



PRIME MINISTER

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP STATE DINNER, BANGKOK, 7 APRIL 1994

Thank you for honouring me with this dinner.

I am delighted to be here - in this great city and in a country whose unique and rich culture and warm hospitality is legendary throughout the world.

It is certainly well-known to Australians, and held in great affection and regard.

For some time now Thailand has been a favourite destination for many thousands of Australian tourists, and increasingly for Australian business people.

I am very glad that, as Australian Prime Minister, I have now had the opportunity to make it *my* destination.

The friendship between our two countries goes back a long way, at least to 1945 when the first Australian Mission was established in Thailand.

In the years immediately before that thousands of Australian soldiers had come in contact with Thailand and the Thai people as prisoners of war on the infamous Burma-Thailand Railway.

Through the horrors of that experience Australian soldiers came to hold the Thai people in very high regard for the assistance they gave them and for their courage and humanity.

It led one of them, a very great Australian, Sir Edward Dunlop, to devote a substantial part of his life to developing medicine in Thailand, and to promoting a better and more extensive relationship with Thailand and the other countries of the region.

Weary Dunlop died last year, but his message about Thailand and about Asia has never been better understood in Australia than it is now.

We are old and good friends. And today the opportunity exists to build that friendship into a far-reaching relationship with great rewards to both our countries.

A summary of what we have achieved between us in recent years illustrates the potential for cooperation, the potential for an expanded Australia-Thailand relationship.

In the past five years, two-way trade between us has reached more than \$2 billion, growing at a rate of 25 per cent and making Thailand our twelfth biggest export market.

Our aid program with Thailand is Australia's fourth largest.

We have an active defence cooperation program.

On a per capita basis, Australia has settled more Indochinese refugees from Thailand than any other country.

Our education links are growing rapidly, with over 2,000 Thais studying in Australian institutions and 50 per cent more Thais seeking visas for education in Australia in 1993-94 than in the previous year.

Since 1991 there have been more than 40 separate ministerial and parliamentary visits.

Nearly 200,000 Australians visited Thailand in 1993 and more than 4,000 Thais are now visiting Australia each month, with the latest figures showing a 50 per cent increase on the corresponding period in the previous year.

Both our countries recognise that we share interests beyond the bilateral economic and commercial relationship.

We recognise that it is in our mutual interest to ensure that the voice of middle sized economies is heard internationally.

We recognise that we have much to gain from cooperation on regional political and security issues, as well as developing regional economic linkages.

We recognise these common ambitions and, furthermore, these days we know we can achieve them.

We worked together on the Cambodian peace settlement.

We worked together in the Cairns Group.

We are now working together with APEC.

It was a great privilege to work with you, Prime Minister, at the historic meeting of APEC leaders in Seattle last November. That meeting was concrete evidence of the growing sense of community in the Asia-Pacific region, and the meeting in Jakarta later this year will be vital in building the momentum.

By bringing the economics of East-Asia and North America together in one cooperative framework, APEC is a key to unlock the region's full economic potential for the 21st century.

A rapidly growing economy linking the developing economics of Indochina and the rest of South-East Asia, Thailand also has a vital role to play as a leader in ASEAN.

It is for this reason among others that Australia is very pleased to have built the Mekong River Friendship Bridge - a real and symbolic link between the developing economics of Laos and Vietnam and the dynamic ones of ASEAN.

For Australia, the Friendship Bridge is a striking symbol of the creative role we can play in the region.

We are in no doubt that Australia has a very great deal to offer Thailand as an economic partner and as a source of skills and expertise.

Much is happening within the relationship to demonstrate the truth of this. But we are far from realising its full potential.

As a first step towards doing so that we must come to a fuller appreciation of the changes which have occurred in both countries over the past decade.

We must understand present realities - particularly economic realities.

For example, I doubt that many Australians are aware of the size of Thailand's economy - over 100 billion, the second largest in ASEAN.

And I doubt whether many are aware that your economic growth is predicted soon to be the highest in ASEAN.

On the other hand, I am not at all convinced that the dramatic reform of the Australian economy is widely appreciated in Thailand.

Australia's economy is now highly competitive, open and geared for integration with the region and the world.

It is the fastest growing economy in the OECD; the lowest taxing country in the OECD; and with inflation among the very lowest in the OECD.

The Australia of this decade is a *new* Australia. An efficient, productive, competitive and creative Australia.

An Australia which is a very good place in which to invest, which welcomes investment, which actively *encourages* investment.

An Australia whose companies are now constructing Bangkok's tallest building and the Si-Chang Port Development, bidding for Bangkok's mass transit system, providing banking services, using Bangkok as a regional aviation hub, helping to build the \$1.3 billion Muang Thong Tani residential project.

An Australia, in other words, able to play a constructive role in Thailand's future and the development of the region.

Prime Minister, next year will be the 50th anniversary of the first Australian diplomatic mission in Thailand, the first step in what has been a most warm and rewarding friendship.

The talks we have had today I hope will mark another step - a very substantial step - towards fifty even more rewarding years in the Australia-Thailand relationship.

Thank you very much for extending to me and Annita the privilege of this dinner and the opportunity to address you this evening.