PEACE AND PROSPERITY: The Spiritual Challenge
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Melbourne Writers' Festival
Melbourne
23 August 2008

Paul Keating's Melbourne Writers' Festival *tour d'horizon* stands as one of the most expansive addresses on international issues ever given by a Prime Minister of Australia, in or out of office. The address underlines the breadth and cogency of Paul Keating's world view and the corroboration of it to principles founded in truth, justice and magnanimity.
He builds the address around a single question: can the well-off bulk of humanity assimilate a constancy of peace and prosperity or will a spiritless contentment hollow it out? The address marks the shift in world power from West to East, of Russia's marginalisation, of China's coming out, the need for a representative structure of world governance, the threat of nuclear warfare and a final question: will a universal peace be achieved and will it come about by human insight or catastrophe?

A prestigious American think tank told us recently that 66 per cent of humanity lives in high-income or high-growth countries; up from 25 per cent 30 years ago. A powerful statistic.

Since 1982, the world has experienced a 25-year-long wave of economic growth, overlaid by only two cyclical investment recessions: 1989–90 and 2000–03.

This extended period of high growth and low inflation has brought prosperity on an unprecedented scale. Growth has risen the world over in a long linear trajectory.

This period of macroeconomic consensus and stability has been called 'the great moderation'. A moderation in all the factors that go to the production of goods and services and their overall management in conducive monetary and fiscal frameworks.

And coinciding with this long period of growth and stability was the strategic epiphany at the end of the 1980s—the end of the Cold War—the bipolar rivalry that characterised and threatened the peace of the world in the second-half of the twentieth century. A bipolarity that, nonetheless, evaporated in an instant.

What replaced it was the unipolar moment of the West, with the American eagle perched victorious on its mountain lair.

That victory, by some coincidence, also came with the full onset of globalisation. The opening of borders to goods and flows of funds with its concomitant intensification of trade and financial interdependence. As it turned out, a globalisation of economic

growth annealed by a globalisation of peace. The first of a kind since that which followed the Napoleonic Wars.

The key question now and the central one of this address is, can that two-thirds of humanity in those high-income and high-growth countries assimilate that growth and prosperity, or will the condition corrode or hollow humanity out, slaking us of those earnest values and high convictions that have stood by us down through time?

More than that, will the seduction of secularity and self-absorption lure us into a bubble of spiritless contentment, sustained only the inability of others to organise themselves effectively to disrupt or appropriate it?

Is it a case, as Pope Benedict recently remarked, that the Western world is a world 'weary of its own culture', a world 'weary of greed, exploitation and division, of the tedium of false idols and the pain of false promises'? That is, a world without a guiding light, one without absolute truths by which to navigate.

John Stuart Mill made much the same point, seeing the great struggle of life as being between creativity and the 'despotism of custom' or perhaps, we could say, between originality and tradition, of authenticity trying to breach those tedious moulds of contemporary culture, replete with their false idols and chimeras of an idealised happiness.

Benedict told us recently in Sydney that 'life is a search for the true, the good and the beautiful' and we know that whenever those objectives become subordinated, we become lost in a morass of preferences and experiences uninformed by truth or ethics. Experiences, he went on to say, which detached from what is good or true, 'lead to moral and intellectual confusion and ultimately to despair'.

So, are we—those of us in that opportune two-thirds of humanity— capable of forging a second Enlightenment? One not solely dependent on science but one leavened by understanding and virtue, making the most of science? One that goes to the profound and innate dignity of every human life, transcending the old barriers of ethnicity and creed, and of course, geography.

In a world shrunk by transport and communications, vulnerable to shifts in climate and natural disasters and subject to devastating weapons and armouries, can a higher framework of co-existence obtain other than one governed by self-interest or nationalism or, indeed, by a misplaced sense of superiority?

Benedict also told us in Sydney that the State cannot be 'the source of truth and morality'. That that source can only be a set of truths and values which devolve to what it means to be human, one to each other, society to society, state to state. In Benedict's terms, one of God's creatures.

We are currently living through one of those rare yet transforming events in history, a shift in the power in the world from West to East. For five hundred years Europe dominated the world, now, for all its wealth and population, it is drifting into relative decline.

