Australia’s relationship with India is its oldest continuous formal diplomatic relationship with any Asian country. Diplomatic relations were established in time of war, 1943–44, and before Indian independence, and were accompanied by a mixture of optimism, confusion and mistaken assumptions on both sides. As the first chapter of this book shows, Australia’s first high commissioner, Sir Iven Mackay, struggled to find the right language with which to describe an India on the path towards independence, but hoped that some form of kinship between Australia and India might underpin the re-emergence of the British Commonwealth as a force in world affairs.¹

These early diplomatic exchanges between Australia and India have teased historians for their suggestions of potential unrealised, for opportunities missed, especially when compared with the very recent excitement about the future of Australia–India relations. One of the most eagerly awaited strategic documents mapping Australia’s economic future with India illustrates this point. In mid-2018 Peter Varghese, recently retired secretary of Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and high commissioner to India before that, handed to government his 500-page report, An India Economic Strategy to 2035.² The executive summary points to the 700,000-strong Indian diaspora, the fastest growing diaspora in Australia, as a source of underappreciated people-to-people connections,

¹ See Chapter One.
creating network opportunities in India and also influence in Australia. The summary envisages dramatic increases in Australian exports to India, tripling in value from A$14.9 billion in 2017 to a projected A$45 billion by 2035; and investment rocketing from A$10.3 billion to more than A$100 billion. The sense of untapped opportunity and complementarity between the two countries comes with a feeling that it is time to make up for missed chances.

It was not the case that these opportunities were present in the early days of official relations. As is told in more detail in this collection of essays, the hardening lines of the Cold War quickly began to circumscribe the nature of relations between Australia and India, and the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 dragged attention towards East Asia. But even a history of Australia and India from the inception of the Cold War to the early 1990s—which this volume is not—would still invite investigation of such aspects as trade, investment, education, tourism and cultural exchanges, and also the question of the extent to which Australian–Indian relations escaped the bipolarity of the Cold War.

Interpreting the breadth of official ‘relations’ between two countries such as Australia and India invites both well-known and alternative forms of historical interpretation. Adding a special focus on the Australian High Commission in New Delhi is also best served by diversity in interpretive approach. Histories of diplomatic representation have enjoyed a resurgence in recent years, spurred by cultural and social perspectives being brought to bear, including innovative methodologies borrowed from disciplines such as anthropology and geography. They have also benefited from a constructive tension between the necessarily state-based starting point for considering diplomacy and the trend towards decentring the state and enabling diplomats forms of agency and representation beyond the status of mere ciphers and reporters for their governments. The new journal, Diplomatica, launched in 2019, is a testament to the renewed historical energy around diplomacy. The journal’s subtitle, ‘A Journal of Diplomacy and Society’, also reflects the high level of interest in the official world, gaining social and cultural lenses of interpretation, of the public meeting the private in the hands of historians.

How these methodological shifts might yield interpretive riches in the case of Australian diplomats overseas is a question that will continue to be answered in coming years. In the chapters that follow here, a concern with establishing missing parts of the story of Australian diplomatic representation in India, drawing primarily on government records, meets the ‘new diplomatic history’ in ways that are suggestive for future work. These essays derive, in part, from two conferences held in 2016 on the work of Australia’s diplomatic representatives in New Delhi, one held at the high commission itself and another at Deakin University. As such, they include not only historians’ views of aspects of the bilateral relationship, but also the perspectives of ‘practitioners’, those who served at the post in New Delhi, including locally engaged staff members.

The State and the Diplomat

Diplomats across the world enjoyed greater standing than in recent times in the period prior to the Second World War. Indeed, their reputation suffered afterwards for being unable to prevent it. Historians of diplomacy tend to see the war years as marking the rise of political leaders in diplomacy, aided by the growth of executive level summity. In establishing formal diplomatic relations and representation during 1943–44, during the rise of wartime summits, Australian and Indian governments acted at a time of some questions around the future of professional diplomats. But both nations attached considerable importance to a robust diplomatic service as they sought a stronger diplomatic presence in the postwar world. From an Indian perspective, the developments of 1943–44 constituted a pre-independence marker of state agency in international relations. The core argument of Srinath Raghavan’s study of India’s Second World War is that the conflict spurred the institutional and practical foundations of the modern Indian nation-state more than the subsequent actions around independence. Australian historians such as Stuart Macintyre and David

