

## **Submission to inquiry on public diplomacy**

Three issues are identified to assist in the inquiry on public diplomacy. Issues vary from quite specific incidents to broader concerns in promoting Australian interests abroad. They mostly concern nations of the Indian Ocean.

I am Kevin Murray, director of Craft Victoria, an organisation funded by both state and federal Australian governments. We are engaging in a wide range of cultural exchange initiatives. Craft provides an important language of exchange the places participants on a relatively equal level. One of these, the South Project, is a multilateral venture that seeks to develop closer ties between Australia and its neighbours across the southern latitudes. In conversation with the ambassadors of participating countries, a common response to this project is the expectation that a formal south-south project would happen eventually, and that Australia seemed the obvious country to lead it, given its clear southern location and relative prosperity.

There is much to be said about the methodologies that the South Project has evolved to facilitate international partnerships, ranging from residencies to cultural agreements. Thus far, it has been with great success and cooperation from overseas partners, particularly New Zealand and Chile. Much could be written about this, but I take this opportunity to focus on three concrete issues that may be of use to the inquiry. We welcome further discussion about the South Project if this is of interest.

### **A Cultural Agreement with South Africa**

The South Project is a five-year program of exchanges designed to foster dialogue between cultures of the south. It began in July 2004 with a gathering in Melbourne of representatives from fourteen different southern countries. South 1 established a network and direction that forms the basis of the creative exchanges of South 2: The Journey. South 2 involves residencies (2005), workshops (2006) and publications (2007). There are forums in Auckland/Wellington (2005), Santiago (2006) and Johannesburg (2007). These dialogues will feed into a Festival of the South in Melbourne, February 2009. For more details please visit the website at [www.southproject.org](http://www.southproject.org)

I have travelled to South Africa on four occasions to help develop cultural exchange with Australia. The nature of these visits has evolved from research to partnership building. On each occasion, I have found great interest from the South African government in developing cultural exchange with Australia. This fits within their outward looking vision for the New South Africa and their focus on south-south exchange.

However, in my conversations with officials, I hear a consistent complaint. They explain that there was an attempt by the South African government to initiate a cultural agreement with Australia. The government has a large number of these agreements with a broad range of the world's nations. They found this initiative rejected by Australians.

The situation from their perspective is that they are being approached by an NGO (Craft Victoria). While they would like to engage in partnership, it needs to be at a government-to-government level. When I have raised this issue with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, I have been told that there is a policy to no longer engage in cultural agreements.<sup>1</sup> These are considered part of a 'cold war' mentality when governments controlled their cultural activities on the international stage. These are no considered best handled at the NGO level.

While this might be the case with at the Australian level, it does not represent the South African way and leaves a partnership opportunity like ours stranded. The

matters at stake are honour and, most likely, funds. While it has not been stated overtly, I surmise that one of the reasons for declining the invitation for a cultural agreement with South Africa was the expectation that Australia would be generous in its side of the agreement. While no doubt budget issues would play a part in this, our own attempts to engage with South Africa would be greatly assisted by actions that address the more symbolic theatre of partnership. I have sought advice from DFAT about alternative gestures, such as Memoranda of Understanding. I was told that an approach would be made to the Treaties section about this.

We are persisting with this exchange. I am travelling again to Pretoria in February 2006 to continue negotiations. We are planning an event in October 2006 to develop cultural exchange. As a compromise measure, the government is advising us to pair with a local NGO who could be the recipient of funding. We are exploring partnership with the Hector Pietersen Memorial and Museum in Soweto.

In development of partnership with South Africa, we have had great good will and assistance from both South African and Australian interests. The Australian High Commission in South Africa has been very helpful and supportive. The visitors program recently brought a South African curator Mona Mokaena to Melbourne, which was a very important visit for the project. The only major obstacle continues to be the issue of the cultural agreement.

Broadly, there was a strong relationship between the Australian government and the South African people during the freedom struggle when support was given to opposition figures like Nelson Mandela. Now that democracy has been victorious in South Africa, it is especially important that Australia continue its positive role in the region. This is challenged by the shadow of the 'packing for Perth' story that cast Australia as a haven for racists. Talking to ordinary people in South African townships, I have been politely asked 'Does Australia still have apartheid?' This misperception has been aggravated by reports of racist taunts towards South African cricketers during their Australian tour. It seems critical that Australia's positive role as a nation of tolerance is promoted in this crucible of modern democracy.

## **The water issue on the island of Kulhudhuffushi, Maldives**

On 26 July 2005, I make a visit to the island of Kulhudhuffushi, in the northern Maldives. I was in the process of selecting an artist to participate in the cultural program of the Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games. I had made contact with members of the new National Gallery of the Maldives, who has subsidised my visit and were accompanying me to the island. My aim was to find a suitable craftsperson of rope-making who could be part of a residency program in February 2006.

We spent the day visiting various candidates. I was impressed with the warmth and hospitality shown to us. The mood of the island seemed relaxed. We visited a circumcision celebration in the evening and were entertained by a specially organised live musical performance which was most energetic.

Kulhudhuffushi is a major island, relative to the average land mass in the Maldives. There are no tourist resorts and it is mostly dependent on fishing for income. It was affected by the tsumani. The large tides did cover much of the island, which led to contamination of the water table and a toll on some vegetation. But the response to this seemed resilient.

