

A towering presence in 1973 broke down diplomatic walls

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When Gough Whitlam rose to his full 194 centimetres to address the Chinese premier, Zhou Enlai, at a banquet in Beijing in October 1973, he did so as the first Australian prime minister to have visited China.

"Australia is moving in a new direction in its relationships with the world and specifically with the region in which Australia inevitably belongs," Whitlam declared. "The course that we are setting is already clear and committed. Our concern is no longer exclusively with nations in far removed areas of the globe. Now, our concern is with all nations and particularly those with whom we share a common environment and common interests and with whom we seek relationships of equality.

"In Peking today, we give expression to our new international outlook."

His speech was greeted with thunderous applause, as tends to be the way of things at official banquets in Beijing. Whitlam and his wife Margaret, anyway, were objects of fascination wherever they went in China – both towered physically over their hosts.

But Whitlam's efforts in breaking down the distrust that existed between China and western nations like Australia meant he towered over much of the diplomatic world at the time, too.

Whitlam, in stating that Australia and China shared not just a common environment but common interests, was overturning decades of suspicion and outright hostility that had infected Australian policy towards China during the Cold War.

His speech lay the ground for more than 40 years of cordial relations and immense growth in trade between Australia and China, which itself underwent an economic transformation that stunned the world.

It helped that Whitlam in 1973 stood not as a stranger in the Great Hall of the People, like most other



Gough Whitlam at Beijing's Temple of Heaven in 1973. Photos: National Archives of Australia

senior western politicians of the time. Two years and three months previously, in 1971, Whitlam had taken an immense political risk by making his first visit to China.

He was opposition leader then. It was audacious even for the bold, "crash through or crash" Whitlam. China was emerging from its violent years of "cultural revolution", but its leadership was fragile, its senior figures suspicious of each other and the outside world.

The Coalition government of Billy McMahon thought Whitlam had played into its hands by going to "Red" China, a communist country long closed to the world.

Australia at the time had no diplomatic relations with China, recognised nationalist Taiwan as the real government, and regularly voted against Beijing taking the Chinese seat in the UN. Whitlam, crowed McMahon, had allowed himself to be "played as a fisherman plays a trout" by Zhou in Beijing.

McMahon was massively deflated, however, to learn that while Whitlam was in the Chinese capital, attending a midnight audience in the Great Hall of the People with Zhou, the US national security adviser Henry Kissinger was also in the city, secretly arranging a visit for US president Richard Nixon.

Australia's major ally, the US, was about to switch foreign policy regarding China in just the style championed by Whitlam, leaving McMahon's Coalition looking very silly, and very yesterday.

Whitlam, thus, emerged as a world trailblazer in the delicate business of forming diplomatic relationships with China, and drawing the massive nation, representing one quarter of the world's population, into the orbit of international affairs.

When he became prime minister in 1972, one of his first foreign policy moves was to

recognise the People's Republic of China, six years ahead of the US.

In early 1973, Whitlam appointed Stephen FitzGerald as Australia's first ambassador to China. FitzGerald, who had been Whitlam's China adviser, had been a key member of Whitlam's retinue during the 1971 visit to Beijing.

FitzGerald has since written that Whitlam's motivation for reaching out to China was simply a rational extension of his long-held view that it would be in Australia's national interests. Indeed, Whitlam had called for recognition of China in his maiden speech to parliament in 1954.

"He [Whitlam] 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'," FitzGerald stated.