

Dear Friends,

I am very honoured to be invited to give this public lecture on **'Current prospects for East-West detente – Reflections of a former Western diplomat'** - in the Central Museum of Contemporary History of Russia.

This beautiful building on Tverskaya 21 until 1917 housed the English Club, an exclusive Moscow club. I like to think that in the golden years before war broke out in 1914, two of my literary heroes, Boris Pasternak and Robert Bruce Lockhart, might as young bachelors around town have visited the old English Club here for card games or for balls. And at an earlier time, Lev Tolstoy would have frequented this club.

The theme of my lecture requires some explanation and context. And I must warn you – please do not expect a scholarly academic lecture from me today. My approach will be wide-ranging, philosophical and discursive, in the spirit of my recently published book 'Return to Moscow'.

In my first Australian foreign service posting, from 1969 to 1971, I spent two remarkable years in Moscow. I was the junior diplomat in the very small Australian Embassy. Our embassy was not far from here in an attractive little palace at 13 Kropotkinsky Pereulok.

My young family and I lived in a much less attractive, closely guarded diplomatic apartment complex on Kutuzovsky Prospekt. It was at the height of the Cold War. On both sides, there were huge obstacles to normal official, or simply human, interaction of diplomats with ordinary citizens of our host nation.

We did not conduct diplomatic relations. We experienced Brezhnev's Moscow as cautious onlookers, as if through an impenetrable glass window. We were in many ways a forward observation post in enemy territory.

Our diplomatic duties were light. There was almost no Russian-Australian policy discussion, trade talks, or cultural exchange. We exchanged Kremlin gossip with colleagues from other embassies in the Western camp. We tried to keep up with what was happening: in East-West relations, in the Helsinki detente process, in the treatment of dissidents like Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov, and in the treatment of the 'refuseniks' - Soviet Jews wishing to emigrate.

The Soviet system seemed impregnable, protected by the policy of mutual nuclear deterrence. None of us expected any early end to this. We underestimated how soon the Information Technology revolution, the magnetism of Western consumerism, and obligations under the Helsinki Accords, would shake the self-confidence of the Soviet system.

For the next 26 years I pursued my career as an Australian diplomat and foreign policy analyst. I went back briefly to Moscow in 1985 for the funeral of Konstantin Chernenko. Mikhail Gorbachev made a strong impression on our delegation. But we also noted how the Soviet system was showing signs of stagnation, and even exhaustion.

I went back again in 1990 for an international diplomatic conference in Vladivostok. It was such a sad experience. The Soviet system by now showed unmistakable symptoms of decay, of loss of self-belief. The Pacific Fleet was rusting at its moorings. I remember well - there was no aviation spirit to fly us back to Moscow!

I did not go back to Russia again during my diplomatic career, which ended in 1998 after postings as Australian ambassador to Poland 1991-94 and Cambodia 1994-97.

Before this, I had watched great historical changes from my job heading Policy Planning Branch in the Australian Foreign Ministry in Canberra: the period of Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost reforms, and the voluntary liquidation of the Warsaw Pact. I witnessed the Reagan-Gorbachev and George H W Bush- Gorbachev summit diplomacy that – as we hoped, permanently - brought an end to the Cold War.

As Australian ambassador to Poland in 1991, I watched the failed coup attempt in Moscow in August 1991; the rise to power of Boris Yeltsin as President of a new non-communist country, now called the Russian Federation; and the final dissolution of the Soviet Union and the resignation on Gorbachev on 31 December 1991.

For at least a decade after that, Russia experienced very difficult economic conditions and social changes, caused by the transition from a communist state system to a market economy and society.

Russia ceased to play a visible role on the world stage. Russia watched helplessly as Yugoslavia was dismembered, and as Ukraine, the second most important Soviet successor republic, stood on the brink of collapse, mired in corruption, and unable to decide its own future political direction. Meanwhile the West under US leadership was experiencing its historical moment of unipolar power.

In 2001, it all began to change. Islamic fundamentalist terror, which the West had itself naively supported in Afghanistan, tragically struck at the World Trade Centre. This tragedy dramatically challenged Western assumptions of a stable liberal world order, serving Western interests and values, and underpinned by American global power.

China began its long march to become a world economic and political leading nation. And Russia, under the leadership of the competent and clearheaded Vladimir Putin, began to rebuild its power, faith and pride in itself.

During my diplomatic career I always loyally followed the prevailing policy line. It was not my habit overly to criticise the policies of my leaders. I retired in 1998, still young at 55.