The next day, towards the end of my visit, I was in conversation with a resident, which I recorded for possible broadcast (I occasionally put together programs for the ABC Radio National). I introduced this conversation by saying that most

people I'd met in Kulhudhuffushi seemed very happy, but in any part of the world people always have problems and issues that they must deal with. What are the problems in Kulhudhuffushi? In response, this man said that water was a big issue. He explained that there was a severe water shortage due partly to the tsunami and also the population on the island. He went on that there was a class difference on the island between those with tin roofs, who could harvest rain water, and those with thatched roofs, who could not.

Previous to my visit, I had consulted the Australian High Commission of Sri Lanka website for relevant information. A recent newsletter featured the High Commissioner celebrating the construction of a water filtration plant on the island of Kulhudhuffushi.

I interjected during the conversation and said that I assumed the recent water filtration plant is helping. At this point, by interlocutor said, 'Well, that's one of our main problems.' He then explained that there was great concern on the island about the plant. The perception was that it was taking water away from the island and selling it to tourist resorts. All the islanders received in payment was a 'peppercorn rent'. I responded that this must be a misperception and I would investigate.

On the journey back, I broached this subject with my two companions. One of these was a member of the burgeoning political opposition in Maldives. The nation had been a de-facto one-party state for decades, and a number of important figures were seeking to renew their democracy with a capable opposition. He had been talking to many of the island's residents about political issues while I was talking to craftspersons. To confirmed the resident's story. He said he was very concerned about the situation—not just for the water crisis on the island but also that the islanders were threatening to destroy the filtration plant. He said that this would send an unfortunate message about the island and dissuade future foreign investment. I responded as before and said that this must be based on a misunderstanding and as an Australian citizen I felt responsible to gather the correct information and would appreciate if he could convey that to his contacts on the island.

On 3 August 2005, I sent an email to Will Nankervis (Second Secretary, Political) at the Australian High Commission, Sri Lanka, to alert the mission to this issue and seek their advice. On 13 August 2005, I received a reply that the High Commission was monitoring the situation closely. I have heard subsequently that the filtration plant was destroyed by locals. I presume this was of great cost to the businessman who funded the project, and likely to have led to further difficulties to the island in attracting future investment.

There was the possibility that I could have averted this situation if equipped with more information. There are times, particularly in remote areas, where Australian cultural activities might assist with diplomatic interests if adequately informed.

On a positive note, we ended up bringing out a Maldivian stone carver for the Commonwealth Games, who partnered with a local indigenous artist to work at the children's cultural centre, ArtPlay, at Federation Square. We also published an essay from a Maldivian writer as part of the publication *Common Goods: Cultures Meet through Craft*. Thus there was a positive story about Australian involvement in the Maldives arising from my visit.

The Maldives faces a great challenge currently in developing its National Gallery in a way that would reflect the full spectrum of its arts and crafts. Given Australia's strength in cultural infrastructure, we have potentially a few positive role to play in helping develop their arts organisations. This would be assisted greatly by providing opportunities for exchange between arts organisations in Maldives and Australia.

## Success in Mauritius

In the first week of June 2005, I visited Mauritius to select an artist for the cultural program of the Commonwealth Games. According to normal practice, the first approach was through official channels. The Mauritian government seemed to provide a very limited range of artists for selection. In discussion with alternative contacts on the island, a different group of artists were found. Many of these were of Creole background, who are often overlooked by government.

One of these was Lewis Dick, a remarkable wood carver who had established a school for youth at risk in his village of Bambous. Bambous seemed like the Mauritian equivalent of Redfern—a flashpoint for social unrest in the island. Lewis was providing expression and opportunities for these youth with great warmth and generosity.

We invited him to Melbourne for *Common Goods: Cultures Meet through Craft*. He paired with a local artist in a residency at the Moonee Ponds Incinerator Complex. The visit was a great success and audiences seemed charmed by his energy—he even had the sober audience at the Melbourne Museum opening dancing the national dance, the Sega.

While in Melbourne, he was given a living allowance which he managed to save. On return, he used this money to open a gallery for wood carving in Bambous. The Mauritian press ran an article about this and Lewis Dick thanked Craft Victoria for funding the gallery. Before leaving Mauritius, Lewis Dick had been successful in receiving government support for scholarships to students at his school. This was apparently the first time there had been government support for a Creole artist, and was directly attributable to the recognition Lewis Dick had been granted as an artist selected for the Commonwealth Games.

I was impressed in Mauritius by its close links to Australia. With one exception, every taxi driver I spoke to had a son or daughter studying in Australia. The Australian High Commission in Mauritius are quite active in promoting Australian culture. But the recognition of Mauritian arts seems an important way of presenting a positive image for Australia. A little goes a long way.

Mauritius faces a similar challenge to the Maldives in the development of a nascent National Art Gallery (though theirs does not even have a location yet). As with the Maldives, further exchange at the level of arts organisations would seem to make a significant difference to the island. I found their perception of a National Art Gallery limited to the display of oil paintings, which has a virtually non-existent history and ignores the vibrant crafts that typify their culture. Exchange with Australian galleries would help broaden their perceptions of what an official institution like this could be.

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Kevin Murray  
 Director  
 Craft Victoria  
 31 Flinders Lane  
 MELBOURNE VIC 3000  
 ph +61 3 9650 7775  
 fax +61 3 9650 5688  
[www.craftvic.asn.au](http://www.craftvic.asn.au)

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<sup>i</sup> Though an exception here is the bilateral Cultural Agreement with China that the Australian government signed in July 2005