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‘A precious vase’: Sir James Plimsoll

Jeremy Hearder

Sir James Plimsoll proceeded to Washington in 1970 after serving for five years as Secretary of the Department of External Affairs in Canberra. Washington was a typical posting in Plimsoll's career: he went where he was told, he did distinguished work, and he hated leaving.¹ What made it different was his extensive knowledge and experience of the US; his standing among key Americans; and that he departed somewhat embittered because of the circumstances of his leaving. When Plimsoll presented credentials as Ambassador, President Richard Nixon told him: ‘You yourself are no stranger to our shores, your accomplishments have been many.’² Plimsoll was, indeed, unusually qualified, and well-known in Washington. Since his first visit to the US as an army captain in 1945, he had worked there for more than eight years. In Plimsoll's two periods in Canberra, relations with the US had been a major focus. Ever since his work during the Korean War, Americans had regarded him as one of Australia's most respected diplomats.

1 An expanded version of this chapter appears in the author's book: *Jim Plim Ambassador Extraordinary: A Biography of Sir James Plimsoll*, Connor Court Publishing, Ballarat, 2015.

2 President Richard Nixon in reply to Plimsoll's presentation of credentials as Ambassador, speech, I.3417 of 11.6.70, Plimsoll Papers, MS 8048/3, National Library of Australia (NLA), Canberra.

During Plimsoll's time in Washington (1970–74) he faced a number of difficulties. At head of government level, relations were no longer as close personally as had been the case with Robert Menzies and then Harold Holt. Further, for foreign ambassadors, the White House was virtually closed, while the State Department was excluded from involvement in major foreign policy decisions. Australia, a close ally, would receive only short notice of major US announcements. It was partly a reflection of personality. Nixon was 'not an open person. He didn't much like meetings, and preferred to study the papers and decide'.³ For Australia, this relationship between two close but unequal partners and allies always required careful management. It was not as important to the US as to Australia. As Plimsoll put it, 'A super power looks at things differently from a country the size of Australia'.⁴

Political volatility and social unrest marked the period of Plimsoll's ambassadorship. There were unprecedented demonstrations and riots in major US cities and university campuses in opposition to the Vietnam War and the draft. From 1973, the Watergate scandal reflected an unfolding crisis of governance. Meanwhile, in Canberra also there was unusual political turbulence: during the three-and-a-half years Plimsoll served four foreign ministers, and three prime ministers. Each prime minister insisted on the importance of the US relationship but did little about it. John Gorton, and then his successor, William McMahon, were concentrating on political survival, while the advent of the Whitlam Government brought about a minor crisis in the relationship.

McMahon

Circumstances for the Australian embassy in Washington in 1970 were made difficult by the continuing rivalry between Gorton and McMahon.⁵ In 1970 Sir Keith Waller, Plimsoll's successor as Secretary, once mentioned to Plimsoll that letters from Nixon to Gorton as Prime

3 Lieutenant-General Brent Scowcroft, personal communication, 4 April 2008. And see generally James Curran, *Unholy Fury: Whitlam and Nixon at War*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2015.

4 Jim Plimsoll, 30 November 1972, memorandum (unnumbered), series A1838, item 683(72)57, National Archives of Australia (NAA), Canberra.

5 'Both were intensely political but in ways that inevitably brought them into conflict. Neither man had a strong commitment to the party.' Otherwise they 'had very little in common apart from ambition and mutual dislike'. Graeme Starr, *Carrick: Principles, Politics and Policy*, Connor Court Publishing, Ballarat, 2012, p. 190.

Minister, of legitimate interest to the foreign minister, were not being passed to McMahon. Plimsoll understood the department's problem, but also Gorton's reluctance to share sensitive material with a notorious leaker.⁶

Plimsoll's opinion of McMahon, formed in Canberra, did not improve, especially in the wake of an incident prompting physical intervention by the Ambassador. McMahon, as Foreign Minister, visited Washington for the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (ANZUS) Council talks in September 1970. At a dinner in McMahon's honour at the Residence, guests included William Rogers, Secretary of State, and Richard Helms, Director of the CIA. After dessert, while guests were still at table, McMahon quietly left. Plimsoll followed him out. He said to Plimsoll that he was tired and was going to bed. Plimsoll reminded him that the guests included a number of important, busy people who had come to meet him. McMahon replied: 'Some other time.' He had turned to go up the stairs when Plimsoll seized him by the back of his coat. 'All right I'll stay', McMahon agreed.⁷

In March 1971, Plimsoll was informed that McMahon had challenged Gorton and was now prime minister. Plimsoll replied: 'Well, that's the end of the Coalition Government, because they won't last with him.'⁸ At first, however, Plimsoll was worried that McMahon might replace him with some minister whom he wanted to be rid of.⁹

Plimsoll travelled extensively around the US and his talents in public speaking and handling the media were invaluable attributes. He not only promoted Australia and its policies, but he was the only ambassador representing US allies in Vietnam who travelled so frequently, speaking to local media. As a result, Nixon learned of Plimsoll's public defence of allied policy, and he was pleased. This brought special access to the White House.¹⁰

6 Plimsoll to Keith Waller, 25 June 1970, letter, Jim Plimsoll Papers, MS 8048/3, NAA, Canberra.

7 Arthur Tange, personal communication, 6 January 1998; David Sadleir, 29 January 2000, letter. Tange heard this from Plimsoll and Sadleir heard this from Richard Woolcott, who was also present.

8 *Reminiscential Conversations Between Hon. Clyde Cameron and Sir James Plimsoll*, 1984, TRC 1967, vol. ii, p. 177, NLA, Canberra; Jim Plimsoll, diary, 9, 10 March 1971, Plimsoll Papers, MS 8048/3, NLA, Canberra.

9 JE Ryan, 16 March 1971, diary (unpublished), privately held. Ryan was Number 2 in the embassy.

10 RR Fernandez, personal communication, 19 March 1997. Kissinger told Plimsoll things on the condition that he not tell 'those S.O.B's in State'. Fernandez succeeded Ryan as deputy at the embassy.

In the early 1970s, the Australian Residence had established a reputation for entertaining well, a matter in which there was intense competition among embassies.¹¹ Plimsoll's strategy was small groups of 'people of some consequence who would get something out of the dinner and let us get something out of the dinner'.¹² Plimsoll was a very active host, and vastly overspent out of his own pocket, perhaps by as much as A\$15,000 per year.¹³ Plimsoll's contact with the highest officials in the State Department partly reflected previous acquaintance, and partly his unusual standing. His closest contact was with Marshall Green, Assistant Secretary for East Asia, whose responsibilities included Vietnam and China. In a rare opportunity provided to an Australian Ambassador, Green would invite Plimsoll's comments on draft US policy submissions.¹⁴

During the crisis of the Yom Kippur War in the Middle East in October 1973, although not directly involved, the Australian Government was concerned about possible widening of the conflict. Australia, moreover, was presiding at the UN Security Council, which was heavily involved. In any case, Canberra expected to be treated as 'an ally': to be perceived as being kept well-informed, and as having some dialogue.¹⁵ Plimsoll arranged this with Joseph Sisco, Assistant Secretary of State responsible for the Middle East. Given Sisco's preoccupations, Plimsoll would see him for only 10 minutes at a time, but the arrangement worked effectively to meet an ambassador's need for frequent consultation and sharing of information.¹⁶

11 Peter Costigan (from Washington), *Herald* (Melbourne), 1970–74; Hearder, *Jim Plim*, p. 256; *Reminiscential Conversations* (quoted by Cameron), vol. ii, p. 337: 'Although they rarely made the social columns of the *Washington Post*, the dinners and lunches hosted by Sir James became a legend among the top officials in State, the Pentagon, the White House and the Congress.'

