

FINANCIAL REVIEW

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International relations **China's** President got a sales pitch from an unlikely source when he visited our southernmost state, writes Tony Walker.

China's President Xi Jinping came to Tasmania, he saw and he prompted a stream of superlatives from his hosts, including ubiquitous West Australian Andrew Forrest who was on hand to welcome his "friend".

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Warming up a crowd at a forum organised by the state investment promotion authority TasInvest, Forrest told an audience of **business** people, "Xi is a guy who, if he says he's going to do something, he's going to do it."

This was a prelude to an enthusiastic sales job on Tasmania by Forrest who could hardly have been further away from his natural habitat in the mining precincts of the Pilbara.

"This is a fabulous, fabulous opportunity for Tasmania," said Forrest, who was a co-signatory to the agriculture co-operation agreement with **China** in Canberra on Monday.

"There's not a square inch of the state you couldn't use for eco-tourism, agriculture or industry.

"I'd like to say this is an economic turning point for Tasmania," Forrest added.

His address was greeted enthusiastically by several hundred attendees, including representatives of **Chinese** companies.

In the audience, former Tasmanian MP and president of the Australia **China** Council Warwick Smith gave Forrest a high five after he finished speaking.

It was that sort of day in a state that found itself – unusually – at the centre of attention by virtue of a brisk visit by Xi and his wife Peng Liyuan, who arrived in an Air **China** presidential jet a day after the **Chinese** president's historic address to the Australian Parliament.

The centrepiece of Xi's Canberra visit was the signing of a free trade agreement between **China** and Australia, and a declaration by Xi that Beijing was elevating its relationship with Australia to that of a comprehensive strategic partnership.

Tasmania hopes the FTA will help boost exports and stimulate investment in a state that has been lagging behind its mainland counterparts.

Tasmania exported \$644 **million** worth of goods and services to **China** in 2012-13, double that of its next biggest export destination, the United States. Half of the exports to **China** were foodstuffs.

Several commercial agreements were signed to coincide with Xi's presence, including one between Hydro Tasmania and the Shenhua **Group** to build and install 10 wind turbines using **Chinese** technology.

With his visit to Tasmania, Xi was honouring a pledge he had made to former premier Lara Giddings, who had extended an invitation when she met Xi in 2013 soon after he became president.

China's leader was greeted at the airport by flag-waving schoolchildren. He was presented with a purple lavender-smelling bear named Bobbie, then whisked to Scotch Oakburn College where he met Year 5 students who had written to him in Mandarin.

Xi's program included an encounter with three Tasmanian Devil pups – Bella, Possum and Lulu – and lunch at Hobart's Government House where he sampled Tasmanian whisky and dined on abalone, regarded as a delicacy in **China**.

Then followed a visit to the Hobart waterfront for a signing ceremony of a memorandum of understanding to expand scientific co-operation between Australian and **Chinese** scientists in the Antarctic.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Environment Minister Greg Hunt were on hand for the signing. Xi described scientific exchanges as a "bright spot" in the relationship.

Out on the Derwent, river protesters had other ideas. A spokeswoman was quoted by the ABC as saying, "We are here to ask him to please support marine reserves in the Antarctic."

The protesters were demonstrating against **Chinese** resistance to expanding marine reserves.

Business was not neglected in a day when Tasmania put itself on show for a powerful **Chinese** visitor.

At the TasInvest conference, speakers including Bank of America Merrill Lynch economist Saul Eslake and chairman of Tourism Australia Geoff Dixon talked up Tasmania as a source of good-quality foodstuffs, and as a tourist destination.

Dixon told The Australian Financial Review Tasmania could look forward to increasing numbers of **Chinese** who were increasingly looking for pristine destinations.

"Tasmania has really got what the world wants," he said. He noted a recent Tourism Authority survey, which found Australia ranked first among 15 countries for its food and **wine sold to China**.

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