

Why Asia Matters

Australia's relationship with Asia has always been an ill-defined one that has often been under considerable strain. Considerable debate has taken place over Australia's role and Australia's identity in Asia. Is this a necessary debate and does Asia really matter?

"Defining Moments" in Australia's History

The May 10th Bulletin identifies 125 "defining moments" in Australia's history. It is an interesting exercise and it begins with "defining moment" number one. Some 140 million years ago the break up of the great southern continent known as "Gondwanaland" began. The Australian land mass split from Antarctica about 96 million years ago as a result of sea floor spreading and even today the Australian land mass is still drifting northwards at a rate of about 6 centimetres a year. We remain an isolated country however in about 40 million years time we will collide with Asia!

Other "defining moments" include the human occupation of this vast continent. At Lake Mungo (western NSW) there is evidence of human habitation that dates back at least 50,000 years. Scholars believe these early inhabitants came from the north. In more recent times there is evidence of long term connections with Asia. Theories state that Chinese exploration in 15th Century extended as far as Australia. We know that Makassan fisherfolk from the island of Sulawesi in Indonesia regularly visited the north coast of Australia search for trepang or sea slug. Ideas and technologies were shared.

Indeed I am always fascinated that the Aboriginal word in the north for "white person" is "balanda" while the Indonesia word for Dutchman is "belanda". Makassan fisherfolk also intermarried with indigenous Australian communities while further west around Ashmore Reef, people from the Indonesia island of Rote regularly fished these areas for centuries until the Australian government introduced its rigid policy of "border control". Other "defining moments" included the voyage of Captain James Cook (who, after sailing up the east coast of Australia, called into the tiny island of Sabu near Timor to replenish food and water supplies).

Myall Creek gets a mention where 28 indigenous Australians were massacred near Inverell, NSW, in 1838 and then there is discovery of gold near Bathurst and the gold rush that saw a massive in rush of people to country Victoria. The Eureka Stockade followed. Ned Kelly, Federation, Gallipoli and even the invention of Vegemite in 1922 all get a mention in the Bulletin!

Then comes the Great Depression and suddenly we are into the Second World War. The Fall of Singapore to the Japanese and the Battle of the Kokoda Trail in 1942 are significant "defining moments" and then there is Australia's post-war immigration strategy and the White Australia Policy. This is followed by Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War, Gough Whitlam's ground breaking visit to China in 1972, the fall of Saigon and the arrival of "boat people" from Indo China.

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Other “defining moments” of a more contemporary kind include the 1988 Bicentenary, the sending of troops to East Timor in 1999, the “Tanpa crisis” in 2001 where 433 asylum seekers were rescued by a Norwegian cargo ship only to be turned back in the Indian Ocean south of Java by the Australian authorities. And then there were the Bali bombings in 2002 where 202 people, including 88 Australians, died in an attack on two Bali nightclubs.

I must admit that I am being a little selective here as identify some of the listed “defining moments”. However, I am still amazed at the number of “defining moments” in Australia’s history that relate to Asia. Think about it. There are moments from pre-historic times through to World War Two, Indo China, East Timor and Bali. The White Australia Policy was largely used to keep Asians out while in more recent times the so-called “war on terror” has seen the development of a “fortress” mentality in Australia, especially when Asia is mentioned.

My first point is this. Asia matters because Australia’s history has largely been defined by the presence of the massive region on our doorstep. You cannot ignore your neighbours no matter how hard one tries to look elsewhere.

Australia’s awkward involvement in Asia

Australia’s relationship with Asia has always been a clumsy, awkward one. During the mid 1980’s Prime Minister Hawke claimed that Asia was Australia’s “*true place*”. This is where we belonged. Paul Keating extended this comment to suggest “*the full expression of Australian nationhood lay in the Asia-Pacific region.*” Hawke and Keating were serious about this view and I am particularly aware of the efforts Paul Keating made in trying to develop a good relationship with Suharto in Indonesia.