12 *Reminiscential Conversations*, vol. ii, p. 337.

13 Marjorie Knight (Ambassador's Social Secretary), personal communication, 30 May 1997. Plimsoll worked the Residence staff very hard. He had to be reminded about the need for some days off for the staff.

14 Mack Williams, personal communication, 2 July 1998. This illustrated Green's high regard for Plimsoll's knowledge and judgement, not to mention his memory for detail. This often later led to phone calls from the State Department to Counsellors at the Embassy: 'What's this about the Soviet position in the UN First Committee in 1952?'

15 MJ Hughes, personal communication, July 2000.

16 Joseph Sisco, personal communication, 20 August 1996. Sisco, for his part, recalled that he had had no hesitation in doing this for 'one of the best diplomats I dealt with during my entire career'.

Vietnam and China

With regard to the Vietnam War, a most important task for the embassy was to try to predict what the Americans would do next. If US service personnel in Vietnam increased, a request for more from Australia could follow. If numbers decreased there could be domestic pressure in Australia to do likewise.¹⁷ Washington was the 'imperial capital of an empire at war, and at war at home'.¹⁸ With public demonstrations, the National Guard was sometimes deployed in the streets. In May 1971 Plimsoll decided to sleep on his office couch one Sunday night, concerned that a planned demonstration might prevent him reaching the embassy next morning.¹⁹

For the McMahon Government, the question of diplomatic relations with China was one in which domestic political considerations weighed heavily, frustrating senior officials in the department.²⁰ Waller gave high priority to having the Coalition Government achieve recognition, but without success.²¹ Plimsoll, however, remained more cautious about China.²² On the evening of 15 July 1971, Secretary Rogers phoned to give one hour's advance notice of Nixon's announcement that Henry Kissinger had visited China from 9 to 11 July, and that Nixon himself would visit there by May 1972. Plimsoll estimated that he managed to have his message in Canberra about 20 minutes before McMahon was due to go into the House for Question Time.²³

17 Williams, personal communication 2 July 1998.

18 Sam Lipski (Washington correspondent for *The Australian*), personal communication, 28 August 1997.

19 Plimsoll's diary, 2 May 1971, Plimsoll Papers, MS8048/3, NLA, Canberra. In the event, the main demonstrations were held elsewhere in the city.

20 HD Anderson, 2 October 1970, note, series A1838/2, item 3107/38/20, part 1, NAA, Canberra. One who penned some thoughts on China policy doubted that 'in the prevailing political climate here' his ideas would 'get far in the immediate future'.

21 Keith Waller, *A Diplomatic Life, Some Memories*, Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations, Griffith University, Brisbane, 1990, p. 44.

22 John Lavett, personal communication, 29 August 2002. During discussions with a counsellor at the embassy, Plimsoll referred to China as 'the enemy'.

23 Sadleir, personal communication, 15 January 2002; Plimsoll's diary, 15 July 1971, Plimsoll Papers, MS8048/3, NLA, Canberra.

The announcement evoked some strong reactions in Canberra about the secrecy with which the US had changed policy.²⁴ Plimsoll tended to downplay the significance of the China development. Basic differences between the US and China remained ‘and are likely to continue for a long time to come’. Both countries were ‘still in the exploratory stage of relations’, and relations with Japan would be ‘more important for the indefinite future’. Plimsoll even expressed some sympathy for the degree of US secrecy. It was ‘dangerous’ that relevant US officials were not involved and unable to offer advice; Nixon, however, had no alternative. ‘Once he had begun consultation with even the closest of US allies, the risks of leakage would have become unbearably high.’²⁵ Doubtless Plimsoll’s unspoken thought was of the current Australian prime minister. As for Nixon’s own administration, there had been significant leaks, notably publication of the Pentagon Papers.

Crisis on the Indian subcontinent

The year 1971 also saw troubles in Pakistan, leading to eventual emergence of the new nation of Bangladesh. The US approach was influenced firstly by its relationship with Pakistan as an ally, and an often troubled relationship with India; and, secondly, by its relationship with the Soviet Union. The US was uneasy that the Soviets seemed to be getting closer to India. Kissinger commented: ‘We can’t allow a friend of ours and China’s to get screwed in a conflict with a friend of Russia’s.’²⁶ The situation produced a ‘watershed’ in the relationship of the superpowers;²⁷ and the crisis also brought Plimsoll to the attention of US policymakers, such was his reputation for sound counsel in relation to South and East Asian affairs.

24 Although a Foreign Affairs policy planning paper had warned that, as a great power, the US would act in its own interests and could change policies quickly. See David Goldsworthy (ed.), *Facing North: A Century of Australian Engagement with Asia, vol. 1: 1901 to the 1970s*, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canberra, 2001, p. 332.

25 Plimsoll to Canberra, 17 August 1971, memorandum, series A1838, item 625/14/23, NAA, Canberra.

26 Kissinger, quoted in Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, Arrow Books, London, 1979, p. 527.

27 ‘A Watershed in our Relationship’, in *Soviet–American Relations: The Détente Years 1969–1972*, Department of State Publications 11438, Washington DC, 2007, 15 November 1971 – 31 December 1971.

By December the US was concerned that Indian forces, having overcome Pakistani forces in East Pakistan, would invade and conquer West Pakistan. The US, which felt it had no influence in New Delhi, looked to the Soviet Union to 'restrain the Indians'. On 9 December Nixon warned Vorontsov, the Soviet Chargé in Washington, that 'if India moves forces against West Pakistan, the US cannot stand by. We must inevitably look towards a confrontation between the USSR and the US'. The next day Vorontsov told Moscow, after talking with Kissinger, that the US was 'only interested in the situation on the western border between India and Pakistan', and the US 'are turning a blind eye' to East Pakistan (Bangladesh), where India had won.²⁸

Plimsoll's sympathy for India was well-known.²⁹ Similarly, Waller shared Plimsoll's determination to improve relations with India, 'which had never been given the importance which I thought they merited'.³⁰ Unusually, besides instructions from Canberra, Plimsoll received a personal message from the Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, asking him to intercede with Kissinger, so that Kissinger would have a more balanced view of the Indian position.³¹ Plimsoll later recalled that he thought the US, in their support for Pakistan, were 'behaving in a very dangerous way'. He saw Rogers and other officials, 'to try to hold them back from any violent support of Pakistan'. But he was less certain whether his message was getting through to the White House.

