

Chapter 5

The challenges facing Australia as a medium-sized country pursuing effective public diplomacy

5.1 The committee has identified a number of problems faced by small and medium-sized countries pursuing, with limited resources, their public diplomacy objectives in a world crammed with information and images. This chapter examines the challenges facing Australia in capturing and holding attention in an already crowded international space especially now that countries large and small are competing to stake out their position on the global stage.

Gaining attention in a crowded space

5.2 Australia is one of the many countries endeavouring to secure a space in a fiercely contested international environment. Dr Alison Broinowski, visiting fellow at the ANU, highlighted the strength of competition Australia faces:

It is very difficult when you are representing Australia overseas to put Australia across in ways that differentiate it from, say, the United States or the UK. Our competitor countries like, say, France, Sweden, Japan or Korea put a lot more energy, effort and commitment—Canada, too, hugely—into their public diplomacy or their cultural relations programs.¹

5.3 Agreeing with the general view that Australia has significant obstacles to overcome in achieving its public diplomacy objectives, Media Gurus identified some specific ones:

Coupled with a rolling 24 hour news agenda, the rise of multilateralism and the need to address many audiences for whom English is not necessarily a language of conviction, it poses a challenge for Australia if our voice is to be heard in the cacophony of others.²

5.4 In practical terms, Mr Bernard Wheelahan, Council on Australia Latin America Relations, also illustrated the difficulty Australia has breaking 'through the clutter':³

You have to get your identity up there above the crowd. There are 80 embassies in Peru. None of them are Australian. There are 80 in Chile. For us to get our head above the parapet and to be noticed in Chile certainly requires Team Australia to cooperate there.⁴

1 *Committee Hansard*, 11 April 2007, p. 21.

2 *Submission 2*, p. 7.

3 *Committee Hansard*, 14 March 2007, p. 41.

4 *Committee Hansard*, 14 March 2007, p. 41.

5.5 Every Australian overseas post confronts the same problem of creating a lasting favourable impression while the representatives of other countries are endeavouring to do the same. This competition to be recognised exists at all levels of public diplomacy whether it is in the areas of political influence, trade, investment or cultural activities. Dr Gerard Vaughan, Director of the National Gallery of Victoria, used the example of art exhibitions which he suggested was a limited market:

I could go to the director of, for example, the Pompidou Centre in Paris—in fact, I have done this—and say, ‘Would you like a great exhibition of Australian art?’ He would have at his fingertips directors who have offered him a great exhibition with contemporary Spanish art, American art, Canadian art or whatever it might be, or a group show from South-East Asia and all of the best artists. There is a lot of choice available to the big institutions overseas, so we really are going to have to argue the point and make it attractive.⁵

5.6 Australia is not only a medium-sized country competing with many other countries for a position on the global stage, but it has the disadvantage of being geographically separate from other countries. Asialink observed that Australia's isolation posed another difficulty:

Australia's geographic distance from world centres makes public diplomacy even more important. Given the importance of the Asian region to Australia, strategically, economically and politically, Asialink firmly believes that public diplomacy in this region is arguably the most strategic and logical investment for Australia, and therefore it should be the top priority for our public diplomacy efforts, accompanied by appropriate investments.⁶

5.7 RMIT University also suggested that Australia's remoteness and its historic links to the UK and the US create problems for Australia's public diplomacy:

...it may be viewed as an 'outpost' of US or European values and aspirations, with little to distinguish it from its powerful allies...For much of the world, England and the US remain their reference points for understanding Australia, rendering more complex the task of transmitting distinctly Australian goals, values and ideas.⁷

5.8 The government readily accepts that Australia faces significant difficulties in presenting a modern and definite image of Australia and its people. Dr Lachlan Strahan, Images of Australia Branch, referred, in particular, to the task of dispelling ideas, notions and preconceptions that belong to a by-gone era:

So one challenge for us is to accept—and this is a challenge for all foreign ministries who are running public diplomacy programs—that you in fact

5 *Committee Hansard*, 15 March 2007, p. 43.

6 *Submission 8*, p. 1.

7 *Submission 9*, p. 2.

have a national image to some extent which is given to you, which is something that goes back into the past and has accretions of all sorts of issues and events of the past. Parts of that national image can be enabling and parts of that national image can be more problematic.⁸

5.9 The following section outlines some of the notions or impressions of Australia that may undermine Australia's public diplomacy attempts to present the country in a favourable or appealing light.