Unfortunately, I believe Keating lost his way here and his desire to build good relationships with a tyrant compromised his intentions. However, former National Party Leader, Tim Fischer went further in his praise for Suharto with the comment in 1996 that Indonesian President was “*perhaps the world’s greatest figure in the latter half of the 20th Century*”. Few people were prepared to go that far in their assessment of Suharto and Fischer’s comments no doubt illustrate his desperate desire to find acceptance in the region.

While Hawke, Keating and Fischer showed some optimism, others have seriously questioned Australia’s lack of commitment to the region. Stephen Fitzgerald, the first Australian ambassador to China, argues that Australia has neglected Asia for far too long.

“Australians lack an intellectual interconnectedness and have been unable to adjust to the new realities of Australia’s economic and geographic location” says Fitzgerald. *“The mainstream perception of Australia’s place in the world still stresses links with the imperial heritage of Britain and the cultural and military alliances with the United States during World War Two and the Cold War.”*

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It's possible our present government understands a little about what Fitzgerald is saying. In a speech to the Foreign Correspondents Association in Sydney on 16th April this year, Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer said:

"Our political and strategic interests are obvious. Take a glance at any map – it doesn't take an expert in strategic policy to understand that what happens in our own neighbourhood will affect us more deeply and more quickly than events that occur in most other areas of the world....Australia also has substantial trade and economic interests at stake in the region. Even after the onset of the Asian economic crisis, East Asia takes more than 50% of all our exports, and even more would be transported through the region to markets elsewhere in the world."

Alexander Downer's words are important. He no doubt also had in mind the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). This organisation represents a grouping of nations representing 550 million people. However Stephen Fitzgerald's concerns probably remain, especially as Prime Minister John Howard is quick to stress Australia's separation from Asia.

John Howard goes on to say: *"We are a European, Western civilisation with strong links to North America, but we are here in Asia."*

I must pick up on a number points here. Firstly, Australia's alliance with the United States is a critical issue. Malaysia is particularly wary of Australia's motives here and this is especially so after Canberra has refrained from signing a South East Asian non-aggression pact. This pact prohibits signatories from interfering in each other's internal affairs and it requires the renunciation of the threat or use of force. Nations are required to sign this pact before participating in the inaugural East Asia Summit to be hosted by Malaysia in 2005.

Related to this scenario is John Howard's comment in 2002 that his government would be willing to order military strikes in the region to pre-empt terrorist attacks being planned against Australians. Matters became more critical when, in October 2003, President Bush announced that Australia was America's *"sheriff"* in the region.

Things become more complicated when, for example, the Australian government sold off its Cox Peninsula transmitter station near Darwin to a fundamentalist Christian organization who began broadcasts into Indonesia on short wave. Apart from seriously reducing the capacity of Radio Australia's Indonesian service to effectively reach the region, the sale of this transmitter provided a fundamentalist organisation with the capacity to reach a region already torn apart by sectarian conflict.

Since 1999 much of eastern Indonesia has been drawn into a bloody conflict between Muslims and Christians where around 10,000 people have been killed "in the name of religion". Why a government would offer any organization with a fundamentalist religious orientation the opportunity to broadcast into such a volatile region is difficult to comprehend.

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Then there is the “Pauline Hanson” phenomenon. This has created considerable anxiety in Asia. I remember addressing a synod meeting on the island Sumba some years ago. I made some reference to Pauline Hanson with the comment that the Uniting Church in Australia “tidak setuju dengan Pauline Hanson sama sekali!” (the Uniting Church definitely does not agree with Pauline Hanson). My comment was received with huge applause. Indeed, Pauline Hanson and her One Nation Party expressed sentiments that bordered dangerously close to racism – and Asia was watching!

Meanwhile the more recent treatment of Filipino born Australian citizen, Vivian Alvarez Solon, by Australian Immigration officials together with Canberra’s treatment of asylum seekers and our current commitment to Iraq all raise serious questions concerning Australian attitudes towards Asia and Australia’s relationships with the region.

Dr Mahathir, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, was quick to raise concerns here. He commented that *“by uncritically following the US in attacking Iraq, and by talking, like the US, of pre-emptive strikes against alleged terrorists in neighbouring countries, Australia makes itself less acceptable than ever in Asia”*.

