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# **SUSTENANCE AND SECURITY: AUSTRALIA'S MULTI-LAYERED APPROACH**

**Alexander Downer**

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THE HON ALEXANDER DOWNER MP is the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Mr Downer was elected Federal Member for Mayo in South Australia in 1984. In 1987 he became Shadow Minister for Arts, Heritage and Environment, before taking on the role of Shadow Minister for Housing, Small Business and Customs in 1988. In 1990 he became Shadow Minister for Trade and Trade Negotiations, a position he held until 1992 when he became Shadow Minister for Defence. In 1993 he took on the Shadow Treasurer portfolio, before being elected Leader of the Opposition in 1994. Mr Downer stepped down as Liberal Party Leader in January 1995 and became Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs. In March 1996 he was appointed Minister for Foreign Affairs when the Liberal-National Party Coalition was elected to Government.

# Sustenance and Security: Australia's Multi-Layered Approach

## Opening Speech

THE HON. ALEXANDER DOWNER

It is my great pleasure to be able to speak at today's conference. Please allow me to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the Crawford Fund for its fine work in directing the national strengths Australia enjoys in international agricultural research towards the alleviation of poverty. I've spoken at many functions organised by the Fund, and I am always struck by its very practical approach to advances in agricultural research to better the lives of millions of people in developing nations around the world. This conference is very much in line with that fine tradition.

We Australians have long counted ourselves lucky to live in a relatively secure corner of the world. Although our neighbours have had their fair share of difficulties, until recent times years of political and economic stability had provided the basis for progress in many areas. Australians shared the benefits of this relatively benign regional environment with our neighbours in South-East Asia and the Pacific.

Recent economic and political events in places like Indonesia, East Timor, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Fiji show how quickly old assumptions can change. Now, I don't want to exaggerate the region's problems—indeed, most of the positive factors contributing to stability and security have not altered—but the region's outlook is in some respects more uncertain than it has been for many years. We find ourselves, in the words of the Chinese curse, living in 'interesting times'.

Some of the uncertainty derives from a growing appreciation of the implications that environmental problems have for the vexed issue of food security. Of course, we need to be level-headed about our approach to these matters. Prophets of Malthusian doom have a long history, dating back to Malthus himself, of getting it wrong. Many of you will also remember the apocalyptic

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predictions of the Club of Rome and Paul Ehrlich in the 1970s as to what our world would look like in the 21st century. But it is clear, I think, that development and population growth are putting severe pressures on natural resources, as well as causing severe air, water and industrial pollution. And water shortages are a growing problem.

Progress in agricultural technology has given the world the tools to produce sufficient food for everyone, yet over 800 million people around the world remain chronically undernourished today. 200 million children under five have protein and energy deficiencies. The largest numbers of people living in poverty are in South Asia and East Asia. Both regions have over twice the number of people in absolute poverty as Sub-Saharan Africa.

More than most other donor countries, Australia has a direct interest in reducing poverty in developing countries. Our future security, more than any other wealthy nation, depends on the success of efforts to promote prosperity in our region. For a number of years, the Australian Government has placed a high priority on helping developing countries achieve food security, an aim that is consistent with the focus of our aid program on reducing poverty.

This conference will hear from a number of eminent speakers on how these problems are linked with the seeds of conflict and how international research and development cooperation might play a role in underpinning international security. I don't propose to steal their thunder, but I do want to outline some of the steps the Australian Government is taking to address food security, using a multi-layered approach that encompasses security, trade and development assistance efforts.

## **Non-Military Threats to Security**

The question of non-military threats to security is one that has probably received insufficient attention to date, so I particularly welcome the Crawford Fund's efforts in convening today's conference and helping to focus our minds on the important issues involved.

Those issues also tend to fall between some of the categories we use in thinking and talking about the security challenges facing our region. But I might mention briefly here the experience of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the annual meeting of which I attended last month in Bangkok, as an example of how these issues are being taken up by governments, and of some of the initiatives that are under way.