I began to think about the world and the world order, independently of any policy line. I became an independent political analyst. It was an initially frightening, but finally liberating, experience.

Before that, however, I had learned much from my dramatic final posting from 1994 to 1997 as Australian Ambassador to Cambodia. Allow me to tell you this story.

Australia had been a major player in negotiating the UN Paris Peace Accords that ended years of civil war in Cambodia and installed a United Nations transitional administration, UNTAC, in Cambodia in 1991. UNTAC was succeeded in 1993 by a bizarre two-headed sovereign Cambodian government with two Prime Ministers, Hun Sen and Prince Ranariddh, each with their own agendas, parties and armies.

This unstable balance could not last: Ranariddh began to collude with the still dangerous Khmer Rouge rebels. They continued to threaten much of Cambodia from their bases in remote mountain and jungle areas on the border with Thailand.

The West and China had helped to keep the Khmer Rouge militarily strong, even after the invasion of Vietnamese forces in 1978, which overthrew its cruel regime in Phnom Penh. The West thereafter played a cynical Cold War end-game, with the aim of weakening Russia's remaining Asian allies, Vietnam and its protégé Cambodia. On Margaret Thatcher's orders, to Britain's shame, the British SAS elite special forces were training the Khmer Rouge in war operations.

Western governments expected that Hun Sen's party would simply fade away, losing power as Communist parties had lost power in East Europe. This did not happen.

Civil war broke out again in June 1997, between forces loyal to Ranariddh and Hun Sen. I advised my government to accept the reality that Hun Sen's side had the greater strength and legitimacy to govern. My advice was taken. It was perhaps the first and last time I had initiated policy. Unusually, the American, British and French ambassadors in Phnom Penh were of the same realist view as me. We prevailed over strong anti-Hun Sen ideological lobbies in our capitals. Facts triumphed over prejudice and misinformation.

Early in my posting to Cambodia, an older Australian businessman, an Australian food and wine merchant who lived in Phnom Penh, gave me good advice, whose wisdom I came more fully to appreciate much later:

'Never forget, Tony, that we are only guests in this country – and we should always respect our Cambodian hosts.'

My foreign minister at this time, Gareth Evans, was keen to bring in Western democracy and human rights, which he saw mainly in terms of freedom of the press, and presence of opposition parties. I was once instructed to make a strong speech asserting these values. I was opening an educational aid program at the University of Phnom Penh.

Retribution was swift: it took the form of a noisy hostile demonstration early on a Sunday morning in front of my residence. The next day, Phnom Penh was flooded with copies of a free fake newspaper, in English and Cambodian, called 'Forget News'.

This fake newspaper contained rude articles and obscene cartoons alleging sexual crimes and misdemeanours by Australian Minister Gareth Evans, by my predecessor as ambassador, and by me.

Hun Sen had precisely made his point about freedom of the press.

Hun Sen is still in power in Cambodia 22 years later, strongly supported by both China and Vietnam. He is less inclined than ever to listen to Western lectures on human rights.

It was a useful early lesson about the power of sovereign states to defend their sovereignty: especially if they are resolute and iron-nerved, and choose reliable allies. The sad fates of Saddam and Gaddafi, and the happier outcome for President Assad in Syria today, offer obvious parallels to my Cambodian experience.

After the second Abkhazian War in 2008, the Magnitsky death in prison in 2009, and the resulting US sanctions in 2012, I began to follow events in Russia-West relations more closely.

Even before the outbreak of the well-armed anti-Syrian Government revolt in 2011, and the dramatic and sinister Maidan Square confrontation in Ukraine in February 2014, I had come to conclude that most western narratives on Russia and its leader Putin do not ring true.

As Putin and his nation became stronger and more confident, the West's condemnations escalated. In particular: after the Crimean referendum voter support to reunite with Russia in March 2014; after Kiev's massive military attack on the Eastern provinces launched in April 2014; and after the unexplained shutdown of the international civilian airliner MH17 over Eastern Ukraine in July 2014 . I realised, that I had to listen to my own voice.

I began to cherish the hope of seeing Russia again and making my own judgement of what was happening here.

Unknown even to myself, I was shedding years – actually, decades - of the strongest Cold War anti-Russian mental pressure. The first steps were the hardest. I remember the feeling almost of treason, of disloyalty to my country, when I first began to read Russian news agency websites like rt.com , and when I started to follow on mid.ru Maria Zakharova's brilliant weekly Foreign Ministry briefings.