These are troubling words and Australia’s image in Asia has been further called into question over our relationships with East Timor. Australia signed the Timor Gap Treaty with Indonesia in 1989 and this involved three Zones of Cooperation covering a lucrative share of oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea. The Timor Gap Treaty came after the Labor Government in Canberra controversially recognised Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor in 1985.

Then in 1998 Prime Minister John Howard (in a letter to the new Indonesian President, Habibie) advocated an opportunity for self- determination in East Timor. This represented a major policy change that effectively isolated Indonesia while events in East Timor moved towards a UN sponsored referendum in August 1999. The East Timorese voted for independence and UN peace keepers went into East Timor a few weeks later to restore order after the Indonesian military unleashed a reign of terror in the region. These peacekeepers moved in under the leadership of Australian forces.

East Timor became independent in May 2002 and on the first day of independence Australia negotiated the Timor Sea Treaty with East Timor. Indonesia had clearly forfeited any share of the Timor Sea oil and gas reserves while Australia was able to claim a massive share of the reserves because of its maritime boundary claim that included the entire continental shelf (that contains most of the oil and gas reserves).

The East Timor Maritime Boundaries Law of 2002 disputed Australia’s maritime boundary claim by creating a 200 kilometre Exclusive Economic Zone. This incorporated most of the Timor Sea oil and gas reserves under East Timorese sovereignty. The total value of the Timor Sea oil and gas reserves is estimated at being more than US\$30 billion. Under the Australia’s arrangements East Timor will receive between US\$4 ad 5 billion. Under East Timor’s arrangements the nation is able to access to the reserves totalling around US\$15 billion.

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Australia has the appearance of being a bully here as the world's poorest nations battles for a bigger share of the cake. Meanwhile Indonesia is the big loser and Jakarta has been inclined to be quite resentful towards Australia over this outcome.

Alison Broinowski in her book *About Face - Asian Accounts of Australia* (2003), suggests this resentment is often embodied in what Indonesian military leaders are known to say: *"Australia is an outsider...a continent on its own...Australia is the appendix of Asia.....small, ignored until it hurts, unnecessary, and easily removable"* (p.36)."

This comment could be interpreted as a gross insult however one needs to think about things. Australia's intentions in East Timor surely raises questions while the White Australia Policy was no doubt a deep insult and an affront to Asian people. The "Pauline Hanson" phenomenon (that does not go away), hostilities aimed at Muslim communities here in Australia in the shadow of the September 11th incident in New York, the Bali bombings in 2002 and the bomb blast outside the Australian Embassy in Jakarta in 2004, are all sad reflections on a society that prides itself on a "fair go".

With this in mind, I am particularly troubled by opposition expressed to the construction of a Muslim prayer room in Sydney's Hills District. Baulkham Hills Shire Council tried to stop the development and then, in an act of vandalism and intimidation, the building was smeared with pig's blood. This is a gross insult to Muslim people while it indicates some people here in Australia lack the ability and maturity and to deal with anything that is different.

There is increasing evidence to suggest Australia is digging itself into a "bunker" as we develop a "fortress" mentality and become even more suspicious, fearful, dismissive and even antagonistic towards the region to our north.

An significant indicator here is Foreign Aid. Commitments measuring 0.7% of GDP have been set by the United Nations for member nations. Australia currently makes a foreign aid commitment of 0.26%.of GDP (2004-05) while the OECD (organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) figure is 0.41%. Projected figures for Australia in 2006 shows a foreign aid commitment of 0.28% while the United Kingdom will offer 0.43%. Norway and the Netherlands are committing 1.0%. A substantial part of our foreign aid commitment goes to the Asia-Pacific region and such a small foreign aid commitment is no doubt indicative of what is being said about a developing "fortress" mentality in Australia.

Further to this point, it is interesting to note that the Australian information library at the Australian embassy in Jakarta has closed. The Australia-Indonesia Institute has a declining budget and now is said to *"mumble along with no clear direction or coherent strategy"*. Radio Australia is deeply wounded and current Australian Government travel warnings regarding the Asia region paint a hostile picture and provide no incentive towards those who wish to visit.