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Lee have similarly pointed to the crucial role of the war in the centralising of Canberra’s power with respect to citizenry and the powers of the states and territories.7

When Indian independence was declared in August 1947, the new government embarked on the rapid building of a diplomatic service consistent with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s vision of a strong international identity. This growth of the Indian foreign service unfolded roughly in parallel with the professionalisation and expansion of the young Australian diplomatic service. Indeed, the management of relations between the two countries demonstrates the development of Australian diplomacy, from amateur appointments much influenced by British styles8 to strong appointments of some of the most senior officers of the Australian service. If developing in parallel, it is harder to make the case that there was equal weight in how the two diplomatic services regarded each other. Simply put, for long stretches of time, the governments of the two countries proved unwilling or unable to elevate the relationship beyond second billing status.

The high quality of Australian appointments to New Delhi reflected a recurrent wish by Canberra for greater substance between the two countries, but underlying differences made this difficult. Until recent years, the relationship went through bouts of enthusiasm followed by long periods when there was little substance in each country’s dealings with the other.9 In the early years of the relationship, under the Chifley Labor Government in Australia, there were expectations that substance would be found in a common internationalism. These hopes proved overblown, partly because Australia’s white-only immigration policy presented an affront to Indian opinion.10 Trade relations, having grown selectively

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8 Even as late as 1973, the Australian high commissioner to India possessed a British diplomatic uniform with a plumed hat, gold braided jerkin and an accompanying sword. He did not, however, use this in New Delhi where there were no opportunities for such imperial grandeur. Instead it was used in Kathmandu at the annual levee held by the King. (Author’s personal knowledge.)
with British India, then stuttered under the strictures of India's planned economy from the 1950s onwards. Above all, the two governments had fundamentally different views of the world. Australia was aligned with the United States, formally through the ANZUS Treaty (Australia, New Zealand and United States) from 1951. India, by contrast, was famously non-aligned, pursuing an independent foreign policy in the context of the Cold War. The sense of divergence took other forms, too. From 1974 onwards, when India tested its first thermonuclear device in the Thar Desert, the two countries had radically different views on nuclear disarmament.

Nonetheless, as the essays here show, there were regular attempts by Australia to add substance to the relationship. For instance, Iven Mackay suggested a student exchange. Under his successor, Roy Gollan, Australia participated in an important conference in New Delhi on Indonesia's struggle for independence. An Australian, Sir Owen Dixon, was appointed by the United Nations to mediate in the Kashmir dispute; his attempts to find a solution failed. Prime Minister Robert Menzies remained interested in Kashmir and tried to use the Commonwealth of Nations connection to bring the parties together, again without success. During the 1950s, High Commissioner Walter Crocker argued the case—unsuccessfully—for ameliorating the ill will generated in Asia by the White Australia policy through introducing a quota for Indian immigrants. The India–China War in 1962 brought hope that India would become more sympathetic to the West’s anti-communism. The Australian Government was supportive of India's position in the Bangladesh crisis of 1971, and Australian aid and early recognition of Bangladesh brought much goodwill in India. And Rajiv Gandhi and Bob Hawke established a genuine rapport, but were unable to turn this into breakthroughs on economic or political cooperation.

The creation of the Australia–India Business Council in 1985 was the start of a renewed emphasis on providing alternative forums for interaction. The gradual economic liberalisation of India from 1991 under then finance minister Manmohan Singh made it possible for trade to grow. Above all, it was the end of the Cold War and India's engagement with Asia to its east, the area of Australian strategic interest, that allowed both countries to find common ground. The end of the stand-off between the two on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty was critical. When the Gillard Government agreed to supply India with uranium, this removed a block to dialogue. In addition, the age of terrorism has provided opportunities
for intelligence sharing to mutual benefit. Major Indian immigration to Australia has, moreover, provided the bedrock for the people-to-people dimension to the relationship that continues to grow stronger.\textsuperscript{11}

**The People of the High Commission**

What makes a good high commissioner to India? Beyond tact and managing personal relationships, the more generic qualities hoped for in senior diplomatic representatives were summarised by Joan Beaumont in her analysis of Australian diplomats serving overseas up to 1969 as:

- integrity, intelligence, negotiating skills. The ability to win the trust of foreign governments and leaders in the wider community,
- sociability, cultural sensitivity, a willingness to acquire an understanding of the political and historical background of other countries, and of course, diplomacy itself.\textsuperscript{12}