Will our understanding of this transformation and our acceptance of its equity for the greater reaches of mankind lead us to a position of general preparedness of its inevitability, or will we cavil at it in much the same way as Europe resisted the rise of Bismarck's creation at the end of the nineteenth century?

We can see with this the twenty-ninth Olympiad, the questioning of China and the resentment at its pretensions about being one of us. Even becoming one of us! The Western liberal press featured, generally in critical terms, the world-long torch relay, juxtaposing all that it represents and is good about it, with what it sees as China's democratic defects, viewing it almost exclusively through the prism of Tibet. Saying, almost, that the aspirations of this massive nation, a quarter of humanity, a legatee of a century of misery, dragging itself from poverty, is somehow of questionable legitimacy, because its current government's attitude to political freedoms and, in specific instances, human rights, are not up to scratch. Ignoring the massive leaps in progress, of income growth, of shelter, of the alleviation of poverty, of dwindling infant mortality, of education, of, by any measure, the much better life now being experienced by the great majority of Chinese.

In a Western and elitist way, we have viewed China's right to its Olympic Games, to its coming out, its moment of glory, with condescension and concessional tolerance.

The Western critic feeling the epicentre of the world changing but not at all liking it seeks to put down these vast societies on the basis that their political and value systems don't match up to theirs.

Henry Kissinger made the point recently, when he said 'we cannot do in China in the twenty-first century, what others sought to do in the nineteenth, prescribe their institutions for them and seek to organise Asia'. And he went on to pose the question: do we split the world into a union of democracies and non-democracies, or must there be another approach to regional and historic circumstance?

How workable would the world be if it were divided into democracies and non-democracies, along a demarcation line set up by self-approving, Jeffersonian-style liberals?

There is a view that should China become a democracy, a real one, many tensions in the global system would go; that democracies find peace with other democracies; that the former political–military state first turns itself into a trading state and as wealth and opportunity rise, so, too, do democratic values.

But what we must remember is that even if all the states of the world became democratic, the structure of the international system would remain anarchic.

India and Pakistan are democracies but this fact has not lowered tensions between them. Democratic Germany took on the rest of democratic Europe in 1914. Some would say that Wilhelmine Germany was not a pristine democracy but can we divine our way to peace in the international system by a beauty contest as to whose democratic fabric is finest or better than another?

The propagation of democracy is a fraught business but with the end of the Cold War, the liberal interventionists got right into their stride and, Iraq was one of the outcomes.

RH Tawney, the British historian and sociologist, once remarked that war is either a crusade or a crime. Woe betide the rest of us if the crusaders enjoy an open writ to underwrite military adventurism in the name of democracy in states which have not even developed organic domestic political structures to take it, much less grow it. Perhaps we should also consider John Stuart Mill's preference for progress before liberty. Or liberty at least in tandem with progress.

The fact is that for the first time in human history, we now live in a global system. Aviation and telecommunications have underwritten a connectedness that past generations could only have dreamt of. Television news and the digital age mark the events of day-to-day life in real time. No longer do we concentrate our affairs in our own parts of the world, rather we calibrate all we do against the rest of the world as a whole. Our mindset is now global.

From here on, we have to synchronise whatever we do within an overarching global strategy. A strategy which has to have as its basis the progress of human existence and not simply the propagation of democracy.

And it is not as if we have been denied a new canvas to paint out a better picture.

For the first time since before the First World War, the dissolution of the Soviet Union opened the potential for a new era of peace and cooperation.

Russia, humiliated but intact, let the bits fall away from its former Union of Soviet States. Wise men like George Herbert Bush, Helmut Kohl, Brent Scowcroft and James Baker saw to it that the bits came away other than in an outburst of triumphalism: that the bits were strategically parked in the quietest and least celebratory way to underwrite an orderly transition from Gorbachev to Yeltsin. And an orderly transition to the independent functioning of those Warsaw Treaty states outside Russia itself. Gorbachev even agreed to a reunited Germany within NATO, after 26 million of his countrymen and women had died releasing the grip of Nazism on their homeland.