I was also becoming more open to the commentaries of Western dissident journalists – people like Robert Fisk and Seymour Hersh, and Australian journalists like John Pilger and Julian Assange. The internet gave me the freedom to read such writers.

As far as I can tell, this was an independent self-initiated process. I do not recall anyone ever urging me to seek out the Russian viewpoint. In that well-known American idiom, I was 'mugged by reality'. So much of what I was now reading and evaluating from these new unfamiliar sources made sense.

I was moving to an alternative world view. Once one starts on this path, it is hard to stop in the middle, to remain an 'even-handed diplomat' ("On the one hand ... on the other hand.") that I formerly used to be.

It was now necessary to choose whom to believe.

I knew before I went into Russia in January 2016, for four weeks of independent travel, that I was going to find some things I liked about this country. What I was unprepared for was how comfortable, as a whole, I would feel myself in Russia. I was expecting to find things there that I would not like.

But I found once in Russia in 2016 that I could no longer honestly experience such negative feelings. Like Robert Bruce Lockhart in 1913, and like my embassy trade colleague Laurie Matheson in 1969-71 about whom I write in my book, I found I had truly fallen in love with Russia. At the ripe old age of 72. It was an exciting and liberating feeling.

In my brief encounters two years ago with a few Western expatriates in Moscow, some of them were still caught in the trap of disdain and condescension towards Russia. I found myself irritated by their superiority and negativity, by their almost desperate self-belief that they were holding onto 'objective' Western perspectives on Russia. I should not have been so critical – they needed to hold onto that viewpoint in order to make sense of their work.

Their situation was really very little different from the Cold War bubble within which we had lived in Soviet Moscow so many years ago: the false belief that outside our little Western enclaves, everything was poor and dishonest.

However, I found, during my visit in 2016 and again now, a new Russia, a vibrant young country with its own values – some Soviet, some pre-Soviet, and some entirely new. But some of my former colleagues do not seem able to perceive this: they seem to need to see modern Russia through a critical negative lens as a Soviet successor state.

I have learned the importance of 'signifiers', in conversation and in writing on matters to do with Russia. Here, my early training in translating Soviet articles stood me in good stead. I learned from studying the Soviet press how journalists were obliged to include ritual phrases condemning the West, to assure editors and readers of their ideological reliability, before going on to write

interesting and possibly true comments about current East-West policy issues. We learned to filter out such phrases as necessary ideological signifiers.

It is precisely the same in the West now. If a Western article about Russia does not contain prominent language to the effect that Putin is a thief or corrupt profiteer or hooligan, it is unlikely to be publishable in Western mainstream media or even in liberal intellectual websites.

I do not see this as a conspiracy: many Western writer and media producers have internalized such distortions of Russian reality, to the point where they unconsciously accept them as reality. And they sometimes become irritated when I point this out.

Another thing: Unlike China or India or Japan or the Islamic world which have clearly very visibly different value systems, Russia superficially seems more like the West. Thus Russia shocks and frightens the West in those areas where it is clearly different from the West. It is harder to understand and respect differences when someone seems so close. This is why the bitterest quarrels are quarrels within families, when it is thought that the conduct of a family member has let down the whole family or tribe. Russia seems almost to be part of the Western European family of shared values – but not entirely.

I wanted to explore all this in my book. To explore why Russia evokes such strong feelings of both attraction and fear in the West. Russia has evoked such feelings long before Communism.

As someone who came late in life to love Russia, I wanted to try to convey to my Western colleagues why this country deserves to be understood and respected for what it now is. Nobody should lecture to, or be afraid of, or laugh at this country.

Once I had decided to go to Russia to write such a book, I found a publisher who shares my point of view and intentions – Terri-Ann White, director of The University of Western Australia publishing house, a person well-known for her open-mindedness.

I did not wish to write a political syllabus. I thought at first it would be a two-part book: my memories of the old Soviet Russia - and similarities and contrasts in what I found in modern Russia. I designed an independent four-week itinerary, in order to explore some of the key cultural signposts that in my opinion have strongly influenced the contemporary Russian identity. You will see in my chapter headings the broad history and ideas that I have tried to survey in this book.

The short final part of the book is a political section, criticising the current Western information war on Russia. But I hope readers will enjoy the much longer middle part of the book, discussing what I learned in my travels about Russia's history, culture and values.

