

Cut Through, September 17, 2026: **Revisiting Paul Keating's legacy: Australian foreign policy and national identity**

All timestamps are approximate

Bernard Keane (00:00)

Hi there, I'm Bernard Keane, and today I'm talking with James Curran, Professor of Modern History at University of Sydney. That's his day job, but my interest in talking to him is about this book, *Grand Ambition*, Paul Keating's *Global Vision for Australia*, which has just recently been published.

James is as far as I'm concerned one of the best foreign policy commentators in Australia and his observations are always backed by an incisive understanding of Australian history in its terms of its foreign and security and defence policy making. even though it's what 30 plus years

since the events that are covered in this book occurred. It is, I think, absolutely relevant to the sick situation in which Australia finds itself Now full disclosure, James is at the same school of history that gave me a PhD, so I'll allow people to make a judgment about that based on how they feel about such things. But James, congratulations on the book. It is

d despite I guess its slightly wonky subject matter, it is a compelling read. I found it absolutely fascinating and it's a testament I think not merely to your sources, which I think absolutely impeccable but also your skill at writing.

James Curran (01:18)

Thank you, Bernard.

Bernard Keane (01:18)

a lot of us lived through and obviously you did as well a lot of us lived through this stuff

James Curran (01:22)

Mm. Mm.

Bernard Keane (01:24)

and remember

a lot of it. But one of the things that I guess that even those of us who were moving through it and didn't quite see through it, obviously couldn't see through a historical prism at the time was beating

re defeats Hawke and becomes Prime Minister almost literally the day the Cold War is ending.

James Curran (01:41)

Mm.

Bernard Keane (01:42)

R removing at a stroke, you know, the the whole paradigm of Australian security and defence and foreign policy thinking throughout the Cold War.

J just looking back now,

how important do you think that was in terms of shaping the environment that Keating had to react to and that he wanted to impose his own agenda on

James Curran (02:00)

Yeah, well, that's right, Bernard. Look, I mean, I think it gave him a very early opportunity to demonstrate his intent that he was going to redefine Australian foreign policy for a new era. mean, you know, Australia didn't have the luxury of, I guess, what the Americans were able to go through at this point and indulge and sort of set out grand theories about the end of history or the clash of civilizations. And Keating had to sort of try and bed down, I guess, a framework for how Australia would engage with the region.

how he wanted to elevate the APEC forum which Bob Hawke had started in 1989 and which was effectively a forum in which finance ministers of the region sort of swapped statistics and talked about the economic settings. He wanted to sort of elevate that into a leader summit and put Australia into what he called the big league of international diplomacy. It's intriguing to think about this period as well because here was Paul Keating arriving in the prime ministership and by his own admission he said, look,

everyone thought my foreign policy was a blank slate. No one knew what my views were. And that's backed up by some senior officials that I quote in the book saying, look, he didn't have the interest that Hawke had in the Commonwealth or in South Africa or in the Middle East for that matter. So he came with this blank slate and Asia was the sort of tablet onto which he wanted to, I think, inscribe some new coordinates for Australian foreign policy. So I think it's important to mention too that in that early period, mean,

He really did gather some of the best and brightest as it were around him, some of the real diplomatic and trade talent that was in the Canberra system at that time to sort of work out how were they going to use this period, right? Here's Keating becoming prime minister just before Christmas. Two weeks later, he has to host an American president, George H.W. Bush, visiting. Only the second time a serving American president had come.

since 1966. So how were they going to use the opportunity? Now, at this point, there was a lot of tensions in the bilateral relationship over the export enhancement program, which was giving Australian farmers a hard time. Keating wanted to put all that kind of bilateral claptrap to one side and actually say to Bush, look, I'm going to give you a kind of an agenda for keeping America engaged in the region. And part of that is you've got to be more economically engaged.

We know the military is here, but you've got to you've got to plan a more surer commercial trade.

So I think in that space, you know, there he is in early January doing this with the American president. And let's not forget, there was a lot of concern that America might withdraw from Asia after the Cold War had been won in Europe, that it wouldn't be as heavily focused. And then in the following month, so he deals with one head of state from the United States, that's one half of the old great and powerful friends. Then in the next month, he hosts a visit from the Queen. And of course, this provokes outrage because of the comments he makes about

Australia having a necessarily independent outlook on the world. For some reason, this creates a huge controversy at the time.

