



CLIMATE ENERGY FINANCE

Penny Wong: Rebuilding World Orders with Australian Multiculturalism

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The moment Penny Wong and Anthony Albanese stepped onto the stage to announce the Labor government in May 2022 was destined to be historical and revolutionary. Foreign Minister Wong, embodying the achievements of multiculturalism in Australia, also understands how Australian multiculturalism can influence and shape a highly diverse new world order.

Australia is one of the major nations to develop via immigration and globalisation in the past 100 years, welcoming the diaspora from Europe and Asia.

It is significant that one of the most multicultural nations in the world has the first Australian female foreign minister of Chinese-Malaysian heritage. Wong [pointed it out](#): “one in two Australians are either born overseas or have parents who were born overseas so this is a very Australian experience”. However, Australia has failed to represent its diversity in its elite politics for decades. Such representation matters to the multicultural communities in Australia, as a step to banishing the White Australia Policy and embracing true diversity and powerful positives of immigration within Australian society.

Wong’s is not a token appointment and to regard it as such undermines her merits and the exceptional nature of her foreign policy achievements.

As Wong’s said on Australia’s identity during her [address](#) at the National Press Club last month, “we are a land that is home to the oldest continuous culture on the planet, and to people from more than 300 ancestries. A nation whose people share common ground with so many of the world’s peoples.”

She has diversified Australia’s foreign relations strategy and extended its focus beyond China. She is practising “shoe-leather” diplomacy, restoring relations with the Southeast Asia and Pacific regions, and advocating for First Nation foreign policy while acknowledging British colonial history in the Indo-Pacific region.

Her diplomacy works with nuances. She has moved Australia away from the central US orbit and back to the region where Australia is rooted geographically, culturally and in terms of our trade flows, toward balancing power relations in the Indo-Pacific with an Australia-based lens.

During her Press Club [address](#), she called for a “greater self-reliance and a more active” foreign policy, while advocating for “making more things here, responding to climate change and making Australia a renewable energy superpower”.

Reuniting the Neighbours with Respect, and Addressing the Need for Helping the Region to Counter Climate Change

Before Wong, relations between Australia and countries from the Indo-Pacific region declined and in some cases soured.

The Coalition government was dedicated to following the steps of the United States blindly, as well as claiming the Pacific region as Australia's "backyard", [angering](#) our Pacific neighbours. Negative reactions from countries in the region showed this course of action was a non-strategic move that hindered Australia's national interests.

The [security pact](#) between China and Solomon Islands signed in April 2022 was a wake-up call for Australia, as a significant security threat and a consequence of Australia's lack of diplomatic interaction with the Solomon Islands and the region generally, as well as a clear reflection of our dramatically curtailed foreign aid, showing our unwillingness to support our neighbours. Australia now needs to modify its budget of May 2023 to start to reverse this failure of generosity in investing in our region.

When referring to the security agreement between Beijing and Honiara, instead of solely condemning a territorial state's decision as the Morrison government did, Wong on her [visit](#) to the Pacific region, respectfully recognised that each country can make its own choices. She later added, "What we would urge, as Australia, is consideration of where a nation might wish to be in three or five or 10 years", followed by a localised proposition for "putting more energy and resources" in the Pacific region to counter climate change and help transition and development.

Wong showed the region that she came with respect as a neighbouring nation, acknowledged others' national discretion, subtly placed policy recommendations as a friend, and provided support based on what the Pacific countries really needed. Wong defined Australia as part of the Pacific family and suggested that the Pacific family is responsible for Pacific security. With a deep and comprehensive understanding of the region's struggles, she [advocates](#) that Australia should be "a partner of choice for the countries of our region" and "not patriarchs".

First Nation Foreign Policy, from Australia to the World's Colonial History

In Australia, she has also embedded First Nations' history in domestic policymaking. To present Australia as a truly multicultural nation with respect for its own history, she went beyond migration to include the [First Nations perspective](#) in Australia's foreign policy. She [believes](#) that "elevating First Nations perspectives will strengthen our connections across the world and in our region, especially across the Blue Pacific."

During her first visit to the United Kingdom, she [confronted](#) the colonial history of the British at King's College. By sharing her personal experiences of the impact of historical British colonialism, she revealed the stories that were once not told enough to the world. She said these stories are hard to listen to, "but understanding the past enables us to better share the present and the future". Wong did not represent the perspectives of the First Nations People in the speech, a group whose life experiences are largely unknown to her. A month later, Wong announced the [appointment](#) of Justin Mohamed as Australia's inaugural Ambassador for First Nations People.

This is another "first time" for Australia - the first time for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to have a stake in the policymaking process. Hamish Fejo from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) [highlighted](#) that "the Indo-Pacific is home to the largest number of Indigenous people with 70 per cent of the 370 million original inhabitants worldwide". Indigenous people can finally share their connection and their knowledge of the land with the Australian government, which can not only lead to a more sustainable future, as Fejo suggested, but can also enhance the relations and connections between Australia and the Indo-Pacific region.

Building the New World Order in Progress

Professor Hugh White from the Australia National University [regards](#) Wong as the “most capable member of the Albanese government’s foreign policy team”. She “has an aura”, as White noted in his latest work.

Indeed, Wong has a rare aura as a leader from the West. Australia’s national interests are her prime motivations, but her outlook and concerns are regional and global. Such knowledge and empathy come from her cross-cultural experiences, as has been illustrated in her courageous, nuanced pursuit of policies.

Wong is building a new world order, where colonial history can no longer be buried, where a multicultural society can take a lead role in globalisation. And Australia is being remade into an active and helpful middle power nation in its region with its own agency, constructively and strategically navigating our presence in the geopolitics of growing China-US rivalry.

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