Perhaps the most current issue has something more to say to us here. The Schapelle Corby case is significant and disturbing. Schapelle was sentenced to 20 years gaol on the basis of a drug conviction in Bali on Friday 27th May. This Queensland beauty therapist appears to be the victim of something quite bizarre and many feel justice has not been done.

However the media outcry over this case together with popular outrage aimed at Indonesia is not particularly helpful. Anti Indonesian slogans have appeared along freeways in Brisbane while some people are even suggesting tsunami appeal money should be withheld. The Indonesian Embassy in Canberra has received "hate" mail.

Tim Lindsay, Professor of Asian Law in Melbourne University writes in Friday's Sydney Morning Herald:

"There are lessons to be learnt from this: what happens in Indonesia directly affects Australians. Whether it is war, terrorism, trial or tsunamis, Australians will always be part of what happens to our near north. It is time we focussed more on building links, on repairing that catastrophic decline in Indonesian studies and language skills in Australia and engaging, rather than demonising and shunning, a neighbour, just because it has an Australian on trial."

I believe Tim Lindsay says it concisely. Asia matters because it is there. Our history with Asia is a poor one. We need to attend to this and ensure relationships are repaired.

Future Realities

While the past and the present are important, we must look to the future because Asia is changing rapidly. Soon the combined population of China and India will constitute 40% of the world's population.

There is no doubt that China is emerging as a new economic and military power running second only to the United States. Nations including South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia are now modern, developed nations with a rapidly developing middle class and an economy that is moving from an export orientated one to a consumer society.

Meanwhile in the West birth rates are declining and the average age of the population is on the rise. In contrast to China, India and Indonesia, there will be fewer people in the workforce in Western countries and the welfare state will come under greater challenge. Observers suggest Western countries will experience a significant decline in living standards as massive amounts of money are directed towards care for the elderly and less money is available for investment.

Technological innovation is often the product of young people and with fewer young people, the West's technological edge will decline. Meanwhile Asia faces great possibilities because the population is young and it increasingly able to embrace technological innovation. Numbers of internet users are on the rise in Asia and there is a heightened level of "being connected" throughout Asia and the world.

Many recent Asian leaders had a background related to independence movements and post World War Two reconstruction. This also took place against a background of a Cold War mentality associated with anti-colonial struggles that maintained ties to socialist and communist struggles against capitalism. Many regimes edged towards authoritarianism.

The 1997 Asian financial crisis changed all this. Authoritarian governments have fallen and a process of reform is taking place. Democracy is growing in Asia as governments become more accountable and transparent. The fall of the tyrant, Suharto, in Indonesia is an example while similar trends in South Korea and Taiwan brought their respective opposition leaders into government after long periods of authoritarian government.

Globalisation is the “buzz” word as transnational corporations and free trade agreements pay little respect for traditional borders. National sovereignty is giving way to networks of common interests as neo-capitalism holds centre stage.

In this age of “interconnectivity” information is streamed instantaneously into living rooms where even the most humble home becomes a communication centre. Satellite television, internet connections and mobile phones are everywhere, even in the most remote communities.

For example, the Australian television soap opera “Home and Away”, that is filmed on Sydney’s northern beaches, is popular in West Papua. Meanwhile I remember speaking one Saturday morning in Hyde Park, Sydney, to a large rally protesting over the militia rampage in East Timor during 1999. ABC television beamed images of me and other speakers into Asia via the Australian television network and my colleagues in Jayapura, were able to see me on the evening news.

During the riots in Jakarta when Suharto fell from power, many Indonesians rushed home to watch the action live on CNN! Satellite phone networks together email are not readily subject to the power of the censor and I am able to know within minutes of an event taking place in the jungles of Mindanao or the slums of Bangkok. I am certain the information revolution in Asia has contributed significantly to the development of reform movements and the need for governments to be more transparent and accountable. In other words, they can no longer get away with it like they used to!

I believe a revolution is taking place in Asia. People are better informed, better educated and better connected. The population is young and increasingly able to embrace new technologies.

Rural villages are giving way to super cities while urban middle classes move from labour intensive activities to market driven economies. Roles of women are changing radically as many receive the opportunity to develop their skills. Urban populations are now doubling every 11.6 years while 16 of the world’s largest cities (over ten million inhabitants) will be in Asia by the year 2015.