Bernard Keane (05:01)

There's

also the t to to to use a phrase which Keating denied ever using, but there was the tweaking of the royal brass strap that enraged the indeed,

James Curran (05:10)

Right. Yes, he touches the royal person.

Bernard Keane (05:15)

people have been beheaded for less, so

James Curran (05:19)

That's right. That's right. But I mean, look, the thing is, mean, you know, I mean, there is it's almost as if I mean, I've been thinking about this a bit lately. It's almost as if circumstance these two visits, providing with an opportunity to say, these this is the American world. He's not trying to get he's not trying to sort of extract Australia from the America American world at this point, he's actually trying to make Asian engagement more relevant for the American political elite, right?

And then at the same time, he is trying to say to the Australian community, look, we cannot, because if Britain has moved on itself and joined the European community, we cannot keep looking back to this country in terms of our future in Asia. And the comments that he makes in a speech of welcome to the Queen are very mild. They're very moderate. I mean, they are so uncontroversial, but because he uses the word independent,

The conservative opposition at the time lambast him and say this is impolite, this is shocking, it's a tilt at republicanism. And I think for an Irish Catholic like Keating, who's grown up in the tribal labour culture of the 1950s and 60s, he has extremely sensitive antennae for this kind of comment. And then he goes into parliament a few days later and says, look, you know, you, the

opposition are tying yourself to a country that's not relevant for us anymore. And even more, it walked out on us.

in 1942 when Singapore fell. all of a sudden, you know, the modern imperative of putting Australia into, you know, a new understanding of its place in Asia gets connected to we need to get rid of these old this old British bootstrap stuff. And conservative Australia is enraged. And I can see the whole edifice. I mean, that already that already had a panic during the bicentenary. Now he was an Irish Catholic Labor Prime Minister getting stuck into the British connection.

And so, you know, creates a real storm in the relationship, but also in domestic politics.

Bernard Keane (07:22)

Yeah, talk a little bit more about Keating's sort of background in his early life, because in some ways there's there's a there's some apparent contradictions here. There's there's

James Curran (07:29)

Mmm.

Bernard Keane (07:30)

there's the fact that he rages at Churchill for for what Churchill did in Singapore and and Australian troops, but he goes to Churchill's grave on his first visit to the UK. in you know, in a in an almost ritual act of of of of homage. He he's a key figure in the New South Wales Labour right.

And therefore a very strong adherent to of the of the US alliance.

And yet he's later seen as not certainly not in Whitlam's league, but but in some ways

less less inclined to reflexively side with the US than

the than other figures. He and he grows up in this time that's dominated by the Cold War. and I

James Curran (08:08)

Yeah, that's right.

Bernard Keane (08:09)

mean, how do you think that shaped the figure that that became

the keating of the eighties and then obviously into the prime ministership.

James Curran (08:16)

Yeah, so I think, you know, here is someone who was born in 1944. So he grows up in the shadow of the Second World War. His early heroes, as you say, are Churchill, Churchill of the

1930s, not so much the Churchill of Gallipoli or the Churchill of 1942 in Singapore. He loves Churchill's gallantry and his fighting spirit. On the other hand, he loves Roosevelt's idea of a unitary world, you know, and I think he is starting to see

in this early reading that he does as a young man that Roosevelt is telling the European empires that it's all over, right? That the era of decolonization is starting. Now, look, I think it takes a while for Keating to put all this together into a worldview, but certainly you're right. mean, you know, by the time that Keating is really fascinated by Churchill, Churchill has been rehabilitated in many ways in Australia and around much of the English speaking world, but

particularly in Australia, has been rehabilitated as the kind of Cold War statesman, right? The guy that talked about the Iron Curtain,

Bernard Keane (09:18)
The Fulton's bridge. Yeah.

James Curran (09:19)
Fulton speech, Missouri, that's right. And some of the earlier dismissive comments about Australian troops fighting prowess in the Second World War, that Australians come a bad stock, the cable battles that he had with Curtin over the return of Australian troops, much of that has been forgotten. And there is a very strong

sort of English sensibility in Keating. I mean, as you say, when he goes on his first trip overseas, he makes the effort to see Churchill's grave. He goes to the Turner paintings in the Tate Gallery. He goes to the House of Commons and watches Parliament. He tries to make a visit to Australia House on the Strand. He does all the things that a lot of young Australians do. He loves the music of Elgar. And so I think this gives him more a sense of what's possible in politics, what the potential

of power is, right? Rather than, it certainly doesn't, I think, give him a sense of Australia should be part of this British world forevermore. In his maiden speech in parliament in March of 1970, he's already talking about, you know, the excesses of indulging in loyalty to Britain and the excesses of committing to the American war in Vietnam. And so I think he, I think what it's giving him is a sense of