Two years later, however, at a White House dinner, Nixon greeted the Australian Ambassador and then turned to the guest of honour and said of Plimsoll: 'He knows a great deal about the Far East, and he was of immense value to us in recent troubles in India and Bangladesh.' Two months later, Nixon saw Plimsoll at another function and repeated the sentiment: 'I will never forget what you did for us on Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. I will always be grateful. We owe you a great debt.' Plimsoll felt that, on hearing it a second time, it was 'not just polite persiflage'. But he was unsure what the President was referring to. Perhaps the US had been contemplating some sort of military intervention, probably naval, in support of Pakistan, and that 'what I had

28 Ibid.

29 Lavett, personal communication, 25 March 2002. Plimsoll 'even had meetings in his office with emerging Bangladeshis – at that time no doubt regarded as dissident Pakistanis – to give them advice and encouragement'.

30 Waller, *Diplomatic Life*, p. 45.

31 Williams, personal communication, 2 July 1998. The message to Plimsoll came in such a way that the Indian Ambassador was unaware of it.

been saying to people may have held them back'.³² Plimsoll saw the emergence of Bangladesh as inevitable. He later noted that the situation had been 'the only issue on which Australian and US policies have diverged markedly'.³³

In a 1972 article comparing career and non-career ambassadors in the diplomatic corps in Washington, the *Christian Science Monitor* reported that Plimsoll and the Ambassador for Japan, Nobuhiko Ushiba, were 'among the most respected career men'.³⁴ At the same time Plimsoll was, according to another observer, probably the worst-dressed ambassador.³⁵

Watergate

The year 1973 proved a difficult one with the unfolding crisis of governance in Washington, as well as a crisis in Australia's relations with the US. The Vice President, Spiro Agnew, resigned mid-year. The Watergate affair intensified with resignations and subsequent indictments of senior White House figures, the resignation of Attorney-General Elliot Richardson, and the President's firing of the Special Watergate Prosecutor, Archibald Cox.

Plimsoll later recalled realising that there had been a 'diseased atmosphere' detectable in the White House after Nixon's re-election in November 1972, before Watergate 'gathered steam'. A lawyer who had attended a meeting with White House officials told Plimsoll that, when the constitutionality of a proposed measure was discussed, the response was, '[i]f the President wants it, it's constitutional'. Plimsoll, by no means an avid television watcher, found himself often glued to the one television set in the embassy as key witnesses testified before Congressional Watergate hearings. The country became divided, and the conduct of normal business, especially in the White House, became

32 *Reminiscental Conversations*, vol. ii, pp. 313–15; Washington to Canberra, 15 December 1971, cablegram no. I.127272, series A1838/272, item 169/11/148, part 51, NAA, Canberra.

33 Post-annual review, 1971–72, series A1838/346 TS, item 693/3, part 14, NAA, Canberra.

34 'Mr Ambassador – Flags, Pomp and A Changing Role', *Christian Science Monitor*, 26 May 1972; Plimsoll Papers, item 8048/16/3, NLA, Canberra.

35 Marjorie Knight, personal communication, 30 May 1997.

increasingly difficult.³⁶ Nixon seemed to be 'isolating himself' and 'a lot of small but important decisions appear to have been left aside', not least in international affairs.³⁷

Plimsoll later recalled finding it hard to believe that Nixon could have been 'that stupid' to be personally involved in the Watergate burglary. If Nixon had admitted involvement early on, 'he would probably have got away with it'. Many members of Congress had their own skeletons in cupboards, and at first they were not 'inclined to pursue him too far'.³⁸ In reports to Canberra about Watergate, Plimsoll took a cautious approach.³⁹ As Ambassador, Plimsoll had contact with senior White House figures as well as members of the administration. He knew Maurice Stans and Elliott Richardson, who in different ways both suffered over Watergate. Another he knew was Alexander Butterfield, who later revealed the existence of the tapes of Nixon's conversations. Any leakage of embassy comment on Watergate would have been disastrous for maintaining White House contact, and for achieving what became a major problem: a Whitlam visit to the White House.

The Whitlam Government

On 2 December 1972 the Labor Party, under the leadership of Gough Whitlam, won the election. Plimsoll decided to decline the offer of a job at The Australian National University from the Vice-Chancellor, Sir John Crawford.⁴⁰ Plimsoll hoped to establish a good working relationship with Whitlam. He had known Whitlam and his wife Margaret for many years, as well as Whitlam's father, a former Commonwealth Crown solicitor. Whitlam had visited Plimsoll in New York, and in Delhi. In Washington, the Whitlams stayed with him at the Residence in 1970 and 1972.⁴¹ Plimsoll and Whitlam were of a similar age and height, and with similar elephantine memories and enthusiasm

36 *Reminiscent Conversations*, vol. ii, pp. 166–8; Plimsoll's diary, 14 June 1973, 25 June 1973, 23 October 1973, Plimsoll Papers, MS8048/3, NLA, Canberra.

37 Washington to Canberra, 19 July 1973, cablegram no. 3834, Plimsoll Papers, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), Canberra; Washington to Canberra, 21 October 1973, cablegram no. 5805, Plimsoll Papers, DFAT, Canberra.

38 *Reminiscent Conversations*, vol. ii, p. 166.

39 PG Timmins, personal communication, 21 December 1999.

40 Plimsoll's diary, 4 December 1972, Plimsoll Papers, MS8048/3, NLA, Canberra.

41 *Ibid.*, 15–19 July 1970, 26–29 January 1972.

for the arts and literature.⁴² Plimsoll had seen Whitlam in Canberra during his consultations in August 1972.⁴³ On 20 December, Plimsoll returned again briefly for consultations.

This was the beginning of an unusually testing time for Plimsoll and embassy staff. The new Australian Labor Government was raw and inexperienced after 23 years out of office. Whitlam, also foreign minister for the first year, wanted to keep tight control of foreign policy but did not keep his colleagues informed. In his haste to use his new power to change Australian foreign policy towards a 'more independent' stance, he tended to take the US for granted. Nixon, hypersensitive in the wake of the problems of Watergate, was deeply upset by Australia.

