

Submission to the inquiry conducted by Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee, on behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade on “Building Australia’s relationship with Indonesia”

I am pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry by the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade on Australia’s relations with Indonesia.

I am by profession a historian of Indonesia. I was educated at Monash University, where I received my PhD under the supervision of Professor J.D. Legge, J.A.C. Mackie, and D.P. Chandler. Since 1979, I have been teaching about Indonesia’s history, culture and politics at Griffith University. I have published a number of books and many articles on Indonesia’s (and Southeast Asia’s) modern history, of which the most recent is *Suharto: a political biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). I have served as Dean of the Faculty of Asian and International Studies at Griffith University, and member and Chair of the Expert Advisory Committee for the Humanities and Creative Arts of the Australian Research Council. I am currently Director of the Griffith Asia Pacific Research Institute at Griffith University.

Since my interests in Indonesia are historical (including what might be called contemporary history, that is, the effort to understand contemporary issues in the light of their historical development and antecedents), I have not been engaged as fully as many of my colleagues on policy issues relating to the relationship between Australia and Indonesia. Even though I am a frequent visitor to Indonesia, I rarely make contact with staff from the Australian Embassy, since my experience is that generally they are neither instrumentally helpful nor intellectually enlightening, and that they sometimes tend to take a somewhat disdainful attitude to the efforts of Australian scholars to conduct research in Indonesia. However, because of a number of serious misgivings about the direction the relationship has taken in recent times, I thought I should add my considerations to the evidence being compiled in the course of this inquiry.

In the interests of brevity, I wish to make just three comments; inevitably, such summary treatment will be subject to some crudities of generalisation; I am happy to comment further upon these points, or the matters that might follow from them, would that be deemed to be useful.

1) “Ballast” in the relationship

Recent difficulties within the sphere of Australia-Indonesia relations have been confined almost wholly to what might be called the political sphere, that is, the official or government-to-government contact between Australia and Indonesia. The Sub-Committee will be aware that one of the fundamental changes made to the relationship was the conscious effort by the Hawke and especially the Keating governments to add “ballast” to the relationship: that is, to attempt to establish a multi-faceted relationship (including enhancement of the cultural, education, economic, defence/strategy and political dimensions of the relationship) which would fortify the relationship in times of political tension and not allow it to fall prey to the kinds of lurches which had befallen the relationship episodically since 1950.

Recent difficulties in the political dimensions of the relationship have illustrated the wisdom of this policy. In other words, while there has been considerable tension at the political level,

other aspects of the relationship have endured and prospered without much sign of problems. Thus, Australian scholars of Indonesia have continued to work in Indonesia, and to enjoy friendly and collaborative relationships with their Indonesian counterparts, Indonesian students have continued to come to Australia in excellent numbers, a much smaller number of Australian students has continued to study in Indonesia, cultural partnerships have continued to flourish, and (notwithstanding some hiccups at the time of the financial crisis on 1997-98), economic relationships have continued to strengthen.

Much more needs to be done to develop the existing multiple strands of the relationship, as well as to develop new ones. One vehicle for these efforts, of course, in the Australia-Indonesia Institute, which might profit from an enhanced visibility and budget, and an expanded range of responsibilities. The Sub-Committee will wish to consider how best other efforts to “thicken” the relationship might be made.

2) The “political” dimension of the relationship

Notwithstanding the general solidity of the relationship overall, the question remains of explaining how and why the political relationship (as defined above) has had such a difficult time in recent years. In my opinion, from the Australian point of view there have been two major problems:

The first is the lack of understanding of the dynamics of Indonesian politics (that is, how Indonesian politics and politicians work) within Australian government circles. This problem was most clearly evident in the difficulties that surrounded Australia’s close involvement with the process that eventually led to the independence of East Timor. My comments are not to be interpreted as criticism of the actions Australia took, beginning with the Prime Minister’s letter to President Habibie of December 1998 and continuing on to the introduction of the INTERFET forces and afterwards. I am not one of those who believes that what Australia did was wrong or misconceived. My criticism, rather, is the way that it was done, which betrayed a lack of understanding of Indonesia’s attachment to East Timor in the context of its fierce unitarianism, and of what Indonesia’s leaders expected to eventuate as a result of Habibie’s January 1999 decision to accelerate the process of “solving the problem”. With greater understanding of what might eventuate, and a sensitivity to the protocols of Indonesian politics, much of the subsequent damage to the relationship might have been avoided or at least reduced. Thus, the Prime Minister seemed to have no idea that photos of taken of him, wearing the broadest of triumphant smiles, with groups of Australian soldiers bound for East Timor, would cause great rancour amongst Indonesians who had thought, no more than a few months before, that Australia supported Indonesia’s continuing sovereignty over East Timor.

