



Speech by

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Australia: Looking Anew at Latin America and the Caribbean

United Nations Economic Commission for
Latin America and the Caribbean

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(Check Against Delivery)

Thank you for that warm welcome and your kind introduction.

I am delighted to be in Chile, the Pacific gateway to Latin America.

I am very pleased to be able to make my first official visit to Chile as Foreign Minister, the first bilateral visit to Chile by an Australian Foreign Minister since 2000.

While we are separated by the Pacific, Australia and Chile have many overlapping interests, including the pursuit of free trade and investment, protection of the environment and nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

It is clear however that our relationship is modest when compared with the degree of our shared interests and the potential that offers.

Our relationship with Chile is increasingly important to Australia, as is our relationship with Brazil from where I have just come. Importantly, this is true of Australia's relationships generally throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

Australia's desire to broaden, deepen and strengthen our relationships with Latin America and the Caribbean is the reason I am here tonight.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean is based in Santiago, but its representatives come from all over Latin America and the Caribbean.

Founded in 1948, the Commission is an influential forum for this region. It has played an important role in the economic and social development of Latin America and the Caribbean, particularly the fight against poverty, protecting the environment and linking the region to the global economy.

I am also here at ECLAC because Australia has renewed its pledge to multilateralism. The Australian Government is committed to supporting and engaging with multilateral institutions, in particular the United Nations itself.

No single country has the capacity to address successfully the profound challenges the world now faces.

It is clear that only by working together as nations can we make progress on the significant challenges of our time, such as climate change, global economic circumstances, pandemics and international terrorism.

I pay tribute to ECLAC's contribution to economic development in this region and thank you for the opportunity to speak to you.

Relationship with Latin America

Today I had excellent meetings with President Bachelet and Foreign Minister Fernandez. Earlier in the week I had an equally good meeting with my Brazilian counterpart Celso Amorim.

What struck me in these meetings is how much overlap there is in the interests and approaches of our countries to critical international issues.

The Australian Government's foreign policy approach rests on what we describe as three pillars: our alliance with the United States; our comprehensive engagement in the Asia-Pacific region; and our engagement with the United Nations and other multilateral institutions.

It has, however, become increasingly clear that while Australia's priorities are regional, our interests are necessarily global interests and that now requires us to do much more with countries, regions and continents we have until now regrettably neglected.

South America is one of these continents and Latin America and the Caribbean is one of these regions.

Currently our commercial, investment and trading links are the strongest aspects of our relationship with the countries of Latin America.

These links invariably reflect our shared interests in mineral and petroleum resources.

There are more than 80 Australian companies with offices in Chile and many have interests in the minerals and petroleum resources and energy sectors.

Australia-based mining companies BHP Billiton and Rio Tinto hold 57.5 per cent and 30 per cent stakes respectively in the world's largest copper mine, Escondida, here in Chile's unique Atacama Desert.

BHP Billiton's development of new projects such as the US\$870 million Escondida Sulphide Leach project and the US\$990 million Spence copper mine are well underway.

Many of our companies, having commenced operations in Chile, are now pursuing major opportunities and investments in other Latin America countries, particularly Peru and Colombia.

There are strong linkages in the minerals sector with Brazil and Argentina and there are opportunities in Mexico and Uruguay.

Our trading relationship has however broadened beyond the minerals and petroleum resources link.

Australia's merchandise exports to Latin America grew by nearly 50 per cent in 2008, to over A\$3 billion, a remarkable growth achievement. Our merchandise imports from Latin America totalled A\$4 billion for the same period.

The Australia-Chile Free Trade Agreement, which came into force this year, is a testament to the value Australia places on deepening the commercial relationship with Chile and the region.

It is the first Free Trade Agreement that Australia has signed with a country in Latin America and it is among the highest quality agreements signed by Australia .

Our Ambassador here in Chile, Ms Virginia Greville played a key role as lead negotiator on the Australian side.

Education is an area of significant growth and potential in our relationship.

Latin America is one of the fastest growing sources of foreign students for Australia. We welcome this close contact with future leaders of the region.

Thousands of students, particularly from Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Mexico, travel to Australia each year to access our world class programs, including those that focus on English language skills.

Brazil is now our 9th largest source country overall for student enrolments.

Annual enrolments in Australian educational institutions from Latin American countries totalled more than 28,000 at the end of 2008, reflecting a more than 20 per cent growth over the previous year.

We are also developing scientific and research links with Latin America.

An agreement on science and technology with Brazil is under discussion and there are significant opportunities to boost cooperation and innovation with Chile.

This is a two-way process. The Argentine company Invap constructed Australia's Opal nuclear reactor in Lucas Heights in Sydney.

Cooperation in agriculture and agribusiness offers significant potential for Australia and Latin America.

For many years Australian agricultural industries saw their counterparts in Latin America as competitors.

It is a mark of the change in perceptions both in this region and in Australia that increasingly opportunities for cooperation in agriculture are being developed.

Deepening our engagement

Australia is keen to grasp the opportunity to do more with Latin America at all levels – bilaterally, regionally and multilaterally.

In multilateral fora, we are like-minded with many Latin American countries on issues such as the environment, trade liberalisation, including agricultural trade reform, disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation, and human rights.

It is also clear that while the region has traditionally looked to the North, to the United States and Europe, you are now looking to the East and to the West, to Africa, Asia and the Pacific and Australia.

We both have a stake in the Asia-Pacific century and we both share a strong record of involvement in, and commitment to, regionalism and multilateralism.