You know, there is the capacity for Australia within these relationships to be independent or more self-reliant. I think that's what he carries through. But my argument in the book is that when he becomes treasurer, of course, he's focused on globalizing the Australian economy. And, you know, by necessity or really, he can't say much about foreign policy in that period. But that when he becomes PM, a lot of that earlier reading and that earlier thinking about Australia's

place in the world is sort of joined together. The prime ministership becomes the cultural identity and foreign policy bookend to the economic opening up of the country. And look, I do point out Bernard that in the late seventies, you know, he's shadow minister for resources. holds

Bernard Keane (11:22)

Mm-hmm.

James Curran (11:24)

that portfolio in the Whitlam government for the last few weeks of the life of the Whitlam administration. And in the seventies, he's going to Japan a lot and he's starting to give speeches in the parliament saying,

Australia needs to have the complexion of an Asian country, not a European one. So there is a foundation on which the Asia emphasis and intensity of his prime ministership is built. But I think it takes his coming to power in 91 for this to start being developed.

Bernard Keane (11:54)

of the things that that I got I was reminded of by the book is, and and perhaps this just reflected my my lack of interest at the time, is the centrality of trade to

foreign policy at this point,

which is makes makes you know the story that that you tell so much more relevant for now. And in you know,

James Curran (12:18)

Yeah.

Bernard Keane (12:19)

many ways we watch a kind of an alternate universe scenario play out.

back in in the early nineties in regard to America's fear of Asian competition, but obviously encapsulated

in Japan pro pre pre you know lost decades Japan, a Japan that that I maybe people have forgotten about now, but was was actually widely feared, certainly in

James Curran (12:41)

That's right.

Bernard Keane (12:41)

the US as this you know enormously potent economic force that had

that had moment historical momentum on its side. Now that that that story turned out to be very, very different. But trade and the issue of trading relations in the Asia Pacific is one

that's that's predominant. I mean clearly as you say, Keating was very keen to to elevate APEC to a leaders' forum and if

nothing else, give Australian Prime Ministers, you know, a a decent international meeting to attend rather than rather

than just chok But trade becomes

you know, the the the area where the biggest push is made and where Keating has quite significant success, whether it's sustained over the long term is another issue. But that becomes that's really central to do to a lot of this story, isn't it?

James Curran (13:31)

It absolutely is, Bernard. That's right. And I think it's central to understanding to Keating's understanding of power, right? And where power is shifting to at this point. Now, it was very clear through the 1980s in the hawk government, of course, that the flying geese economies of North Asia, Korea, Taiwan, Japan, in particular, were taking off. Right. And Keating, as Alan Ginjal, his foreign policy advisor, said,

that Keating, the first question he would ask about a country is what is its GDP? Because the GDP of that country would determine what you could do with it. So he was fundamentally interested in the economic weight of these places. And of course, you you had the Gano report on the Northeast Asian ascendancy come out in 1989, as I said before, Hawke's formation of the APEC Finance Ministers' Meeting. So there was a good base on which Keating could build there. But he is...

I think also talking about making sure that the Americans are kept on the streets, as it were, via trade. This is his message to President George H.W. Bush in January of 1992, that if the Americans are going to continue to look at Asia through a hubs and spokes model of its alliance system, that is with all the spokes going out from Washington to Tokyo, to Seoul, to Manila,

to Australia and New Zealand that in fact, better trading arrangements, a more integrated trading regime in the region is going to actually cement America's presence a lot more. It's going to protect Japan. It's going to help Japan, as you say, because of the fear that Japan would use its economic power at this point to perhaps translate that into a more forward leaning, potentially aggressive military posture.

This was also a way of sort of restraining Japan as it were. So that was the sort of message that Keating was giving to HW Bush in January, 1992. And in fact, at the end of that meeting Bush's national security advisor, Brent Scowcroft said to Keating and Ashton Calvert, look, you've articulated American trade policy better than we have, right? Now that's fine with HW Bush, but of course he's defeated later that year by Bill Clinton. So.