I wanted to show my readers that though Russia is in many ways not European, such differences do not necessarily signify backwardness or a tendency to despotism in Russia. These differences have strong foundations in Russia's independent national value systems.

Once I clearly realised this direction of my thinking, many things started to fit together. I saw Russia through new lenses: John Le Carre's novels; Pasternak and Zhivago; Tolstoy and the 1855 siege of Sevastopol; Sakharov; the Gulag; Russian Jewish history and the refuseniks; even Pushkin and Tchaikovsky. Everything began to look a little bit different.

I hope that to some extent, I began to see Russia as many educated Russians see Russia. Not that small minority who think that in the West almost everything is better – every society has some people like this, for better or worse reasons - but people with a natural strong pride in their country.

However, I have had to pay a personal price for this. I have not been able to take all of my Western colleagues on this philosophical journey. Some of them find my new outlook highly difficult to understand.

They cannot understand and realise how much their view of Russia and its quality of political leadership is being supported by the massive never-ending onslaught on them of false data. I regard this process as an echo chamber of reverberating false ideas. It is much worse than propaganda, because its proponents have come to believe it themselves. It is a self-reinforcing cycle. And it leads to dangerous policy.

Unfortunately, I have launched my book at a time of growing prejudice against Russia and its political leadership in the key countries for which my book was intended, in US and Western Europe. I knew my book was the result of intellectual and moral effort. I hoped that its success in Australia would be the springboard to finding major publishers who might republish it in US and UK. But despite good sales in Australia - more than 2000 copies, remarkably, in its first five months - there has up until now been no clear interest outside Australia.

And even in Australia, my book – initially very well received, thanks in part to the enormous loyalty and energy shown by my publishers UWA Publishing - began to encounter some strange obstacles.

So I fear now that my little book – whose mission is, as I see it, to help towards a better, more informed public understanding in the West of today's Russia – might itself become a casualty of the renascent Cold War which we are all now sensing. I am now perhaps seen by some in my country as a 'Putin puppet' or 'Kremlin troll'.

I am too old and experienced in the dark side of cultural diplomacy to let this worry me. Like Stephen Cohen in the US, I will continue resolutely to fight against any situation of exclusion.

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So finally, after these long but I hope interesting personal detours, I return to my main theme: current prospects for East-West detente.

As I write this, they are not good. In fact they are very complicated! In the West, many of us have lost our historical understanding of the horror of superpower nuclear war, if it should ever break out. We don't think of these risks as real, it all now seems more like a computer game.

The dominant bipartisan power structure in Washington needs to maintain the myth of a powerful Russian enemy, to keep the defence contracts rolling along. Arms design and sales, and entertainment, are now America's main domestic sources of income and employment. So much of her industry and jobs have gone offshore. Social problems are growing.

It is unlikely to get much better after Trump: for a brief moment, his election seemed to represent renewed hope for warmer relations with Russia. Now Trump has been entrapped by America's new Cold Warriors.

I see this as a long journey: showing patience and courtesy, and hoping that we will reach an understanding. I do not have a vote in your country, but I wish Vladimir Putin and Sergey Lavrov long political careers: the world needs their wisdom and moderation.

I hope that eventually, a US President – Trump or his successor - will see the need for a real warming of relations with Russia, that both George W Bush and Barack Obama, trapped in their illusions of

American exceptionalism, failed to see: and that Trump or his successor will be strong enough domestically to convince the country of the necessity of detente. At present, Trump is manifestly unable to do so. Maybe when the present hysteria around the alleged Russian interference in America's presidential election calms down, Trump might be able to return to some of his original positive intentions.

Meanwhile, Russia seems to me to be on the right policy track. But Russia should not trust naively in the West's benevolence or friendship. Russia should continue to develop her own powerful associations and alliances, in Eurasia and beyond. Russia should intelligently use her economic resources, in order to keep her nuclear and non-nuclear deterrent forces in good working order. Russia should continue to defend her national identity and values, while at the same time defending herself from extreme nationalist forces or ideas at home.

I say this as a loyal Australian. I want my children to live their lives on a peaceful planet, where our biggest common challenges will be linked to the consequences of global climate change. I do not want us to be pushed into any unnecessary tension or war between powerful nuclear-armed states, brought about by the incompetence and provocations of unreliable allies.

I want Australia and Russia to continue to grow over time, as self-respecting, independent, multicultural sovereign nations: and that they will become stronger friends.

I hope I might live long enough to see this.

Thank you, friends.