



Submission to the Inquiry into Australian's Relations with Indonesia

Sadly this inquiry comes at an important time in Australian-Indonesian relations, since the consequences of the Bali bombings are still being felt by both our nations.

I write as an Australian who has been travelling to Indonesia since I first took part in a school excursion in 1972, and who has been researching in Indonesia, particularly Bali, for nearly twenty-four years. My education in Indonesian Studies was a direct consequence of the Menzies Government's decisions to invest substantial resources to establish university centres with a regional emphasis, and also a consequence of the wave of Australian interest in Indonesia that was supported by the Gorton and Whitlam Governments. Australian-Indonesian relations, particularly the fostering of knowledge of each other, should always be a bi-partisan priority.

Australian-Indonesian relations should not, however, be mistaken for Canberra-Jakarta relations, or even military-to-military contacts. Given the shifts that occur in government policies and politics on both sides, and given the problems of the history of human rights abuses in the Indonesian military, government and military contacts should be the end point of programs to foster relationships, not the starting point. Unless Australia has politicians with a good general understanding of immense complexities of Indonesian society and politics, we cannot negotiate on a government-to-government level. Some basic questions reveal the depth of the problem: how many Australian politicians can give a speech in Indonesian? How many of the Australian Intelligence operatives sent to investigate the Bali bombings can speak Javanese, the first language of members of the group most likely responsible for the bombings?

The current state of the study of Indonesia in Australia is dire. Funding programs to support Asian languages in schools have been cut, only a small number of schools in New South Wales are able to support Indonesian language studies, and university departments teaching Asian Studies have suffered heavily in the cuts in funding in real terms that have occurred across that sector over the last decade. In the case of university education we are caught in a vicious cycle. Many of my students find the study of Indonesian history "too difficult" because it is unfamiliar to them, and it is unfamiliar because there has not been enough education about Indonesia across the board.

This problem is reinforced by the visibility of Indonesia in the Australian media. Our media shows very little interest in Indonesia until dramatic events occur. Media coverage of recent events has reinforced "Living Dangerously" clichés about Indonesia without breaking through barriers against understanding, partly because so few people in the Australian media have any relevant background knowledge. The reporters hastily sent off to Bali and Jakarta mutilated Balinese and Indonesian names,

and spent more time interviewing Australians in Indonesia than the Indonesians themselves.

Another example is a recent exhibition of Indonesian art that I curated. This exhibition, "Crossing Boundaries. Bali: A Window to Twentieth Century Indonesian Art", organised by the Asia Society AustraliaAsia, and currently touring regional centres in Victoria and New South Wales, is an important initiative in raising cultural awareness. However part of the funding was rejected by the relevant board of the Department of the Arts and Sport, and there has been no media attention to the exhibition. In contrast to the many interviews I have done over last two weeks on the bombings, I have not been contacted at all about this exhibition.

In 1988 the Ingleson Report recommended a "mainstreaming" of knowledge of Asia in Australian educational curricula, along with support for the teaching of key Asian languages throughout the country, especially Indonesian. We need to return to these ideas, and give adequate funding to programs that can build up the society-to-society relationship.

Exchange programs are an important part of our relationship, which also means that instead of Australia's immigration authorities doing their best to prevent ordinary Indonesians from visiting Australia, they should be facilitating contacts.

A starting point in building relationships would be to greatly increase the funding of the Australia-Indonesian Institute, which cannot support many of the good applications it receives each year. The Australian Research Council's priority areas should include research on Asia. Ultimately an educational strategy needs to be devised in which the study of Indonesia, and of the region in general, becomes a normal part of all school and university curricula, not an exotic and unfamiliar "extra."

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