



**Vote of Thanks to the Minister for Trade and Investment, Senator The Honourable Simon Birmingham**

**Dr Martin Parkinson AC PSM, Former Secretary, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet**

**Melbourne, 18 October 2019**

Minister, thanks for that typically thoughtful, nuanced and deliberative exposition of the challenges, opportunities and complexities of the China-Australia relationship.

As you know better than most, the centrality of China to Australia's continued economic success and our national security places tremendous importance on an informed, substantive, national discourse on all aspects of our relationship with the Chinese Government, the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese people, and our own Chinese-heritaged diaspora.

Relationships with counterparts is a key ingredient of making the broader nation-to-nation relationship a success – and you have built a good relationship with your counterpart.

But we also know that alone is not enough without a serious discourse among business, government and the broader Australian community on the complexities of the relationship.

It was a sense that this discourse was, at worse, non-existent or, at best, ill-informed, that led my predecessor as Secretary of PM&C, Michael Thawley, to strongly advocate for Commonwealth support for China Matters, something which I willingly embraced when I became Secretary. The foresight of the Secretaries of DFAT, Defence, Attorney-Generals, DIIS, and Home Affairs to become early supporters of China Matters highlights our common concern about the need for a better debate.

I know that the current and former Secretaries do not share an identical view on the complexities, opportunities or challenges in the relationship. But what they all share is a view that there is immense value to Australia of an independent, well-informed and nuanced perspective and voice on how the rise of China matters for Australia.

And we can see from the other key China Matters supporters – Rio Tinto, PwC, Aurizon, The Star, Genesis Care, Australia Post and the ANU – and all the other organisations represented here tonight, this sense of importance is shared broadly among the business community.



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China, in all its dimensions, will shape the context in which Australia's business, political, bureaucratic and community leaders will take decisions over coming decades.

China's strategic competition with the US is unlikely to abate, and our strong alliance relationship with the US will necessitate an even greater focus on our own defence, cyber and intelligence capabilities.

China's commitment to control of the South China Sea will not be unwound.

Its attempts to shape, indeed bend, countries in our region, including in the South West Pacific and Timor Leste, to its world view will also not abate.

This will require a greater diplomatic, business and people-to-people investment by Australia with others in our region that wish to safeguard their own sovereignty, the ability to act independently and in their own national interest.

But it also requires a more nuanced approach to policy at home – we have to avoid any sense that any disagreement we have is with the Chinese people. We need to continually reiterate that we welcome China's rise but we have to show we mean that – this requires flexibility in foreign investment and other policies and a willingness to work with China where we can advance our shared objectives, of which there are many.

At a time like this it is critical that policy deliberations and public debate be informed by as many perspectives as possible, but that these be well grounded in deep subject knowledge and experience.

China Matters plays an integral role in ensuring better informed debate and in a richer consideration of policy options, and I strongly hope that this continues for many years to come.

To conclude, Minister, your speech tonight has set the scene for a what I am sure will be a rich and rewarding set of discussions tomorrow, one in which we can tease out the complexities and air the different perspectives we can bring to the issues. So thank you for spending time with us tonight and, with that, colleagues, I would invite you to join me in thanking Minister Simon Birmingham in the usual way.



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