Chile is leading the way on Pacific engagement, through initiatives such as negotiation of the Trans Pacific Partnership Free Trade Agreement and through its membership, along with Peru and Mexico, of APEC, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum.

It was a measure of the foresight Chile has shown that it launched with Singapore the Forum for East Asia Latin America Cooperation (FEALAC/ FOCAL).

Australia is very pleased to be a member of that Forum, along with 18 Latin American countries.

The increasing importance of this region to world prospects is also reflected in the G20 Leaders' process.

For the first time, developed and emerging market countries, including Argentina, Brazil and Mexico, are sitting as equals in a group that has driven the international response to the global economic crisis.

Australia looks forward to continuing to work closely with G20 members Argentina, Brazil and Mexico, and consulting with other countries such as Chile, in taking the G20's agenda forward.

In many ways the people-to-people links that I referred to earlier have got ahead of the government-to-government contact.

When that occurs, it is incumbent on governments to catch up.

This is why the Australian Government is looking with fresh eyes and fresh enthusiasm at Latin America and the Caribbean, looking at ways to enhance and deepen our engagement.

This desire for deeper engagement is reflected by a number of recent Australian initiatives to work more closely with countries of the region.

Today, with Minister of Agriculture Hornkohl, I signed a Memorandum of Understanding on agricultural cooperation between Australia and Chile to further strengthen our agricultural export sectors.

It reflects, too, the shared vision we have of the crucial importance of liberalisation of international trade in agriculture.

I also announced two new education cooperation projects with Chile.

One will see Chilean educators visiting Australia to share perspectives on teaching.

The other, through a grant from the Australian Council on Australia Latin America Relations (COALAR), will assist in developing English language education kits for Chilean schools.

With Brazil we are working on a Plan of Action for an Enhanced Partnership. I had a good discussion on this Plan with External Affairs Minister Amorim earlier this week.

It will strengthen Australia's links with Brazil across a broad range of areas, including energy, science and technology, sport and culture.

Following my visit to Mexico in November 2008, Australia and Mexico agreed to formalise political consultations, and I look forward to those taking place in the near future.

I was very pleased to sign a similar Memorandum of Understanding today with my Chilean counterpart, Minister Fernandez.

Those consultations with Chile will amplify and expand the excellent relations we already enjoy on trade and investment through our Free Trade Agreement.

We value our co-operation with the countries of Latin America in the United Nations and other multilateral fora and have increased our cooperation on specific UN initiatives such as the Responsibility to Protect, where Australia and Chile work together in the R2P Group of Friends, as well as on the broader human rights agenda.

In New York, in January, our Australian mission to the UN co-hosted with Uruguay a very successful peacekeeping workshop on the implementation of the mandate to protect civilians in UN peacekeeping operations.

There is a range of global issues on which Australia values its co-operation with Latin America, the most pressing of which is climate change.

Our first act as a Government was the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol. Since then, Australia has played a leading and constructive role in international climate change negotiations.

ECLAC has noted that Latin America and the Caribbean stand among the regions expected to be worst affected by climate change.

The work which Australia is doing with our Pacific Island neighbours on climate change has synergies with the Caribbean. Both Pacific and Caribbean Island nations have contributed little to the causes of climate change, but they are among the most vulnerable to its effects.

Australia is strongly committed to working towards an ambitious post-2012 international climate change outcome that is fair, effective and efficient.

Nuclear proliferation is another issue which can only be addressed through effective multilateral action.

The need remains for real progress towards the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty's objective of a world free of nuclear weapons.

That's why Australia established last year, with Japan, an International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, in which we collaborate closely with the countries of Latin America.

By setting up the Commission we aim to reinvigorate the global effort against the proliferation of nuclear weapons and seek a recommitment to the ultimate goal of a nuclear weapons-free world.

I know the Commission appreciates the ongoing input of Commissioner Ernesto Zedillo, former President of Mexico and that of Brazilian Minister Celso Amorim, during the initial formation of the Commission.

Santiago hosted a successful regional meeting here in May and the Commission looks to Latin America as an example of a successful nuclear weapons-free zone.

Australia is also giving consideration to an expansion of our development assistance program to Latin America and the Caribbean.

Over coming months we will be looking closely at what we can do in this respect. We are considering new efforts in a range of areas, including funding volunteers, supporting non-government organisations and providing scholarships.

Australia recognises that investment in human resource development is vital. We are looking at what we can do to give students from this region the opportunity for short-term study, research or placements in Australia.

I also commend a new initiative undertaken by Australia's Council on Australia Latin America Relations (COALAR) in this field.

COALAR has developed the Australia Latin America Leadership Program. Eighteen young leaders from Latin America will come to Australia at the end of September for a two-week leadership program with 18 Australian counterparts. The program is an excellent example of our determination to develop new means to enhance and strengthen links between Australia and Latin America.

We are also committed to strengthening our diplomatic presence in Latin America and the Caribbean. In addition to Australia's on the ground presence in the region – in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Trinidad and Tobago – Prime Minister Rudd announced in November 2008 at the APEC Summit in Peru that we will recommence our presence in Lima from 2010.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen.

Strengthening our relationships with the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean is a high priority for the Australian Government.

We know that we have a great many shared interests.

Some of these have been pursued on the ground by business and industry who have grasped tremendous opportunities.

Governments, including the Australian Government, now need to catch up with that.

There is now an array of new or growing areas where our interests align. These provide a much broader, stronger foundation on which we can deepen and embrace our relationships.

The Australian Government has a new commitment to working much more closely with Latin America and the Caribbean, and the strategy to make that happen into the future.

Thank you.