Keating has to start all over again. And Clinton says, look, I've just won an election on it's the economy stupid. And I can't be going to the American people and talking to them about some new gathering in the Asia Pacific that you're talking of, that is the APEC Leaders Summit. I need to be able to go to them and sell it to them that it's going to create jobs. Now, intriguingly at this time, Clinton is already aware of the fact that the American heartland is saying our jobs are looking like they're going to be well, they are already being outsourced.

to the market economies of Asia. So he was already aware of that sentiment, which as we know went on to sort of really fuel so much of Trump's Marga base and Trump's rise,

Bernard Keane (16:34)

Well, arguably Ross Perot that

was central to s lot of Ross Perot's appeal, he takes what, twenty percent odd of the vote in ninety

James Curran (16:43)

Run.

Bernard Keane (16:43)

two and helps helps Clinton win the White

House. So it's it's already there.

James Curran (16:46)

That's right. Yeah.

Bernard Keane (16:47)

You're absolutely right, and earlier than maybe a lot of us tend to assume.

James Curran (16:52)

Yeah, well, exactly. I mean, look, the Australian side had a huge job in convincing Clinton and the people around him that this was a good idea, because there were so many trade analysts in the Washington system who were still really harnessed the idea that the best way for us to do trade is a bilateral, notwithstanding the fact that they were getting into the North American Free Trade Agreement. That was one thing, sure. And that's where people like Kissinger, for example, said, that's where America needs to put all of its efforts. But

But the Australian side Keating, Ashton Calvert and Don Russell, was sent, was Keating's chief of staff and he'd been a principal economic advisor to Keating during the treasury years. Keating sends Don Russell to Washington specifically to get them over the line on the APEC Leaders Summit to lock the Americans into the first meeting in Seattle and then to get them on board for a second meeting that Indonesia would ultimately host in Bogor in the following year in 1994.

So, I mean, there was a huge advocacy effort that was undertaken here. The argument was being marshaled in all parts of that Australian national security and trade system. And I think, yeah, I think a lot of that has been forgotten actually, you know, to be effective Australia has to put up a really good argument and what the documents that I was given access to from Keating and others really show the way in which

they persuaded the Americans and the skeptics in the American system that that APEC leaders was going to be a good thing for the American economy as well.

Bernard Keane (18:31)

One of things that you really bring out, I think, is the extent to which Sir Hato was important to getting

James Curran (18:36)

Yeah.

Bernard Keane (18:37)

the trade liberalisation agenda up. Keating really seemed to work assiduously at that relationship, didn't he? And that seems to be is it fair to say, is it, you know, as as as important as his relationship with Clinton in terms of of his foreign policy?

James Curran (18:51)

Yeah,

absolutely, absolutely. And I mean, what's interesting is to watch the way in which Keating in a way, sort of diplomatically seduces both Sahato and Clinton and keeps each of them in sort of engaged and informed about what the other is saying about this idea of the APEC Leaders Summit. He knows Keating that he has to get Sahato on board in order to get the rest of Southeast Asia. But even before he does that,

he needs to get me the Japanese Prime Minister Miyazawa signed up. Miyazawa will only come on board if Indonesia is on board because the Japanese think that if you don't have Southeast Asia basically with Indonesia at the forefront, you won't get the rest of the region on board. And then of course he had to get Lee Peng. But yes, I mean, it's it's a staggering to think that through the 80s, there was only one head of government visit.

from Australia to Indonesia. Hawke went to Indonesia once.

Bernard Keane (19:49)

Wow. Okay. Nothing like that.

James Curran (19:51)

And yeah, and so here's Keating making his first visit in April, 1992, his first visit overseas as PM to Jakarta and a big effort just to listen to Sahado. Now, this is what Alan Gingell sort of

conveyed to me not long before he sadly passed away was that Keating used to just sit and listen to Sahado for the first sort of

15, 20 minutes of a meeting, just listen to what Sahado had and then sort of give his response and then outline what he was seeking to gain from the meeting. So clearly from the documents I saw, Sahado appreciated this. Sahado had a great affection for Keating's nationalism. He used to tell his advisors and even more his ministers in Jakarta, you should watch Paul Keating in parliamentary question time and just thank God that you're not subjected to that kind of treatment.

There was a mutual, I think, regard between the two, which is quite unusual. mean, here was Soeharto, a senior statesman, formerly of the, you know, the former leader of the non-aligned movement. But I think Keating, you know, clearly sort of making these comments on his first visit that Indonesia is the most important country

Bernard Keane (21:05)

Yeah, yeah.

