1. Overthrowing the tyranny of distance: A resource colony forever?

While the rest of the world was being battered by the global financial crisis, China was busy spending wildly on domestic infrastructure and housing, and Australia was enjoying a commodities boom supplying it. Australia's future prosperity seemed to be guaranteed indefinitely. In a larger sense, of course it is true that Australia has far more actual and potential resources than are being exploited at present, and the region almost immediately adjacent to it, including not only China but South-East Asia and South Asia as well, all of it rising in income and ambition. This would seem to be common sense.

However, China's path upward, although likely in the long run, is fraught with uncertainty in the next two or three decades. If Australia, in Geoffrey Blainey's famous formulation, is shaped by the tyranny of distance, so China is shaped by the tyranny of history. The centralism, the authoritarianism, the familism, the corruption, are so interwoven into the core of Chinese culture that the ghost cities and hollow bans are not mere epiphenomena of China's rapid change, but something that can be escaped, if ever, only slowly and in fits and starts. Australia must prepare to take advantage of the rise of Asia, but also take measures so as not to be hostage to the development of China, or any other Asian nation.

However, Australia cannot easily follow the alternative path that other non-commodity-exporting developed nations have taken in the past, either. Even at the height of the traditional industrial era, Australia's economy was too small to maintain much of a self-sufficient industrial system. It now struggles to manufacture cars or its own submarines. It cannot augment its domestic market by exporting manufactures, as its wages are too high by global standards to compete.

At the same time, Australia is well-positioned to compete in other aspects of the global economy, even if some of its advantages are hiding in plain sight. Australia is very close to the Asian marketplace compared to other OECD nations save Japan and South Korea. Unlike them, it has a Western culture, and a robust and respected common-law legal and judicial system. Unlike Hong Kong, its legal and political system is secured for the future. Unlike Singapore, its military security is robust. It has enormous amounts of space and can accommodate effectively infinite numbers of newcomers, if certain measures are taken. Australia is in a position to be the English-speaking world's closest window on, and platform for dealing with, the Asia-Pacific century. Without abandoning its resource and agricultural potential, it should begin to move to exploit that potential.

The tyranny of distance is now being dissolved at an unprecedented rate. The federationist writers of a hundred years ago used to speak of the “annihilation of distance” brought by the steam engine and the telegraph. No doubt some subaltern reading such books on an un-air-conditioned liner making its way through the Red Sea in summer had his own opinions as to how effectively distance had been annihilated.

Today cheap jet travel, the internet and Skype have annihilated distance much more radically. Yet even more is in the works. After a hiatus of some decades, the supersonic flight world is once again active with new ideas, including the promise of supersonic flight that is cheap, without sonic booms, and less polluting than subsonic craft. Immersive virtual reality promises to make telepresence far more effective. In this coming world, these advantages of Australia will grow greater than ever.

2. Australia’s arc of instability: How to manage it?

The source of Australia’s current prosperity is also its fundamental existential problem. It is a resource treasure house in close proximity to a large, growing, rapidly modernising population that
greatly desires those resources and will have them by one means or another. Australia has dealt with this problem to date by a mix of strategies that have been reasonably effective. It has made the resources available to the world marketplace at a reasonable price. To date, it has been cheaper and easier for anybody desiring those resources simply to buy them than to try to take them from Australia by force. For much of Australia’s history it had its security guaranteed by the British Empire, and for most of that period that was a very effective strategy. When it failed, at Singapore in 1942, Australia shifted to a security guarantee from the US. That has been the underpinning of its defence ever since.

It has supplemented this with a pro-active military program, capitalising on its status as a better-educated, more high-technology country surrounded by less capable neighbours. It has been capable of small-scale interventions (unilaterally, when necessary) in the Arc of Instability that stretches from Aceh in Sumatra in the north-west to the Solomon Islands and Fiji to the north-east. However, most of the fundamental assumptions of this strategy are coming under pressure. The Obama administration has demonstrated that the US guarantee may be subject to periods of foreign-policy fatigue in the American body politic, and its historical bond with Australia may be weakened by administrations that increasingly have to counterbalance that bond with the demands of trade and security with Asian powers. North Korea has demonstrated that even a small determined power can develop the ability to threaten Australia directly with long-range nuclear systems, while driven by non-economic motivations that cannot be placated merely by the availability of resources at a fair price.