George Herbert Bush talked about a New World Order, then lost to Bill Clinton. And what happened then? Well, nothing happened then! The Americans cried victory and walked off the field.

The greatest challenge we face, whether for managing incidents or easing the new economic tectonic plates into place, will be to construct a truly representative structure of world governance which reflects global realities but which is also equitable and fair.

For two Clinton presidential terms and two George W Bush terms, the world has been left without such a structure. Certainly one able to accommodate Russia and the great states like China and India.

Instead President Clinton and President George W Bush left us with the template of 1947; the template cut by the victorious powers of World War Two, the one where Germany and Japan were left on the outside, and still are 60 years later, and in which China and India are tolerated and palely humoured.

Sixteen critical years have already been lost. And it is not as if we are dealing with a world where things are the same now as they were sixteen years ago. The world is dynamic: sixteen years ago China was not a world power; today it is. Sixteen years ago, Russia was collapsing; today it is growing and strongly.

The fact is, we are now sitting through, witnessing, the eclipse of American power. Yet for those sixteen critical years, two American Presidents did nothing to better shape the institutions of world governance. To shape it for the day, for that moment in history when the United States becomes another power among equals, or near equals.

And there has been no help from the old powers, Tony Blair's Britain and Jacques Chirac's France. After all, they had box seats to the event, courtesy of being on top in 1947. But Blair's contribution was not anything new or free-thinking, rather he thought being an American acolyte was all that was required. Chirac was simply incapable of adding any strategic value to the equation.

The fact is we are again heading towards a bipolar world. Not one shaped by a balance of terror like the old one, but certainly not a multipolar one. In fact, one heavily influenced by two countries, the United States and China.

This will face us up to a number of major decisions and soon.

For a start, will we regard China as a force for stability and good, a partner in the world, or will we continue to treat China as an upstart economic adversary to be strategically watched?

Some will say, but what about Europe? Don't forget Europe; Europe is a pole.

I do not think it is.

Europe, in settlement of its twentieth-century conflicts, has opted for a cooperative regionalism where the prerogatives of each of the former sovereign states have been blended or subsumed to a homogenous whole. But a whole lacking that most crucial of all strategic ingredients—the political ability to conscript and direct a population; to respond militarily and do it decisively. To do it in its own terms and the terms of its population. In the long history of Europe this homogenisation is actually a welcome change but the challenge for Europe is to extend that supranationalism to others.

States like China and Russia still enjoy a power of galvanic action, politically and strategically, of the kind Europe had and used in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There may come a time when the young people of these countries refuse to be conscripted for military service by their respective polities. But that time is not now.

As Chinese military power grows in lockstep with its economy, it is reasonable to assume that the only other major economic and strategic force on the landscape will be the United States. Just the two of them.

But let us not leave out the Russians.

Russia's economy, while growing in strength from the burnt out wreck it was in 1990, will not be in the league of that of the United States or of China. But Russia will still be wealthy; wealthy enough to continue to field its massive arsenal of nuclear weapons. So whether you attribute to Russia full pole status or not, you can certainly attribute to it huge strategic standing.

It is more the pity then, that after that unexpected epiphany in 1989, the Clinton administration rashly decided to ring-fence Russia by inviting the former Warsaw Treaty states of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic to join NATO.

By doing so, the United States failed to learn one of the lessons of history; that the victor should be magnanimous with the vanquished. In this case, the victor and its agent, NATO, gave those former Soviet-bloc countries an invitation to actually jump camp. And in doing so, strategically occupying the territory that formerly belonged to the Soviet Union which came within the control of Russia.

At some time the United States will be obliged to treat Russia as a great sovereign power replete with a range of national interests of the kind other major powers possess.

In the meantime, the great risk of this sort of adventurism is that with NATO's border now right up to the western Ukraine, the Russians will take the less costly military option of counter-weighing NATO's power by keeping their nuclear arsenal on full operational alert.

This posture automatically carries with it the possibility of a Russian nuclear attack by mistake. The years of Russia's economic poverty, certainly since the collapse of its economy in the first half of the 1990s, has meant the Russians have allowed their surveillance and early warning systems to ossify. To compensate, they are keeping their nuclear arsenal on full operational alert. No need to stand by if you are not, in fact, standing by.

