

Book launch - *Australia's China Odyssey: From euphoria to fear*

Speakers: Professor James Curran, historian and *Australian Financial Review* columnist
Mr Dennis Richardson AC, former Secretary of the Australian Department of Defence
Mr Iain Watt, Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President (International), University of Technology Sydney
Ms Elspeth Menzies, Executive Publisher, NewSouth and UNSW Press

Emcee: Professor James Laurenceson, Director, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney

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Professor James Laurenceson:

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming this evening.

My name is James Laurenceson. I'm the Director of the Australia-China Relations Institute. And rather than giving a big spiel myself, the first duty I have is to hand over to Mr Iain Watt – Iain is the UTS Deputy Vice-Chancellor (International) – to begin proceedings.

Iain, over to you.

Mr Iain Watt:

Thank you, James.

I'm just off a plane back after 10 days in the United States. So if my eyes start drooping it's because I don't know what time it is in my body at the moment.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, good evening. And thank you for joining us here at UTS. I'm not quite as tall as James either. It's fantastic to see such a group of eminent Chinese scholars and other people who have a fascination with what's happening between Australia and China here in a room today.

Before we start, I'd like to acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, upon whose ancestral lands our city campus now stands. I'd also like to pay respect to the elders, both past and present, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for this land.

So I'm delighted to welcome you all to the Australia-China Relations Institute's launch of historian and AFR columnist Professor James Curran's new book, *Australia's China Odyssey: From euphoria to fear*, published by NewSouth. The book – which only hit the shelves on Monday, has already debuted to great acclaim, having been endorsed, and these are not my words, Dennis, I'm just reading what was written for me – by public service titans Mr Dennis Richardson AC, former Secretary of Defence and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, who's here today to formally launch the book – welcome, Dennis – Mr Peter Varghese AO, also a former DFAT head; and Mr John McCarthy, who held ambassadorships to the US, Indonesia, Japan and India; as well as *New York Times* foreign correspondent, Jane Perlez.

As all of you here today are well aware, the Australia-China relationship has been riven with complications since late 2016. The downward trend in the bilateral relationship is one which ACRI has comprehensively tracked. And since then, Australia has been in the grip of what might be described as a feverish debate about how to deal with Beijing. And amidst this climate of growing anxiety about what China's rise means for Australia, it's getting much harder to offer a calm, balanced and contextualised view of how Australia might manage this relationship into the future.

This book does just that, by probing the past out of which the present has emerged and by cutting through the noise.

It asks what lessons, if any, does the past management of the China relationship hold for current policy makers. Will a historical sensibility concerning Australia-China relations make any difference, given China's increasingly authoritarian grip at home and its strategic muscle-flexing abroad?

Crucially, it tackles one of the hardest questions of our time, the future of Australia's China policy. What is to be done?

Australia's China Odyssey is a major contribution to Australia's China debate and will undoubtedly soon cement itself as a seminal text on Australia's discussion of China.

So let me now introduce our special guest for the evening, Mr Dennis Richardson, one of Australia's most distinguished public servants. Following two years as Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Mr Richardson commenced the [role of] Secretary for Department of Defence in 2012, a position he held until his retirement in 2017.

He was ambassador for Australia to the United States from 2005 to 2009, a career public servant since 1969, when he joined Australia's foreign service. And what a group of people who joined Australia's foreign service in the late 60s and early 70s!

From October 1996 until his appointment to Washington D.C., Mr Richardson served as Director-General of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation. And he was also a principal advisor to Prime Minister Bob Hawke from 1990 to 1991.

In 2021-22, Mr Richardson also chaired the Comprehensive Review of the Legal Framework of the National Intelligence Community. He holds a BA with Honors in history from the University of Sydney and was made an Officer of the Order of Australia in 2003.

James Curran is a Professor of Modern History at Sydney University, where he specialises in Australian and American political and foreign relations history. A former analyst with the Office of National Assessments, he was also a Fulbright Scholar at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., and later the chair of Australian History at UC Dublin.

Professor Curran has authored a number of books, including *The Power of Speech: Australian prime ministers defining the national image*, *Curtin's Empire*, *The Unknown Nation: Australia after empire*, along with Stuart Ward; *Unholy Fury: Whitlam and Nixon at war*; *Fighting with America: Why saying no to the US wouldn't rupture the*

alliance; and, most recently, and quite differently, *David Campese: The last of the dream sellers*. His poetry's been published in *Meanjin* and *Quadrant*, and his rugby writing in France's twice-weekly *Midi-Olympique*. He writes a fortnightly column on foreign affairs for *The Australian Financial Review*. And we're all very much looking forward to hearing from him later on this afternoon.

