

Preface

The period between 1999 and 2003 proved to be quite an interesting period in modern Myanmar history, because it provided unusual insights into the political and other forces that propelled Myanmar on its pathway towards a transition to democracy. My assignment as Australian Ambassador from 2000 to mid-2003 enabled me to obtain some unique perspectives on current developments in Myanmar, which I was able to refine and extend over the next 10 years or so, after my 'early' retirement from the Australian foreign service and while a Visiting Fellow on Myanmar at The Australian National University (2003–2015).

Why was this period especially interesting or illuminating? Why is it still worth recording in some form some time later? One obvious answer is that some of the specific origins of Myanmar's current transition trace their start and many of their enduring characteristics to this period, which made this an unusually good opportunity — in terms of openness, access to people and places, and availability of data — to document these early encounters with reform. The second answer is that for those participating directly in attempts to transform and improve Myanmar — Myanmar people and foreigners alike — this period was an experimental laboratory. Some initiatives tried at this time worked and were perpetuated; some did not work and were modified or dropped.

My experience is not unique: some of my Australian colleagues shared similar experiences; some of my foreign colleagues also shared similar experiences. But much of this background is not well known, has not been widely or accurately reported, and is already being forgotten.

I was fortunate in several ways, mostly not of my own making: Australian policy towards Myanmar at this time — under Foreign Minister Alexander Downer in the Coalition Government of John Howard — was somewhat innovative; and I met many Australians working in and with Myanmar, some of whom had been doing so intelligently and empathetically for many years. I was also able to travel widely inside Myanmar and met many Myanmar people deeply committed to making their country a much better place. Most of these people remain good friends to this day.

I dedicate this book to those Myanmar people.

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