An interesting trend here is the growth of Christianity. In the year 1900, 71% of the world's Christians lived in Europe and 8% lived in Asia. For the year 2000, 29% of the world's Christians are found in Europe and 16% are found in Asia. Projections for 2025 indicate that the figure for Europe will be 20% and for Asia it will be 18% or 460 million people. That is an estimated 460 million Christians in Asia by the year 2025.

There are now more Christians living in Indonesia than there are people living in Australia. Meanwhile the combined population of Australia and New Zealand roughly equals the number of Christians in India. Indonesian churches form one of the largest blocks at various ecumenical gatherings these days (World Council of Churches and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches) while the official number of Christians in China is 20 million. Unofficial numbers may be as high as 50 million.

These statistics demonstrate that the impetus of Christian faith has definitely moved away from Europe to focus on Asia, Africa and the Americas. No doubt this important trend will be ultimately reflected in the way we understand the church and in the way are the church in the future.

Asia matters because there are massive changes taking place. A revolution is taking place with major social and economic implications. The church is a growing force in this region. Australia needs to build relationships "where the action is". Otherwise we will be left behind.

Issues that Confront

One cannot talk about issues in Asia without making some reference to "globalisation". Francis Fukuyama talks about the "end of history". The demise of the Soviet Union and the entry of China into world markets, says Fukuyama, means liberal capitalism has triumphed for all times. The rest of history will spent simply building the institutional details of capitalism world wide.

Samuel Huntington takes a very different approach. His thesis is referred to as the "cash of civilisations" and Huntington predicts that cultural forces are the key to understanding this globalised world. Cold War ideologies are long gone and the issue now concerns nations or groups who embrace different civilizations. These civilizations will come into conflict and the obvious conflict will involve the West against a Chinese-Islamic alliance.

Meanwhile Robert Kaplan predicts a coming chaos where globalisation will lead to the fragmentation of nations and the fragmentation of communities. Ultimately, Kaplan says, the world will rip itself apart. Fukuyama, Huntington and Kaplan are all, in different ways, rather theoretical and simplistic. However, they provide important points for discussion and they force us to take seriously what is happening around us.

Throughout the world today poverty may be declining however an obvious feature of globalisation appears to relate to a growing inequality across Asia and the world. The share of global income received by the poorest one fifth of the world's population has declined from 2.3% in the 1960's to 1% in 1997. The ratio of the top one fifth's income to the poorest one fifth income went from 30:1 in 1970 to 86:1 in 1999.

Another great divide in the process of globalisation concerns the control of information. Developed nations effectively own around 90% of available media and communications. Information is power and in any society, the one who controls the flow of information is ultimately in charge.

In Asia those who are poor and without power still constitute huge numbers. Two thirds of the world's poor live in Asia and 60% of Asia's population (1.9 billion people that includes 357 million in India and 115 million in Indonesia) still live on an average of US\$ 2 a day. Some 21.5% (690 million people) live on less than US\$1 a day. Rural poverty is a major issue. Around 75% of the world's poor live in rural areas. They are landless people, indigenous people, scheduled castes, internally displaced people, victims of landmines, pastoralists and fishing folk. Women are particularly disadvantaged.

About 70% of the world's more than 250 million indigenous people live in Asia. Throughout India 54% of all indigenous people live below the US \$1 a day poverty line while literacy rates are as low as 13%. "Dalits" or outcastes form around 20% of the population in India and 50% of these people live below the poverty line with literacy rates of around 30%.

HIV/AIDS is now a major concern. While statistics in Africa are horrifying with an estimated 15 million people having already died of AIDS and at least another 25 million people who are HIV positive or are living with AIDS, the situation in Asia is also serious. An estimated 8.2 million people are living with HIV in Asia. In 2004 newly infected people in Asia totalled 1.1 million. India has the largest number of people living with HIV (5.1 million people) while Indonesia (13,000) and China (840,000) are experiencing sharp rises.