Strikingly, a variety of this strain of thinking is contained within the booklet providing information for this very inquiry, which states (p. 17) that “Relations suffered significantly as a result of Indonesia’s responses to perceived criticisms from Australia on a number of sensitive issues ...”, including East Timor. This kind of writing is as inaccurate as it is exasperating and unhelpful; it blames Indonesia for causing the problem, which allegedly results from Indonesia’s failure to comprehend what Australia was really doing in relation to East Timor, and then responding inappropriately. Australia, equally, is apparently blameless according to this account. While I do not wish to excuse Indonesian politicians and government and armed forces representatives from the lies, purposeful misunderstandings and grandstandings in which some of them indulged during these times, it was incumbent on Australia to understand the reason behind and to prepare the grounds for this kind of

behaviour, and to calibrate the style of its intervention appropriately. This, after all, is what diplomacy is meant to achieve.

Similar comments might be made about the Australian government's lack of appreciation and understanding of Indonesia's predicament regarding the "illegal immigrant" saga, when the Australian government seemed to think that Indonesia would jump to accommodate its desire to control the flow of illegal immigration to Australia at the source. Such thinking, both in style and content, betrayed an incapacity to appreciate that a few hundred immigrants leaving in boats for Australia was an insignificant problem in Indonesian eyes, itself confronting a vast flow of internal migrants as well as the raft of political, economic and other problems resulting from the collapse of the New Order in May 1998.

The second and related problem is one of personality and personal representation. Unlike his immediate predecessor, the Prime Minister (and, *mutatis mutandis*, his Foreign Minister) appears to have no substantive sense of the importance of personal communications and appropriate personal representation in Indonesia. Judging from media reports and the views conveyed to me by Indonesian colleagues, the Prime Minister appears uncomfortable and awkward in this non-European cultural setting, and to lack both the interest and the sensitivity and patience need to develop substantial long-term personal relationships with key figures in the Indonesian political hierarchy. The building of such personal relationships is the very opposite of the "megaphone diplomacy" which has sometimes been in evidence on the Australian side. The Prime Minister also appears to project an attitude of arrogance and a readiness to talk down which is guaranteed to raise the hackles of Indonesians who endured a long period of colonialism which did much to shape the mind-set of contemporary Indonesian political thinking and behaviour. Finally, rightly or wrongly, he is frequently understood as representing the view that he and his government are not so interested in the countries of the Asia Pacific as were their predecessors, and much more fixed on elaborating bilateral ties, especially with the United States.

These are difficult and sensitive problems with which to deal, and admit of no easy solution. One thing that occurs to me is that the Australian government and its agencies has not sufficiently capitalised upon the wealth of expertise on Indonesia in Australia's universities. There needs to be a much more coordinated and systematic approach to making use of the expertise that exists in Australia on Indonesia, both on matters of policy and of its proper management.

3) The problem of diminishing expertise

The final point I wish to make is to point to the serious decline in the quantity and, consequentially, the reach and quality of Australian research on Indonesia. It is fair to say that, outside of Indonesia itself, it is Australians who have made the most telling contributions to our modern understanding of Indonesia. One could point, for example, to the work on modern history, politics and political economy by scholars like Legge, Feith, Mackie, Reid, Ricklefs, Ingleson, Crouch, Robison, Cribb, Dick and others, to work on economics by Arndt, Hill, Manning and others, to that on culture by Kahn, Fox, Foulcher, Hill, Robinson, and so on. Currently, that imposing legacy is under severe threat, partly because of the market-driven models of funding which Universities perforce employ, which favour technological and vocational knowledges above strategically important ones, partly because in the decline in area studies, and partly because of declining student interest in the language, history, politics and economics of Indonesia. The first generation of great Australian scholars of

Indonesia is now long retired and rapidly thinning. The second generation, educated in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, is aging and approaching retirement age, and sometimes attracted to more lucrative and prestigious positions outside Australia. There is no evidence that there is a third generation of the numbers and quality of its immediate predecessor.

Australia, then, runs the risk that within a decade or so, it will have lost a great deal of its accumulated academic area expertise on Indonesia. Some serious efforts need to be made to prevent this happening, since the costs of miscalculation in dealing with Indonesia, as we have already experienced, can be huge. One way of staunching the loss of expertise might be to develop a program of postgraduate scholarships dedicated to those wanting to develop real area expertise on Indonesia. A more ambitious way might be to found and fund a dedicated Centre for Research on Indonesia, perhaps based at the ANU (but, please, not restricted to it), which could serve as a centre for high quality research on modern and contemporary Indonesia and its relations with Australia, provide a focus for Indonesian scholars visiting Australia, and generally exemplify the fact that Australia values the relationship highly and want to do what it can to embellish and promote it.

I hope these summary thoughts will be of some use to the Sub-Committee in the course of its deliberations.

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