James Curran (21:06)

to Australia in its future. This really, I think, is noticed in Jakarta. They can see there's a new prime minister on board.

Bernard Keane (21:12)

That phrase the most there was no more, I think it was no more important country than Indonesia. There's there's one that

James Curran (21:17)

That's right. Yep.

Bernard Keane (21:18)

would it got a lot of headlines at the time. but

James Curran (21:21)

Yeah, exactly.

Bernard Keane (21:22)

it did symbolize, it really strongly symbolized a new a new era in that

James Curran (21:26)

Mm.

Bernard Keane (21:26)

relationship that that Keating really made his own. he

James Curran (21:32)

Yeah, my word.

Bernard Keane (21:33)

had a he had this image, particularly from his treasury years of being this sort of cold economic rationalist and the

James Curran (21:39)

Mmm.

Bernard Keane (21:40)

You know, the the the the beautiful suits and the and the

James Curran (21:43)

Mm.

Bernard Keane (21:44)

you know remorseless attitude toward his enemies kind of bolstered that. But that image it took rather a beating, didn't it, when he he got down and he kissed the Kakoda Memorial in in Papua New Guinea in in 1992. And that the he seemed to bring a real passion to try to reframe our understanding of our history, particularly the the you know the World War II history, through the prism of the region and

That's that's for me, that's one of the most mysterious elements of of

James Curran (22:12)

Mmm.

Bernard Keane (22:13)

his this, you know, coherent vision that he's got is this intense

James Curran (22:16)

Yeah.

Bernard Keane (22:17)

passion to kind of get Australians to see things, see their own history through a different prism that's much more focused on where we live rather than where in civilizational terms we came from, I guess.

James Curran (22:29)

Yeah, yeah, exactly. And look, I mean, part of this was an accident of circumstance. He's prime minister at the time that the 50th anniversary of the end of World War Two is being commemorated. So there are so many occasions where Keating has to talk about these key battles in the region and what they mean for Australia. So you're right. I mean, I think he's trying

to wrench an understanding of the Anzac legend that had been kind of araldited to Gallipoli, the Western Front, and of course to the Middle East and say to the Australian electorate, look,

There were actually these battles that we fought in support of Asia and Asian peoples during a critical time of the Second World War. And perhaps that is the kind of baptismal font, as it were, for a renewed sense of Australian nationhood. Perhaps that too shows that Australia has kind of earned its place in the region, even by blood sacrifice. I mean, I think that's basically what he was trying to say. He recognized that Australia's engagement with the region, if you look at it objectively,

You know, had to deal with obviously the ghost of what Australia had to deal with fighting in Malaya and of course in Vietnam during the Cold War had to deal with the idea of forward defense that we were trying to keep the Asians as far away from Australia as possible. So he was a new way of looking not only at the Anzac legend, but giving the 1990s model of regional engagement some kind of historic foundation. And I think it's worth probably mentioning there briefly to that.

You know, he talks very deeply. You know, no one knew that that kiss kiss at the ground was coming. It's like a papal like gesture. Some some of the journalists around him thought he'd had a heart attack at the time. But but there is this deep wellspring in the Keating family about his uncle Bill. And Bill died on the Sandakan death march at the hands of the Japanese captors in the most brutal, awful way. You know, the body sort of just left by the wayside on this death march from Sandakan to Ranao.

And Keating used to talk about the fact that he'd go to the family's place sort of once a month in Annandale and they'd say a prayer for Uncle Bill. So he said to me on one occasion, look, one of our family died up there defending Asia. How do you get a thing like that out of its head? So this interplay of the personal, the commemorative, but also the Asian engagement agenda, I think created a very powerful reinterpretation of the Anzac legend. And as we know, the RSL went completely nuts about it.

And so did a lot of conservative politicians and commentators. This again, here was they thought, here's this guy rattling the cage again and shaking the foundations of what we understand Australian history and the Australian settlement to be. So, you know, I think really it's unparalleled just how much this prime minister really tried to tilt at all the pillars of what was a common or accepted understanding of Australian history.

Bernard Keane (25:22)

We we we we touched earlier on his his view of the United States. I mean McKetty now is well known for his you know

James Curran (25:30)

Mm.

Bernard Keane (25:30)

his opposition to AUKUS and particularly the the the the loss of sovereignty that it

James Curran (25:36)

Mmm.