But first please join me in welcoming Mr Richardson to the lectern to say a few words about *Australia's China Odyssey*.

Mr Dennis Richardson:

Thanks, Iain.

Despite some of the jobs I've had, I don't know nearly as much about Australia-China as, indeed, a lot of people in this audience. And indeed looking at some of you, it's pretty easy to be intimidated standing up here, and I mean that. I've got to find my glasses. Here they are.

Thank you very much Iain, and thank you to the University for hosting this event.

James and I, we shared a tutor at the University of Sydney, a few years apart, but nonetheless, we did share one. Not long after I joined the Department of Defence in 2012, I was having a dinner with a large number of graduates who had just joined Defence. And out of curiosity, I asked them whether any of them knew the background to that big monument at the center of Russell in Canberra, which has an American eagle on top of it. And universally, I was told by them all that it was a gift from the American government, et cetera, et cetera.

I asked them, given that they'd been in the department now for some six months and they were in different parts of Russell, how many of them walked past that monument every day, and quite a number of them did. I then asked how many of them had bothered to go across and see what the monument was about? Not one person had done it. I queried what value they might subsequently offer to Australian government policy if they were so lacking in curiosity, because the monument was paid for by donations from the Australian public in the early 50s. And it was the Australian thank you to the million American men and women who had passed through Australia during the Second World War – far from being a gift from the United States.

Most graduates today have no memory of 9/11. The Cold War, including for a lot of commentators, appears to have been a cozy deal between the United States and the USSR, with the odd angry moment, such as the Cuban missile exchange, but it was all so neatly managed. And when we talk about Huawei, we immediately think of the previous government's ban in respect to 5G. It's almost out of the public consciousness now that the first ban on Huawei was by a Labor government in 2011, when the then-government prevented Huawei from taking any part in the NBN.

Today, Angus Houston, a good friend and neighbor of mine, talked about how the current geostrategic environment is the most challenging in his lifetime. And without being too much of a pedant, I thought to myself, well, is that right? Angus is a little bit older than me. He was born just after the end of the Second World War. And within the first 10 years of his life, there was the bringing down of the Iron Curtain, there was the Korean War, there was the Malaysian Emergency or the Emergency in Malay. There was a communist insurgency in the Philippines and Thailand. And China was taken over by the Communist Party, for better or for worse.

So I thought to myself, it appears to me that we tend to see the world we live in as always being the most challenging because we don't know the end point. But after you know the end point, for instance, we know how the Cold War ended, we know how the Malay Emergency and the like ended, it all looks so neat and tidy. But when you're living through that period, I suspect it's anything but neat and tidy. So I think you need to be very questioning of words such as unprecedented and the like.

And that's the importance of James Curran's book. It brings an historical perspective to the Australia-China relationship. I think a lot of people actually think that our relationship with China started in 2012, when President Xi Jinping became president. There's a hazy memory of what happened before, but most commentary starts from 2012. But while the past can inform the present, it does not dictate the future. And the world does change. Geostrategic environment is a bit like geology. It's slow-moving. Sometimes, so slow-moving that you don't see the cumulative effect of the change, even though at a particular point, you see how dramatic it is. And interspersed in that slow moving movement of the plates you get sudden movement of the plates. You get sudden jolts which dramatically and overnight change the landscape. And geopolitics is a bit like that.

James – and of course, if you're launching a book, you've always got to go and quote part of it, and I actually did read it – in his conclusion, always a good part – I've only read the conclusion, James – in his conclusion, James talks about how Australia has responded to China's rise. He says, 'Ultimately, Australia has responded to China's rise by rebooting a policy approach it followed consistently from the late 19th century. It has continued to believe that solidarity with its great power allies, old and new, is the best means by which to preserve its welfare and wellbeing. Australia has even enlarged the geographic definition of its primary strategic environment, the Indo-Pacific, in its search for new friends, primarily India, that might help it balance China into the future.'