Whether one might profitably search for an ‘Australian style’ in distinctive diplomatic behaviour will always be contentious. In their 2003 study of the making of Australian foreign policy, Allan Gyngell and Michael Wesley concluded that, for all the advances in communications, the performance of Australian diplomats overseas still turned on their skills relating to information gathering, reporting and advocacy. Gyngell and Wesley attempted, through surveys, to dig a little deeper and found that Australian diplomats liked to claim an Australian style of diplomacy. This, they argued, was characterised by behaviour that was direct, energetic, imaginative, informal and well prepared.\textsuperscript{13}

Alan Renouf, former secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs (1974–76), argued in his memoirs that Australia rarely obtained the best value from its diplomats posted abroad.\textsuperscript{14} The diplomat abroad was not encouraged to make ‘a personal and intellectual contribution to foreign policy’. The creation of Australian foreign policy has largely been the


\textsuperscript{13} Allan Gyngell and Michael Wesley, *Making Australian Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 126–31, doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511755873.

preserve of prime ministers. A forceful foreign minister such as Percy Spender or Gareth Evans could overturn this maxim, but heads of mission overseas, until very recently, have had little influence on key parts of policy towards their country of posting. Indeed, Crocker thought he had been naïve to think he could shape policy.

Elsewhere, the characteristics of the ‘ideal’ Australian ambassador were considered in a recent history of Australia’s representation in the United States. Some of those commenting included former ambassadors who pointed to qualities such as the need to be able to manage a large, multi-focused staff, a capacity to weather a high flow of important visitors and a whirl of diplomatic–social events, and enough energy to ensure that they saw different parts of the big country and spoke to key stakeholders in their geographic homes. Given the size and diversity of India, perhaps the qualities of coping with scale, being prepared to travel beyond the capital, and maintaining different relationships have the strongest resonance with a posting to New Delhi.

In the case of the High Commission in New Delhi, one high commissioner who stands out is Walter Crocker. His two postings to New Delhi, 1952–55 and 1958–62, gave him a ringside seat and high standing in Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s India. Even his posting in between these two tenures seemed to shed light on India. Crocker spent the mid-1950s in Indonesia, arriving there in time for the famous Bandung conference of 1955, where Afro-Asian solidarity and non-alignment took shape, partly through the efforts of Nehru. An intellectual and avid note-taker and diarist, Crocker published a much-admired essay on Nehru that has stood the test of time. In addition, his journals, diaries and memorabilia open the door to different perspectives of the Australian high commission, enabling us glimpses of the Crockers’ lives among others of the diplomatic set. Walter Crocker appears prominently in two of the following chapters.

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18 See Chapters Three and Eleven.
For the most part, this volume considers the work of high commissioners thematically and chronologically rather than allocating discrete chapters to each commissioner. The exceptions, in addition to the attention owed to Crocker, are James Plimsoll and Arthur Tange, as a case study chapter of two of the best known of Australia’s public servant mandarins in India; and the tenure of Graham Feakes who, in serving a double term of six years from 1984, was the longest continuously serving high commissioner.

The high commission was always more than its resident high commissioner. The Australian high commission buildings warrant attention for the symbolic significance of their architecture, for their local geography and for the social dimensions of diplomacy they enabled. Picking up on some of the themes made more visible through Crocker’s copious writings, we offer thoughts on the significance of the buildings comprising of the Chancery and High Commissioner’s Residence. This focus has two aims. The first is to gain an understanding of the symbolic significance of the Joseph Stein–designed buildings in the context of postcolonial India and the making of ‘official’ New Delhi. The site has a distinctive provenance and standing among other posts that has endured over time, even though one of the two Stein buildings was destroyed. The second and related aim is to widen the lens from high commissioners and senior advisers to consider the locally engaged, mostly Indian, staff who have worked
with them. A good number of the locally engaged staff have worked at the high commission for many years, in contrast to Australian-based staff appointed for around three years. This makes the locally engaged staff the more enduring human components in the high commission’s work.

**Structure of This Book**

The chapters that follow are organised chronologically in the main, allowing also for thematic dives where needed. Chapter One, by Eric Meadows, discusses the surprising beginnings to the relationship, before India’s independence and at the initiative of the British Government. Mackay’s job was to set up the mission and ‘make Australia known’ in India. Neither task proved easy in the midst of war and with the political uncertainties that led to Partition. He had almost no diplomatic colleagues with whom to discuss issues; the relationship with Australia was India’s first at ambassadorial level. That, of course, was an issue that had to be sorted out during Mackay’s time: what was the status of a ‘high commissioner’ and to which Indian ministry should he be accredited?

