



Submission No 28

**Review of Australia's Relationship with the
Countries of Africa**

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Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with the Countries of Africa

Terms of Reference

The Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade shall inquire into and report on Australia's relationship with Africa, with special emphasis on:

- bilateral relations at the parliamentary and government levels;
- economic issues, including trade and investment;
- cultural, scientific and educational relations and exchanges;
- development assistance co-operation and capacity building;
- defence cooperation, regional security and strategic issues; and
- migration and human rights issues.

My submission comes from an interested and concerned individual with reference to Australia's relations with African countries. I have been an Executive Committee member of the African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific (AFSAAP) since 1989 and an Honorary Research Associate in History at La Trobe University since completing my doctoral studies in 1995. I worked and lived in Africa (Uganda 1964-64; Zambia 1968-73) and since 1987 have been involved in historical research on Africa and have visited East, West and South Africa. I was a member of the African Research Institute in La Trobe University until it was closed in 2006 for lack of funding and support in the university at a time when La Trobe University was undergoing structural change.. This occurred with no oversight from the Vice-Chancellor's Committee nor from any State or Federal Government body despite considerable protest both nationally and internationally.

My submission relates to all the terms of reference, in so far as they are dependent on Australian expertise. I focus however on the lack of facilities and incentives for the study of Africa in Australia and specifically in Australian universities. In so far as the knowledge economy is concerned, a university student might gather smatterings of information concerning Africa in courses on International Politics, Peace Studies, Human Rights, History, Environmental Studies, Literature, etc, but nowhere in this large country is there anywhere that a student might focus on African Studies, and

only a handful of universities offer specific courses on Africa¹. I believe that the allocation of Australian Research Council grants for post-doctoral research has seriously omitted topics relating to Africa in the last two decades. Research into the state of African Studies by Tanya Lyons and me in 2003 showed that the teaching of courses on Africa had decreased in Australian universities, and that the retirement of key senior academics had left an almost moribund field of study after peaking in the late 1970s and early 1980s.²

As has always been the case Africanists have been spread across many disciplines and across the country. This was the reason for the formation of AFSAAP in 1978 and the African Research Institute at La Trobe University in 1985. Both organisations have drawn together people with Africa as an interest, to include academic staff and students, Non-Government Organisations and others. David Dorward, who directed the African Research Institute maintained links with DFAT, AusAID and trade links through the South Africa Business Council; he may still have links with the Australia Africa Business Council. Interest in Africa remains high among students and there are still postgraduates doing research on Africa, albeit the number of African specialists is much reduced.

AFSAAP has survived thus far, albeit with a changing focus and losing some of the impetus of scholarship on the African continent. The change in Australia's demography has brought increasing numbers of Africans from the Horn countries, West Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, etc and among the Business category of migrant, from South Africa. A new field of research has opened up examining cultural and social issues of Africans settling in Australia. This has been a growing field of interest for members of AFSAAP, in turn attracting new members. My bibliography 'Africans in Australia' is attached in Appendix 2. The bibliography was published in an issue of the *Australasian Review of African Studies* in 2008 that focused on Africans in Australia.³ The bibliography indicates the research that has been done during the last twenty years and current trends. A relatively new feature of the academic scene is a small number of African Australians in academic positions. This group is not necessarily teaching African Studies, but often they have African research interests.

It would be excellent if the Joint Standing Committee will think deeply about how African expertise can be built up in the university sector. This is where inspiration and aspiration first occur in young people who might make a career in NGOs, in

¹ Lyons, T. and Dimock, E. 'The State of African Studies in Australia' in Zeleza, P. (ed.) *The Study of Africa: Volume II Global and Transnational Engagements* Dakar, Senegal, CODESRIA.. See appendix 1

² Lyons, T. and Dimock, E. 'The State of African Studies in Australia'. Appendix 1

³ Dimock, E. 'Africans in Australia: a bibliography', in the *Australasian Review of African Studies*, Issue 2, Volume XXIX, 2008. This issue contains other valuable bibliographic material, statistics concerning Africans in the Australian and New Zealand censuses by David Lucas, and some research-based articles. This issue is available on the web, under the AFSAAP website at www.afsaap.org.au

international business, in academia or in government departments such as DFAT, DIMAC or others.

There is, I argue, a need for at least one Africa-focused Institute that is properly funded with a number of staff, undergraduate teaching that focuses on Africa across a number of disciplines and facilities for postgraduate and post-doctoral research. An institute of this sort would be a feeder of personnel and ideas for institutes such as the Lowy Institute as well as a source of expertise for government departments.

The continent of Africa is extremely complex with diverse geographies and cultures, composite local and colonial histories, and in varying states of development and engagement with postcolonial worlds. With a population of more than a billion people, increasing from 220 million in 1950,⁴ large parts of the continent have been affected by drought or floods, which may be related to longer-term climate change. Such natural disasters have already played a part in the internal conflicts of some territories and along with political upheavals have led to the internal displacement of populations and an increase in refugees. This is immensely significant to Australia as Federal and State Governments determine policy concerning migrant intakes for the future and as bi-lateral and multi-lateral relations are established and extended. If the current Federal Government is serious about engaging more closely with African countries, consideration should be given to increasing levels of expertise in Australia.

⁴ Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/Africa/demographics> accessed 11 December 2009.

