

30 years of the Contemporary European Studies Association of Australia (CESAA)

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Abstract

The establishment of the European Studies Association of Australia (CESAA) owes much of its emergence and vitality to changes in the new geopolitical framework and especially to the end of the Cold War in Europe. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, followed by the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Maastricht Treaty deliberations in 1993 responded to these political changes. What captured the imagination of the world, including in Australia, with the Maastricht Treaty was the proposal for a single currency (the Euro) not to mention the embracement of a new name – The European Union (EU). The Maastricht Treaty agreed by the twelve members of the European Community of the time saw the emergence of a new global actor in the making. Australia, across the board began to engage with this entity, and universities, scholars and others began to explore the nature of the European Union. In this context came the Association for European Studies which saw itself as a voice for these European developments.

Keywords: CESAA, ESAANZ, European Union, EU, ANZJES, Australia, New Zealand

Introduction

In many respects the evolution of European Studies in Australia dovetailed with developments and the journey within the Contemporary European Studies Association of Australia (CESAA). I was a long-time member of the association having joined in the year 2000 and from 2004 on was voted President at each Annual General Meeting. This changed in 2021 when I stood down and the Association made its leap towards a multi-branch scenario in Australia with the establishment of a branch in Sydney as well as a Trans-Tasman joint association. The connotations of the term “President” overstated the authority of the actual office considerably, as it simply meant the person where “the buck stopped” in whatever way one wished to interpret this.

Writing on this 30th anniversary of CESAA as an insider placed me in a privileged position to document the story of the association for more than half of its existence. At the same time much of CESAA’s history was also well documented in its files which I had access to, allowing me to discover debates and views on many matters I was unaware of as well as dismissing many of the rumours and tales which emerged over the years. Consulting the early files and minutes of CESAA was a central data source and a wealth of valuable knowledge.

Writing a history of an association

This paper seeks to address the journey of the Association rather than European Studies but is conscious that the two often travel in parallel pathways. A number of scholars have sought to write the history of European Studies in Australia, like Fields (1999), Murray (2009, 2012), Morgan (2018) and Winand et al. (2015), all worthy contributions and helpful in reconstructing contextual matters in Australia as an excellent starting point. On the other hand, only partial and superficial attempts have ventured into the endeavour of writing and addressing the journey of the Association. Winand et al. (2015) provides a partial insight as does Mascitelli et al. (2020) of the role of the Association and its relationship with European Studies in Australia. This 30th anniversary of the Association offers us an opportunity to address what has happened in this Association and what it meant for European Studies in Australia. This anniversary allows us to take stock of both the political period which defines Australia in a multi-polar world and how it viewed both Europe and the European Union, partially in view of Brexit, alongside negotiating a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the EU and Australia. In part this anniversary highlights the realisation in Australia that despite all attempts to ignore Europe, it remains a central political node of the world as the 2022 war in Ukraine demonstrates.

It is sometimes noted that Australia has a limited understanding of the European Union. This is reflected by the poor media coverage, by government neglect and generally by a lazy approach and reliance on the UK as “Europe” rather than addressing and understanding “continental” Europe. One scholar, Pomfret, has highlighted this weakness stating:

... Australian views of the EU have changed more slowly than events. There has been little interest in the evolution of the EU, as Australia’s trade shifted from Europe to Asia. The information gap was fed by reliance on London media resources. The only Australian news bureau in Brussels closed down in 2003. After that, the Australian press reprinted articles from the UK press or London-based reporters, both of which were heavily infused with a transactional view of the EU and dominated by Euroscepticism (Pomfret, 2022).

Having lived and worked in Europe for more than 20 years for the Australian government none of what I am writing surprises me. Australia looked to the UK as its instrument for understanding Europe and even the European Union. Australian governments of the day dismissed developments in the European Union until it was very late. One example which comes to mind was Australia’s dismissal of the introduction of the Euro in the late 1990s. Slowly economic observers and government began to realise that the Maastricht pledge for a single currency was for real. As noted by the Australian Financial Review at the time:

The Deputy Prime Minister is the latest in a string of Australians who come away from visiting continental Europe convinced that Australia, with its British filtered vision of the euro’s problems, is seriously underestimating the speed and possible impact of the single currency on the Australian dollar and financial markets (Brenchtley, 1997).