Bernard Keane (25:36)

embodies, but he's he was an he was a strong supporter of of the US alliance within Hawke's government. H how did he see the role of of the US in the region at at at the at the point when

It

is now seriously in question for the first time since

before World War two, really.

James Curran (25:58)

Yeah. So, I mean, so during his prime ministership, I mean, he can give expression to all the same kinds of sentiments and views that we would we have seen subsequently. mean, when Bush came, for example, Mr. Keating said, you know, like, we've been alongside you in every battle. He could recite the curtain look to America's speech as a kind of a proof that labor had been so significant in forming the American relationship at a time of crisis. He could.

give expression to all of that. could have conversations with American secretaries of state about the intelligence facilities and why Australia needed to get more from those intelligence facilities. And that if the Americans weren't going to come on board with this, then maybe they had to rethink the presence of those facilities. all of this stuff, I think he was a supporter of it. I think he had a problem with the obsequious nature of some aspects of the Australian system, you know, that they had come to look upon the American alliance.

as a way of life. You know, by the end, I mean, is admittedly, this is just after his left office. But when Clinton comes to Australia in November 1996, Clinton writes him a letter, it's detailed at length in the book and says, at some point, America is going to have to learn that it can't necessarily be the dominant power in Asia, that it's going to have to be the balancing power. Now, this is about 14, 15 years before

You know, former Jimmy Carter advisors, a big new Brzezinski was saying this kind of argument. It's well before Hugh White was coming to this kind of view that America was going to have to fundamentally reappraise its role in the region. So I think he was starting to see then that if China's trajectory continued, it was going to mean something for America's preeminence in Asia. But yeah, mean, Keating was a supporter in terms of defense material, intelligence and the history of the relationship. But

You know, as I argue, getting back to your earlier question about the centrality of trade, there is a sense in the 1990s, in this period, that Keating is moving the American relationship onto a somewhat different footing, that the trade is more important than defense. And I mean, I think that's the way of the world at this point. I mean, this now, now people will pour scorn on this period and say that was the post-Cold War peace dividend. And that's,

Bernard Keane (28:14)

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

James Curran (28:15)

that's when countries went to sleep. But these were different circumstances.

Bernard Keane (28:18)

is there a through line from that to his view of Trump now, which I think is different to the view of

of of of of a lot of of us and

a lot of commentators and observers, which is that putting aside everything else, Trump has a far more pragmatic view of the role of China and America's relations with it than any previous

president that in terms of actual implementation, regardless of what they might have thought

privately.

James Curran (28:48)

Yeah, I do think there is. mean, in a couple of ways. mean, firstly, you know, arguably had the Americans listened to the Keating advice in the early 1990s where he was saying, unless you're more economically engaged, you will turn inwards and you will default to protectionism. Well, look what's happened. But secondly, yes, I mean, he has been consistent from this from the election of Trump that this president doesn't believe, as Keating puts it, that he has a

a hotline to God. He doesn't believe in American exceptionalism, although I mean, arguably the Iran adventure is kind of putting a little bit of a spoke in the wheel of that belief, but that fundamentally he's interested in a commercial fight with China, not a military one. And that while ever we've got a president like Trump who is not interested in starting World War III or who is not necessarily interested in staking everything.

in terms of the US position in Asia on the defense of Taiwan, we know from the recent book regime change what he really thinks about Taiwan, that for the sake of the preservation of peace in Asia, this is not a bad thing. yes, Keating is the first to say that the way Trump is going about it by unsettling the alliance system and so forth is not exactly helpful and undercutting some of the, I guess, the traditions and ways of thinking and behaving that the United States has become known for.

All of this is unsettling and disturbing, but this is simply the new world with which Australia is going to have to come to grips. What's interesting is the studied refusal of the present generation of ministers in Canberra who are instead doubling down on the alliance, even as many other allies, including the Japanese, are adopting different approaches. It's extraordinary to see the way in which there is a of a rusted on faith.

in American staying power in Asia when Trump is doing everything he possibly can to undermine that. And I think that's what frustrates Keating now. I mean, he more or less says it's over. Now, the extent of the American presence on Australian soil, militarily and logistically and in terms of intelligence, not to mention the coming nuclear powered submarines, the Marines in Darwin means that Australia is locked in and it's now more of a target if there is a war.

