

# Whitlam's trip to China started as an adventure and ended with a coup

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*When Gough Whitlam decided to go on his ground-breaking trip to Beijing 50 years ago, he tracked down Stephen FitzGerald in a Canberra pub to ask him along.*

It's not the first time [China](#) has been "coming down" to "get" Australia, or "the Chinese" seeking to overrun us. It's a paranoia that goes back to the 19th century of course, variously dormant or active depending in part on how much political oxygen it's given.

In 1971 it was fed by a clamorous government invocation of a "downward thrust" (originally former prime minister Robert Menzies' words) bent on invasion of Australia and now blending the old bogey of race with the new one of communism.

And with the Vietnam hot war on top of the Cold War, the politics were rough and often dirty. The anti-war movement, and Labor's part in it, excited the government to frenzied attacks on Labor as dupes of Asian communism. In that environment, it was not an attack easily met with rational argument.

Since 1949, the invocation of a communist threat by conservative governments and the tarring of Labor with a communist brush had contributed to keeping Labor out of government. As then-prime minister Billie McMahon candidly boasted in 1971, China was "[a political asset to the Liberal Party](#)". It was a liability for Labor.

We had no diplomatic relations, we voted regularly against Beijing taking the China seat in the United Nations, we recognised and promoted the defeated Chinese nationalists in Taiwan as the government of the whole of China. We had troops fighting in Vietnam, a war constructed by the government as prosecuted by China, and so by this construction we were actually at war with China.

And China itself? Not an attractive political picture. In 1966, Chinese leader Mao Zedong, in an act of apparent insanity, had unleashed on the hapless Chinese people a movement he called the [Cultural Revolution](#), plunging the whole country into chaos, physical fighting and near all-out civil war. By 1971, this madness had subsided somewhat, but China was a country where the government, or what was left of it, had turned in on itself and had been doing its best to alienate its own people and the outside world.

And in the face of all this, in mid-1971 Gough Whitlam went to China.

Not the best moment to be launching a bid to engage, some might have thought, and many in Whitlam's party said it was mad, and likely to lose them the next election, within Labor's grasp for the first time in 23 years. He was the first Labor leader with the courage to take up this challenge. It not only flew in the face of Australia's foreign policy, and Washington's, it was at great risk to his own and his party's fortunes.

But his decision was calculated, and consistent with ALP policy since 1955 to recognise Beijing. Whitlam himself had first called for recognition in his [maiden speech to Parliament](#) in 1954. He saw this as rational, logical and in the nation's interests. He believed we must accept that China is a permanent and significant part of the international landscape, whatever its government or what we think of it, and like Churchill he believed "the reason for having diplomatic relations is not to confer a compliment, but to secure a convenience".

And Whitlam, and ALP Federal Secretary Mick Young, had seen an opportunity. Quarantined from the politics of enmity and fear, Australia had quietly been selling wheat to China since 1960, worth over \$100 million a year. But the Australian Wheat Board had returned empty-handed from China in late 1970, and this was public news. For the first time since 1949, the government was in difficulty on China.

If the trigger was trade, the opportunity was diplomatic engagement, and in the ALP's cable to Premier Zhou Enlai, it sought discussion of diplomatic relations, not just trade.

Whitlam had also been reading the signs. Some other countries, notably Canada, were moving to recognition of Beijing, there were indications the US might be about to shift, and China itself had signalled a willingness to engage, inviting the

US table tennis team to Beijing, the start of what became known as ping-pong diplomacy.

I was neither politician nor Party official, and had no expectation that I would be part of this adventure. But the day after the invitation arrived from China, Whitlam tracked me down in the Curtin pub, where I'd gone to meet Mick Young and Eric Walsh. He asked me to join as China adviser, then added, with his familiar irony: "Would you mind travelling economy class?" Would I what!

I spent the six weeks before departure and the two weeks on the road trying to meet the demands of his prodigious thirst for knowledge.

It was not certain that Whitlam would actually meet Zhou until the night it happened, but this was critical to the success of his mission. He met other ministers, but Zhou was the commanding historical figure, strategist of foreign policy since before the Communists came to power, whose reputed intellect and diplomatic charm had made him a legend even on the anti-communist side of the Cold War.

And when it did happen, there was a shock. The Australian journalists who'd accompanied the delegation throughout, instead of being asked to leave after witnessing the initial introductions, were asked by Zhou to stay throughout the discussion, together with a large number of Chinese media. I had not prepared Whitlam for this. But when I realised it was to be "on stage", I was thankful that it was Whitlam in dialogue with Zhou and not any other Australian leader I could think of, government or opposition. Once through the initial surprise, he had the intellect, skills and knowledge to play opposite Zhou. And did to such effect that the journalists' reports next day were positive, even glowing.

And to cap it, as Whitlam was leaving China it was announced that Henry Kissinger had had a secret meeting with Zhou, four days after Whitlam. In Australia, Billie McMahan said: "Whitlam did not even know that Kissinger was there. That's how much the Chinese trust him. It makes a mockery of the man". Eric Walsh, reported on the trip for the Australian Financial Review.

But the blind-siding was of McMahan, who'd been kept in the dark by Washington, and the vindication was Whitlam's. He walked away from China with a commitment to diplomatic relations, and a resumption of the wheat trade. And in a full public discussion, with great diplomatic skill he had contrived to defend

Australia's alliance with the US, corrected Zhou's understanding of the origins and intentions of the ANZUS Treaty, defended Japan against Zhou's charge of revived militarism, and declined to be drawn into identifying with the Chinese view of the world.

It started as an adventure and ended with a coup, of extraordinary significance and execution. From Opposition, he had effectively committed Australia to changing a China policy that had been in place for two decades and had seemed immovable.

What were the ingredients in this success? First was Whitlam's unrivalled intellectual grasp of international politics and an ear attuned to our region, and then: a strong commitment to active statecraft and diplomacy as the most effective means of securing the national interest; a belief that if you engage with governments you don't like you'll have greater advancement of the national interest than if you isolate yourself from them; a conviction that you must find a way to engage even against great challenges and obstacles; and an understanding that as a leader you have to engage in person, at the highest level.

He wasn't a "China-lover". He just cared about Australia's future in an emerging, post-colonial, Asian world, and his success was founded on judgement, courage, and political leadership. And of course, with Kissinger following on his heels, a bit of luck.

But in this one stroke he also took on the broad Australian paranoia: fear of China, fear of Vietnam, fear of Asia, and the fear of taking strong issue with the US on foreign policy without damaging the alliance. This opened the way to public acceptance not only of China, but of the Asia engagement which became the foundation of foreign policy, and of the legislated ending of the White Australia policy.

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