The greatest threat to Australian security in the coming era may be the determination of the Green movement that, for essentially quasi-religious reasons, Australian resources must stay in the ground. The last embargo of a rising Asian power led to a war that could be finished only by the use of nuclear weapons.

3. Nuclear proliferation: Under whose umbrella will Australia shelter?

Another irony is that the very political classes who have been calling for a greater orientation of Australia as an “Asian” nation have been the ones most guilty of keeping their heads in Europe while Australia’s security depends on a clear-eyed and realistic assessment of the reality of Asia. By Europe I specifically refer to the “End of History” illusion that gripped European intellectuals with the collapse of the Cold War—the idea that international relations were on the verge of evolving into a peaceful transnational governance under positive international norms and regulations. The pilot program for this was to be the European Union, which would leap ahead of the US and other less enlightened powers, until it was globally emulated. In this rule-based world, military forces would be an expensive anachronism, which would gradually wither away into a global peacekeeping force. And the most terrible of weapons, nuclear arms, would be confined to the existing nuclear powers, who would gradually reduce their forces until they vanished for good.

This vision has been thoroughly undermined by developments. The benign Hegelian world proved to be an illusion born of the optimism of the Cold War’s peaceful end. The European Union has failed precisely where it has been most ambitious in assuming the attributes of a state: maintaining a currency, securing its borders, and developing a common foreign policy.

Ukraine embodied all of the failures of postmodern statecraft rolled into a single package: Ukrainians traded their nuclear weapons, inherited from the USSR, for international treaty guarantees of security and territorial integrity. Today these guarantees are in tatters, as Sebastopol, under international law a Ukrainian city, passed into Russia’s possession as readily as Bismarck swallowed Schleswig-Holstein, and with little more effective protest from today’s “international community” than was heard in 1864.

North Korea torpedoed a South Korean warship with fewer repercussions than Japan’s sinking of the USS _Panay_ in 1937. Nuclear proliferation proceeds apace as India’s and Pakistan’s nuclear arsenals are normalised for all intents and purposes, North...
Korea’s nuclear warhead program is limited only by its competence, and Iran’s program is all but legalised in return for their accepting little more than a speed bump along the highway to full capability.

Several major Asian powers are generally considered to be a “screwdriver’s turn” from nuclear weapons capability, possessing the science, technologies, fissionable materials and delivery capabilities for nuclear weapons, requiring only the directive from on high to proceed and some small period of time. Nations with less capability, of course, can always just buy them from one of the less scrupulous unofficial nuclear powers, as Saudi Arabia has reportedly arranged with Pakistan.

In this environment, Australia must carefully consider its realities and options. The first option is to believe in the Hegelian vision and rely on international treaties and the declaration of the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone to prevent any use or threat of nuclear attack on Australia. Some advice might be sought from the Ukrainians as to this option. The second option is the status quo, reliance solely on the US nuclear umbrella. This has worked well for Australia to date, at least so far as anybody can prove. The question is, would it work into the indefinite future, especially given the increasing uncertainty of American politics? Would a President Trump or Sanders retaliate for a nuclear strike on Australia if the aggressor threatened to attack a US city as a consequence?

The third option is the acquisition of a nuclear deterrent by Australia. This is a perfectly feasible option both technologically and financially. Australia is an advanced technological nation with sufficient capability to build atomic weapons, and is actually an exporter of ores for fissionable material. But would an Australian government have, and be willing to expend, the political capital needed to follow through on a nuclear commitment? (It would, among other things, require Australia to withdraw from the Treaty of Rarotonga.) And would it be worth the expense and effort to acquire the weapons when its delivery methods would likely be more vulnerable and therefore have less deterrent effect than the gold-standard umbrella it now enjoys, namely high-quality nuclear-powered ballistic-missile submarines with continuous at-sea deterrence?

There is a fourth option, which will be discussed later in this article.