The ARF, as many of you will be aware, is the pre-eminent multilateral security forum in our region. To date, its deliberations

have tended to focus on so-called 'traditional' security issues such as tensions on the Korean Peninsula, territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Last month's meeting also included constructive discussion of some of the difficult communal and separatist issues facing Indonesia—with all ministers present committing their governments to support for Indonesian territorial integrity—and recent political turmoil in Fiji and the Solomons.

Those issues are, of course, extremely important ones for Australia, and the region. But the meeting also allowed discussion of issues such as the impact of globalisation on countries in the region. Clearly many in the region are concerned, particularly after the recent financial crisis, about the potential for some aspects of globalisation to exacerbate the economic gap within and between countries, and for traditional social structures to be adversely affected.

These concerns need to be seriously addressed, and I welcome the attention the ARF and other forums are according to them. But as the Bangkok meeting recognised, we need to look at both the opportunities and the challenges that come with globalisation, and also at what nations can do, individually and collectively, to maximise the benefits and minimise the negative effects of globalisation.

I am encouraged that the ARF agenda has broadened in this way. Australia very much welcomes this growing sophistication and maturity in the regional security debate.

### **Globalisation and Trade Liberalisation: Positive Factors for Food Security**

The debate in Bangkok on the challenges of globalisation leads me to the first, and very fundamental, point I want to make about food security. It is this—that the building of economic and social walls is as illusory a defence of national wellbeing as were the walls of the Maginot Line for France in 1940.

We must remember that the expansion of international trade and commerce over the past few decades has enabled many Asian countries to make the transformation from essentially agrarian societies to prosperous industrialised economies in less than a generation. That same process took Europe and North America centuries to complete.

With prosperity has come improved access to education, information and technology for millions of people, in turn encouraging democratisation, accountability in government, and respect for basic human rights.

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Today, unfortunately, simplistic and counterproductive approaches to ensuring food security continue to hold wide sway. And it is the most prosperous nations—I'm thinking in particular of the EU, and the United States—that are, sadly, guilty of some of the practices and policies most pernicious to achieving a more equitable distribution of critical resources, including food.

The simple fact is that no single measure will do more to promote food security in developing countries than a reduction in trade barriers. Australia strongly supports food security based on self-reliance rather than self-sufficiency, as only through trade can food move from areas of surplus to areas of deficit. Equally importantly, access to wealthy markets allows developing countries to obtain the income to buy food and other goods.

Australia has been at the forefront of trade liberalisation through the reduction of protection and subsidies, particularly those involving agriculture. We continue to take an ambitious but pragmatic approach in international forums to champion the interests of free trade in agricultural products.

Why does this matter to developing countries? It matters because an organisation like the European Union spends around 50 per cent of its budget on agricultural subsidies. How can developing country exporters ever hope to compete on the international market when the Europeans artificially depress commodity prices through subsidies to their own agricultural production, marketing and export?

I now want to touch on some of our Government's many programs to help countries in our region establish greater food and water security. Those programs are important, and an essential part of Australia's multi-layered approach, but I cannot emphasise too much the need to reduce trade barriers. Only through such action can we truly give developing countries a fair chance to compete, earn income, and import the goods their people need.

## **Agricultural Research**

The first area of activity in this regard is international agricultural research. Australia has a long record of achievement in the field of agricultural research, and our research community has actively taken our technological achievements to the world. That is something of which all Australians can be proud.

The Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) is the main focus for Australia's contribution to international agricultural research. Bob Clements and his team are doing an excellent job in matching Australian expertise to the needs of

our developing country partners and supporting the work of the international agricultural research centres.

Of course, I must also commend the work of the Crawford Fund itself, which not only provides well-targeted workshops and training for developing country scientists, but also convenes excellent conferences like the one that has attracted us all today. At last year's conference, in this very room, I indicated that the Australian Government would continue to support the Crawford Fund, and in the May Budget we allocated \$610 000 for its work for the year 2000–2001. I am today happy to announce that our Government has decided to commit to that level of support for the Fund for a further four years, until 2004–2005.