Before returning to Canberra, Plimsoll had conveyed Whitlam's personal message to Nixon strongly opposing the renewal of bombing of North Vietnam. Read today, the message seems balanced if intense, 'but Nixon was very annoyed by it because he had never been rebuked by an Australian'.⁴⁴ Whitlam had expressed his 'deep concern'. Nixon's reaction was: 'Doesn't he think I'm concerned?'⁴⁵ Unaware of Whitlam's message, three of his ministers – Cairns, Cameron and Uren – each issued statements that 'intruded with mounting stridency about murderers and maniacs in the White House'. Nixon's anger 'turned to fury'.⁴⁶ All of this 'took some explaining to the Americans, because they had never been subjected to public criticism by Australia; we had always been at great pains to keep our differences in private'.⁴⁷

42 Gough Whitlam, personal communication, August 1996; Plimsoll's diary, 16 May 1972, Plimsoll Papers, MS8048/3, NLA, Canberra. Whitlam had been impressed that in 1972 Plimsoll had had James Mollison, Director of the National Gallery of Australia (NGA), to dinner in Washington, along with directors of the major galleries in Washington. Whitlam believed that Australia had never had a gallery director who knew anything about US art. Plimsoll was introducing Mollison to a new world. One outcome was the purchase for the NGA in 1973 of Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* painting. Plimsoll held a similar lunch for Mollison again on 25 October 1973: Plimsoll's diary, 25 October 1973, Plimsoll Papers, MS8048/3, NLA, Canberra.

43 *Reminiscential Conversations*, vol. ii, p. 308. Whitlam had mentioned that Kim Beazley (Senior) would like Foreign Affairs, but Whitlam ruled this out on account of his Moral Rearmament background: 'He would never lie – a Minister for Foreign Affairs has to be prepared to lie sometimes.'

44 Waller, *Diplomatic Life*, p. 48.

45 Marshall Green, *Pacific Encounters, Recollections and Humor*, DACOR-BACON Press, Bethesda, Maryland, 1997, p. 135.

46 Edward Gough Whitlam, *The Whitlam Government*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1985, p. 43.

47 Waller, *Diplomatic Life*, pp. 47–8.

On 27 December 1972, Australia announced cancellation of all military aid to South Vietnam, and abandoned a plan to train Cambodian troops in Australia.⁴⁸ On 28 December, in Sydney, Plimsoll had a wide-ranging discussion with the new Prime Minister/Foreign Minister. Whitlam was critical of US policies on Vietnam. He took issue with Plimsoll's analysis of US attempts to get out of the war, but apart from the 'intractable question' of Vietnam, he saw no other problems with the US. For his part, Plimsoll was concerned at Whitlam's apparent lack of interest in the possible economic consequences of 'reckless' measures he was considering in relation to French nuclear testing in the South Pacific.⁴⁹ Whitlam had earlier denounced French nuclear testing in the region and had pledged to take the matter to the International Court of Justice. Plimsoll's home consultations were shortened as Whitlam asked him to return to represent the government at the funeral of former US President Harry Truman.

Upon becoming Prime Minister, Whitlam signalled a desire for 'a more independent Australian stance in foreign affairs'.⁵⁰ Earlier, in 1971, Plimsoll had warned about the dangers of such an 'emotionally attractive' concept, as seen from Washington. He doubted that Australia would 'achieve anything by announcing important decisions without first having genuine consultation with the United States'. Although Australia and the US had 'different roles to play', wrote Plimsoll, their 'basic interests' were the same. Australia needed to work 'in the greatest intimacy. Australia has a bigger interest in that than the US has'.⁵¹ But early 1973 was a heady time in Canberra for the first Labor Government in 23 years. Changes in foreign policy by what Plimsoll called 'dramatic gestures'⁵² were easier to achieve than in domestic policies, and there was more to come. Since his return from Canberra to Washington, Plimsoll had 'not looked very happy'.⁵³ But Plimsoll steeled himself for being 'the meat in the sandwich between an irate White House and the tempestuous new Labor Government in Australia'.⁵⁴

48 Peter Edwards, *A Nation at War: Australian Politics, Society and Diplomacy During the Vietnam War*, Allen & Unwin and AWM, Sydney, 1997, p. 324.

49 *Reminiscent Conversations*, vol. i, p. 436.

50 Richard Woolcott, *The Hot Seat: Reflections on Diplomacy from Stalin's Death to the Bali Bombings*, HarperCollins Publishers, Sydney, 2003, p. 112. Text of Whitlam's statement is in *Australian Foreign Affairs Record*, vol. 43, December 1972, p. 619.

51 Plimsoll, Washington, to Canberra, 17 August 1971, memorandum, Plimsoll Papers, DFAT.

52 *Reminiscent Conversations*, vol. ii, pp. 301–2.

53 Fernandez, personal communication, 19 March 1997.

54 Roy Macartney (Washington correspondent), *Age*, 5 February 1974.

He saw Rogers on 8 January 1973, while in Australia, maritime trade unions were boycotting US shipping in response to renewed US bombing of Hanoi.⁵⁵ Plimsoll reported to Canberra that ‘the dominating question [from Rogers] was: where are Australian–American relations going?’, given the statements by the three Australian ministers, and the trade union boycott. Rogers had told him that the statements had ‘caused great resentment in the White House and in the Administration generally’.⁵⁶ Plimsoll and Rogers, who knew each other well, had a ‘reasoned discussion’. However, Rogers asked him to report to Canberra ‘that we feel very strongly about this. Don’t send back a report that we are taking this in our stride because we are not’.⁵⁷ Plimsoll had conveyed to Rogers that Whitlam ‘wished to have good and close relations with the US and that he saw Vietnam questions as the only substantive matter of difference’. The problem with that proposition was that, seen from Washington, Vietnam had long been a core part of bilateral cooperation. It was from this that Whitlam now was departing.

The Vietnam peace agreement came into effect on 27 January 1973. Canberra felt that the agreement opened the way for establishment of diplomatic relations with North Vietnam. Plimsoll reported ‘dismay’ in the State Department at the speed of Australia’s proposed action in this direction, as well as a lack of prior discussion with the US, such as the Americans had had with Canada and Japan. The US had hoped that friendly countries would hold back on such a step ‘to see whether North Vietnam was ready to give effect to the agreement’. Plimsoll warned that a move towards diplomatic relations ‘would be bound to touch a raw nerve in the White House’ and recommended moving slowly.⁵⁸ However, on 26 February, Whitlam announced that Canberra and Hanoi had decided to establish diplomatic relations.⁵⁹ Nixon retaliated. Australia was included in a list of countries to be treated in a discriminatory fashion. The Ambassador was not to be received by the administration

55 *Reminiscental Conversations*, vol. i, p. 454.

56 Washington to Canberra, 8 January 1973, cablegram no. I2602, series A7976/1, NAA, Canberra.

57 *Reminiscental Conversations*, pp. ii, 176.

58 Washington to Canberra, 2 February 1973, cablegram no. I.13166, series A1838/2, item 3020/10/3, part 1, NAA, Canberra; Washington to Canberra, 2 February 1973, cablegram no. I.13039, series A1838/2, item 3020/10/3, part 1, NAA, Canberra; Washington to Canberra, 6 February 1973, cablegram no. I.12399, series A1838/2, item 3020/10/3, part 1, NAA, Canberra.