Stereotypical or outdated images

Sunshine, cuddly koalas and abundant natural resources

5.10 For many years Australia has prided itself on its image as a safe and relaxing place—a country of sunshine, wide beaches and unspoilt natural wonders. Mr Urs Walterlin, President, Foreign Correspondents Association Australia and South Pacific, stated:

Of course one could argue that Australia is in a very fortunate position and does not really have to care too much about protecting its image, that we are already protected by what I like to call the 'CK factor'—that is, cuddly koalas. Millions of people overseas still see this country mainly as a place where these wonderful animals live and where you can still find a fish called Nemo. Therefore, image-wise, the CK factor works to a certain extent as a buffer against more critical news coming from this country. However, this buffer is becoming thinner, not only because Nemo might soon not have a home anymore as the Barrier Reef is bleaching away but mainly because people in so many important source countries of the Australian tourism industry are taking an increasing interest in what their potential holiday destination does to protect not only their attractions but, indeed, the world.⁹

5.11 The India Business Council in its submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (JSCFADT) elaborated on this narrow view of Australia:

Despite Australia's obvious economic success and strength, the stereotypical view of Australia that one frequently picks up in India and elsewhere is that we are a relaxed people, fairly laid back, not very hard working, obsessed with sport and leisure, not as advanced in technology, management or business as say the US, Europe or Japan. Australia's relative economic affluence is frequently viewed as being almost entirely due to our good fortune of having a small population enjoying the benefits

8 *Committee Hansard*, 14 March 2007, pp. 5–6.

9 *Committee Hansard*, 12 April 2007, pp. 27–28.

of a very large country, which is richly endowed with abundant natural resources.¹⁰

5.12 Media Gurus noted anecdotal evidence suggesting that Australia's image in 'overseas audiences (other than in very special bilateral groups i.e. diplomat to diplomat or educator to educator or scientist to scientist) is still 'a rudimentary one of sunshine, beaches, kangaroos and desert—particularly in Europe and the Americas'.¹¹ This presentation of Australia is especially attractive for tourists.¹² These images, while positive, are limiting. Dr Strahan explained:

For instance, there are a lot of people overseas that tend to think of Australia as a quarry, a farm and a beach. Those are all positive images, but we are so much more than that, so part of our challenge is to always make sure that some of those outdated perceptions are well and truly countered to take advantage of some of the positive images that we have of the country which are already out there. We need to turn those to our advantage, but primarily it is to then broaden the national image and to make people aware of everything from our scientific excellence through to our high educational standards and our dynamic culture.¹³

5.13 The image of Australia as perceived by other countries has evolved over the decades. Although Australia may have advanced and its behaviour and attitudes changed, others may still hold on to antiquated notions. Public diplomacy is very much concerned with refreshing the image of Australia so that it reflects contemporary life.

5.14 Indeed, the Government acknowledged that Australia has a direct national interest in an international reputation as 'a responsible member of the international community, committed to the rule of law, ready to assist in cases of humanitarian need, and a constructive contributor to the economic development of its neighbourhood'. It would like to be recognised as 'a thoughtful and creative country, genuinely committed to peace and prosperity of its region and a source of practical ideas'.¹⁴

10 *Submission no. 15* to the JSCFADT, Inquiry into Australia's relationship with India as an emerging world power, p. 13.

11 *Submission 2*, p. 2.

12 The committee has looked at Australia as an attractive tourist and study destination in a number of reports including, Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, *Japan's Economy: Implications for Australia*, August 2000, pp. 151–157 and *Opportunities and challenges: Australia's relationship with China*, November 2005, pp. 161–168.

13 *Committee Hansard*, 14 March 2007, p. 6.

14 Commonwealth of Australia, *In the National Interest: Australia's Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper*, 1997, Chapter 1, paragraph 25.

Race relations

5.15 Australia's commitment to racial equality and to eliminating racial discrimination is also important to Australia's reputation today.¹⁵ The 1997 White Paper on Australia's foreign and trade policy cited race as a major issue that goes 'to the values of the Australian community'. It stated that on the question of race Australia's reputation matters:

Central to the values to which the Government gives expression is an unqualified commitment to racial equality and to eliminating racial discrimination.¹⁶

5.16 Yet outdated views on this important matter of race relations linger and have the potential to frustrate Australia's attempts to present itself as a tolerant country. RMIT observed that in this regard Australia 'carries some potent baggage':

For example, Australians may view the 'White Australia' policy as a thing of the past, but in much of Europe and Asia its legacy persists and works against views of Australia as an inclusive, tolerant society. Such perceptions may be reinforced by widespread international interest in such events as the Cronulla riots and (less recently) the statements of former politician Pauline Hanson.¹⁷