4. Wistful for the Blue Ensign: Is Hong Kong’s deadline Australia’s opportunity?

Another trend currently under the radar for most Australians is the future of Hong Kong. Since the handover in 1997, China has in general abided by the principle of the handover agreement in terms of continuing to let its vigorous market economy flourish. Hong Kong residents have been less happy over the gradual encroachment of mainland authorities over Hong Kong’s political self-government. China has generally refrained from overt violation of the handover agreement, but has exercised gradually increasing pressure over the political system. This has brought adherents of a vigorous democracy movement, a great many of whom are young people, into the streets. The symbols of their movement have included the Guy Fawkes masks beloved of the Occupy and Anonymous movements, and, somewhat ironically, the old Blue Ensign of colonial-era Hong Kong. Just as progressives and republicans in Australia and New Zealand have wanted to get rid of the Blue Ensign on their national flags, the democracy protesters of Hong Kong have adopted it as a symbol of constitutional government and civil liberties.

Over the next twenty years, which is to say within the timeline of this look forward, the people and businesses of Hong Kong will be watching the intent of the mainland government very carefully, as the 2047 deadline for expiration of the fifty-year guarantees of free markets and democracy approaches. Long-term planning for infrastructure and property development in Hong Kong will be well under way during that period. It is quite likely that as the deadline draws closer, a great many Hong Kong people will be quietly seeking a second home or passport, in case they need it as their primary one.

This deadline and uncertainty offer an opportunity for Australia. If this century is destined to be an Indo-Pacific century, as many indicators suggest, then Australia’s possession of seacoast and modern infrastructure on both oceans gives it, in effect, a front-row seat in this arena. There has always been a place for a city where the businesses and financiers of the English-speaking world can readily access the Asian business arena, yet enjoy the familiarity and security of Anglo-American common law and the Anglo-American business environment. Asian entrepreneurs and English-speaking courts have always been a highly productive mix. Hong Kong has provided this environment for nearly two centuries now, to the benefit of all. Yet how long can businesses, financiers and the ordinary people of Hong Kong count on Beijing to successfully replicate the magic?

The opportunity for Australia is to offer a home on its soil or under its umbrella to much of the energy that now resides in Hong Kong and make every attempt to attract it to that new home. This is happening already in a piecemeal fashion, as
Chinese and particularly Hong Kong people have been taking advantage of Australia’s rational immigration policies and migrating to its major cities. However, it would be possible to go further, and take advantage of one of Australia’s underutilised assets —its north and north-west coast, with its closer proximity to Asia’s existing business centres. If Australia began a development plan to exploit this opportunity, it would be turning into an available reality in ten to twenty years, exactly the time frame needed to attract what is likely to be a growing crowd of opportunity-seekers anxious to develop a nearby Plan B. Western Australia is even on the same time zone as Hong Kong, a feature that the émigrés now shuttling regularly between Hong Kong and Vancouver would undoubtedly welcome.

Britain in the nineteenth century took four fishing villages on the fringe of the Asian mainland—Bombay, Calcutta, Singapore and Hong Kong—and by offering a trustworthy legal and administrative framework, turned them into four of Asia’s main business centres. Australia could provide a fifth. This would, of course, require an improvement in a number of areas, including transport speed, availability of cheap fresh water, and resolution of Aboriginal land title claims. However, these issues may be addressable by new developments, as we will discuss later.

5. Australia’s next generation: Where will they come from?

Since its founding, Australia has had two principal concerns regarding its population. The first was a fact considered readily evident: that Australia had more opportunities, in terms of land, resources and global location, than it had qualified Australians able to take full advantage of them, and, when needed, to defend them. The second arises from the observation that it would be easy enough to increase the number of people in Australia above that of natural reproduction by immigration. The question then is, you may have 30 million people in Australia, but will they be Australians? This question was answered variously in the past, with national and racial preferences and bans. Those approaches are beyond the pale today.

Currently, Australia has three systems for admitting non-Australians: a general points-based immigration system based on national needs and candidate qualifications; a refugee category based on genuine evidence of persecution and need for asylum; and a treaty system based on reciprocal meaningful benefit, which is currently extended only to New Zealand. (“Reciprocal meaningful benefit” in this context means that citizens of the countries involved have not only the theoretical right to jobs or other opportunities, but that there actually be jobs realistically available on both ends.)

Australia’s population growth could be accelerated, if desired, by broadening the applicability of any or all of these three systems. Most discussion to date has revolved around broadening or narrowing the criteria in the first two categories. There is an interesting option for accomplishing the acceleration through broadening the third, as will be discussed later in this article.