This leaves the rest of the world relying more on generals, battlefield commanders and intelligence assessors to restrain a nuclear response than it does the Russian President or his government. This means that while the Cold War is over, the risk of a mistaken pre-emptory response has increased.

Russia is the only country in the world with the capacity to massively damage the United States to the point of seriously maiming it. And ditto for Western Europe. Wouldn't you think that when the Russians surrendered their empire in 1990, US policy would have been adept enough to find an intelligent place for them in the overall strategic fabric?

That is, to have Russia as part of an enlightened framework of intelligent co-existence, thinking back beyond the Cold War to when we partnered with them to defeat Hitler. But even more than that, in people terms, to invite their 160 million, battered by the twentieth century, into the comity and wealth of nations.

Instead, the United States has conducted itself as unrivalled powers have done throughout time; unchecked, it exploited its position.

It has ring-fenced Russia, treating it as a virtual enemy with its west European and central European clients egging it on.

This week the United States signed Poland up to build a missile intercept system on Russia's border. Nominally, the system is designed to protect Europe and the Middle East from Iran. But even the Poles are now talking about having it to deter Russian aggression. NATO, an organisation rendered moribund by the collapse of the Soviet Union, has been refashioned by the United States as an organisation to extend American power and policy to the security order of Europe.

You could be excused for thinking that when the Wall came down the major states of Europe, Germany and France, along with Britain, would have developed their own security order to respond to their own national interests and culture. Certainly with reference to the United States but not mandated by it. But however likely that might have been, the end result is that the key decisions about European defence and security are made in Washington. Hence Europe's strategic impotence.

One of the negative aspects of these developments is that they play into the hands of Russian nationalists while making the hand of those Russians prepared to give liberal democratic principles a go much weaker.

The old West then complains about Vladimir Putin being a poorly disguised Russian autocrat and nationalist when the West has played a large role in creating him.

All of this serves to underline the most pressing problem of all and that is the continuing existence of nuclear weapons.

Nuclear-weapon proliferation is the single, most immediate threat hanging over the world today.

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty entered by compliant states in 1970 is on the verge of collapse.

The Treaty represents perhaps the most egregious example of international double-dealing of any international regime.

In a nutshell, the nuclear-weapon states signed up to the elimination of their nuclear weapons while, in the meantime, other signatory states undertook to forgo their development.

But now, most of the nuclear-weapon states are developing new nuclear weapons. Not only have they not rid themselves of their old ones, they are actually making new ones.

Tony Blair announced the New Trident Submarine Program in 2006 while the Bush administration has turned its hand to new bunker-busting nuclear weapons designed to attack underground facilities. The Russians, quick on the uptake, are also refining their arsenal.

The old nukes had the dubious advantage of existing solely for self-defence. This new variety of US weapons is actually being designed for use, for intended wartime deployment and operation. And ditto for the Russians.

What sort of future compliance can we expect from states already signatories to the NPT, let alone non-signatories, when the promoters of the Treaty reserve the right to ignore their obligations as to elimination, while designing and building new devices?

In that strategic quiet after the thunderclap that ended the Cold War, as Prime Minister of Australia, a non-weapon NPT signatory, I established the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons in 1995. I did it taking the opportunity of the strategic vacuum to move weapon states down the path of lengthening the fuse or time on their warheads while proposing to completely dismantle and destroy weapons no longer operationally deployed.

Robert O'Neill, the Australian professor of war and strategic policy who was on that Commission, recently wrote of his experience in approaching the five weapon states upon the report's publication. He said of the five, only the Chinese 'seemed willing to talk seriously about the changes recommended by the Commission'.

He said the reaction of the other four weapon states—the United States, Russia, Britain and France—was completely defensive. The Americans and the Russians made clear they were prepared to talk to each other but Britain and France, O'Neill said, saw nuclear weapons as desirable levers of political influence, devoid of which their governments would forfeit leverage in Washington and Moscow and within the corridors of NATO.