On the whole, one could safely say that the European Union and Australia have never had a close understanding and relationship despite occasional rhetoric about shared

values. This often comes up when an event of common interest is negotiated as we have seen around the Framework Treaty, the Free Trade Agreement and more recently over defence and security interests and concerns. Clearly this can change, and there is a view that climate change may well be one of the instruments for a closer relationship. But the language and tone, bordering on admiration, is very different when reporting on aspects of UK political developments such as the Australia – UK closer relationship evidenced recently by the AUKUS Agreement of September 2021 as well as the impromptu and rushed Free Trade Agreement between the UK and Australia signed in December 2021.

The founding and early years of CESAA

European Studies and the emergence of CESAA received major impetus in the early 1990s around the end of the European Cold War, the reunification of Germany, the collapse of the USSR and the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty. What also emerged was the new terminology for this European entity now to be called European Union. The specific origins of the European Studies Association in Australia were largely centred around the University of Melbourne through its architect Philomena Murray. Prior to being called CESAA its initial name was Australian Association for Contemporary European Studies (AACES). This long name lasted for approximately six months and changed to Contemporary European Studies Association of Australia (CESAA) at the first Annual General Meeting in late 1991. At this meeting Philomena Murray was elected its President and Walter Veit of German Studies at Monash University, its Vice President. The Association emerged as break-out from the Australian Politics Association at one of its conferences converging all those who had common cause with European affairs ultimately coalescing into a separate CESAA group.

Some of the early actions by CESAA included it becoming the Australian representative of the global European Community Studies Associations (ECSA) in February 1992. ECSA was the global umbrella of all European Studies associations across the world. It has had an uneven track record and today is almost defunct. The longstanding CESAA essay competition was also initiated in 1992. Continuing to this day, the competition has contributed to encouraging dozens of students with their essays in pursuing greater interest in Europe. For a period of time the EU Delegation in Canberra supported this award financially. Once that support ceased, CESAA continued this award under its own steam and finances. After the first 12 months of existence of this association it could count on less than \$2,000 in the bank and, with a modest membership, was restricted to operating in close circles around the key academic institutions in Melbourne universities.

An intriguing discussion in the early period was whether to seek out a Trans-Tasman European Studies association and therefore an Australasian approach. From the discussion recorded in the minutes the idea was advanced but appeared to lack enthusiasm and was therefore shelved for almost thirty years. There is no written evidence I am aware of that this issue was ever discussed with New Zealand colleagues. The irony of the matter is that at the 2021 Annual General Meeting of the European Studies Association, one of the key platforms advanced for future growth was to be its Trans-Tasman nature and therefore the European Studies Australia New Zealand (ESAA NZ) as it is now was born.

Another ongoing matter which also emerged in 1992 and voiced by Sydney colleagues, most notably by the now deceased John Milful from the UNSW University, was the establishment of an European Association presence in Sydney. The conversations initially were constructive and amicable between the Sydney colleagues and the CESAA leadership in Melbourne but soon degenerated. Milful claimed CESAA was entirely Melbourne based with a “colonialistic approach” towards the rest of Australia, including Sydney. I have tried to investigate this assertion of Melbourne–centric operations and could not find evidence for it. As will be discussed in more detail in this paper, CESAA made every possible attempt to establish a branch in Sydney.

European Studies in Australia made some advances in the 1990s despite the competition coming from the focus on Asian studies and the region Australia was a part of. Academic offerings rarely included European Studies *per se*, or, as some would prefer, European integration which was often a collage of European related curriculum under a label of European studies. By the middle of the 1990s the EU was seen in more comparative and developmental terms as per the CESAA President’s report in 1994:

The EU tends to be examined in comparative politics, law, integration theory and international relations perspective in the Australian literature. Things which concern those who are involved in European integration studies include the implications of the single market for non-EC countries, the impact of the EC legal system on international law, governmental policy, comparative federalism, issues of identity and nationalism and citizenship in the context of the EU, power and democratic deficit in the EU, defence and security issues in post-cold war Europe, the CAP, the GATT in international agriculture and Australia’s relation with the EC in the context of its historical relationship with the UK (CESAA President’s Report, 1994 AGM).

At the time of this appreciation, the EU counted 12 member states and to those paying attention the growth and enlargement of the EU was inevitable. Today with 27 members, notwithstanding Brexit, the more observant view it with a little less curiosity, and as a more tangible subject and player in global politics, as an international actor.

Becoming President of the Association

Philomena Murray was the President of the Association for almost all of the 1990s (with a short one-year stint by Linda Hancock) and the driver of its activities. I joined the Association in 2000 and was active in the meetings and events which were mostly focused around the University of Melbourne and the Contemporary European Research Centre (CERC). In those years I had the responsibilities of Treasurer and later as Vice President. I was one of the few members of the CESAA committee not part of the University of Melbourne which was a godsend and kept me out of the University of Melbourne bickering and tensions between colleagues on the committee. Contrary to hearsay I became President in circumstances neither engineered by me or to my liking. As Vice President at the time, and one of the few not to be associated with the University of Melbourne, at a stormy AGM meeting in 2004 I was nominated and elected President.