59 Edwards, *Nation at War*, p. 326; Washington to Canberra, 31 January 1973, cablegram no. I.11925, series A7976/1, NAA, Canberra.

or by senior officials. Embassy officers were to be received at no higher than desk level in the State Department. Marshall Green protested, but there was much angst in the White House.⁶⁰

Plimsoll later recalled that it was a 'difficult period'. It testified to the high regard in which he was held that his contacts continued 'as much as ever'. Rogers, who much later spoke to Plimsoll of this White House edict, said that he and Green were not going to stop talking to him. As they could not see him on the golf course, Plimsoll not being a golfer, they saw him at his residence.⁶¹ Rogers 'had a very high regard for Plimsoll as perhaps the best informed diplomat in Washington on several key United Nations issues and strategy'.⁶² Of other members of the Cabinet, Attorney-General Richardson 'went out of his way to be helpful and co-operative'. The Secretary for Health, Education and Welfare, Caspar Weinberger, with whom Plimsoll had become friendly, blatantly disregarded the directive.⁶³

Plimsoll seemed despondent and unhappy at the direction of the Whitlam Government, and constantly having to defend its new policies to the administration.⁶⁴ He, nevertheless, continued to provide forthright advice to Canberra, warning about possible effects of the new government's moves on relations with the US. Whitlam was 'attached to the principle of universality in our diplomatic relations', especially with communist countries, to assist in achieving the more 'independent' foreign policy to which he aspired.⁶⁵ Following an approach from Cuba about establishing consular relations, Plimsoll noted that many Latin American countries still did not support Cuban membership of the UN. Nor was there any US movement, either from the President or Congress, towards rapprochement with Cuba. For Nixon, Cuba was still 'a very personal issue'; the 1962 missile crisis remained much on his mind, while Bebe Rebozo, a Cuban émigré, was one of his closest friends. The US would regard any Australian move towards Cuba as 'a deliberately anti-American act since there would be little or no resulting benefit to Australia'. Plimsoll 'urged caution' and patience. To hold off

60 Fernandez, personal communication, 19 March 1997.

61 *Reminiscent Conversations*, vol. i, pp. 455–6.

62 Marshall Green, personal communication, 13 April 1997.

63 *Reminiscent Conversations*, vol. i, pp. 455–6; Plimsoll's diary, 19 January 1973, Plimsoll Papers, MS8048/3, NLA, Canberra.

64 Fernandez, personal communication, 19–20 February 2001.

65 Whitlam, 'Statement by the Prime Minister', *Australian Foreign Affairs Record*, December 1972, p. 59.

was not a matter of 'following' the US. Rather, looking at it from an Organization of American States regional perspective, 'there should be no conflict with the idea of the independent foreign policy in waiting on the countries of Cuba's own region to develop a position'. Canberra accepted Plimsoll's comments as 'generally valid' and was persuaded not to respond to the Cuban approach.⁶⁶

Whitlam wanted to move quickly towards recognising North Korea. Plimsoll had had years of involvement in policy towards Korea. The Foreign Minister of South Korea, who frequently consulted him when visiting Washington, was 'very hurt' that Australia, as an old friend and ally, 'had canvassed its new moves with a number of other countries before talking them out with Seoul'.⁶⁷ Green told Plimsoll that the US disagreed with Australia 'making any decision at this stage in favour of recognition or diplomatic relations with North Korea or even saying that it was an objective'.⁶⁸ Plimsoll advised Canberra to proceed cautiously: 'Let the contacts with the [DPRK] grow rather than be created overnight',⁶⁹ he wrote before Whitlam received the visiting South Korean Foreign Minister in Canberra. Plimsoll recalled that earlier Australian policy on Korea had been bipartisan, noting Evatt's support in 1950 of the Menzies Government's decision to commit Australian forces in the defence of the South. Australia was well respected in Seoul; that was 'not something that should be lightly cast aside'.⁷⁰

Getting Whitlam to the White House

During the first six months of 1973, Plimsoll assisted no fewer than six Whitlam ministers visiting Washington. But Nixon had let it be known at the end of March that he was 'so displeased' that he would not receive Whitlam himself. Whitlam professed surprise. He had thought that for him to visit the President should be 'as natural and relatively informal as his visit to a British Prime Minister'.⁷¹ Getting Nixon to reverse his decision presented a major challenge. Whitlam's first idea was that, on

66 Washington to Canberra, 20 April 1973, cablegram no. 2124, Plimsoll Papers, DFAT; Canberra to Washington, 27 April 1973, cablegram no. 1933, Plimsoll Papers, DFAT.

67 Washington to Canberra, 24 February 1973, cablegram no. O.1775, Plimsoll Papers, DFAT.

68 Washington to Canberra, 3 March 1973, cablegram no. O.2045, Plimsoll Papers, DFAT.

69 Washington to Canberra, 29 January 1973, cablegram no. O.883, Plimsoll Papers, DFAT.

70 Washington to Canberra, 9 May 1973, cablegram no. O.4147, Plimsoll Papers, DFAT.

71 Whitlam, *Whitlam Government*, p. 46. Whitlam wrote that this message came via a 'planted story' in the *Washington Post*.

his way to the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' meeting in Ottawa, he could pass through the US. Chances of seeing the President would be improved if an ANZUS Council meeting could be held in Washington.⁷² When Plimsoll raised with Rogers the possibility of Whitlam coming to Washington for an ANZUS meeting, the latter instantly reacted that this would include Whitlam meeting the President. 'Now was not the time to raise that' with Nixon, who was 'still smarting'.

Plimsoll reported that he 'spoke frankly to Rogers about forces at work inside the political parties in Australia and the resulting pressures and also limitations on freedom of action'. He pressed the desirability of the two leaders having 'a frank personal talk' soon.⁷³ Whitlam did not appear overly concerned, yet he did not want to be thought an unreliable ally or not a friend of the US.⁷⁴ The prospect of being unwelcome at the White House in his first year in office would not have appealed either.⁷⁵ Whitlam next tried sending Peter Wilenski, his principal private secretary, to Washington to talk to Kissinger. This cut across the normal role of the ambassador. Whitlam, although he respected Plimsoll, felt that it would be more appropriate to get a message of reassurance through to Nixon about the nature of the new Australian Government through Wilenski, who would be more familiar with the new ministers, not least the three 'mavericks'. Whitlam noted also, given his fascination with European history, that Kissinger and Wilenski each had been born only a few hundred kilometres apart.⁷⁶

Wilenski's mission was most secret. Not even Plimsoll was informed. Whitlam had been afraid that a request to see Kissinger through the normal diplomatic channels, if refused, would leak to the press and make his government seem 'isolated from America' or even 'anti-American'. Whitlam personally telephoned Professor Ross Terrill at Harvard to ask him to arrange a meeting. Terrill, who knew Kissinger, was an Australian

72 GN Bilney to Secretary of Department, 28 February 1973, letter, series A138/369, item 686/2/1/5, part 1, NAA, Canberra. Bilney was in Whitlam's office, seconded from Foreign Affairs.

73 Washington to Canberra, 16 March 1973, cablegram no. I.30601, series A1838/369, item 686/2/15, part 1, NAA, Canberra.

74 Bilney, personal communication, 3 March 2008.

75 Whitlam, *Whitlam Government*, p. 46.

76 Whitlam, personal communication, 27 March 2008. See also Gough Whitlam, *Abiding Interests*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1997, p. 286.