The then Prime Minister, John Howard, and his foreign minister Alexander Downer, who received the Report which I had commissioned, dropped it like a hot cake. The then foreign minister labelled it a stunt by the previous government. They did not want to be in the business of taking the issue to the United States, as I certainly would have.

All the more pleasing therefore, for those of us who know that the have and have not policy of the NPT is not sustainable, to see in January 2007 the former US Secretaries of State, Henry Kissinger and George Shultz, along with former Defense Secretary Bill Perry and Senator Sam Nunn, publish a joint call for the elimination of all nuclear weapons.

In October 2007, those four statesmen led a conference at Stanford University on ways of taking their proposal forward. Robert O'Neill believes momentum is building,

and he said on rereading the Canberra Commission's report today, he believed it makes more sense than it did in 1996.

The plain fact is, there can be no non-proliferation without de-proliferation. If the weapon states are not prepared to rid themselves of nuclear weapons, why would other states continue to deny themselves the kind of leverage that these weapons bring?

Look at India and Pakistan or even North Korea. None of these states are NPT signatories, yet India, by having these weapons, is now pulling a deal from the United States for nuclear technology. Pakistan's possession of them saw the regime of General Musharraf treated very favourably by the United States while North Korea continues to be handled with kid gloves.

And what a dicey proposition Pakistan is. Another one of those trustworthy democracies. Bhutto has been murdered, like her father, while Musharraf himself is now gone. Who is to contain and manage Pakistan's nuclear weapons for the long-term benefit of the rest of us—another flimsy coalition of political parties, another General?

It seems if you have nuclear weapons and flaunt them, you are more likely to be noticed and treated concessionally. North Korea is the exemplar in this respect.

Many people will think and some will say that with communications and the globalisation of economic wealth being what it is, an outbreak of major conflict seems more and more remote. That global interdependence and the shrinking of the world makes war a decidedly unproductive way of resolving foreign-policy differences.

People should be reminded that that was said at the time of the last great intensification of trade between Britain, France and Germany along with the growing US economy before 1914.

The lesson is that when the strategic bits go wrong, the economic bits soon follow. Certainly not the obverse: when trade goes well, the strategic wrinkles get ironed out.

As I remarked earlier, the structure of the international system is anarchic. Was anarchic; remains anarchic.

This condition cannot be remedied but structures to mitigate its most violent manifestations can be put into place.

Against this backdrop remains the open question about the West and its fibre. The question which was resoundingly answered by that generation who suffered the Depression and the Second World War and who delivered us into a new era of peace and prosperity.

Is our culture a culture made compliant by too much coming too easily, producing a state of intellectual and spiritual lassitude which can only be shaken by the gravest threats, be they economic, environmental or indeed strategic?

As that pendulum swings from West to East, are the motivations for the West's former primacy swinging with it? Has the bounty of science and industrialisation with its cornucopia of production and wealth encouraged us too far away from simpler requirements and concern for the needs of all?

Was the twentieth century a psychological age, as Roger Smith in his History of the Human Sciences pointed out, in which the self became privatised, while the public realm—the realm critical to political action for the public good—was left relatively vacant?

As societies, have we taken our eye off public affairs for way too long?

Let me return to the theme I touched at the beginning of my remarks.

Can we, all of us, assimilate, adjust ourselves to a constancy of peace and prosperity without lessening our regard for those enlivening impulses of truth and goodness? The search, as Benedict said, for what is good, beautiful and true.

A new international order based on truth and justice founded in the recognition of the rights of each of us to live out our lives in peace and harmony can, I believe, provide the only plausible long-term template.

The old order of victorious powers, of a compromised UN, a moribund G8 with major powers hanging on to weapons of mass destruction, is a remnant of the violent twentieth century. It cannot provide the basis for an equitable and effective system of world governance.

Just as world community concern has been ahead of the political system on issues such as global warming, so too world community concern needs to galvanise international action to find a new template for a lasting peace. One embracing all the major powers and regions.

This can be done but it requires leadership and imagination. It cannot be done without understanding and virtue.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant said some day there will be a universal peace; the only question is, will this come about by human insight or by catastrophe, leaving no other outcome possible?

Humankind demands that that proposition be settled in the former and not the latter.