In the wilderness – The Association with few friends

Not surprisingly it was an uphill battle as President of the Association for the first few years, and I was feeling vulnerable and isolated. I was not yet an established academic, still did not have my PhD and I felt the sustainability of the Association would be tested. I knew I did not have the authority or standing of the previous President, and I sensed the Association's marginality. It appeared to me that the EU Delegation lost interest in the Association, many colleagues dismissed CESAA as a waste of time, and it felt that we had been shut out of numerous circles. While I made sure that our Annual General Meetings were properly structured, democratic and participatory, the level of interest was not always in line with these expectations. A year after becoming President of the Association, I reported to the next Annual General Meeting (in 2005):

It has been a difficult year of change, consolidation and seeking to implement a new strategy of expansion of CESAA. The aftermath [of the 2003 AGM] has not been easy. Clearly, we have some ways to go before there is a different climate and sense of what CESAA is and not simply being a small, inward looking, Melbourne University club The intentions of cutting the apron strings with Melbourne University have in part occurred" (AGM report 2004).

While there were some wonderful colleagues who sat on the committee over the years, many came and went, and I remained as President of the Association purely because I was the last man standing. I often questioned myself on why the Association was unable to go beyond this survival stage and I overcame these moments of gloom by reiterating the belief that the right moment would come and the committee would reflect a new moment of growth and interest.

Within the EU, the early 2000s was a time of change and development. The introduction of the Euro along with the 2004 accession of 10 Eastern and Central European countries saw the EU growing from 15 to 25 overnight. In the background in Australia however, the conservative Howard government (1996-2007) had little time for the European Union. Having had his own negative experience with Brussels in the 1970s, Howard was not enthused by European integration, reflecting traditional allies' mentality (UK and the US). Tension with the EU was at its highest, anger at agricultural subsidies provided for a negative discourse with the EU and some of this negativity was reverberating onto EU courses in universities. Most importantly the growth of the Asian trade markets, especially with China was redirecting much of Australia's global attention towards Asia and less so towards Europe.

Politics played out in European studies in Australia – The question of Macedonia

In 2005 a new cluster within CESAA emerged with a specific project on the Balkans diaspora and the EU. New colleagues surfaced on the CESAA committee initially as winners of an EU project related to the accession of Balkan countries to the European Union. The interest was promoted primarily by colleague Steve Bakalis from Victoria University in Melbourne. This project also included a close relationship with the ANU in Canberra and their own Diaspora project. It was an intense and constructive period as I remember, and it felt like CESAA was making an impact both in the European studies community as well as outside of Melbourne. A curious incident occurred at a

conference organised by the ANU in Canberra in 2005 on the Diaspora in the Balkans. I attended both as President of CESAA in support of the conference but also in my own right as a presenter on the Italian diaspora in Australia. Day 1 of the conference proceeded in the expected manner but on day 2 all participants were advised there would be an address to the conference participants by ANU's then Vice Chancellor, Ian Chubb, before the beginning of the day's proceedings.

There was some tension in the air as it was unusual that a Vice Chancellor would ask to address the conference. Chubb then informed the conference participants that the proceedings would only continue if international protocols were respected in relation to addressing the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and not as "Macedonia". It was a clear reprimand of the conference to have allowed this. Any further reference to "Macedonia" needed to call it the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia! According to the Vice Chancellor the official protest for this naming violation originated from the Greek Embassy in Canberra. Being somewhat astonished about what had happened in Canberra, I returned home to Melbourne to receive a letter from the EU Delegation with the identical reasoning and a warning to CESAA and all in the EU community of the necessity to uphold the FYROM terminology irrespective of its use.

The attempts to extend CESAA's national footprint – A new CESAA Canberra chapter

The ANU had long held a sympathetic view towards CESAA and its activities. In March 2005, the Canberra chapter was established at the ANU under the guidance of Karen Hussey with some 5-6 colleagues. Karen had been a member of the CESAA committee in Melbourne before moving to the ANU in Canberra to complete her PhD and pursue her career. The proposal to establish a CESAA chapter (branch) received support from the Director of the EU Centre at the time, Simon Bronitt. A number of initiatives were organised, and I was invited to open the Chapter. The diaspora conferences were just some of the joint initiatives, and ANU Centre for European Studies was at the time an important player in the European Community. Unfortunately, with Karen Hussey's move to Europe the Centre lost its key champion and eventually died out.

