

Chinese Communist Party up Close and Personal

Superficially the ICAPP Conference in Nanning Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region bordering Vietnam last week might be described as a charm offensive by the Chinese Communist Party in the year they mark their 90th anniversary. That's another one up on the Soviets. The CPC funded the Conference from start to finish and basked in the warm glow of appreciation and congratulations from 100 delegates and their Chinese counterparts. Slated as a meeting for Asia Pacific political parties to have a frank and open exchange about economic development and people's access to the economic upside a number political parties from the left to the right came together in a single forum. That's the strength of ICAPP, an acronym for the International Conference of Asian Political Parties; the brain child of veteran Philippines politician and one time Presidential candidate Jose de Venecia and Chung Eui-yong former Chairman of Foreign Relations Committee of the Democratic Party of Korea. Launched in 2000 ICAPP has outlasted its critics as just another 'gabfest' and 10 years on is bidding for Observer status at the UN. Over 340 political parties across 52 countries qualify to participate in ICAPP and on this occasion 53 accepted the invitation including the Liberal Party of Australia. It might seem odd to some that Australia's conservative party would have such a connection with the CPC but it's long standing and important to our bi lateral relationship. It's somewhat ironic that we invited the CPC to our National Conference long before the Labor Party was game to. I know what you're thinking; what about Tibet, human rights, democracy and the rule of law? What about it? These are very important but in context which I will come back to. First to ICAPP; there is something surreal about having breakfast with delegates from the United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) to one side and Nepal Congress to the other, after all the insurgency is still fresh in all our minds especially theirs. "How's the King," I ask? 'Ex King' I am reminded; "At home on his best behavior" I'm told with a broad smile. Everywhere you look at these ICAPP conferences you see political adversaries huddled together in conversation. In many cases it wouldn't be possible on home ground. Recognizing the width of the political spectrum at the Conference Secretary General Chung Eui-yong's commented that the hand of Confucius was upon us encouraging parties to 'go the middle way.' He reminded us that Confucius said, 'Going too far is as

bad as not going far enough'. I'll bear that I mind when next I have an animated discussion with my political opponents.

I am yet to come across the Workers Party of North Korea but look forward to it after my brief visit to the 'hermit Kingdom' in 2006. There are some exceptions as would be expected but in the main people are communicating from the left to the right and that can't be a bad thing. In an era where ideology appears less important than ever to some political parties are interested in how to frame economic policy, build physical and social infrastructure, attract inward investment and survive. In a quiet moment advice from across the political spectrum is sought on campaign techniques, electoral funding, polling and election strategy. You might think this Conference was getting ahead of itself but the reality is that there is a different global economic order unfolding as growth moves to emerging economies; China, India, South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Russia, and Brazil who now account for the majority of economic growth in the next decade and beyond. The world is changing. There is even speculation that the US dollar will lose its pre-eminence as the global reserve currency. The US economy is stalled, the Euro Zone is in deep trouble and in the west there is a general lack of confidence about the future.

I have travelled extensively through Asia these past 30 years and share the assessment that a new era of Asia Pacific prosperity and development is upon us. Australia and New Zealand finds itself in the middle of a seismic shift from west to east driven by regional growth. The emergence of our Asian neighbours presents Australia with opportunities and challenges. How we respond to regional neighbours will have some bearing on whether we share to the extent that we would like in this new prosperity. For example Australia ranks ninth as a provider of education to our nearest neighbour Indonesian well behind Europe and the USA. I am told at the Conference we have priced ourselves out of the market, an ongoing missed opportunity. When our Federal Labor Government summarily suspended the live cattle trade to Indonesia following an adverse TV report carried by the ABC without so much as picking up the phone to Jakarta we comprehensively undermined our claim to be a reliable trade partner.

People are driven by basic instincts regardless of where they are from and in which country they reside; the human species is fairly predictable – family, security, dignity and prosperity might be expressed differently but are the human drivers common to us all. In a new world of communications and social media most people are across what's happening else where; witness the upheaval across North Africa. China is no exception so the CPC is paying attention.

It's not just the case of leaving an old economy behind – it's about transition that builds on what came before, gradual and incremental. In some cases it will be intergenerational.

There are risks associated with transformation of an economy – the biggest is not being able to manage the risks. Some people will not find the transition an easy path, if the structures of Government are not in place for the new economy there will be a collapse of confidence as was most evident in Eastern Europe on the fall of the Soviet Union. New found wealth and prosperity can unfortunately give rise to obscene opulence, graft and corruption. This is the ugly consequence of the new economies and unrestrained can strip away at the humanity of a community. To use a western clique 'the haves and the have nots' soon lead to an untenable gulf between the rich and the poor. This is a major challenge for the Chinese Communist Party and emerging democracies.

Political parties have an indispensable role to play in the transformation of the new economies. Political parties should be the epicenter of policy formulation facilitating community input that carry through as policies of Government. Political parties that don't adapt are destined to be shown the door.

It would be disingenuous to believe that the Chinese are motivated by a simple desire to build friendly relations. They are embarked on an influence building strategy no different than other major powers before them. In recent time the CPC has actively participated in international exchanges and developed a comprehensive diplomatic policy to match through the International Department of the Central Committee of the CPC. The exchanges go way beyond ideological differences and aim to 'build mutual understanding and cooperation'; code for you stick to your way and we'll stick to ours. It's also about demystifying China, dealing with those misunderstandings and

perceptions that persist in the region and else where about the mighty Chinese dragon and its intentions. The depth of the CPC engagement is impressive – 600 parties in more than 160 countries. It's more than a charm offensive; it's about winning hearts and minds, reassuring the international community and crafting influence. As the USA and Europe focus inwards on their own issues the Chinese quietly go about mending fences and building bridges; arguably a much more powerful tool than an aircraft carrier.

The participation of former Minister for Public Security and current senior politburo member Zhou Yongkang together with PRC Ministers and Party Secretary of Guangxi and Governor of the Province underscored the importance the CPC placed on the Conference. Recorded messages from PRC Vice President Xi Jinping and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon reinforced the occasion.

So what about what about Tibet, human rights, democracy and the rule of law? For one I have always counted Tibet historically as part of China. Many will disagree. What about past excesses including The Great Leap Forward, The Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen Square to name some? All countries without exception have their dark chapters and it would be naive to believe that internally the emerging Chinese middle class and elite are not at times introspective about their Marxist Leninist heritage. The reality is that China today is very different place 5 years on let alone 30 years back.

There is no universal template for democracy; every country needs to find its own pathway based on what works best for them consistent with their people's aspirations. The Chinese people are clearly aspirational and the reality is that through an open and honest engagement with the International Department there is an opportunity to constructively showcase our own democracies, human rights and rule of law. The invitation to be a key note presenter and moderator of a Conference session afforded such an opportunity. The ongoing dialogue and engagement is far more important than most people and critics appreciate.

China is not without its challenges in these uncertain economic times. They must do more than export and invest externally. With the slowing of growth in the west demand for Chinese exports will be predictably dented. World Bank President Robert Zoellick says: "The challenge of China adjusting its growth model will be even more important

given the current economic climate of slowing growth and weakened confidence. But China has proven . . . it can make remarkable progress in bringing prosperity to its people, and thereby boosting regional and global growth. China's growth potential remains high. We believe the World Bank can assist China to grow smartly and sustainably while avoiding the so-called 'middle-income trap'.

Credit should be given to the CPC on the remarkable transformation of China into a powerhouse economy and emerging world leader. They are entitled to feel a profound sense of achievement and deep satisfaction given where they started from in 1949 and China's critics should take a step back as they might get a better view.