Some of Australia’s most significant early diplomatic activity in New Delhi unfolded in exploratory ways, with blurred lines between official and unofficial, between public and private, as Julie Suares demonstrates in Chapter Two. New Delhi was the location for two major international conferences; the first on Asian relations in 1947; and the second on Indonesia in 1949. Australian attendance at the first was unofficial—the Australian Institute of International Affairs and the Australian Institute of Political Science sent representatives. But the high commission provided valuable support. At the second, official Australian representatives tested how the ‘old’ Commonwealth could work with the ‘new’ Asian members, and moved between official settings and the home of Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in their negotiations. As Suares shows, these two conferences were important sources of information about decolonisation in Asia more generally, and they highlighted issues that Australian governments wrestled with throughout the fifties and sixties: sensitivity to Australia’s domestic population policy and how it would be read in Asia; and the balance between Australia’s Western alliance, geographic location and wish to have sustainable relations with an emerging Asia.
While Mackay’s appointment was successful within the limitations of the times, his successor Roy Gollan was less suited to the circumstances of post-independence New Delhi and to Australia’s need for a close analysis of India’s developing foreign policy. Walter Crocker, on the other hand, as Eric Meadows discusses in Chapter Three, was unusually well-matched for his tasks. Chief among these was to observe and report on Nehru, something Crocker did in detail and with great insight. Crocker was fortunate to share an Oxbridge educational background with key members of the Indian bureaucracy, which facilitated access to a group of decision-makers that was still small enough, in the 1950s, for intimacy. But while Crocker personally could represent the best of an intelligent Australian view of current issues, his time in office showed the limitations of a diplomat’s role when a home government had a world view different from that of the host. Meadows finds that while Crocker was forceful in arguing for reforms such as modifications to Australia’s restrictive immigration policy and Australian participation in the Bandung conference in 1955, he enjoyed little support in Canberra. While Prime Minister Robert Menzies and External Affairs Minister Richard Casey thought differently from each other about India, neither prioritised it ahead of Cold War alliance diplomacy.

In Chapter Four, Peter Edwards considers the period 1963–69, during which two of Australia’s senior diplomat mandarins, Sir James Plimsoll and Sir Arthur Tange, served in New Delhi. Both were consummate professionals looking to add greater substance to the Australia–India relationship. Edwards finds that, for a short time in the wake of Plimsoll’s arrival in 1963, it looked as if conditions were more favourable for the relationship, with the Indian Government reeling from its bloodied nose in the border war with China. But this moment passed, and the Australian Government’s attention shifted rapidly to escalating crises in Indonesia and Vietnam. Thereafter, Tange in particular observed firsthand what he had long argued: that the White Australia policy was having a disproportionate impact on Australian relations with countries such as India. Tange was, nevertheless, able to instigate greater high commission reporting on Indian politics in the Lok Sabha and take some early steps towards defence cooperation.

Chapter Five, by David Lowe, focuses on the staff of Australia’s high commission and the building they inhabited. The first section of his chapter explores the symbolic significance of the Australian Chancery and Residence buildings by American-born architect Joseph Allen Stein, which
opened in 1966 while Tange was high commissioner. Lowe shows that as Stein became famous for his many public buildings in post-independence New Delhi, the Australian site became part of a revered architectural history wherein the environment, modernism and internationalism mixed with local style. The site would remain a talking point, including when the chancery was pulled down in 2004 to make way for a bigger building. Drawing on interviews, the second part of the chapter explores the experiences of locally engaged staff, a large part of embassy communities that are often overlooked. Lowe finds that locally engaged staff can be important bridges between Australian ‘national interests’, which they tend to at least partly absorb, and the Indian political and business worlds. They offer insights into how boundaries are drawn between Australian-based and local staff, and the circumstances in which these boundaries can be relaxed.

In Chapter Six, Ric Smith, a junior diplomat in New Delhi from 1970 to 1973 working under the direction of High Commissioner Patrick Shaw, recalls the difficult birth of Bangladesh in 1971. This account of the crisis is written from observation, memories and conversations with others, as well as archival documents. Smith exposes the different positions taken by Shaw in New Delhi and Australia’s High Commissioner in Islamabad, Francis Stuart. During the crisis, the Australian Government acted out of step with its traditional allies, in particular the United States. It took a different view of the causes of the crisis and, moreover, was openly sympathetic to India’s difficulties in coping with a vast influx of refugees. Smith finds that Australia’s early recognition of Bangladesh earned it much goodwill in New Delhi.