Sinologist. It was only an hour before the meeting with Kissinger on 2 May that Plimsoll, who happened to be in the embassy, was informed of Wilenski's arrival, and that Wilenski had asked to see him.⁷⁷

It was not an easy meeting. Wilenski sought Plimsoll's help in preparing to talk to Kissinger. Plimsoll was unhappy with being kept out of the picture, at Whitlam not asking him to talk to Kissinger, at the short notice of Wilenski's arrival, and at this last-minute request for advice before such an important meeting. He hardly knew Wilenski, and would have wondered what Wilenski could hope to achieve with Kissinger, one of the most powerful people in Washington. Not surprisingly, Plimsoll, according to Wilenski, was 'not at all helpful'.⁷⁸ Searching quickly for something to say, he annoyed Wilenski, of Polish background, with a suggestion that he refer to the common English-speaking background of both countries. Later in the evening Wilenski called on Plimsoll at the Residence to give him some account of his meeting,⁷⁹ Wilenski later told Terrill that with Kissinger there had been a 'reasonably conciliatory tone' and 'talk of wiping the slate if not clean, partly clean, reopening direct line of communication between the prime minister and the president'. On matters that they disagreed on, Kissinger 'adopted a lecturing tone', and kept reminding him 'of the responsibilities of a great power'. There were, nevertheless, hopeful signs that a Whitlam visit would take place.⁸⁰ At least one embassy officer considered Whitlam's initiative as 'an appalling, insensitive, stupid thing to do to Plimsoll', risking undercutting his standing with the Americans.⁸¹ Plimsoll kept his counsel. It was a new way for Australian diplomacy even if it had several precedents in the international diplomacy of special envoys earlier in the century.⁸²

In the next month, June, Andrew Peacock, a minister in the previous government, visited Washington on a US Leadership Grant. Plimsoll talked to him about the problems confronting a prime ministerial visit. He had a dinner for Peacock at which Republican Senator Charles

77 Ross Terrill, *The Australians: In Search of an Identity*, Simon and Schuster, London, 1987, p. 89; Terrill, personal communication, 16 July 2008.

78 Terrill, personal communication, 10 July 2008.

79 Plimsoll's diary, 2 May 1973, Plimsoll Papers, MS8048/3, NLA, Canberra; Terrill, personal communication 10 July 2008.

80 Terrill, personal communication, 10 July 2008.

81 Hughes, personal communication, 2000.

82 Waller, *Diplomatic Life*, p. 50. Later that year in China, Waller found it 'a bit gratuitous' that, given the limit on numbers present, Whitlam preferred to take Wilenski in to see Chairman Mao in preference to the Secretary of his department.

Percy was a guest. Percy later helped Peacock to meet other prominent Republicans, among them George HW Bush, then National Chair of the Republican Party.⁸³ Bush took Peacock to meet the Vice President, Spiro Agnew. In an 'ugly fifteen minutes', Agnew said the US was sick of being criticised by banana republics, and then having people (like Peacock) creep in to back down. Peacock replied that this was not the point. A refusal to receive Whitlam would boost his standing in Australia and, in the longer term, would have a bad impact bilaterally. Agnew would not budge, but Bush was impressed, and arranged for Peacock to see Nixon, who listened and said he would think about it. Next day, Bush, after accompanying Nixon on a plane flight, phoned Peacock to say that Nixon had taken the point: he did not want Whitlam to get a boost in the Australian electorate as a result of no invitation. Peacock told Plimsoll this before leaving the US on 15 June.⁸⁴ The next morning Plimsoll was telephoned by Lieutenant General Brent Scowcroft, Kissinger's deputy.⁸⁵ He extended 'an invitation on behalf of the president for Mr Whitlam to see him on 30 July'. Plimsoll immediately informed Canberra.⁸⁶ Scowcroft recalled that Nixon had been persuaded that refusing to receive Whitlam 'would be an affront', and regardless of what he and his ministers had said, 'would not be the right thing'.⁸⁷ Although the invitation came soon after the Peacock visit, Nixon's reversal was probably the cumulative effect of a number of such demarches and conversations, in Canberra as well as in Washington.⁸⁸ Plimsoll certainly pushed hard on this. Scowcroft recalled Plimsoll as a 'very skilful advocate at a very difficult time, trying to explain very different attitudes and policies'.⁸⁹

When Whitlam came to Washington, he had some 40 minutes with Nixon during which he tried to establish 'some rapport and mutual confidence'. He felt this 'crucial test' came off very well. He was accompanied only by Plimsoll, whom he told not to give an account of the talk to anyone, 'and

83 Later President of the United States, 1989–93.

84 Peacock, personal communication, November 1996. Plimsoll saw Peacock several times at dinners between 1–15 June 1973; Plimsoll's diary, Plimsoll Papers, MS8048/3, NLA, Canberra.

85 Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, *The Final Days*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1976, p. 196. Scowcroft was later National Security Advisor to President Ford (1974–76) and to President GHW Bush (1989–93).

86 Plimsoll's diary, 16 June 1973, Plimsoll Papers, MS8048/3, NLA, Canberra.

87 Brent Scowcroft, personal communication, 4 April 2008.

88 Fernandez, personal communication, 20 February 2001.

89 Scowcroft, personal communication, 4 April 2008. Also Roy Macartney, *Age*, reported from Washington that 'the Australian Ambassador's enhanced standing at the White House had helped prepared the way'. Quoted by Cameron in *Reminiscental Conversations*, vol. ii, p. 333.

that includes Wilenski'.⁹⁰ Along with others, Plimsoll also accompanied Whitlam on calls on Agnew, Rogers, Kissinger, and Congressional leaders.⁹¹ The program for the visit was a shadow of the normal one for an Australian prime minister. There was no joint press conference and no lunch or dinner at the White House. Rogers and his wife, who had the Whitlams and Plimsoll to a late afternoon drink at their home on a Sunday afternoon, tendered the sole US hospitality. By contrast, some weeks later, Nixon hosted a dinner in honour of the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Norman Kirk.⁹²

Plimsoll filled the gap in local hospitality by hosting three dinners and a working lunch at the Residence. His personal standing was such that, despite the coolness from the White House, he was able to attract many significant Americans to meet and talk with over meals, opportunities that Whitlam 'fully used'.⁹³ These included five Cabinet members: Rogers, Elliot Richardson, Weinberger, Earl Butz (Agriculture), and Claude Breniger (Transportation). Others had been prominent in previous Democratic administrations: Robert S McNamara, President of the World Bank and former Secretary of Defense; and Arthur Goldberg, former Labor Secretary, Justice of the Supreme Court and US Permanent Representative at the UN. Other guests included Senate Democratic Leader Mike Mansfield, and leading Congressional figures, the Administrator of NASA, and Leonard Woodcock, president of the United Automobile Workers.⁹⁴ At the Residence, Graham Freudenberg, Whitlam's speechwriter, had a sometimes spirited discussion with Plimsoll about the speech that Plimsoll had drafted Whitlam at the National Press Club in Washington. One issue was the US F-111 aircraft for the Royal Australian Air Force, costs of which had escalated in the 10 years since the original agreement. Freudenberg wanted Whitlam to attack the F-111 project. Plimsoll disagreed: regardless of the rights or wrongs of the original decision, Australia had the aircraft and 'ought to make the most of it. It's an asset, don't throw it away'. Whitlam said nothing, but later privately told Plimsoll that he would not mention the F-111 in the speech. 'In fact I'm glad we have got it, because I think it

90 *Reminiscent Conversations*, vol. ii, p. 332; Washington to Canberra, 1 August 1973, cablegram no. O.7136, Plimsoll Papers, DFAT, Canberra.