The closure of CERC (University of Melbourne) – The end of an era

The early days of CESAA were built around what was happening at the University of Melbourne and less so at Monash University. One of the key developments especially at Melbourne University was the emergence of the Contemporary Europe Research Centre (CERC) which became the prime focus and, in the end, overshadowed CESAA. In November 2009, the European Studies community and CESAA were informed of the closure of CERC. This was a shock to the European Studies community as well as to CESAA. In response to this development, I drafted a letter of protest on behalf of CESAA to Glyn Davis, the then Vice Chancellor of the University of Melbourne stating:

CERC has been over the years a beacon of engagement and understanding on the role of Europe and the European Union and its closure will be a damaging blow to the strong European research community in Melbourne and Australia (Mascitelli 2009).

The response from the Vice Chancellor was quick and informative. Extracts from it said:

Unfortunately, the Centre has also been unable to attain external research funding to sustainably support its operations. Given that both the Faculty, and the wider University has had to operate in a very constrained funding regime, it is simply not feasible to continue to sustain an underperforming program (Davis 2009).

The letter to the Vice Chancellor was not understating the importance of CERC within the European Studies community and its closure, many felt, was a blow. The Vice Chancellor's response was made available to the former CERC directors, but it was clear that the changes introduced on the back of the introduction of the Melbourne Model also settled some scores and dealt with some uncomfortable personalities. In the chaos of closures other well-known colleagues in different branches of European studies were made redundant. The whole episode underscored the fragile position of scholars in this space in a university which had been a major player in European studies in Australia.

CESAA Review evolves to the Australian and New Zealand Journal of European Studies (ANZJES)

In 1998 CESAA Review was established, a quasi-journal, irregular in its output and mostly designed to inform and provide news and events in and around the European Studies community. In the early issues the content included a President's report, reports on events and sometimes an in-depth paper on a specific aspect of European Studies and contributions received (and reviewed) for publication. For years the colleagues tried to make it a proper and professional journal but not with a lot of success. This journal continued for 34 issues until 2008 when it was suspended eventually to be replaced by the Australian and New Zealand Journal of European Studies (ANZJES).

The creation and production of EU Registers was a task that the EU Delegation counted on and which CESAA also saw as an important contribution to documenting and listing all in the European Studies space in Australia. In the days when the internet, search engines were either primitive or non-existent, the EU register provided a major source of knowledge and information for all in the European space. The document was a collection of details of relevant people for the Association to be able to contact and include in activities. The task of codifying who was in the European space was always a source of debate as it included all things European – languages, law, economics, politics, history and anything else that might be close.

The establishment of ANZJES in late 2008 involved a realisation by the leadership of CESAA that a positive contribution to European Studies by the Association would be the establishment of a journal. This time however we had the right people around us and interested including Matt Killingsworth, then Vice President of CESAA, Natalia Chaban from the NCRE at Canterbury University in New Zealand and eventually Peter Morgan in Sydney. The first issue emerged in hard copy in 2009 and the focus of this first issue, and not accidentally, was the very theme of European Studies in Australia and New Zealand - central to the very existence of the Association and, dare we say, the journal itself. In the early years the dilemma for the journal was attracting scholarly

content as it was classified by the Australian Research Council as a “C” listed journal. This meant we had to market the journal into the minds of scholars in order to get sufficient paper proposals. This continued until 2017 when the journal began attracting submissions from scholars as a consequence of a stronger profile and exposure of the journal at conferences and EU gatherings. This enabled us to move to producing three issues of the journal per year.

Another ongoing discussion centred around whether to continue producing the journal in hard copy or producing it purely as an online source. The jury was out on both options, but it was a costly affair to print the journal including national and international circulation. Towards the later years the printing (and circulation) of the journal would become difficult to sustain and, in the end, the difficult decision to transition to an online-only format, stored in the Open Journal System at Sydney University, was taken. These were important advances for the journal and the Association coinciding also with the 30th anniversary of CESAA.

A qualitative leap forward – the arrival of the EU Centre at RMIT University!

In 2011 RMIT emerged on the European Studies scene with the Jean Monnet award entitled “Comparing regional developing policies and approaches: Europe and Asia”. The association was aware of a number of bidders from various universities for this award. At the time there was a protracted debate within the association on whether we should support one bid or be happy to be in any/all bids. When the award was made public, to our surprise it was won by the RMIT Europe Centre. We knew nothing of RMIT’s place in European studies and it had never been on our radar. It was through this award that we met Professor Bruce Wilson who would go from a person on the margins of the European Studies community to the ‘go to person’ on European Studies, especially in the official channels of the European Union. Fortunately, there was a desire to collaborate from both sides and from that year onwards a relationship of collaboration was created between the Association and the EU Centre at RMIT University. It was a winning formula for both, and this collaboration would be to the benefit of European Studies in Australia.