Again, being a pedant, I would simply note that the term Indo-China first appeared in a major Australian government document in the 2013 Defence White Paper. And it was initiated by Stephen Smith in cahoots with Bronwyn Bishop and a range of other people. And I can ensure you for one overriding reason, they were all from Western Australia. And when you live in Western Australia, you do think about the Indian Ocean in the way in which you don't on the Pacific, and they saw that as a more accurate framing of Australia's continental space.

But I think – I'm not quite sure – I don't 100 percent agree with James on that score – that, ultimately, we just lurch back to our old friends and strong allies. In part, that's true, but I think there are good reasons for it. There's been at least four big changes to the framework around which has wrapped the Australia-China relationship. The number of people born in China, living in Australia in 1901, was equal to what it was in 1983. The reason for that was the White Australia policy. And the White Australia policy was so effective that by the end of the Second World War, there were fewer than 10,000 people living in Australia who had been born in China. By 1983, it got back to what it was in 1901. And of course, following Tiananmen Square, the family reunions migration from China blossomed to the point where I think, in the last census, it's our third largest immigrant group. And that has had electoral implications, which we've seen in the recent election.

We've also seen China's rise, economically and militarily, in its ambitions, both regionally and globally, and its preparedness to take on core Australian strategic interests, such as in the South Pacific. We've also seen a blossoming of Australia-China trade relations, which James outlines. Gone are the days of just wheat and wool of the '50s and '60s. We know how it embraces Australia today and we've seen the changing nature of ANZUS. We all forget that the United States had to be talked into ANZUS. We were the ones who initiated it. The United States was rather lukewarm. Strategic circumstances have now changed, where I believe Australia is a more important ally to the United States today than how it was seen in 1951. And we see that in AUKUS. AUKUS is not just about Australia, it's also about the United States and the region. And we've seen changing China-US power relativities. China over time almost certainly will become the dominant military power in the Western Pacific.

James talks about that. And he, again it's quite interesting, he says that Americans have never been truly satisfied re Australia-China. And a default policy for the major political parties in Australia is the US. The result is that Australia can, at times, be little more than an auxiliary in whatever strategic decisions the United States makes. For many in the national security community in Canberra, the American alliance has become a way of life. And of course, that is why tonight I've carried my papers in the AUSMIN little carry bag that they gave me

in 2008. I thought that was an appropriate little point to register that I'm probably one of those officials who has done well out of the alliance.

But James calls this a strategic gamble. He says, 'But this is a strategic gamble, possibly the greatest in the history of Australia's relations with the world. Its politicians bank on a hope that the internal strife in the United States is but a passing phase that, once more, American democracy, as it has in the past, will recover its purpose, following a period of drift and introspection.' And he goes on re Trump and the like.

I actually think, and maybe very wrongly, I actually think that Australia will look increasingly to the United States the more the power relativities between China and the United States change. Many people talk about that as a justification for 'accommodation'. And I don't use accommodation in a critical sense. But I actually think it's simply a natural instinct for a country of Australia's size, in our geostrategic circumstances, to reach across the Pacific to a broadly like-minded country, with all the differences, when we see the rise of a country such as China seeking to exert its influence. Sometimes, contrary to our own interests.

We did that in the late '30s, early '40s re Japan. We opened our first independent diplomatic mission anywhere in the world in Washington, in January 1940. And six months later, we opened our second independent diplomatic mission anywhere in the world in Tokyo. And I think that instinct – and I'm not comparing a parallel between China and Japan, Imperial Japan, not at all – I'm just saying that if you have a great power rising up in our part of the world, one which we don't always agree with, call it balance, call it insurance, call it whatever you like. I think it's a natural instinct for a country like Australia to look across the Pacific in that way.

In that context, I think the Morrison government, by and large, got the big picture right. I would disagree with some of its tone and tenor, and obviously some mistakes were made, but the big picture, more or less, right. Where I had a real problem with the previous government was the tendency for some to call into question people's loyalties and patriotism when they were critical of the government or disagreed with the government; the low point being the Senate committee, which in respect of which Senator Abetz demanded that three Chinese-Australians denounce Communist Party ideology before the committee.

And interestingly, that committee was chaired by someone from the Labor Party. It wasn't a Coalition-chaired committee. And I'm critical – just as the Coalition, just as the right of Australian politics, tends to look towards national security to beat its opponents over the head, the Labor Party looks to a self-proclaimed moral superiority to beat its opponents over the head. So no one's got clean hands in this.