91 Plimsoll's diary, 30–31 July 1973, Plimsoll Papers, MS8048/3, NLA, Canberra.

92 Plimsoll's diary, 27 September 1973, Plimsoll Papers, MS8048/3, NLA, Canberra. Plimsoll attended this dinner.

93 Washington to Canberra, 1 August 1973, cablegram no. O.7136, Plimsoll Papers, DFAT, Canberra.

94 Plimsoll's diary, 28–31 July 1973, Plimsoll Papers, MS8048/3, NLA, Canberra.

is a good thing for the populous countries to the north of us to know that we've got a weapon like that. And I'm not going to do anything to disparage it.⁹⁵

The important thing about the visit was that it took place at all. Whitlam, moreover, felt that it had 'gone very well', and 'had more than achieved the purposes we had in mind'.⁹⁶ Few knew that Plimsoll's presence during the visit had been by no means assured. His health was 'beginning to play up a bit'.⁹⁷ At 5 am on 19 July, nine days before the visit, Plimsoll had 'fainted in his bathroom and fallen unconscious to the floor'. During the next few days he had visited two specialists, including a neurologist, and had undergone various tests. On 21 July, during a weekend, he was confined to bed with a cold and a temperature of 101°F (38°C). Plimsoll had accompanied Whitlam on his subsequent visit to New York and, on return to Washington, he had a further examination. Ultimately, he was assured that he was in good health but should reduce his weight.⁹⁸ Here was a case of an ambassador maintaining the high levels of energy and astute interpersonal management needed in Washington, at the expense of his health.

Eviction from Washington

Plimsoll had come to relish his role as ambassador, including 'the intellectual challenge presenting Australia's case at the highest level'. The richness of US political life 'was a source of endless fascination for him'.⁹⁹ He was well settled in Australia's most important post, from where he could exercise some moderating influence on the emerging foreign policy of the new government, given his attachment to providing frank and fearless advice, and his relationship with Whitlam. But others had different ideas. During Whitlam's visit, Plimsoll received a personal letter from Whitlam notifying him of the end of his posting in Washington and of his transfer to Moscow.

95 *Reminiscential Conversations*, vol. i, p. 392.

96 Washington to Canberra, 1 August 1973, cablegram no. I.7136, Plimsoll Papers, DFAT, Canberra.

97 Fernandez, personal communication, 19 March 1997. Fernandez thought Plimsoll had collapsed on two occasions in the Residence. Plimsoll had reminded Fernandez of standing instructions for the No. 2 to inform Canberra when the Head of Mission was ill – at the same time he did not want Fernandez acting 'precipitately' on this.

98 Plimsoll's diary, 19–23 July, 2 August 1973, Plimsoll Papers, MS8048/3, NLA, Canberra.

99 Lipski, personal communication, 28 August 1997.

The news would not have been a complete surprise. Some weeks earlier, Whitlam had told him that he was thinking of replacing him: where would he want to go? Plimsoll had asked for Moscow, Port Moresby, or the OECD in Paris. Whitlam said it would probably be Moscow, and then afterwards another big post such as London. Plimsoll said he would fit in wherever he was wanted.

Whitlam later told Richard Woolcott that he had been enormously impressed with Plimsoll's 'dedication and decency', in that few of Plimsoll's stature would be prepared to go from Washington to Port Moresby.¹⁰⁰ At the same time Plimsoll, for all he had said about being willing to fit in with changes, would have preferred to stay longer in Washington. And he found the rationale for his move unconvincing and upsetting. Unknown to him, a manoeuvre, involving movement of others as well, had been underway for some time. Whitlam had wanted to find a post for Bruce Grant, a leading journalist, one who had given him public support before the election.¹⁰¹ Whitlam suggested Washington; Grant was hesitant. Then it was suggested that Grant become permanent representative at the UN in New York: Waller argued successfully that McIntyre should be allowed to remain because Australia had been elected to the UN Security Council. Wilenski suggested either Tokyo or Delhi. Grant was interested in Delhi, which he had discussed in the past with Plimsoll.¹⁰² Sir Patrick Shaw, who had been in Delhi for more than three years, and wanted to end his career there, was informed that Grant would take his place. He was then offered either Tokyo or Washington. He preferred Tokyo, his wife preferred Washington: they chose Washington.¹⁰³ The Shaws were good friends of Plimsoll, who was surprised to be replaced, not by a political appointment, but another career officer, one whom he thought was 'less in sympathy with the Whitlam Government than I was'.¹⁰⁴ Plimsoll was upset that the first

100 *Reminiscental Conversations*, vol. ii, p. 324; Woolcott, personal communication, 12 December 1997.

101 In late 1972 Grant, along with others including Kenneth Baillieu Myer and Walter Crocker, had written a letter to the editors of leading Australian newspapers advocating a change of government.

102 Bruce Grant, personal communication, 1997; Waller, *Diplomatic Life*, pp. 48–9. Waller emphasised to Whitlam the 'highly professional position' of the PR at the UN.

103 Karina Campbell, personal communication, 19 February 2004. See also Roy Macartney, 'Musical Chairs in an Embassy', *Age*, 5 February 1974.

104 *Reminiscental Conversations*, vol. ii, p. 324.

he heard of his move was as a *fait accompli*, and that no one in the department, especially not Waller, had seen fit to tell him what was afoot.¹⁰⁵

Plimsoll found an opportunity to discuss the matter privately with Whitlam while he was in Washington. Recapitulating their talk in a later letter, Plimsoll said he knew some 'might consider that I was unduly pro-American' but Whitlam had reassured him that he was 'not dissatisfied' with his performance. Nor was Whitlam 'doubtful of [his] loyalty as Ambassador to your Government'. Plimsoll undertook to go to Moscow if things had gone too far for the decision to be reversed. Whitlam told him he had been advised that Plimsoll's term had expired. Plimsoll contested this: since 1946 all his predecessors had served six years or more. Whitlam had said he would look into that. Some weeks later, in the absence of anything further from Whitlam, Plimsoll wrote to him, more in sorrow than anger. He had already been instructed to seek *agrément* for Shaw, while *agrément* had been sought for him in Moscow. Having rehearsed the points they had already discussed, he took issue again with the department's assertion that his term had expired. He repeated his view about the need for a five-year posting, given the time it took to get to know the US. He noted that nearly 40 foreign ambassadors currently in Washington had been there longer than he had.¹⁰⁶ Whitlam replied three weeks later. Whitlam 'did not take issue' with what Plimsoll had told him about the Washington posting, but this was now 'water under the bridge'. As to the failure to convey to him the view that his time had expired, Whitlam expressed 'regret that events took this course'.¹⁰⁷