CESAA’s 30th anniversary and the step to ESAANZ

With the 30th anniversary of CESAA in 2021 it was good time to direct the organisation towards important milestones. This included the incorporation of a Sydney Branch of CESAA as well as a conscious move towards a cross Tasman operation. The impetus for the initiative of merging the organisations came from the senior leaders of both sides of the Tasman in 2020 as we mulled over the next step for the Association. What was also uppermost on our minds was the generational divide and the need for an influx of a younger set of leaders for the Association. Some of us had been around for years and decades and there was a need for new blood. One pleasing outcome of the merger was that the newly named European Studies Association Australia and New Zealand (ESAAANZ) had women as its President and its Vice President. The Association would now cover Australia and New Zealand but equally the small but real presence of a core of Europeanists in Sydney. For years the Sydney presence had been clustered around Peter Morgan at Sydney University. Peter, who had come from the University of Western Australia as early as 1994, had been acknowledged as the West Australian

correspondent for CESAA. Moving to Sydney, Morgan maintained contact and membership of CESAA and, more importantly, in 2009 took a keen interest in the newly established journal – the Australian & New Zealand Journal of European Studies (ANZJES). Almost from the get-go, Peter assumed the leadership of the journal steering it to its 13th volume by the time of CESAA’s 30th anniversary. In that year the journal also found a more secure home with Open Journals at the library at Sydney University allowing for the journal to be managed, archived and ensure availability from its first to the current issue, an achievement we are very proud of and one which is not appreciated enough by the European and scholarly community in Australia.

While the Sydney operation at the time of the 30th anniversary was fragile, it had come a long way from what it was. For years, in fact decades, CESAA maintained a steadfast intent of establishing a presence in Sydney with the desire to not fall into any form of “Melbourne colonisation” which in my view was never a view in CESAA either in my time and even before. Sydney, the largest city in Australia, with more universities than Melbourne, has as much vibrancy as Melbourne. Nonetheless I was aware of the obstacles along the way in establishing a Sydney branch, as I reported in 2004: “The Sydney expansion is fraught with more difficulties in a widely acknowledged fragmented EU studies presence throughout the NSW universities” (AGM President’s Report, 2004). What may have played a role in the failure to fulfil its potential could be the personalities of the day, different agendas and the consequent misunderstandings. There is nothing in the DNA of Melbourne or Sydney for it to be uniquely attractive or attracted to European Studies.

The role of the Association in moving beyond universities

Over the last decade or so traditional tertiary education institutions like universities seem to be distancing themselves from the provision of European studies curricula within their institutions. The Association has evidenced a noticeable decline in academics pursuing European Integration studies within these institutions. This is largely a question of universities pursuing larger degree cohorts and less “boutique” degrees such as studies on the European Union. The counter to this trend is the realisation – as it was always there - of a whole new environment – secondary school teachers and their desire to be able to include the European Union in their curriculum. Through a series of projects and initiatives, the Association has engaged with secondary schoolteachers over the last few years and has discovered a fertile environment for furthering an understanding of Europe and the European Union within the school curriculum. Prompted by initiatives from RMIT EU Centre, along with supporting contributions from Monash and Swinburne Universities, the “teaching the teachers” project has been a mainstay of active engagement with a non-traditional audience for European Studies and one that is bound to increase. This is complemented by the manifestation from the European Union that they too see secondary school teachers and students as the next frontier for “soft diplomacy” as well as being the next audience for promoting better understanding of the European Union especially in non-EU countries. This will, I am sure, remain a focus of the Association in the years to come.

Conclusion

A role for the Association in being at the heart of European Studies in Australia almost seems inevitable. In part because of the decline of universities in pursuing European Studies as well as distractions and difficulties that might appear at any one point in time. While the Association might not always be at the forefront of European Studies initiatives, it has no other agenda than the promotion of a better understanding of the European Union in Australia. While universities play a corporate game, chopping and changing their priorities, the presence of the Association, with its volunteer and committed members has more clearer perspectives. In a more ideal scenario, it would be a fitting outcome if the Association was acknowledged for and, more importantly, supported in what it does. I look forward to the 10th anniversary of ESAANZ and hope that our predictions of a vibrant Association are demonstrated in practice.

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