And if you're looking at the way the Australia-China relationship has played into domestic politics, it's primarily Coalition, and sometimes ugly attempts to portray good Australians as disloyal. But equally, look at the ALP ads in respect of Gladys Liu in Chisholm in the last election. Anyone ever seen them? Well, you should get them out. They are a black-and-white ad with Gladys Liu in the frame, in a sinister dark over-voice, 'What do you know about Gladys Liu?' That was all it said. Didn't say anything about national security, didn't say anything about anything, but the undertones were very, very clear.

I think it's against the backdrop the last few years that, I think, James' book is really very important and fascinating. I read it with great interest, not only because I'm interested in history, but I think the starting point to a discussion about the Australia-China relationship has to be an understanding of the history, where we've come from, so we can identify some of the old nostrums that are pulled up from time to time. So we can pull people up and say, 'Look, we've been there before. We don't need to go there again.'

I think it's a superb book, James. I think it is a starting point for any serious discussion about Australia-China relations. I read it with the same interest I read your fortnightly columns in *The Australian Financial Review*. And I've got to say, while a lot of people here won't know what I'm referring to, but Neville Meaney would be extremely proud. Thank you.

Professor James Laurenceson:

I would now like to invite the author himself, James Curran, to the lectern.

Professor James Curran:

Thank you very much, James.

Thank you very much to everybody for coming this evening, particularly to those who have come from long distances. Many of you have come from Canberra today, which I appreciate very much indeed.

Thank you to Dennis for launching the book, to have someone of your eminence and standing in Australian public affairs and one who's contributed so much to the life of this country, and also to the making and remaking of Australia's international image over a long period and in many capacities, is a great honour indeed. So thank you for your endorsement of the book, for your disagreements as well, and also for launching it here in Sydney.

I'd like to thank the Australia-China Relations Institute for hosting this event, to James Laurenceson, its Director, to Elena Collinson, and Amy Ma who worked so tirelessly on bringing this event together. It's a huge task with myriad logistical requirements. I'm very grateful for all the time and effort that has gone into this event over many months indeed. These things don't crop up overnight. So thank you very much to ACRI for hosting this. And I'll just pay tribute as well, of course, to ACRI's role in continuing to publish important and impactful evidence-based research and policy analysis of the Australia-China relationship.

My Sydney University colleagues are here. I'm very grateful for their attendance, and in particular to the Head of School, Keith Dobney, Professor Keith Dobney. The Head of Department, Professor Kirsten McKenzie, many of my colleagues here who've been a great support to me, and of course also the support staff in the school who helped me a lot when I had a bit of a problem with my vision over the last couple of years. I'm very grateful for your help and support.

I also need to mention those who read drafts of this book, and commented, and really gave me an enormous amount of support, in particular to Max Suich, who can't be here tonight, but to former Ambassador to China, Geoff Raby, who is here, and who read all of these drafts very patiently and offered a lot of very constructive and insightful suggestions to improve the text. Elena Collinson read the entire draft and gave many great suggestions as well. The book is certainly an improvement because of all of those people's interventions. But I must say while I'm the beneficiary of all those interventions, of course, the weaknesses and the limitations of the book are mine and mine alone.

I had a lot of great conversations with people who are here, extended and frequent conversations, including Peter Drysdale and Shiro Armstrong, Paul Kelly, Max, as I already said. Did I mention Shiro? Did I mention Shiro? Yes, I did. Thank you. Thank you, Shiro. And again, a great beneficiary of those conversations, and I learned a great deal and I'm still learning.

I wanted to thank NewSouth Press. I don't think Phillipa McGuinness is here tonight, but Phillipa did commission the book, Kathy Bail championed it. Elspeth Menzies played a pivotal role in shaping the book as it got underway, and Sophia Oravec was superb in shepherding this through to publication at every stage. I don't think I've ever had such a seamless production of a book before, so I'm very grateful to NewSouth Press. It's a wonderful product, and I think it looks great. I think it looks great. So hopefully, it will stimulate some debate.

Angus Britts is here, a former student of mine and a scholar in his own right, who keeps producing important works on Australian military history. And Angus very generously helped me to fund a research assistant to help with this book. So Angus, thank you very much.

