

Australia India Leadership Dialogue 2016

On 4 December 2016, cabinet ministers, senior bureaucrats, members of Parliament, business leaders, distinguished academics and leading journalists from both Australia and India came together in Melbourne, Australia, for the second annual Australia India Leadership Dialogue. Building on the successful discussions of the inaugural dialogue the previous year, the event examined the prospects for the Australia-India relationship, and how it could be strengthened.

The dialogue covered issues ranging from domestic politics to trade, services, education and the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific.

The event was opened by the AII's director and CEO, Professor Craig Jeffrey, who highlighted the need to bring businesspeople, political leaders and intellectuals together to further engagement between Australia and India. He emphasised that this was a *dialogue*, where the purpose was not to debate or make accusations, but to let one's guard down, to recognise doubts and points of difference, and to use those as a basis to move forward onto something new.

Business between the two countries was a key topic. Ms Shobana Kamineni, president designate of the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and executive vice chairperson of Apollo Hospitals Enterprise Limited (AHEL), began by highlighting an imbalance in investment. Indian businesses have invested more than \$10 billion in Australia, which, by contrast, has only \$850 million in direct investment in India. She said this represented substantial unmet potential. India's increasingly open economy and framework of competitive federalism were generating a spirit of excitement about the country, which continued to improve in rankings on ease of doing business. India was growing in sectors where Australia had great expertise. Indian tourists were also a growing market for Australia, and were spending substantially more than in the past – another great opportunity. Ms Kamineni also said as India grew, environmental issues remained a major and growing challenge – another possible area where Australia could offer expertise.

The Australia India Leadership Dialogue was pleased to have Australia's former trade and investment minister, Andrew Robb, AO, speak at a lunchtime session. Mr Robb, who had met with India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, when negotiations for an Australia-India Comprehensive Economic Agreement began, said Mr Modi had always had a strong idea of what he wanted from Australia.

"Modi was clear. He wanted access to Australian services. He saw a great opportunity for the Australian service sector to work more closely in building India's health, education, tourism and agriculture services."

While the Australia-India trade relationship hadn't taken off in the way most had hoped, Robb argued that India was still a place for Australia to invest in.

"There is a momentum about what is happening, China and India are heading back to where they were for 18 of the last 20 centuries ... By the end of this century, China and India will share global power with the United States," he said.

"We are not big enough to swamp India; we are big enough to complement India. Let's do investment, let's do services, and we can share the benefits."

The prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, delivered the dialogue's keynote address in which he emphasised the need for a broad commitment for the Australia-India relationship to succeed.



The Hon Malcolm Turnbull, Prime Minister of Australia at the 2016 Australia India Leadership Dialogue

“Our governments are committed; Prime Minister Modi and I are committed. But we need your help to seize the agenda and lead the efforts of government,” Mr Turnbull said.

Discussions on the topic of water security highlighted that in an increasingly water-starved world water and food security are crucial. Seventy per cent of the world’s water resources are used in agriculture. India has the largest area of irrigated agricultural land in the world. Participants spoke of India’s need for modern, automated irrigation and how Australia might help. Australian experience had shown that automated irrigation could double the agricultural output from a given amount of water.

The dialogue welcomed Simon Birmingham, minister for education and training, who spoke at the event’s closing dinner at the iconic Melbourne Cricket Ground.

Mr Birmingham emphasised the importance of human ties when discussing relations between nations. While economic statistics were important, relations between nations were best built by facilitating human ties. Education was of crucial importance here. Through education Australia could deepen ties across the world and throughout the region.

Success here, he said, would depend upon Australia’s capacity to recognise what it could do well and what it could do better. It would mean being attentive to what we could learn from students to engage and maximise opportunities, and developing programs that provided lasting benefits.

Mr Birmingham noted that practical collaborations and exchanges between schools in Australia and India were planned for 2017 which would further Australia’s goals. These would include language programs and programs to improve vocational education in the region.

The minister concluded by emphasising the importance of enriching human ties between nations and by highlighting the special position that education occupies for this task.

Delegates acknowledged the rich history of the Australia-India relationship, and the substantial place India occupies in the Australian psyche. They applauded the substantial nature of the dialogue which had taken place, and the goodwill of those who believe in the Australia-India relationship, which, they felt, would enable bilateral relations at all levels to grow and strengthen.

**Professor Amitabh Mattoo and Ross Fitzgerald
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