5.17 All too readily, it seems that incidents such as the Cronulla riots breathe life into notions of Australia as a racist country. These disturbances took place in December 2005 and were widely attributed in the media to ethnic tensions. Mr Walterlin noted that the clashes in Cronulla made worldwide headlines. Although he stated that 'it was a shocking situation', he noted that it was 'a great opportunity to actually tell the world that multiculturalism in this country is fundamentally an enormous success and that the Cronulla event is not something that is typical for Australia'.¹⁸

5.18 This observation ties directly to the discussion on the importance of public diplomacy which, as noted by some commentators, 'is done before it is needed not afterwards' or is there 'from take-off, not just on emergency landings in times of crisis'.¹⁹ Thus, Australia's public diplomacy has the difficult task not only of managing the fall-out from the occasional public demonstrations of bad behaviour, but of countering any underlying predisposition to interpret these incidents in an unfavourable light and attribute the behaviour to all Australians.

15 Commonwealth of Australia, *In the National Interest: Australia's Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper*, 1997, Chapter 1, paragraph 24.

16 Commonwealth of Australia, *In the National Interest: Australia's Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper*, 1997, Chapter 1, paragraph 24.

17 *Submission 9*, p. 2.

18 *Committee Hansard*, 12 April 2007, p. 32.

19 See paragraph 2.16 and accompanying footnote.

5.19 A longitudinal research project conducted before, during and after the Sydney Olympic games provides an example of how outdated stereotypical views can endure and be easily reignited. The survey results from this project showed that despite the promotion of Australia during the Sydney Olympics as 'a multinational and tolerant society', media reporting in South Africa conveyed a very different impression. The project found:

Overall, the key shifts over the period of this study was that whereas in 1999 South African students had the general impression that Australia was a racially tolerant society, by 2001, the opposite perception held sway...during the Sydney Olympics, the state-owned SABC had produced and broadcast programming promoting the idea that black Australians had been (and were being) repressed by white Australians, and that white South Africans were migrating to Australia because they felt more comfortable living in a racist society like Australia.²⁰

5.20 Mr Kevin Murray, Craft Victoria, provided another example. He drew on his experiences in South Africa to illustrate the perceptions of Australia held by some South Africans. In his view:

Now that democracy has been victorious in South Africa, it is especially important that Australia continue its positive role in the region. This is challenged by the shadow of the 'packing for Perth' story that cast Australia as a haven for racists. Talking to ordinary people in South African townships, I have been politely asked 'Does Australia still have apartheid?' This misperception has been aggravated by reports of racist taunts towards South African cricketers during their Australian tour. It seems critical that Australia's positive role as a nation of tolerance is promoted in this crucible of modern democracy.²¹

5.21 In response to Mr Murray's observations, DFAT noted that monitoring the media by the Australian High Commission in Pretoria as well as regular direct contact with a wide cross-section of South African society indicated that there were 'perceptions among some South Africans, mostly ill-informed, of racism in Australia'. DFAT explained that this needs to 'be seen in the specific context of South Africa, where issues of race in a wide range of countries attract an unusual level of prominence'.²²

5.22 In general, Dr Strahan, DFAT, noted that the White Australia policy is an issue that, although abandoned by Australia several decades ago, still surfaces in some areas.²³ He cited the case of South Korea:

20 Nancy Rivenburgh, Eric Louw, Eric Loo and Gary Mersham, *The Sydney Olympics and Foreign Attitudes Towards Australia*, CRC for Sustainable Tourism Pty Ltd, 2004, p. 50.

21 *Submission 4*, p. 2.

22 Department of Foreign Affairs, Answers to question on notice, 1 May 2007, p. 24.

23 *Committee Hansard*, 14 March 2007, p.6.

Some South Koreans would hang on to this attitude that we have a racially discriminatory immigration policy. When I would tell them that that in fact ended decades ago, they would be surprised. To some extent, this said something about how South Korea saw itself in the world, as much as Australia's place in the world. The way in which you have to respond to that is to try to get the message out as consistently and thoroughly as possible. We will often do that through schools to try to get the young in other countries to understand that this is the modern Australia that they are dealing with.²⁴

5.23 He agreed, however, that some attitudes 'can be rather resistant to being confronted with accurate countervailing evidence'.²⁵

Committee view

5.24 As with other countries, Australia is seeking to gain favourable attention on matters it regards as significant. It wants to ensure that its messages are not only heard but interpreted as intended, that misconceptions are corrected and stereotypical or outdated notions are dispelled. The committee heard evidence that some current perceptions of Australia, however, are still embedded in stereotypic notions that may no longer accurately represent the country. Some of the outdated images held about Australia may not only limit a broader appreciation of Australia and affect its reputation, but act as an obstacle to the effective pursuit of its foreign policy.