David Lee explores a period during which both Australia and India aspired to a new middle power status. He shows that the route each government took to thinking of itself in middle power terms was different. Lee’s Chapter Seven covers the terms of four high commissioners in this ‘middle power phase’ between 1972 and 1983—Patrick Shaw, Bruce Grant, Peter Curtis and Gordon Upton. He finds serious attempts and some incremental gains, during both the Whitlam and Fraser prime ministries, towards something that might be described as closer relations between Australia and India. But such initiatives could easily be derailed. Australia’s negative reaction to India’s testing of a nuclear device in 1974 did not help create closer relations. At the end of the decade, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan prompted a tough response from Fraser that did not align well with Indian foreign policy.
Writing for Australian Foreign Minister Bill Hayden in 1984, Graham Feakes in the Department of Foreign Affairs identified a sense of ‘drift’ in Australian–Indian relations. Thereafter, Feakes spent two terms in New Delhi from 1984 to 1990 trying to arrest the drift. Meg Gurry examines the Feakes years in Chapter Eight, uncovering rich detail about his dedication to bettering relations. During the Feakes period, a warm relationship sprung up between prime ministers Bob Hawke and Rajiv Gandhi, and a joint Australia–India coal mining venture in Bihar augured well. As had happened previously, however, residual scepticism inside the public service bureaucracies of both countries did not match the enthusiasm of India’s and Australia’s leaders. Then a contretemps, this time the sale of Australian fighter jets to Pakistan, quashed Feakes’s hopes for a new dawn in the Australia–India relationship.

The creation of Bangladesh out of the former East Pakistan had shifted the balance of power on the subcontinent very clearly in India’s favour. It also prompted Canberra to discard the previous policy of treating Pakistan and India as of equal importance. But very little was done afterwards to give practical weight to India’s importance. Up to the end of the 1980s, the Department of Foreign Affairs did not have a senior advocate for relations with India nor did it have a section solely focused on India. Trade was in the ‘too hard’ basket. It was easier for Australian exporters to look elsewhere. Chapter Nine, the second in this book written by practitioners involved at the time, shows how this began to change with educational exports after India began to open its economy in 1991. Michael Moignard and Quentin Stevenson-Perks recall how the student flows met a huge unmet demand for information about Australia in India. Their chapter concentrates on the period from 1998 onwards when the two-way trade began to increase markedly. Large numbers of Indian students studying in Australia led to greatly increased tourism and immigration. More than this, two-way trade in commodities also grew. Moignard and Stevenson-Perks take this story of growing engagement further, showing how greater trade and migration brought mutual benefits and provided an underpinning to a relationship that had not been present before. Political and strategic collaboration would wait until after 9/11 and the rise of terrorism.

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One of the most significant developments in the twenty-first century has been the rise of defence and strategic cooperation in the Australia–India relationship. Ian Hall analyses this in Chapter Ten, noting the importance of Australian Prime Minister John Howard’s visit to New Delhi in 2006, and the eventual easing of tensions through Howard’s resuming the sale of uranium to India. At the same time, Australian educators and business leaders increasingly beat a path to India where economic growth signalled greater opportunities. As Hall shows, the burgeoning defence ties survived some wobbling by the government of Kevin Rudd on the Quadrilateral Security Dialogues (Japan, Australian, India, United States), and re-emerged most strongly in the ‘Indo-Pacific’ language of two Australian White Papers in 2012–13, and in joint defence exercises in 2018–19. Concern for the rise of China played a powerful role in driving some of these developments but, as Hall argues, differences between the two governments’ respective policies towards China has also made them wary of each other.

