our delegation still belongs with WEOG—Western Europeans and others—and Australia is a member of no purely Asian regional organisation.

As Foreign Minister, Bill Hayden was the first to foresee a time when Australia would become a Euro-Asian country, and the Hawke government was the first to have the breadth of vision to endorse the concept of ‘Asia-literate’, even though none of the Cabinet spoke an Asian language.

Each generation of Australians has had to redefine itself, and to rediscover Asia. The horns of our dilemma are always history versus geography, Western tradition versus Asia-Pacific location. We are not helped by the fact that ‘Asia’ cannot be defined and is infinitely various. But we have not helped ourselves by indulging in insincere rhetoric about Asia, or by holding endless conferences inside Australia, when our time and money would have been better spent actually living in the region. Worse, we have failed to ingest the knowledge of Asia and the respect for its cultures built up by Australians throughout our history, and have failed to teach that to our children.

If Asia is as economically and strategically important as our leaders say, and if its history and culture are as rich as some Australians have found, then our progress towards ‘coming to terms with Asia’ has been tragically slow. So slow, indeed, that you have to wonder whether we mean it. And if we don’t, how can we expect to be taken seriously, even if the Far Eastern Economic Review in its Asia 1992 Yearbook has at last listed Australia as a nation of the Asia Pacific region. Do we deserve it?

ALISON BROINOWSKI’s most recent book, The Yellow Lady - Australia’s Impressions of Asia, was published in March by Oxford University Press.