(There is now a third question, which is whether current population growth, by whatever means, is adequate to sustain the social benefits system that depends on a large rate of increase for its actuarial viability. Although this has been debated, it is likely that any adaptation to a smaller growth rate, not to mention a flat or negative one, probably requires a more wrenching restructuring of institutions, and thus a greater expenditure of political capital, than the adaptations that could increase the population rate.)

6. Beyond old Australia: Where will the new jobs and homes be?

In contemplating an accelerated population growth, a question arises. Other things remaining equal, many incomers will likely be seeking jobs and housing in the major metropolitan areas. These areas are becoming increasingly dense, and home prices have risen substantially and are continuing to rise. This has been to some extent a result of deliberate policy choices, based on Green ideology, but also propped up by the desire of the home-owners who have bought at high prices to maintain the asset value thus achieved. This is hardly an Australian problem alone; it has been encountered across the English-speaking world, all of whose cities have been a result of similar deep-seated preferences for nuclear families owning (not renting) stand-alone single-family houses, and a willingness to commute whatever distance is needed to afford such housing.

Affordability plagues London, San Francisco and Vancouver just as much as Sydney and Melbourne, and for similar reasons. Yet the US, and to a lesser extent Canada and Australia, are demonstrating a coping strategy that, applied more consistently and deliberately, could be a winning strategy for a new, growing, better-connected and more economically robust Australia. This is the creation and encouragement of what the urbanist Joel Kotkin has dubbed “aspirational cities”. These are the new cities, suburbs and exurbs of the American South-
West and West. They were born in the post-war era, when the interstate highway system, affordable jet air travel, telecommunications and airline deregulation, and nationwide simultaneous television broadcasting knit America together into a genuine nationwide market and nationwide mental space. Suddenly, it became possible to start or grow a business anywhere and sell nationwide, and many veterans and their families took their veteran’s financing and bought affordable (and now tolerable due to air-conditioning) housing in places like Orlando, Houston and Phoenix. Many people and businesses abandoned congested and high-priced city centres for increasingly distant affordable suburbs and exurbs.

Although these areas were sometimes accused of racism, in fact such exurbs and new cities are heavily favoured by immigrants, who like the affordability and find suburban strip malls convenient places for establishing the restaurants, retail businesses and religious meeting places that provide the economic base and community centres of their diaspora communities.

Some Green advocates critique these aspirational communities for sprawl and energy inefficiency. Yet these concerns are largely misplaced. As economic activity continues to transition to self-employment and entrepreneurialism, as manufacturing transitions to small-scale local 3-D manufacturing, and as self-driving cars promise more efficient ground transport, the paradigm of daily commutes from the periphery to city centres is likely to decline. Off-the-grid technologies hold out the promise of exurbs that do not require the least-efficient low-density grid connections. (Ironically, while hard-core Green elements oppose almost all forms of progress, many individual alternative energy technologies could be quite useful in making exurbia both affordable and low-impact.) With such developments, exurbs hold out a renewed version of the original promise of the suburb, the garden city combining the more attractive features of urban and country living.

Canada and Australia already have their own versions of aspirational cities. Calgary became not only a centre of employment due to the years of the oil boom, but also gradually became a headquarters town, attracting first energy companies, and then other corporations. Brisbane and the Gold Coast also became centres of aspirational opportunity. As usual, such places attract newcomers. A disproportionate number of the 600,000 New Zealanders living in Australia, for example, have gravitated to these areas.

As with the question of reforming social benefit institutions, it does not seem realistic to tackle head-on the understandable reluctance of current suburban home-owners to reduce the value of their homes by changing urban policy in the existing major urban centres. Rather, an agenda for Australian growth, prosperity and security would identify barriers to the growth of new aspirational cities, particularly on the Asia-facing northern and north-western coast, and remove or alleviate them. In effect, it would be a strategy to create a New Australia for the existing Australian population, and newcomers, to the prosperity of both Old and New Australia.