Responding to a changing political environment in the region

5.25 As well as addressing negative images, Australia's public diplomacy needs to adapt its messages to the changing socio-political landscape especially in the Asia Pacific region. The 2003 White Paper, *Advancing the National Interest: Australia's Foreign and Trade White Paper*, recognised that Australia faces complex and evolving challenges especially in Australia's near north.²⁶ It stated:

Indonesia is important to the stability of South-East Asia. It is undergoing a fundamental transformation from centralised autocracy to decentralised democracy, one that Australia strongly supports. This requires major political and institutional changes at a time when the economic base is weak and Islamic extremists are targeting the secular system of government.²⁷

5.26 In its report on Australia's relations with China, the committee looked closely at developments in the South West Pacific. It noted that diplomacy and aid in the Pacific were intrinsically linked as the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan

24 *Committee Hansard*, 14 March 2007, p. 10.

25 *Committee Hansard*, 15 May 2007, p. 48.

26 Commonwealth of Australia, *Advancing the National Interest: Australia's Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper*, 2003, p. ix.

27 Commonwealth of Australia, *Advancing the National Interest: Australia's Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper*, 2003, p. 23.

compete for recognition, often using 'the blunt tool of aid payments'. The committee found that among some Pacific nations, competition between the PRC and Taiwan for diplomatic recognition had, on occasion, appeared to take on the characteristics of a bidding war, conducted mainly through bilateral aid payments.²⁸

5.27 In evidence to this inquiry into public diplomacy, International Public Affairs Network raised similar concerns about what it believed was Australia's declining influence in the region at a time when Taiwan and China 'are steadily increasing their presence'. It suggested that 'Others are following in their wake. Cuba, for instance, is providing, or is about to provide, doctors to Timor Leste, PNG and Solomon Islands'.²⁹

5.28 Dr Benjamin Reilly, Centre for Democratic Institutions, also noted the increasing activism of the PRC and Taiwan in the region and in the South Pacific in particular. He was in no doubt that 'the strategic situation in the region and particularly in the Pacific is changing extremely quickly'.³⁰ Ms Jennifer McGregor, Chief Executive Officer, Asialink, also observed that this area to Australia's north is moving very fast:

We are not in a world any more where we are...in a leadership position ...that position is fast being lost and we have to continue our focus in this area.³¹

5.29 The committee has already commented on China's public diplomacy campaign and the resources it is employing to portray the country as a 'good neighbour' in the region and responsible global citizen.³² Australia's public diplomacy must take account of the rapid changes taking place in the region and of ensuring that its reputation remains strong. Media Gurus observed that knowledge of Australia is 'greater in the Asia-Pacific region, thanks to closer economic, security and development assistance links and increasing people-to-people exchanges'. It noted, however, the considerable scope for 'misunderstandings and negative stereotypes about Australia's perceived role in the region'.³³

5.30 Indeed, recent surveys indicate that Australians may not fully appreciate that discrepancies may exist between how they see themselves in the region and how

28 Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, *China's emergence: implications for Australia*, March 2006, p. 175.

29 *Submission 27*, pp. 22–23. In its inquiry into Australia's relations with China, the committee considered closely the growing influence of China and Taiwan in the Southwest Pacific. See Chapter 10, Senate Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade Committee, *China's emergence: implications for Australia*, March 2006, pp. 163–179.

30 *Committee Hansard*, 15 May 2007, p. 34.

31 *Committee Hansard*, 15 March 2007, p. 9.

32 See chapter 3, paragraphs 3.10–3.12.

33 *Submission 2*, p. 2.

others view them. The Chicago Council on Global Affairs in partnership with the Asia Society published the results of its survey on attitudes and found:

Australia is not seen as a very influential country in Asia. Asked to rank Australia's influence in Asia, respondents in China and India give it an average rating of 6.2 and 5.2, respectively, placing it only above Indonesia and in the case of India, on par with South Korea. Australians, however, see their role a little more positively and rank their influence in fifth place out of nine countries.³⁴

5.31 A survey, conducted in 2006, of NGOs in the region found that overall Australia is regarded as a good international citizen.³⁵ Although the Asia Pacific NGOs surveyed recognised Australia's importance and respected its role in the region, 59 per cent of regional NGOs surveyed disagreed with the statement, 'I always listen to what Australia has to say' compared to 20 per cent in agreement.³⁶ Also, even though NGOs generally held positive attitudes toward Australia, perceptions were 'slowly changing'. According to the survey, some NGOs registered a shift toward a more negative attitude toward Australia.³⁷

5.32 These surveys indicate that Australians engaged in public diplomacy should be aware of their assumptions and how these may differ from the perceptions of overseas communities. They should also be cognizant of changes in attitudes toward Australia and what these trends mean for Australia's public diplomacy.