### **Food Security Activities**

Our second avenue of effort aims to increase the food security of our development partners through targeted activities funded by the aid program. I have made a pledge of \$1 billion for food security for the four-year period from July 1998. The pledge covers not only immediate food aid needs, but also aims to boost agricultural production, research and development, and skills and systems. Activities include developing food mapping systems and enhancing women's access to resources. Two years into that program, we are on track to meet that target.

The challenge now facing us is to find sustainable ways to increase yields without causing further damage to our fragile environment. The complementarity between research and other aid activities must be fully and wisely exploited. Developments in biotechnology and genetically modified crops could deliver a second Green Revolution, and these new technologies must be safely put to use in the battle against world hunger.

But increasing yields is only part of the answer. Globally there is at present no shortage of food. There are, however, distribution problems. There is also a serious shortage of income to buy food—in other words, a poverty problem.

Income growth is particularly important in marginal rural lands where poverty is rife and agriculture remains the predominant occupation. People in these areas need money, industries, markets and communications, and the support of sound government policies. Two months ago, I released a rural development strategy for the Australian aid program that provides a framework for Australia's rural development aid activities that focuses on income generation for the rural poor.

### **Water Security**

While the theme of food security has been with us for some time,

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international concern is increasingly turning to the analogous theme of 'water security'.

There has been much speculation in recent years about the potential for future international conflicts to arise over competition for water resources and in particular over shared river basins. One recalls the 1995 remark by Ismail Serageldin, Vice President of the World Bank, that 'the wars of the next century will be about water'.

On the face of it, there is certainly cause for concern. Globally, the availability of fresh water has declined 37 per cent in per capita terms since 1970 as population growth and degradation of water supplies has outstripped global capacity to develop new sources. Almost half of the world's land surface lies within watersheds shared between two or more countries, and there are 260 rivers which cross international boundaries.

Not all commentators are worried by the prospect of conflict over water resources. In an article published last year, Aaron T. Wolf poured cold water (if you'll pardon the pun) on the idea of looming international conflict over water. Although there have been some minor conflicts, his exhaustive search of historical records yielded only one example in history where states had gone to war over shared water resources, and that was over 3,000 years ago!

In fact, shared water resources by their very nature have often encouraged cooperation between states, even in times of great tension. For example, the Working Group on Water Resources in the Middle East was the one mechanism that continued to function throughout the Middle East peace process, when other forms of dialogue faltered. Wolf cites the example of the Mekong River Commission, which continued to operate right through the enormous upheavals of the Vietnam War.

We should of course remain alert to the potential for conflict over water, particularly for conflict within states, but we do need to keep this question in perspective.

If claims of tension arising from water's availability might be open to challenge, problems derived from water quality are not. Between 10 and 25 million people die each year because of lack of clean water and adequate sanitation. This is where problems with water resources really hit hard, but it is an area where Australia can make progress, investing over \$40 million last year on improving water supply and sanitation infrastructure in developing countries. Our approach is based on Australia's long experience of dealing with water scarcity and the expertise we have developed as a result.

## Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, Australia is very conscious of the need to come to grips with the problems of food and water security, particularly in our own neighbourhood. Our multi-layered response attacks these problems at every level. Under our development assistance program we've developed a series of activities to address those problems directly. These are practical responses that take advantage of the expertise that we Australians have garnered over the years in dealing with our own agricultural and resource problems—expertise we are happy to share with our neighbours.

Australia has also taken the lead in fostering a more expansive debate on regional security issues, such as in the ARF, and in developing new mechanisms for security cooperation.

Finally, and most importantly, Australia remains committed to breaking down barriers to world trade, barriers that distort the distribution of food and other resources, and limit the access of developing countries to export earnings. The best guarantee of food and resource security lies in freer markets, and our Government is committed to ensuring that developing countries share equally in the benefits that globalisation and trade liberalisation can offer.

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