Two Australian high commissioners wrote of their times in India in ways that gave them enduring standing as commentators of influence. Crocker wrote several books about his distinguished service as a head of mission, but none is better than his study of Nehru, which David Lowe discusses, alongside Bruce Grant’s depiction of Indira Gandhi, in Chapter Eleven. Crocker’s book on Nehru is still regarded as an insightful account of Nehru as prime minister and was reprinted in 2008. Crocker saw himself as a scholar diplomat, a persona that some of his colleagues derided.20 His reputation as a deep contemporary thinker on international relations persists, and his work on Nehru is seen in this context. Bruce Grant, on the other hand, was a distinguished journalist and novelist before his one appointment as a head of mission—New Delhi, 1973–76. His account of his time in India remains arguably the best Australian diplomatic memoir, and thus forms the second part of Chapter Seven. His focus was on India itself and Indira Gandhi as leader. Grant brought to his dispatches and to his memoir, Gods and Politicians,21 a novelist’s gift for language and an

20 For instance, the British view was that Crocker was a ‘bit of an academic’ whose disillusion with India would have been more tempered if he had wider regional contacts. ‘He wants to warn his compatriots not to take Indian pretensions at face value. This lesson is not needed by Menzies.’ Letter, Gore-Booth to Garner, 19 February 1962, The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA): DO 196/211.

21 Bruce Grant, Gods and Politicians: Politics as Culture—an Australian View of India (Sydney: Allen Lane Australia, 1982).
eye for exotic Asian backdrops. Both he and Crocker, in different ways, brought India to life for Australians through compelling pen portraits of Nehru and his daughter Indira.

The book ends with some broad-ranging reflections from Peter Varghese. As high commissioner from August 2009 to December 2012, and then secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs until his retirement in July 2016, he is uniquely qualified for this task. In his reflections he notes key changes by Indian and Australian governments that have enabled their relations to strengthen and become more multidimensional. These include the opening up of the Indian economy from the 1990s, the increasing focus of Australian governments on the story of Asia’s growth, and the rising numbers of the Indian diaspora in Australia. In a point that goes to the heart of this book, Varghese recalled how he sought to have the high commission drive the burgeoning relationship with India. In doing so, he was conscious of the limited ‘bandwidth’ available in a Canberra department experiencing significant resource pressures.

High Commissioners to India: 1990–2020

There have been, to date, 22 Australian high commissioners to India (not including the acting role of Charles Kevin in 1948). The availability of government archives enables us to cover those serving up to 1990 in some detail in this book. Other, later, holders of the office are not considered in the same depth, but it is important to recognise them briefly here. David Evans who had been ambassador to Russia and then high commissioner in Malaysia served in New Delhi from 1990 to 1993, in a time of considerable political and economic instability in India with two short-term administrations. The Janata Dal (Socialist) administration of Chandra Shekhar could not pass its budget and was replaced by the reforming administration of P.V. Narasimha Rao from March 1991 until 1996. After the growing chaos of the late 1980s and at the insistence of the International Monetary Fund, Rao with his finance minister began a period of major economic liberalisation. Evans’s time in India coincided with the ‘Look East’ policy, under which India consciously began to develop its much neglected relations with South-East Asia. The Australia–India Council was established in 1992 to foster cultural connections between the two countries.
Against this background of India opening to freer trade and showing interest in Australia’s prime area of strategic interest, the appointment of the first high commissioner from the Trade side of the portfolio was significant. Darren Gribble had been ambassador in South Korea before his appointment to India and had presided over an expansion of trade with that country. Gribble served in New Delhi from 1994 to 1997. He emphasised the importance of public diplomacy to increase awareness of Australia in India. The New Horizons program from 1996 showcased Australia as an exporter of services. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) had published its important report, India’s Economy at the Midnight Hour, which flagged to business how important India’s economic future was to the Australian Government.

Rob Laurie’s term as high commissioner (1997–2001) was overshadowed by the Pokhran nuclear tests in 1998. Australia’s reaction to this put a severe dampener on the relationship. Laurie had served in India as deputy high commissioner from 1969 to 1971 including several months as acting high commissioner. He had been high commissioner to New Zealand and to Canada among other posts. During his tenure, the visit of President Clinton to India led to a thaw in relations between India and the United States.

Penny Wensley, who followed Rob Laurie, was the first woman to head the high commission, serving from 2001 to 2004. She came to the post from her role as Australian permanent representative to the United Nations in New York, senior roles in DFAT in Canberra and a posting as ambassador for the environment. Her period in India coincided with increased communal violence including the massacre of Muslims in Gujarat State, which was led at the time by Narendra Modi.

