

Standing to

In the year that we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the signing of the ANZUS Treaty, a recent visit to the Australian Parliament by a delegation from the United States Congress has helped to reaffirm the strong ties between our two countries. In this exclusive interview with the leader of the US delegation, Henry Hyde, journalist Peter Cotton reports on why the Australia-US relationship remains important in Washington.

According to influential US Congressman Henry Hyde, very few things in this world are perfect, but America's relationship with Australia comes pretty close.

Mr Hyde, who is Chairman of the US House of Representatives International Relations Committee, goes further: "If our relationships with the rest of the world were as strong and as satisfactory as our relationship with Australia, we would be in Utopia."

"It's wonderful and reassuring that Australia has chosen to stand with the US almost alone."

And the reason for the closeness? Hyde puts it down to mutual respect, even affection, which he says flow from a common ancestry.

In recent times, Australia's closeness to the US has seen it support the superpower when most of the rest of the world stood in opposition to its position on the Kyoto protocols on climate change, and its decision to develop a system for countering a nuclear missile attack, dubbed Star Wars II.

Henry Hyde is thankful for Australia's support on these issues: "It's wonderful and reassuring that Australia has chosen to stand with the US almost alone," he says. "To be isolated on these controversial issues is not pleasant, but Australia is a firm pillar. As we stand together, we can reinforce each other and that's very helpful."

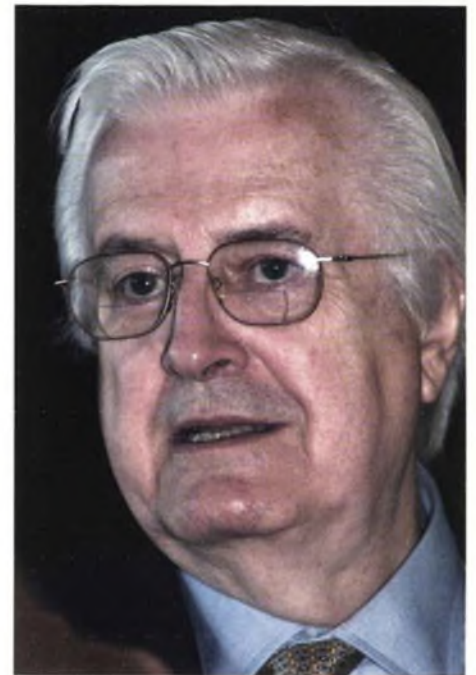
Henry Hyde says ANZUS remains critical to the Australia-US relationship and he deeply regrets New Zealand's decision to drop out of the military alliance.

"[New Zealand] ought to pull its weight and not assume it'll be protected by geography or other countries," says Mr Hyde. "All of us owe a debt to keep the world safe. The development of weapons of mass destruction makes another world war unthinkable, but there's some crazy people out there who are acquiring the ability to deploy weapons of mass destruction. I don't think any country can just opt out of that concern."

While Mr Hyde concedes that there are some areas of friction in the Australia-US relationship, especially trade issues, he says they're not insuperable.

"We've got some minor problems on lamb tariffs," he says. "The WTO has made its ruling, and it's nothing that can't be worked out by people of goodwill."

Mr Hyde last month led a delegation from the US Congress on a four-day tour of Australia.



Henry Hyde, Chairman of the US House of Representatives International Relations Committee. Photo: AUSPIC

During stopovers in Sydney and Canberra, he and his six-member delegation met with a range of Australian political leaders, including Prime Minister John Howard, Opposition Leader Kim Beazley, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, Shadow Foreign Minister Laurie Brereton, the Speaker of the House of Representatives Neil Andrew and Senate President Margaret Reid.

Mr Hyde says that while there was no formal agenda in his delegation's meetings with the Australian leaders, the contact helped foster strong personal bonds between the Australians and Americans.

"These are people who I now feel closer to and I'd now not hesitate to call them up on the phone if I had a question or a problem," he says. "That's one of the many advantages of one-on-one, face-to-face meetings."

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Henry Hyde says that if legislators have an open mind, and want to learn something, travel is an invaluable aid to their decision-making.

“There’s more to foreign policy than reading newspapers.”

“In my first year in the Congress, 27 years ago, I took a trip to Africa,” he says. “The Peace Corps was just getting started and I was not too supportive of the Peace Corps. But in Africa I saw them teaching people how to dig wells, and giving other simple, but critical assistance. That trip gave me a brand new appreciation of the Peace Corps.”

“There’s more to foreign policy than reading newspapers and I never fail to learn something when I travel. It’s essential if you’re to be informed.”

Given the success of the Hyde delegation’s visit to Australia, why is it that so few Members of the US Congress make the trip Down Under?

Henry Hyde points to what he calls Congress’ fixation with Europe – Members of Congress regularly travel to Europe to participate in the meetings of a range of world organisations.

Then there’s the fact that Australia is a long way from Washington. “It’s two ten-hour flights, with a stopover,” says Mr Hyde. “So that might be a bit off-putting.”

“However, so many Members of Congress wanted to come on this trip to Australia that we had to turn some of them down. I think you’ll now see more coming down here, despite the distance.”

Henry Hyde is a combat veteran of World War II, having served with the US Naval Reserve in the South Pacific, New Guinea and the Philippines.

He was elected to the US Congress in 1974 and has held a number of senior positions in Congress and in the Republican Party.

In 1998-99, he was the chief manager of the impeachment of President Bill Clinton in the House, and in the Senate trial that followed.

Like voters in other parts of the world, Mr Hyde says Americans have become cynical about politics and politicians in recent years.

He says that while political leaders have a role in countering this cynicism, it’s also up to every individual to become better acquainted with their political system.

“People get complacent,” says Henry Hyde. “They enjoy freedom, but they forget how painful it was to acquire that freedom and how fragile that freedom is.”

“We paid a price for representative democracy and we have to continue to remind young and old people that they have responsibilities as well as rights. That takes leadership and that’s perhaps a neglected function of politics that we ought to revitalise.”

“We paid a price for representative democracy.”

Mr Hyde says politicians can help counter voter cynicism by encouraging voters to take a role in policy formation. “It’s their world, it’s their peace and it’s their prosperity,” he says, “and they have earned the right to have a say in it. They’re very foolish if they don’t avail themselves of that opportunity, either through their representatives or by running for office themselves.”

The visit to Australia by the delegation from the US Congress was coordinated by the Parliamentary Relations Office of the Australian Parliament. Peter Cotton is a freelance journalist from Canberra. Illustration: Pat Campbell