Last, but not least, my two daughters. Now, Pia Curran, who can't be here tonight, but sends her best wishes. She's in first year university. Pia Curran also read the whole book and gave a lot of great suggestions to

improve the text, and I would just like to thank both of my daughters, Pia and, of course, Ella, who is here, as well for all their love and support over the years, and while I was writing this, but all their love and support. And Ella, in fact, is just fresh from a debate win last night at her school about why international sanctions are not the way to end military conflict. I'm just so tickled pink that both of them have such a passion for literature and history and words, and the use of words. So I find that really thrilling.

Okay. Now let me just say a few brief words about the book and why I wrote it.

As I began to observe this debate more closely in 2016 and '17, I was struck by a number of themes that were beginning to strangle rational discussion and in some ways policy.

Themes which convinced me that greater historical context was needed in a debate, that if it wasn't obliterating the past entirely, it was firing off older epithets and applying old slogans to new circumstances.

The first theme was how absolute were the strategic judgments that were being made – which connects to your point, Dennis. This I found a particular paradox in an age often heralded of extraordinary uncertainty. It was notable that advocates in some think tanks and in some sections of the press were supremely confident about the future and what was coming.

Among these absolute judgements were that China constitutes an existential threat to Australian security and prosperity, that Beijing is hell bent on world domination, that Australia's social democratic institutions are as nine pins before this tide of Chinese influence, that war is imminent and that America has our back as it did in World War Two.

The second theme was the ease with which a slew of older images were plucked from history. Silent invasions were already taking place. Red flags of domination were being waved. Enemies were spied within the gate and fifth columns were on the march. There was relish too, if not periods of heroic self-congratulation, particularly under the previous government, that Australia had globalised its China problem, gaining undreamt of accolades in Washington and London for doing so.

In the space of only a few years, we have a new cold war with all the zero sum terminology and mindset that comes with it, but with no real discussion of the tragic consequences that await this part of the world, where the battle lines of any hot/new cold war would form. We've had the renewed application of the same metaphors that Western governments have invoked before every international crisis, since the Second World War, namely the supposed lessons of Munich, the shame of appeasement and the doctrine of containment. The doctrine which, while pervasive in much commentary, so often dare not speak its name. And I think we need look no further for proof of the deterioration in public life and policy debate than the formation of the bipartisan 'Wolverines', and they were bipartisan, it's important to remember, who built the China threat into the imminent destruction of everything that we hold sacred.

But the third theme, and I think the most disturbing, and again, this chimes with what Dennis has just said, was the tests of patriotism that were being applied to some participants in the debate. Now this, as Dennis has already mentioned, had one of its ugliest manifestations in the federal parliament when prominent Chinese-Australians were subjected to a crude loyalty test. Many more Chinese-Australians have suffered and continued to suffer racial abuse. This introduction of the patriotic card, perhaps above all others, did the most to corrupt the political culture, creating a climate which picked at the country's multicultural fabric, but also narrowed the policy options available to governments, because it made the China threat a test of one's love of country.

I don't think there's any cause for argument about the increasingly troubling dimensions of the strategic environment in East Asia.

Nor is there reason to doubt the legitimate discomfort here about that disturbance to the regional equilibrium, a country which, over the life of its modern history, has sought solace in the embrace of great protectors as an Asian power rises and asserts itself.

And there's no question that Xi Jinping is the most forward leaning Chinese president in foreign policy terms that, indeed, Canberra and the world has had to deal with in living memory.

There is a new world order and it's one unlike policy makers and politicians have encountered before, because China's growing assertiveness is also coinciding with doubts about American capability and its internal resolve.

So taken together, I think there is some reason to accept the judgment that we are living through a time of geopolitical flux.

Now it is akin to, but I want to stress again, it's very different from, the 1930s, the postwar period of decolonisation when Australia had expected the European empires to flood back into the region. They didn't, they had to accommodate themselves to the rise of Asian nationalism, and other periods like the twin shocks of the 1960s and '70s when you had the British retreat from Southeast Asia, their ambitions to enter Europe, and, of course, a chastened post-Vietnam America. These were all periods of extraordinary turbulence in Australian strategic policy and they required a lot of adroit and agile reactions and policies.

Now, how Australia responds and what it must do in policy terms to meet the challenge of China arouses great feelings. I think that's an obvious point. It stirs emotions.

Wolf warrior bullying from the Chinese Ministry for Foreign Affairs, its economic coercion, human rights abuses in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong, the arbitrary detention of foreign nationals, including currently incarcerated Australians, Yang Hengjun and Cheng Lei, have only succeeded in uniting many against China. And that behavior of Beijing does have to be resisted.

