I've recently finished reading Jenny Hocking's biographical work on former prime minister Gough Whitlam. The book covers Whitlam's childhood and adult life up to the day he launched the “If I’m Time” election campaign in Blacktown in 1972. Among many things, the book explores how Whitlam became interested in international affairs.

An early prompt was from his wartime service in the Royal Australian Air Force. His election to parliament in 1952 later gave him access to “study tours” which he used enthusiastically. By the time he was opposition leader Gough was visiting overseas leaders as if he was the prime minister.

Not surprisingly, when he became prime minister in 1972, Whitlam’s interest in the world, especially by acknowledging that people around the world share a desire for a common good, a fruitful and peaceful relationship with other nations in each other, celebrating different ways of life.

However, two prime ministers have dropped the international baton. Malcolm Fraser (1975-1983) re-established the protectionist barriers of the Menzies years, warding off interest from Asia and looking longingly back to Britain. John Howard (1996-2007) was worse. Howard encouraged Australians to fear sundowners and strangemen, urging us to pull the continental quilt over our heads and wait for the baddies to go away.

It’s heartening that Australians are currently one nation in an engagement with the rest of the world. In recent months there have been calls from the old rattags or two for Australia to retreat minus itself, stop the iron ore, cut migration, and rule out the global financial crisis with the gate through the paling fence firmly locked.

Generally, Australians have resisted these calls. Fraser and Howard aside, Australia has engaged successfully with the rest of the world over the past three decades; and, as I read it, Australians are happy to continue that.

A key reason is that we understand our standards of living have increased - and will again increase in the future - as a result of our becoming an international trading nation.

I was looking at the latest trade statistics the other day. There’s some interesting numbers there. I was surprised to learn that Japan, not China, is far and away our most important trading partner. Last year we sold $30 billion worth of goods to Japan and bought just $20 billion worth in return, meaning a net gain for us of $10 billion. In contrast, our trade with China actually costs us $4 billion. Despite all that coal and iron ore shipped to China, we spend more in return on Chinese manufactured goods. After Japan, our next best trading partner, in terms of being a good carurer, is South Korea, followed by India.

But China isn’t one the west lose most to. That trophy goes to the United States, which picked our wallets last year for a net $14 billion. Germany was next in terms of trade losses followed by Singapore and then China.

One thing Australia has learned from international engagements is how little we are; and, therefore, how clever we have to be when we engage with other nations.

In trade, we have a limited range of things to sell. Our big earners are coal, iron ore, meat and cereals. Manufacturing goods make up less than 15 per cent of all that we sell overseas.

The list of our biggest customers shows how much we have changed as a nation in three decades. Eight of the top 10 buyers of our stuff are from Asia. The other two are our old pals, the US and the UK, but they are only ranked fourth and seventh respectively.

Recession affects world trade. Already nations are buying and selling less. That’s what happens when economic activity slows down. But resorting to jingoistic “Buy Aussie” campaigns can only damage our economy and our image with the rest of the world. Sure, go ahead and boycott the products of firms you think have behaved badly to your workers or to the environment. Demand decency from the commercial world. But boycotting overseas goods because they are from overseas is self-defeating. Trade, when it is conducted fairly, benefits everyone.

Australia has only become a genuine trading nation in recent decades. Now is not the time to retreat. Don’t go looking for the continental quilt.

Professor Philip O’Neill is director of the Urban Research Centre, University of Western Sydney.

Celebrating the Catholic education system

Church schools provide parents with a choice, writes Ray Collins.

CATHOLIC Schools Week is an opportunity to acknowledge the history, purpose and achievements of Catholic schools from their earliest days to the present.

In the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, 56 schools, ranging in size from 28 students to more than 1000, continue to provide quality education to those who seek enrolment.

They form a system of schools that continues a tradition of education that dates back to Bullock and Manning valleys dating back to the 1860s.

For more than 170 years, Catholic schools in various forms have offered an education that fosters religious education, academic learning, the arts, physical activity and skills training.

This education takes as its foundation the gospel of Jesus Christ, helping students to develop a belief and values system that has encouraged the building of communities where Jesus’s message of love of God and love for one another is paramount.

Catholic schools continue the centuries-old tradition of the Catholic Church as a significant provider of education in the community.

This celebration of Catholic schools is given added emphasis by the fact that 2009 is the 100th anniversary of the death of Blessed Mary MacKillop, the founder of the Sisters of St Joseph. The Josephites have played a prominent role in the education of the children of the Hunter. Often in the most outlying areas of the diocese.

Mary’s commitment to the education of the poor and her outreach to isolated communities has been a hallmark of education in the diocese.

This year the theme of Catholic Schools Week is Youth in Action - Active in Faith, Active in Learning.

Students are encouraged to give expression to their faith through their outreach to the community and to be active in their learning through their attention to studies and a thirst for knowledge. Across Australia, parish communities and their schools will celebrate this theme.

Today, more than 17,000 students are enrolled in Catholic schools in the diocese with more than 2000 teaching and support staff employed to meet their educational and pastoral needs.

Together with the government schools system and the independent schools, Catholic schools provide parents with a choice of education based on the needs of their children.

Recent government initiatives have encouraged a greater degree of co-operation between these systems and that has been evident in initiatives in the Hunter including the Climate Cam for Schools program, service learning and trade training centres.

The Catholic schools system in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle continues to provide quality education in a caring and supportive environment.

Why not visit a Catholic school this week?

Ray Collins is the director of schools in the Catholic Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle.