



PRIME MINISTER
CANBERRA

AUSTRALIAN AMERICAN LEADERSHIP DIALOGUE

I would like to extend my greeting and warm wishes to all those participating in the 11th Australian American Leadership Dialogue, particularly to Mel Sembler who is being honoured at tonight's dinner. Mel and Betty have been great advocates for Australia, and even better friends.

During Mel's tenure as the US Ambassador in Canberra, Australian-American relations strengthened and deepened. Australia benefited enormously from Mel's extensive network of contacts. He was able to ensure that even the very highest levels of the US Administration were aware of the Australian perspective. Mel was, of course, also a tireless advocate for US interests in Australia. Even when we disagreed, his views were always respected. Mel has every reason to wear the Order of Australia with pride.

This level of cooperation continues under our current excellent representatives in each other's country : Ambassador Schieffer and Ambassador Thawley - both of whom are participating in the dialogue.

I believe that the importance of Australia's relationship with the United States will continue to grow in future years. This should not be read as simple praise for the United States, although I do admire greatly that nation's commitment to the principles of freedom, tolerance and openness – values also honoured by our Australian democracy. My statement reflects a pragmatic recognition that the United States is the world's pre-eminent strategic and economic power, as well as a friend and ally of long-standing.

The relationship between our two nations has never been stronger or closer. Based on a strategic security alliance, it has matured over the last 50 years to a close friendship built on common values. It demands neither subservience nor dominance. It can and does accommodate differences of view and at times differences of interest.

We welcome US engagement in the Asia Pacific and recognise that the strategic alliances it has forged with nations such as Australia and Japan represent an important long-term commitment to the region. We commend the leadership demonstrated by the United States in the war against terror. Only by strong, decisive collective action can we respond to the threat terrorism poses to the security and stability of our world and our own region.

Important as these security concerns are, we do not believe that they should be the sole basis of our relationship with the United States. This year the Australian Government will seek to conclude, if we can negotiate the right terms, a free trade agreement with the United States. The aim is not just increased market access but rather closer economic integration. We are looking to forge an economic partnership that will promote the two-way flow of people, ideas, innovation and capital. We should not underestimate the importance of this type of economic partnership to our future prosperity.

Since its inception in 1993, the Australian American Leadership Dialogue has played an important role in the maturing of the relationship. This exercise in citizens' diplomacy provides an invaluable opportunity for frank and robust discussion between our respective policy and opinion makers. It has been very successful in building the influential bipartisan networks which underpin the continued deepening and strengthening of the relationship.

I would like to take this opportunity thank Phil Scanlan whose leadership has seen the dialogue continue to grow in stature and importance. To the participants, I hope your discussions will be fearless as well as friendly and that you are able to take full advantage of the opportunities created by the Australian American Leadership Dialogue – a most extraordinary and useful institution – to expand and enrich Australia's relationship with the United States.

(John Howard)

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