7. The water question: Is a breakthrough imminent?

When Australians first started to generate a coherent vision of the continent’s future, its interior had not been explored and its hydrography was not understood at all. In America, President Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark across his continent in 1804 and found 3500 kilometres of well-watered land with perhaps 1000 kilometres of desert between the Rockies and the Sierra Nevada. When Burke and Wills crossed Australia from south to north in 1860–61, they crossed 1350 kilometres, and found that the proportions of desert to watered land were effectively reversed. Hopes of an Australian population to equal America’s were replaced with a much more modest vision of a land that would be forever dry and carry only a sparse population around its coasts.

However, this picture may soon be challenged by another trend every Australian should follow. Water desalinisation has in the past always been a species of fool’s gold. It was by nature a highly energy-intensive process that might be the least-worst solution on a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, or, in a pinch, in a rich energy-abundant place like the Emirates.

However, new technology promises a fundamental change. Nanotechnology, the technology of handling materials at the nanometre scale, has been a rapidly developing field for many decades, and a technology buzzword for the past two. But beyond the hype, steady progress has been made on the use
of a nanotechnology-derived solution, molecular filters, for water purification and desalination. Energy-intensive distillation methods are, essentially, a brute-force tactic. Molecular filtering is a smart-technology alternative, accomplishing superior quality results for a fraction of the energy cost, and therefore of the dollar cost.

When considering where to build the new aspirational cities for Australia's coming generations, the north and north-west have been discounted for many reasons, but primarily for the lack of water. Molecular filtering technologies have already been demonstrated to the point where an aspirational city project for a dry area could reasonably begin development depending solely on such technology for residential water needs, at a price competitive to residential water elsewhere in Australia.

These technologies will soon be ready to supply substantial amounts of water for industrial or water-intensive agricultural uses in Australia at competitive prices. However, a trading city oriented primarily to being a business, financial and high-technology centre on the model of Dubai would not need that scale of water. Thus such a trading city is well-suited to be a pilot application for the large-scale use of such technology.

One generation's rare commodity can easily become the next generation's cheap commodity, given the right technology. Aluminium, shortly after its discovery, was so rare that Queen Victoria was presented with a dinner service made from it as a novelty; nobody else could afford one. Shortly afterwards, the Hall process made it a commonplace material. Desalinated water promises to be on the verge of a similar transition. No nation is better poised to benefit from this change than Australia.

8. Australia's north and north-west: How to realise the new opportunities?

Whatever initiatives may be taken to diversify Australia's economy in future, resources will remain a substantial part of it. The rising economic powers and consumer classes of Asia remain too much of a pull. They will likely push as well if pull is not sufficient to ensure these resources are developed. However, Australia has the ability to control how its resources will be developed, and it will be able to ensure that environmental damage is minimised and remediation, where needed, is carried out and paid for as part of the price for the resource.

This is particularly true of Australia's north. This area, roughly the area north of the Tropic of Capricorn, constitutes 40 per cent of Australia's land mass but has only 5 per cent of its population. It has substantial undeveloped or underdeveloped resources, including both mineral and agricultural potential. Barriers in the past have included lack of infrastructure, a lack of water in some places, and more water than can be used locally in others. Its tropical climate was another barrier. Now, with the development of affordable air-conditioning, both hot dry areas (such Phoenix, Arizona) and hot wet places (Orlando, Florida) have become aspirational cities attracting millions of transmigrants from temperate climates. Most of northern Australia's locations have annual climate ranges comparable to one of these areas.

In addition to the geographical and environmental challenges, northern development has been held back by bureaucratic and political barriers, including an inability to resolve Aboriginal title in a way that is timely, effective and fair. Narrow interests have been able to block development by putting local advantage or other particular concerns against the general welfare of the Australian nation. These barriers have artificially made it harder to finance needed infrastructure and have raised uncertainty about the long-term political and regulatory environment. In an era when an outgoing British Treasury secretary can leave his successor a note saying, “Sorry, but there is no money” (a phenomenon happening throughout the developed world), such investment will necessarily be primarily private. Guaranteeing a policy and regulatory continuity favouring the long-term general interest would be the best enabling solution to this dilemma.