Bernard Keane (31:11)

Mm. It's as if, yes, it's as if that the national security strategy of last year everyone missed it in Canberra, given it's your very clear statement about accommodating China. That's that seemed to pass a lot of people by as a reflection of the

James Curran (31:22)

Right. Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

Bernard Keane (31:27)

the view within the United States that that

James Curran (31:30)

Right.

Bernard Keane (31:31)

no, it's not there to concede China

James Curran (31:32)

Yeah.

Bernard Keane (31:33)

anymore.

James Curran (31:34)

Well, this is right, Bernard. I mean, you pick this up in your review that you wrote on Crikey of the book. And I think you zeroed in on this expression that Don Russell had used when the Americans got very upset with Keating in 1992 for not subscribing to this idea that that a new trade body in Asia should gang up on the Japanese. Don Russell said, but hang on a minute, Paul Keating is a thinking ally.

And I think that's what's been lost over the last sort of 25 years, actually, 25 to 30 years, is this idea of the country and its leaders as being thinking allies. Mean, and I think of the through line

back to Arthur Callwell opposing the Vietnam commitment in his speech in May of 65 saying, you know, the role of an ally is not to compound the folly of its great power protector. Somehow we've lost a sense of that.

And we seem to be going out of our way to encourage the Americans into believing that, you know, they can prevail in Asia against all of the economic and military odds, not to mention the internal discord in the United States itself. For some reason, that seems to be almost totally a real blind spot for some of the political elite in Canberra.

Bernard Keane (32:55)

just to wrap up, do you did the the the failure to win in ninety six, did that really cruel his legacy on foreign policy? did he turn him into something that's a figure that's a bit more like Goth than Hawk in that regard?

James Curran (33:11)

look, I think initially, there's no doubt that it was a sliding doors moment, right? He said at the time, you change the country, you change the leader, you'll change the country. And look, the Asian agenda continued, but it didn't have the same urgency or intensity. And it was shifted to a bilateral kind

Bernard Keane (33:28)

Yep. Yeah.

James Curran (33:29)

of emphasis and how they did. The conservatives did get access to the East Asia summit. That that should not be underestimated. Kevin Rudd brought in the G20.

Malcolm Turnbull saved the TPP. There's no doubt that the Asian agenda continued, but it didn't have the same focus. It didn't, I think, have the same conscientiousness that it had under Keating. And of course, it wasn't backed up with the cultural agenda about becoming a republic and getting the relationship with Australia's Indigenous people sorted out. So it lost that kind of coherence about, you know, a creative vision for the country's future. Now, Albanese

has taken up some aspects of this Keating agenda. He is talking about finding security in, not from Asia. He basically cut and pasted the security agreement with Indonesia from Paul Keating's 1995 agreement with Sahara. There are elements of it that are obviously still highly relevant. And particularly on, I think, this idea of keeping the Americans engaged in a trade, that's not gonna happen, given the permanence of protectionism.

in the United States. But I think, you know, if John Howard said once, as we all know, that the times will suit him, there are in many ways, given what Keating was saying back in the early 90s, there is a case to be made that the times suit the Keating vision now, because here he was essentially saying that in a turbulent era, a smaller to middle power like Australia can tell its own

story and it can start to sort of articulate what a world looks like with an America that's not necessarily engaged.

with an Asian power that's rising and gathering the region around it and coming up with a constructive alternative to pursuing a balance of power in Asia. you know, yeah, obviously I think Goff crashed and burned, but his opening up was so important for Australian foreign policy and Australian culture in that period. So I wouldn't want to underestimate that, but I think, Keating will say his vision can't be denied and that at some point,

successive governments are going to have to come back to those issues if they aren't already in some ways, as I've said with Indonesia and the language on Asia. So I don't think we can escape it. It's just a question of where from where comes the political courage in order to articulate a vision of this kind, one that is necessarily suited to today. But it's hard to see the political courage coming from anywhere at this point.

Bernard Keane (35:57)

Yep, it's a the well seems to have run well and truly dry on that front.

James Curran (36:01)

Mm.

Bernard Keane (36:02)

James, congratulations again on the book. It's just it's been a delight to to talk to you.

James Curran (36:07)

Thank you, Bernard.

Bernard Keane (36:08)

and all power to your elbow as you continue to both to teach history and to explain and tell history to new generations of people, whether it's via your academic activities or via excellent books like this. or perhaps let's hope other form

forums as well. thanks for your time and let's talk again.

James Curran (36:30)

Thanks, Bernard. I'd love to. Really appreciate it. Thank you.