HIV/AIDS impacts in a number of ways. Young people (age 15 to 24) account for nearly half of all the new infections while women are increasingly at risk. India is a particular case where 50% of all sex workers in the south are infected while 1% of pregnant women in a number of states are HIV positive.

Malaria continues to impact on Asia. The number of world wide deaths from Malaria is now up to 3 million people per year. Nearly 90 million Indonesians live in Malaria endemic areas and there are about 30 million cases of Malaria annually in the country. West Papua, West Timor and parts of Sulawesi experience the highest rates. Only 10% of Malaria cases in Indonesia are treated in health facilities.

Dengue Fever is on the rise with an estimated 50 million cases world wide each year while tuberculosis is also a serious concern. Indonesia ranks high in the number of cases world wide with the number of latent TB cases standing at more than 8.7 million.

Asia is the cradle of the world's major religions. Islam is the fastest growing of these traditions while we have seen that Christianity is also on the rise in the region. Religion is very important in Asia as it underlies every aspect of life and forms a close bond with local cultures. While the overwhelming majority in Asia embrace tolerant expressions of faith, fundamentalism is present among all religious traditions. Extremist tendencies, whether they be Hindu nationalism in India or Islamic militancy in Indonesia, are becoming more significant as they are often related to the impact of change.

Radical Islamism is one such reaction and these groups seek a radical restructuring of society through the application of "Shari'a" (Islamic law). The Iranian revolution in 1979 is an example. This serves to inspire others who believe, that in their struggle for recognition and control, "God is on their side".

Here the world is divided in a struggle between good and evil. Pre-emptive violence is justified and "jihad" is externalised as an essential component of what amounts to a radical, utopian, revolutionary ideology. Much of this thinking is drawn from the teachings of Wahhabi Islam that underlies the official state of Islam in Saudi Arabia. The radical Abu Sayyaf rebels in the Philippines are an example while Jemaah Islamiyah is another.

Jemaah Islamiyah is aiming to establish "Daulah Islamiyah" or an Islamic State that would include parts of Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. Meanwhile Abu Bakar Bashir took a key role in directing Jemaah Islamiyah cells. He spent time in Afghanistan during the 1980's and is known for his likely connection with the Bali bombings.

Laskar Jihad has some connections with Abu Sayyaf and the Taliban however this is a home grown movement that was established in Java in 2000 with the purpose of defending Islam and establishing a Muslim state in the Maluku Islands. It is now thought that Laskar Jihad is positioning itself in West Papua to propagate Islam in an area that is culturally Melanesian and is inhabited by Christian Papuans who resent being dominated by an Asian power.

The rise of extremist, radical groups such as Abu Sayyaf, Jemaah Islamiyah and Laskar Jihad necessitates the implementation of dialogue between religions and the development of initiatives that bring parties together to negotiate peace. Much is at stake here and I am conscious of the 10,000 people who died and the one million people who were displaced in the Maluku Islands recently because extremist religious elements were able to take charge.

With these terrible tragedies in mind, it is sad to see the West failing to set an example here. In his State of the Union Address in January 2002, George W Bush denounced Iran, Iraq and North Korea as being an "axis of evil" while President Bush also described the so called "war of terror" as being a "crusade". A critical need here is to use and apply the language of peace and reconciliation. Emphasising rifts and exploiting points of tension will simply lead to further disasters.

Then in late September 2002, the Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, described Western civilization as being “*superior*” to that of Islam. He claimed that Western civilization “*has guaranteed well-being and respect for human rights and, in contrast with Islamic countries, respect for religious and political rights.*” He also voiced the hope that “*the West will continue to conquer (Muslim) peoples, like it conquered communism.*” This view was retracted under international pressure however Silvio Berlusconi was not the only person to express this.

Canberra’s close association with people who hold such views, especially the views of President Bush, are deeply troubling.

Asia matters because there are global issues that demand global attention. Growing inequality, the control of information, health related crises and religious extremism call for our involvement in terms of advocacy, project support, dialogue, reconciliation and peace building.

Conclusion

Asia matters for a whole lot of reasons. Asia is, perhaps, the world’s most dynamic region. Massive changes are taking place. The scenario is one that parallels, if not exceeds, the significance of the Industrial Revolution in Europe in terms of its social, political and economic consequences. Australia cannot be left behind. The alternative is to become an irrelevant enclave in a sea of great innovation and creativity.