Two of Australia’s most senior diplomats then followed. John McCarthy was high commissioner from 2004 to 2009, having been head of mission in six other posts, including the United States, Indonesia and, most immediately, Japan. He assisted Prime Minister Howard during his three-day visit to India in 2006. McCarthy encouraged Howard towards flexibility on the issue of the ban on uranium exports to India, which had become a major sticking point in relations. McCarthy recalled long conversations with Howard on the issue, with the prime minister reasoning that if the Australian public accepted the sale of uranium to

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22 See Chapter Nine.
China, then they should be able to contemplate its sale to India.\textsuperscript{23} The uranium ban was lifted soon afterwards, and other Australian exports such as coal, gold and iron ore increased during this period. By this time, the size of the Indian diaspora in Australia was also becoming a subject of considerable importance in Canberra and New Delhi. McCarthy managed the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in November 2008 that killed two Australians.

One of the biggest developments of this period was the increased flow of Indian students to Australia, as is described in Chapter Nine. While this was generally welcomed, McCarthy grew nervous about the nexus between education and permanent residency applications, and about differences in regulatory standards for education providers in the different Australian states. The latter part of his term coincided with the crisis in relations sparked by violence against Indian students in Australia in May 2009.\textsuperscript{24} His successor, Peter Varghese, continued to manage the situation with various forms of public diplomacy. Varghese had previously been senior adviser to the prime minister, high commissioner to Malaysia and most recently director-general of the Office of National Assessments, 2004–09. His term in New Delhi, from August 2009 to December 2012, was marked by increased delegation visits by Australian politicians and university and business leaders. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd visited in November 2009 to sign a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation with India; and his successor Julia Gillard visited in October 2012, at which time the two governments agreed to hold annual prime ministerial meetings.

Patrick Suckling followed Varghese in New Delhi from 2012 to the start of 2016. Suckling had previously headed the International Division of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and served in New Delhi in the late 1990s. Prior to his appointment he had been head of DFAT’s Consular, Public Diplomacy and Parliamentary Affairs Division. Prime Minister Tony Abbott was the first foreign head of government to travel to India to meet India’s new prime minister, Narendra Modi. Abbott’s visit came in September 2014, four months after Modi’s electoral victory. There followed further negotiations towards a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement and the strengthening of defence and anti-terrorist cooperation.

\textsuperscript{23} John McCarthy interviewed by David Lowe, 8 May 2017, National Library of Australia (NLA): ORAL TRC 6870/1.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
From the beginning of 2016 to early 2020 Harinder Sidhu was high commissioner. Born in Singapore to Indian parents, she brought linguistic capability (Hindi and Punjabi being two of her seven languages other than English) and policymaking experience acquired from time spent in the departments of Prime Minister and Cabinet and Climate Change, and in the Office of National Assessments. Prior to serving in New Delhi, she was head of DFAT’s Multilateral Policy Division. Sidhu was involved in encouraging India’s signing up to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, a goal that proved elusive. But during her time, a new consulate-general was opened in Kolkata and the commissioned report by Peter Varghese, *An India Economic Strategy to 2035*, published in mid-2018, reflected the Australian Government’s determination to further strengthen the relationship through initiatives in business, investment, education, resources, agribusiness, tourism, energy, health, infrastructure and science sectors. Sidhu departed in the wake of India’s general election that saw Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party returned with an increased majority.

The most recently appointed high commissioner, Barry O’Farrell, has been in situ since May 2020, a year in which the COVID-19 pandemic has retarded significant developments in the relationship. While the pandemic was an unforeseen disaster of global impact, it was hardly the first setback in Australia–India relations. Indeed, the ease with which relations have been set back after promising starts has been a recurring theme since the 1940s when official diplomatic relations began. An Australian parliamentary standing committee heard in 2009 of the need for Australia to work hard to gain India’s attention, to keep Australia ‘on India’s “radar screen”’. Since 2009, shared Australian–Indian anxiety about the rise of China might have aided in keeping Australia on India’s radar screen; and Prime Minister Modi, visiting Australia in 2015, spoke of Australia as a partner in helping to secure India’s progress and prosperity.

The important *India Economic Strategy to 2035* report begins with the

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27 Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, *Australia’s Relationship with India as an Emerging World Power* (Canberra: The Committee, 2009), 5.
comment: ‘Timing has always been a challenge in Australia’s relationship with India’. As the Australian Government works to implement some of the ambitious recommendations in the report, this book adds to our understanding of why timing has been a challenge, and how those at the coalface of the relationship have grappled with it.

29 Varghese, An India Economic Strategy to 2035.
This text is taken from *Rising Power and Changing People: The Australian High Commission in India*, edited by David Lowe and Eric Meadows, published 2022, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.