9. After Brexit: Will an outward-looking Britain give Australia new options?

One of Australia's formative experiences was Britain’s applications for membership in what is today the European Union, first the unsuccessful one of 1960–61 rejected by Charles de Gaulle, and then the one pursued to conclusion under Edward Heath in 1973. Australians, like New Zealanders and Canadians, were blindsided by this move. Canadian writer Jack Granatstein quoted Virgil’s line “tendebantque manus ripae ulterioris amore” to evoke the image of Britannia's daughters stretching their hands out with longing to their mother on the farther shore. The shock of Britain's turn away from its long-standing Commonwealth partners to embrace its former German and Italian foes, and the consequent exclusion of Australian producers from their historical British markets, led to a major change in Australia's perception of itself and its place in the world.

Now, four decades later, Britannia's long-simmering doubts and discomfort about her
abandonment have come to the surface, and a Referendum Act now requires that a referendum be held before the end of 2017 on the question of Britain’s exit (“Brexit”) from the European Union. Opinion polls vary but suggest a close vote. However, even if the referendum fails, it is not unlikely that Britain will leave within a few years anyway. The current problems of the single currency, and the internal no-passport Schengen area, suggest that the EU will need to move to a closer, more centralised federal form in the near future, a change which would by law trigger a new referendum that would almost certainly lead to Britain’s voters rejecting the EU.

Current discussion in Britain among advocates of Brexit turns frequently to the question, “To whom shall we turn for closer trade and co-operation if our ties with Europe are loosened?” And the answer that comes up with increasing frequency is “the Commonwealth”, which in serious discourse really means two options, one being India, and the other Canada, Australia and New Zealand, collectively. The formal Commonwealth Secretariat would not play a serious role; neither India nor Canada is about to comply with a decision with real costs or consequences passed by a majority counting Tuvalu and Lesotho equally with themselves. Nor does it make sense to deal with a rising, developing power like India with the same mechanisms needed to deal with a mature developed power like Canada. What will emerge as a topic of discussion is a close association of what is sometimes called the “CANZUK” group: Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the UK. Some discussion along these lines is beginning to emerge among commentators such as the economist Andrew Lilico and groups like the United Commonwealth Society.

For many Australians, the first response might be to say, “Sorry, mate, way too late.” For those old enough to remember the shock of the first application to Brussels, there may be a temptation to take an almost Sicilian delight at the prospect of a cold and tasty dish of revenge for that betrayal. But the fictional yet plausible Don Vito Corleone would more likely to respond, “Interesting. What would be in it for us?”

And once examined in the light of realism, it does become interesting. A CANZUK association (which could take many possible forms, looser or tighter as circumstances dictated) could, from an Australian point of view, be understood as an expansion of the Trans-Tasman arrangements for trade, finance, defence and free movement of people to include Canada and the UK.

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development in northern Australia and Canada being given the same assurances of continuity of policy as a domestic investment has the potential to fully unlock a needed source of support. This could be guaranteed by an ANZCERTA-plus style agreement including the UK.

10. How can a new framework address all these issues comprehensively?

As the previous discussion demonstrates, Australia faces a complex set of challenges and opportunities over the next several decades. Most Australians have a healthy scepticism of utopian solutions, a liking for many features of Australian life as it is, and a desire to keep them if possible. This is a humane and sane desire. But in times of rapid and universal change, we might heed the words of the Sicilian aristocrat Don Fabrizio Corbera in Lampedusa’s The Leopard: “everything needs to change, so everything can stay the same”.

In order for Australia to maintain control over its resources, it must develop them on its own terms. In order for Australia to maintain the security to ensure it can dictate its own terms, it needs to expand its population and range of development. But in order to ensure its ability to assimilate the newcomers from different linguistic, cultural and political backgrounds, it needs also to have a substantial stream of newcomers from similar backgrounds to existing Australian populations. In order to maintain its cutting-edge resource industry, it would help to have economic diversification to insulate it from the inevitable boom-and-bust cycles of the world commodity markets. Free movement with other advanced economies helps obtain the talent to drive such diversification.