This book doesn't claim to solve the policy problem, but rather provide a fuller picture of the way that successive leaders and governments have managed the relationship. And from that, I do hope that important implications will be drawn for future policy makers.

The conventional view is that so many of these prime ministers and their advisors were duched by the middle kingdom, bribed, even, by Chinese markets in exchange for our resources. And so that myth runs the country was left defenceless because all these officials and prime ministers had their eyeballs propped open with the dollar signs as they started to sort of cash in on the China market. Well, I hope that this book is a corrective to that complete fallacy.

The story, as the book attempts to show, is far richer and much more complicated than that.

The irony, too, is that both Australia and China, when this relationship really began to develop, agreed to move on from history in the 1970s and 1980s.

In the late 1970s, Chinese officials said to their Australian counterparts, 'As far as we're concerned, there are no problems left over from history.' In other words, 'We're not going to hold the White Australia policy against you. We're not going to hold your involvement in the Vietnam War against you. It's a clean slate. Let's begin with a fresh start.'

And Australian leaders returned the compliment. In the early 1980s, Bob Hawke said that the memories of the Cold War and containment were but a distant memory. And he was saying this in 1984. Of course he was talking about the end of the Cold War in East Asia. And after the first major jolt in the relationship, first real major crisis, following the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, then-Foreign Minister Gareth Evans recorded his deep abhorrence of what had happened, but added that despite it, he said, 'Australia may have to deal with

the new Chinese leadership for some time.’ ‘Unlike Europe,’ he said, ‘Australia cannot walk away from China, whether for good or ill, China will remain one of Australia’s most important foreign policy and trade concerns.’ ‘These realities,’ he said, ‘need to be addressed regardless of who governs China.’

It is notable that from the early 1990s, Australian governments, in the wake of that crisis, do make it very clear publicly that the relationship with China is first and foremost about business. From the middle of that decade, as concerns about Beijing’s military modernisation grew, the down payments on the US alliance insurance policy were made and Australia looked to give America more. There is a problem, I think, with some who, as Dennis mentioned, only think the concerns about China began in 2012, and they became alarmed about the expenditure on its military budget in the early to mid-1990s.

Now, looking out over the past 120 years of Australian foreign and defence policy, there are some clear patterns which, I think, emerge.

From the late 19th century down to the 1960s, the country’s political culture put two *cordon sanitaires* around the country. One was the ring of tariff protection and the other was the great white walls of the White Australia policy, the Immigration Restriction Act.

Then, as Britain departed for Europe in the early 1970s, and as White Australia vanished into the mists, the country began to engage comprehensively with the very cultures in the region it had once fought so desperately to keep at arm’s length.

This was a remarkable transformation and one done at breakneck speed. In other words, the political and cultural community quickly reconfigured itself and reoriented itself to a region that had once been its psychological nemesis.

The point is, though, as so often happens when old orthodoxies collapse so quickly, almost overnight, really, it produced a period of extraordinarily creative diplomacy, as Australia looked find for itself new moorings this part of the world, and that included strengthened relations with Japan, China and Southeast Asia, and a genuine commitment to multilateralism in trade and other policy objectives and initiatives. At the heart of it, too, was diplomatic guile and adroit, political and bureaucratic management.

I think it remains a question as to why that reconfiguration and the skills that it honed went somewhat missing in action from 2017. Of course, it is self-evident that China has changed, but Australia in some important ways hasn’t changed, and we do need to have the courage to look into the mirror and see what this debate reveals about some of the history that hasn’t gone away. I think the making of good policy demands it.

Australia, conscious of the changing circumstances and ever attentive to the needs of its security and prosperity, needs to re-energise that vast national project of better understanding the region linguistically, culturally, historically and strategically.

Finally, can I finish with some wise words from my, and indeed, Dennis has already mentioned him, former teacher, the late Neville Meaney.

Meaney said that we can learn from history as we learn from experience, but he warned that if history repeats itself, it never does so exactly. [Dennis] pretty much already said this. Similar circumstances can recur, but each circumstance is unique. And he said that ‘the lessons of history can never be laws, and what we extract from it is always going to be somewhat elusive and somewhat imprecise.’ ‘But despite the paradoxical nature of the study of history, the past,’ Neville said, ‘can never merely be an object of curiosity’. Because of the way that it’s built into the human psyche, it was always going to be a focus of passion, a field for argument, and a basis for judgment. And all that the historian can do, he went on, ‘by bringing the past to life, by probing the causes of events, by looking at the alternatives out of which the present has emerged, is to mediate the passion, clarify the argument, and enlighten the judgment.’