Waller had not been in good health after his time in Washington; this had been widely known. Plimsoll had later learned that Waller felt strongly that three years as Ambassador in Washington was 'as long as flesh and blood could stand'.¹⁰⁸ This was perhaps a view that few were aware of, and which he evidently had not shared with Plimsoll; not in three separate private talks that Plimsoll had had with Waller during his consultations in August 1972, nor during the four talks during

105 Waller, *Diplomatic Life*, p. 42.

106 Plimsoll to Whitlam, 3 September 1973, letter, Plimsoll Papers, item 8048/16/3, NLA, Canberra.

107 Whitlam to Plimsoll, September 1973, letter, Plimsoll Papers, item 8048/16/3, NLA, Canberra.

108 *Reminiscent Conversations*, vol. ii, p. 324.

Plimsoll's short visit at the end of that year.¹⁰⁹ Plimsoll considered that capacity to stand the strain of Washington depended on the individual. For his part, he 'certainly wasn't worn out',¹¹⁰ an assertion that is at least open to question in view of his collapse before the Prime Minister's visit. Whitlam expressed understanding that 'your letter to me can have been no easier to write than has been this reply'. He assured Plimsoll of his confidence in him, and of his interest in Plimsoll's forthcoming posting to Moscow.¹¹¹ On 26 September, Whitlam announced Grant's appointment to New Delhi, Plimsoll's to Moscow, Shaw's to Washington, and Shann's to Tokyo.¹¹²

Final weeks

The year 1973 drew to a close. In January 1974, in Plimsoll's final weeks in Washington, the question of relations with North Korea rose again. It had been understood that Canberra would not move on this until March, which would have been after Plimsoll left. But it was decided that the issue should be 'out of the way' before the ANZUS Council meeting in February, but more especially by the beginning of February, before the resumption of parliament. Whitlam and Don Willesee (now Foreign Minister) feared that otherwise the Labor caucus might 'seize the initiative' and press for relations quickly, which would suggest 'Caucus is running foreign policy rather than the Government itself'. Willesee also directed that relations should be established 'even if the price for this would be to open an office with a Chargé in Pyongyang', although Alan Renouf, the new Secretary, had pointed out that the department thought this would be undesirable.¹¹³

Plimsoll, disappointed, said he had hoped that Australia would have delayed establishing relations in order to try further to get Pyongyang's agreement to the admission to the UN of both Koreas 'in accordance with the principle of universality', and because this would give an additional degree of recognition to the international status and de facto

109 Plimsoll's diary references to Waller, 15, 18, 25 August 1972; 22, 28, 29 December 1972 and 4 January 1973, Plimsoll Papers, MS8048/3, NLA, Canberra.

110 *Reminiscent Conversations*, vol. ii, p. 324.

111 Whitlam to Plimsoll, September 1973, letter, Plimsoll Papers, item 8048/16/3, NLA, Canberra.

112 Ministerial Press Release, *Australian Foreign Affairs Record*, vol. 44, no. 9, 1973, p. 622.

113 Renouf and Senator Willesee, 12 January 1974, note, series A1838/2, item 3125/10/1/3, part 2, NAA, Canberra.

boundaries of the two governments 'and would make it clear that an attack of one on the other would be an act of aggression'.¹¹⁴ He gave up on getting approval to visit Seoul on his way to Moscow to discuss the development of relations between Seoul and Moscow. This had been at the invitation of Kim Dong-Jo, his former Republic of Korea colleague in Washington, now Foreign Minister of Korea.¹¹⁵

In a farewell call, Kissinger told him that basically bilateral relations were good. 'We had so many interests in common that it took a great deal of ingenuity on both sides to create trouble between us.' Although the US was 'unhappy' about the Australian approach to North Korea, it was not something that would affect the relationship.¹¹⁶ Plimsoll later recalled Kissinger as 'an able man with a nimble mind, a profound thinker. But quite ruthless and completely cynical'.¹¹⁷

The US was becoming increasingly divided over Watergate. Plimsoll was guest of honour at a dinner in Spokane, Washington. Following the usual toast to the Queen, he responded with a toast to the President of the US. More than half those present refused to drink to the second toast, even though it was to the office, not the incumbent.¹¹⁸

It was ironic for Plimsoll to be moved not only when he was at his peak in Washington but after the considerable help he had rendered the Prime Minister in his role over the meeting with Nixon. Not long before his departure, Plimsoll accompanied the visiting Lance Barnard, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, when the latter called on Kissinger. Kissinger told Barnard: 'You're mad to move Plimsoll. He's got contacts here and great influence, and you're mad to move him.'¹¹⁹ Yet he was moved, as part of 'musical chairs' to facilitate a political appointment elsewhere. Since Plimsoll's time in Washington, most incumbents have served for around three years.

114 Washington to Canberra, 17 January 1974, cablegram no. I.8128, series A1828/2, item 3125/10/1/3, part 2, NAA, Canberra. In fact, things moved slowly. The Australian Chargé did not arrive in Pyongyang until 30 April 1975, more than a year later.

115 Washington to Canberra, 11 December 1973, cablegram no. I.144009, series A1838/2, item 3127/10/1, part 13, NAA, Canberra; Washington to Canberra, 21 December 1973, cablegram no. I.149483, series A1838/2, item 3127/10/1, part 13, NAA, Canberra.

116 Washington to Canberra, cablegram no. I.14594, series A1838/2, item 3125/10/1/3, part 2, NAA, Canberra.

117 *Reminiscent Conversations*, vol. ii, p. 170.

118 *Ibid.*, vol. ii, p. 168.

119 *Ibid.*, vol. ii, p. 325.

At the core of the Australia–US relationship, in Plimsoll’s reckoning, was the ANZUS Treaty, by then more than 20 years old. There were times when Plimsoll felt that through ill-considered actions, its future was uncertain. On return home, in a speech early in 1974 in Melbourne, he said that Australia must ‘hang on’ to the ANZUS Treaty:

Under it the President is able to act to help us without first consulting Congress. That was achieved in a climate that might be impossible to rediscover. ANZUS is like a precious vase, it could be broken into pieces, and it is irreplaceable.¹²⁰

Plimsoll had, through his judicious counsel, unflagging and well-targeted advocacy in Washington, and adroit mediation between American and Australian prima donna leaders, protected the valuables in the relationship during an unprecedented period of turbulence.

120 Plimsoll, speech to AIIA, Melbourne, 25 February 1974. Recorded in diary of Alfred Stirling, 25 February 1974, DFAT, Canberra.

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