5.33 The above examples identify some of the major problems confronting Australia's public diplomacy particularly in the Asia Pacific region. There are other areas, such as climate change, where shifts are occurring in world public opinion that again create challenges for Australia's public diplomacy. Mr Walterlin was of the view that Australia was 'in danger of being seen as an outsider' on the question of global climate change.³⁸ A recent public diplomacy report from the diplomatic post in Paris noted an increase in criticisms of Australia concerning its 'environment credentials'.³⁹

34 The Chicago Council on Global Affairs in partnership with Asia Society and in association with East Asia Institute and Lowy Institute for International Policy, *The United States and the Rise of China and India: Results of a 2006 Multinational Survey of Public Opinion*, 2006, p. 49.

35 Minh Nguyen, Alison Jaworski and Nicola Gabay, *Report card on Australia' relations with the region 2007, Asia-Pacific NGO opinion survey*, Uniya Jesuit Social Justice Centre in partnership with Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, 2007, pp. 15–16.

36 Minh Nguyen, Alison Jaworski and Nicola Gabay, *Report card on Australia' relations with the region 2007, Asia-Pacific NGO opinion survey*, Uniya Jesuit Social Justice Centre in partnership with Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, 2007, pp. 15–16.

37 Minh Nguyen, Alison Jaworski and Nicola Gabay, *Report card on Australia' relations with the region 2007, Asia-Pacific NGO opinion survey*, Uniya Jesuit Social Justice Centre in partnership with Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, 2007, pp. 16–17.

38 *Committee Hansard*, 12 April 2007, p. 27.

39 DFAT, answer to written question on notice, 1 May 2007, p. 65.

5.34 Terrorism is another important international development which poses challenges for Australia's public diplomacy.

Terrorism

5.35 The government's white paper on transnational terrorism identified countering global terrorism as one of the most difficult tasks for Australia's public diplomacy. It noted that terrorists are very focused on portraying a particular strong and potent image and converting selected individuals or groups to their view:

Propaganda is an important weapon in the terrorists' arsenal. It helps them issue threats, spread disinformation and create terror. The threat of violence, to coerce or intimidate opponents, is a form of terrorism in itself. Terrorists have always used fear as a tactic, but modern technology has made it much more powerful. We see increasingly adept use by transnational terrorists of the mass media to get their fear-inducing headlines. Both the media and the Internet have proven similarly effective in conveying the terrorists' message to their supporters worldwide—and boosting their global recruitment efforts.⁴⁰

5.36 It stated:

But there are also ways we are taking the offensive. One is by arguing back. We must not let these terrorists set the agenda. We must fight the battle of ideas. They should not be allowed the final word. Those who might be swayed by their rallying cries must hear voices of reason.⁴¹

...

We must advance the same values in the conduct of our relations abroad—building, where we can, bridges of understanding. Our message must be heard and understood clearly, strongly and widely. And we must also listen. We achieve this through both institutional and people-to-people contacts.⁴²

5.37 On this matter of terrorism in particular, Australia is engaged in a 'media battleground for public opinion' against people accomplished in persuading others to their cause especially in the way they manage images and transmit messages.⁴³ Their use of modern technology, notably the internet, is particularly relevant for those seeking to counter their influence.

40 Australian Government, *Transnational Terrorism: the Threat to Australia*, 2004, p. 17.

41 Australian Government, *Transnational Terrorism: the Threat to Australia*, 2004, p. xv.

42 Australian Government, *Transnational Terrorism: the Threat to Australia*, 2004, p. xv.

43 The phrase 'media battleground for public opinion' was used by Mark Leonard with Catherine Stead and Conrad Smewing, *Public Diplomacy*, The Foreign Policy Centre, London, 2002, p. 3.

Conclusion

5.38 Australia's international reputation is critical to promoting the country's interests. The examples in this chapter have shown that in some areas and among some groups of people Australia's image is at odds with contemporary reality. The committee has also noted that in a world that is changing, Australia's public diplomacy has to keep pace with these developments. To be effective, Australia's public diplomacy must succeed in projecting messages that give greater breadth and substance to its image. They must reach their target audiences and influence attitudes in a positive way toward Australia.

5.39 The following chapter considers the effectiveness of Australia's public diplomacy in conveying to other countries messages that are coherent, consistent and credible: that do counter negative and stereotypical perceptions that may harm Australia's reputation. It considers ways that Australia can improve its public diplomacy.