This book is offered as a very modest contribution to that ongoing task.

Thank you very much.

Professor James Laurenceson:

Thank you, Professor Curran.

I would now like to invite Elspeth Menzies. Elspeth is the Executive Publisher at NewSouth, New South Wales Press, and has been commissioning books on history, politics, current affairs, design, and memoirs for almost 20 years. She's published many award-winning titles at NewSouth, including books published in partnership with Australia's leading cultural institutions.

Ms Elspeth Menzies:

Thanks very much, and thanks to everyone for coming tonight to celebrate the launch of James' wonderful book, *Australia's China Odyssey*.

Thanks to Dennis Richardson for launching the book, and James for that insightful commentary.

So, as I've already been introduced, I'm Elspeth Menzies, Executive Publisher at NewSouth and UNSW Press.

As the new Albanese government takes its early steps in foreign policy, it seems really important to look back at the complex and crucial relationship between Australia and China, from Whitlam to Morrison, and who better to do that than James Curran.

James is a compelling and talented writer, and the NewSouth team, we've got Sophia here tonight and others, we were all really grateful that James was also a model author to work with. Believe me, not everyone is. So we're really delighted to have *Australia's China Odyssey* as part of our award-winning list, and I hope everyone enjoys reading the book. Books will be sold by the UNSW bookshop over here, and James will be signing copies. Thanks very much.

Professor James Laurenceson:

Thank you, Elspeth. Let me just make a few brief remarks in closing.

I'd like to thank our keynote speakers tonight, in particular, Mr Dennis Richardson, and to our author, Professor James Curran. I would also like to thank Iain Watt, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of UTS International, and the team at UTS:ACRI for making this event possible.

A serious book like this one deserves an impressive launch event, and James, I hope we've delivered that for you tonight.

Let me close, if I may, with a couple brief personal reflections on both James' and Dennis' contributions, sometimes perhaps more accurately described as interventions, into Australia's understanding and discussion of China.

In my view, James Curran has consistently demonstrated a commitment to research and analysis that is grounded in scholarly rigour. Laying out not one or two facts, but a full range of facts and situating those facts in a broader historical and international context. Sadly, this is not the norm; rather, in my view, too many cherry-pick facts and sway in the direction of whatever breeze is blowing in Canberra or perhaps Washington, or perhaps Beijing.

This commitment James has to academic rigour is not always the easiest path or the one with the most personal reward – in fact, quite the opposite. But James, you have my respect, and I think I can speak for others in the audience tonight to say that you have our respect for the contribution that you make. Thank you.

Let me now turn to Mr Dennis Richardson. Mr Richardson's comments on China's international behavior may not always, I suspect, be welcomed in Beijing. But a bit like James Curran, I suspect they may not always be welcomed by some, perhaps more than some, in Canberra, too.

I remember in November, 2015, when allegations were being made that the lease of the Port of Darwin to a Chinese company could facilitate spying, espionage, Mr Richardson described the suggestion as 'amateur hour,' adding that 'when you examine them, they melt like butter sitting on a car bonnet on a hot day.' He described suggestions that the lease would open up the north of Australia as 'alarmist nonsense.' 'Without foundation in any way.' Tell us how you really feel, Dennis!

In 2020, he described some of our more boisterous and obsessive commentators as 'national security cowboys.' Again, an important intervention. That same year, he advised business leaders that when they were being slurred as unpatriotic for trading with China, they should, 'punch their accuser right on the nose,' quickly adding, 'Figuratively, that is.' He then went on to suggest that they should not be ashamed of the jobs that they create and the tax revenue that they provide to the Australian government, which in turn delivers services to the Australian people.

Dennis, thank you for lending your unrivaled credentials to an Australian discussion of China that takes the challenges that China presents seriously, but does not veer into alarmist assessments, or for advocating responses that are one-dimensional, obsessed with cutting off any national security risks rather than mitigating them where we can, and recognising – this is close to my heart as an economist – 'a strong economy is foundational to national security.'

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming. Be sure not to leave without first getting a copy of what is certainly the best book on Australia-China relations this year, and James Curran, I'm confident it's going to hold that title for many years to come.

Thank you.