As these newcomers come into Australia, they will want jobs and houses. Current urban planning doctrines make houses scarce and expensive, and have driven up the price of housing, raising wages and therefore the cost of operations for small and new companies, the most likely source of new jobs. Changing these laws would drive down the existing equity of current home-owners, however, making a vote for such measures political suicide. Therefore, the growth of aspirational cities, especially in the north and north-west, would provide the space for new housing and employment without disrupting existing arrangements in the old cities of the east and south. The new cities would also provide trading centres substantially closer to Asia. Thus, the high demand for secure venues for Asian trading and secure refuges against the political uncertainty in Asia would ensure another stream of qualified newcomers who would add productivity and be grateful to Australia for its virtues. As Hong Kong approaches the planning horizon for the expiration of its guarantees, it would be a particularly likely source of such newcomers.

Australia needs reliable friends in the world. The US has been a reasonably reliable friend, but it has many friends and many interests, and at a ratio of 25 million Australians (generously) to 320 million Americans (conservatively) there will always be a certain asymmetry to the relationship. Britain by itself has useful capabilities, but at 65 million to 25 million, would provide still a rather asymmetrical partnership, and additionally carries historical connotations in the Australian psyche that are not uniformly positive. An Australia in a CANZUK entity, on the other hand, would see 65 million Brits balanced by 64 million Aussies, Canadians and New Zealanders, which would mean British interests, even if they ever could agree on anything, could not prevail against the rest. (There is always the prospect that Scotland, Quebec or other areas might choose to become members of such an alignment in their own right, providing a compromise between independence and union. Special areas such as large “aspirational city” projects in free zones might also choose to affiliate independently, so that newcomers would not disrupt existing local political balances.) In reality, political alignments are so similar throughout the four nations that the Right, Left and Centre would quickly form all-CANZUK alliances and align mostly by affiliation rather than by nation. This is not empire redux, but rather a family that long ago went their own individual ways and decided that they got along rather well, after all, and might as well start a new venture together.

The Victorian era was marked by the emergence of audaciously ambitious visionary figures such as Isambard Kingdom Brunel and Charles Babbage. Brunel envisioned high-speed trains and enormous trans-Atlantic steamers, but was frustrated by having to work with iron rather than steel and low-pressure steam engines that strained to power the fast trains and massive ships he built. His visions began to come true only a half-century later as trans-Atlantic steamers finally caught up to the standards set by his Great Eastern. Charles Babbage correctly understood the implications of machine intelligence, and envisioned an “Analytical Engine” a century or more ahead of its time, but was frustrated by the limits of the technology of his day, and the lack of visionary support to afford the persistence that probably would have given him success.

Their equivalents in the political sphere were the imperial federationists, men like the English
historian and writer J.R. Seeley and New Zealand Prime Minister Sir Julius Vogel. These men theorised that the “annihilation of distance” created by railways, steamships and telegraphs permitted an unprecedented possibility: turning the British Isles and its colonies of settlement into a new form of state, a globe-spanning federation of equal members governed by an imperial parliament. Although this vision excited a great many of the intelligent political thinkers of the day, it never came to pass, largely because the annihilation of distance the technology of the day offered was still too incomplete to make such a scheme practical. Like Brunel’s ships and Babbage’s computers, their vision exceeded the available means.

The possibility of some form of post-Brexit CANZUK alignment might just be the political equivalent of the modern liner or computer, with the internet and jet aircraft providing the annihilation of distance that steamships and telegraphs could not. Just as modern liners or modern super-computers do not much resemble their Victorian precursors in the details, so a CANZUK alignment would not much resemble the imperial pomp the federationists envisioned. It would most likely be little more than a bundle of trade, defence and free movement agreements along the lines of Nato and ANZCERTA. Yet such things have been the stuff of modern security and prosperity, and still they would deliver much of the functionality the imperial federationists desired. Within such a framework, Australia’s chances of realising the rest of the confident, growing and prospering future envisioned here could be greatly enhanced. That too would likely be just one more step in “changing everything, so that everything stays the same”.


Old Guys

get to the club every evening early
with wives called Betty, Flo or Shirley

order the mixed roast with chips and a pavlova
take it back to the table like they’re in clover

always wear their trousers way too high
still like to say I’ve got to fly

sometimes have a piece of one ear missing
play with the past and call it reminiscing

always miss a loop on their belt band
like their sandwiches closed and their spaghetti canned

always look sad when they’re on their own
get there too late to catch the phone

read the death notices, every letter
see they’re not there and somehow feel better

old guys are everywhere, everywhere I see
old guys are starting to look like me

Max Ryan