Asia is also a region of great challenge. The dimensions of such challenges are awesome. I am told that up to 6 million people face famine in North Korea; 8.6 million people are living with HIV/AIDS in Asia; 60% of Asia’s population still live on less than US\$2 a day; separatist conflict in the southern Philippines has killed 120,000 people, the civil war in Sri Lanka has killed 60,000 people while up to 100,000 people have died in West Papua as a result of Indonesia’s military occupation.

There are between 20 and 50 million child labourers in India while around 300,000 people died in the Boxing Day 2004 tsunami that hit the coast of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, India and Sri Lanka. These are staggering figures and they cannot be ignored.

Current developments, therefore, demand that the Uniting Church should continue to engage in Asia. The Australian Government is trying hard, particularly in relation to Indonesia. For example, an MOU was signed in February 2005 that launched negotiations on a bilateral security treaty covering defence, police and intelligence cooperation. Australia is also involved in a counter-terrorism assistance package worth \$20 million while Australia co-hosted with Indonesia a regional interfaith dialogue in December 2004.

During the Seventh Australia-Indonesia Ministerial Forum in Canberra in March 2005, Australian ministers underscored Australia’s support for Indonesia’s territorial integrity while relationships with Indonesian Special Service Forces (Kopassus) appear to have resumed as members of the unit participated in a conference of special forces and counter terrorism experts in NSW in June 2004.

Then, in response to the Boxing Day tsunami, the Australian Indonesia Partnership for Reconstruction and Development (AIPRD) was established. This involves financial aid to the amount of one billion dollars to assist with reconstruction and development in Aceh and else where in Indonesia.

Australia's priorities here have strong pragmatic overtones that fall short of a positive, constructive engagement. There are real questions concerning our engagement with Kopassus while Canberra's commitment to the Indonesia's territorial integrity ignores the plight of marginalised people, particularly in West Papua. In many ways this commitment to upholding Indonesian sovereignty in regions like West Papua serves to condemn the hopes and aspirations of indigenous people who are doing it tough under military rule.

Our engagement with Asia needs to be different. Apart from the need to support peace and reconciliation initiatives, the church has role in working with local partners on issues concerning inequality, poverty and HIV/AIDS. Importantly, we need to engage with Asia as mutual partners and as friends.

Paragraph Two of the Basis of Union sets important directions for the Uniting Church in Australia. These need to be constantly revisited:

"We believe that Christians in Australia are called to bear witness to a unity of faith and life in Christ which transcends cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries, and to this end we commit ourselves to seek special relationships with Churches in Asia and the Pacific..."

When it comes to Asia, my concern is that we Australians are actually retreating behind locked doors like the disciples of Jesus on the first Easter Day. In John's Gospel we read that these disciples were in "fear of the Jews". The disciples were in "preservation mode" and their response provides an interesting example for what may be happening to day.

I worry that we Australians will gather "behind locked doors" because of a deep fear of Asia. I am concerned that we Australians may "dig in" and hide because of a mistrust and even antagonism towards the region. For many years we have looked to our north with the idea that populations will "spill over" and flood south in a kind of "human tsunami".

The World War Two experience lends some understanding as to why people think this way. Meanwhile our involvement in Vietnam was, to some extent, based on a "domino" theory that said Asian communism was making a downward thrust through Asia towards Australia. Antagonists unfortunately described this threat as the "yellow peril". Now there is a fear of "terrorism" while some people speak about an "Islamic cloud gathering over Australia".

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My concern is that Australia's future with Asia will be based on anxiety, fear and suspicion. There are plenty of signs indicating that the doors are already closing. Like the disciples on that first Easter Day, I believe Jesus comes to us with the challenge to reach out. Jesus challenges us to reach out and engage with our Asian brothers and sisters. This is our calling and I believe we have no option but to do it!

Asia is important and we ignore it at our peril.

Rev John Barr
30th May 2005

Suggested Reading

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- Broinowski, Alison About Face – Asian Accounts of Australia
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