**Celebrating the 30th Anniversary of the Australia-Latin America Business Council**

*Address given on 29 November 2019 by Jose Blanco AM, Chairman Emeritus of the ALABC,*

*at the Gala Dinner hosted by the ALABC in Sydney*

Your Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, thank you, obrigado and gracias for being here today to celebrate this important milestone of the Australia-Latin America Business Council. Your presence sustains, energises and validates the work of the Council.

It is a great privilege to be with you today and to have been asked to comment on the journey undertaken by the Australia-Latin America Business Council since its founding in 1989. I am proud to do so on behalf of all the hard working and dedicated individuals who have served as custodians of the Council over the past 30 years.

So much has happened in that time and so many have contributed to making the Council what it is today that I feel incapable of doing justice to history and to all the diverse stakeholders who have nurtured the Council over that time.

Suffice it to say, that if all those stakeholders were able to be here today, we would number many hundreds more.

The journey undertaken since 1989 has had many twists and turns, moments of elation and some of frustration, but it has undeniably been one of steady progress for the Council and for its raison d’être, helping to build a strong and vibrant two-way economic relationship between Australia and the diverse countries that make up the region known as Latin America.

For an institution such as the Council - which operates with modest resources and champions a region that is not a priority for Australia - to survive 30 years is indeed an achievement worth celebrating. However, I believe that even more worthy of acknowledgement and celebration is what the Council has achieved over that period.

I am referring to the fact that by its words and deeds the Council has earned the respect of all those involved in the broad Australia-Latin America relationship, has positioned itself as an important advocate and champion for that relationship and has contributed to bringing about many of the gains that we have seen in that relationship.

Anyone who has been engaged in trying to connect Australian business with the Latin American markets will understand the magnitude of what the Council has achieved and how much it has contributed to the effort of growing the flow of trade and investment between Australia and the region. Over three decades it has been an important flag bearer for Latin America in Australia and has punched well above its weight in campaigning for closer economic and broader relations with the region.

It alone cannot be credited with the gains that have been secured, but without its contribution, those gains might not have been secured when they were and the relationship might not be where it is today.

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Some appreciation of how far the relationship has come can be gained by looking at how many Australian companies today have a presence in the region, the value of our trade with the region, the number of FTAs that Australia has signed with countries in the region, the existence of COALAR and the presence of Victorian and Queensland trade and investment offices in the region, how many students from the region are today studying in Australia, the number of tourists that we exchange with the region and the frequency of flights that connect Australia to the region, plus much more.

What prevailed in 1989 and throughout the 1990s was very different and says a great deal about the vision, dedication and sacrifice of the earliest custodians of the Council. Every individual and institution who nurtured the Council during those formative years, as well as all those who have followed them to this day, deserve mention, recognition and our thanks.

For those of you who may not be familiar with the history of the Council, please allow me to fill in some of the historical gaps.

The Council came into existence in 1989 as an unincorporated association under the name of the ‘Australia South America Business Council’, with the Canberra-based Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry providing the initial secretariat services to the Council. In 1992, the name was changed to the ‘Australia-Latin America Business Council’ and in 2000 the Council became a public company, limited by guarantee, being the status which it holds today.

The creation of the Council was a consequence of the then awakening interest in South America as an investment destination. In part, this followed from then high-flying Bond Corporation’s investments in Chile, where in the late 1980s the company acquired the ‘*El Indio’* gold and silver mine, and the *Compañía de Teléfonos de Chile,* Chile’s dominant telecoms company.

The expectation of further privatizations of state-owned assets and of other investment opportunities in Chile and the wider region motivated a small group of entrepreneurs to support the creation of the Council as a means of channelling Australia’s projected commercial connection with the region.

When Bond Corp eventually collapsed and was forced to divest its Chilean holdings, and other investments failed to materialise, interest in the nascent Council fell away.

In 1991 a new group of directors began to revitalise the Council, relying on a strategy that focused on working collaboratively with important allies such as the Latin American heads of mission, the Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade, Austrade and a growing list of other entities who saw the value in forging closer links with Latin America.

That ‘team’ approach continues to underpin the work of the Council. Today, more so than ever, given that the number of players in the relationship has grown markedly.

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That commitment to working with allies and to delivering events and publications of the highest quality, combined with growing Australian interest in Latin America, helped to raise the Council’s profile and standing, to expand its membership and to build momentum for the relationship.

Throughout the 1990s and beyond, the Council has been active on many fronts. It has taken important business missions to the region. It has hosted business functions for all the region’s visiting heads of state. It has made important submissions to Federal and State governments. It has hosted and participated in important conferences and events in Australia and Latin America. It has helped companies do business in Latin America. It has championed Latin America in the face of widespread indifference and scepticism.

It has also hosted some of the most entertaining, enjoyable and productive dinners of any organisation. Who can forget the sight of then Deputy Prime Minister and Trade Minister, the late Tim Fischer, dancing a choreographed macarena along with the entire audience at one memorable Sydney dinner? Who can forget the camaraderie and networking that are features of all the dinners that the Council holds in major capital cities each year?

The Council’s progress and achievements are due to the efforts and contributions of many. Individuals who served and serve as directors, giving freely of their time and providing valuable leadership and labour. Individuals and institutions who believed and believe in the relationship and who deliver valuable funding and support to the Council through sponsorship, endorsement and more.

Recognition is due to all who have served within the Council and to those outside who have made important contributions, to those who have been members and those who have been sponsors. The milestone that we celebrate today belongs to them and to you.

The just thing would be to name them all, but time, a defective memory on my part and fear of not doing justice to individual contributions make this impossible. I therefore ask you to reflect on the work done and contribution made by all those who came before you and to consider what you can do to make the next 30 years an even greater success.

The Council’s journey involved and continues to involve battling ignorance of Latin America, indifference about the value of the relationship, the competing interests of bilateral relationships as opposed to a regionally-focused one, a lack of financial resources, a short-term focus that can sometimes cause us to question the ultimate goal and complacency about there no longer being a compelling need for an institution such as it.

Without doubt, economic cycles, social unrest, geopolitical upheaval and other factors are guaranteed to produce more twists and turns, moments of elation and of frustration, achievements and setbacks for both the relationship and the Council.

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What sustains us in the face of whatever challenges arise is the conviction that Australia has much to gain from a strong and vibrant relationship with Latin America and that there is an important role for the Australia-Latin America Business Council to play.

Latin America matters to Australia and the Australia-Latin America Business Council has a part to play in helping the relationship achieve its full potential.

We have come a long way, but we still have far to travel. I applaud the work of the Council and I encourage each of you to contribute to its work in any way you can.