

Unspoken Realities

Jacob sat back, gazing out over that upper reach of Sydney Harbour known as the Paramatta River. A massive golden fleece of clouds adorned the western sky. We both enjoyed the spectacle at this time of the year when crinkly golden winter clouds reddened against a westering sun. We often came to the rowing club late in the day, since Jacob's son joined it. The club had good bus and ferry connections, so we didn't need to drive and the bistro served excellent food.

"It's such a beautiful view to the west from here," Jacob reflected. "To think it was once a grimy industrial precinct. We do live in a land of abundance. You know ..."

"Our land abounds in nature's gifts, eh?" I interrupted. "It's easy to fall into the fantasy of living in the best country in the world."

"Oh! I thought we did," he said smiling. "You mean to say there are problems with this country, Russ?"

"Just a few," I said. "Coming back. I've a far greater sense of how we appear from the outside looking in, how others see our global citizenship. I've always thought diplomacy was about reducing conflict between nations and I don't think we're doing well."

"One thing's for sure, the Howard government's approach displays a marked lack of respect for other's sovereignty."

"That's putting it mildly," I exclaimed. "He's been banging on about pre-emptive strikes to protect us from terrorism for months now. It hasn't gone down well in Indonesia. Add to this a lack of emphasis on cultural exchange and aid along with a domestic narrative

designed to keep people ignorant and then dog whistle up fears of the unknown."

"Russ, he's been working on this since the late nineties."

Both well-travelled Australians we were probably more sensitive than many to recalibrations in Australian Foreign Policy. Working globally, Jacob in a scientific field and me in education and tourism, had equipped us with an acute awareness uncommon amongst casual travellers.

I went on: "I couldn't believe it when they shutdown Radio Australia's transmitters on the Cox Peninsula in June of '97. Suddenly our capacity to broadcast the daily narrative of our lives or those of our regional neighbours in the languages of our region either disappeared or was barely audible over large areas. I relied on those broadcasts when I worked in Indonesia."

"What, in Bahasa, Russ?"

"No, I mean the Australian language broadcasts. Yeah sure, I heard broadcasts in Indonesian. Many people listened in. Once I was climbing Mount Batur very early one morning and the kookaburra call sign broke through the darkness. Reducing that footprint couldn't have been more poorly timed."

Back in 1997, I realised Indonesia was on the verge of a tumultuous period. When the change came, it saw economic crisis; the fall of Suharto's New Order Regime; widespread civil unrest often directed at Chinese citizens; a new democratically elected government; as well as the resurgence of the fanatical Islamic fringe group Jemaah Islamia with the return of its leadership from Malaysia in 1999.

I asked, "Did you come across people listening to Radio Australia on any of your visits, Jacob?"

"No, not really."

"Maybe this was because you were working with the scientific community. It seems that from the 1970s,

the more educated were already tuning to the new local FM stations. Ordinary people still depended on AM and shortwave but these broadcasts were highly regulated and censored so Radio Australia had a receptive audience."

"Yes, I guess it attracted a big following amongst ordinary folk."

"It did," I replied. I was reading the book *Radio Wars* by Errol Hodge and found that in 1979-80, it received 198,000 fan letters in Indonesian, and these are just the people who chose to write."

"With all that appalling violence after the vote for independence in East Timor, a strong signal might have helped," Jacob reflected. "What is it with these conservative governments? Why do they want to kill off the ABCs capacity as an independent news service under the guise of budgetary restraint and economic necessity?"

"It's ideological," I said. "It has been since the time Hasluck was Foreign Minister."

"Hasluck! Now there's a name I haven't heard for a while. The man who pleaded for us to be allowed to join the Vietnam War?"

"They don't believe in a free press unless their privileged mates control it," I continued. "It would've been much easier to explain the INTERFET action to ordinary everyday Indonesians if we'd had a full-throated Radio Australia. Suharto's New Order regime didn't only abuse the human rights in East Timor but militarised governance and narrowed opportunities for democratic process throughout Indonesia. Potentially there was a most sympathetic audience."

In response to the violence in East Timor, the UN Security Council carried Resolution 1264, enabling the formation of the International Force For East Timor (INTERFET). Under Australia's leadership, INTERFET was to restore security in the territory. Logistically the

response was well managed, efficiently led and temperate, but there was one problem. Just after Indonesia agreed to admit INTERFET the Australian magazine. *The Bulletin* published comments on foreign policy in which Prime Minister Howard is alleged to have said that Australia was becoming the USA's 'Deputy Sheriff'. This vulgar affirmation of the Howard Doctrine was most unpopular throughout the Asia Pacific region, particularly in Indonesia.

"Many people recognised that Howard had unhealthy Eurocentric, even racist leanings," said Jacob. "One Indian Australian friend of mine who lived in Howard's electorate said Howard had made lots of subtle racist comments in the local newspaper."

"Yes, I've heard that as well, and then there was his relative silence on Pauline Hanson's anti-Asian pronouncements."

"Don't forget his reluctance to support Vietnamese 'boat people' when he was a member of the Fraser Cabinet," said Jacob.

This disturbed me. I sat back thinking of the war, all the Vietnamese students I'd taught, some from thread bare associations of siblings and cousins, parents lost in the conflict.

"Regional foreign policy isn't simple. Timor is a good example. Much as I supported the notion of independence for the East Timorese, I felt that as a nation we needed to move cautiously. Sure, there were very strong feelings in Australia."

"Dating right back to Sparrow Force," Jacob reminded me.

"The Timorese helped a lot in the guerrilla struggle against the Japanese. On the other hand, in 1999 we had one of the world's most populous nations on our doorstep going through a political crisis at the end of 35 years of

military dictatorship."

"You aren't arguing against East Timorese independence, are you Russ?"

"No, far from it, but when we became involved in INTERFET, it was done in such a triumphalist way I was reading this commentary by M.C. Ricklefs recently and he made the point... I thought it was so important I saved the text... it's on my phone... just a minute ... yeah, here it is: 'It was as if Australia, rather than partnering others in a regional police action, was again sending off troops to Gallipoli as the band played "Waltzing Matilda". Military triumphalism was the prime ministerial style of the day. Indonesians, who were humiliated by the collapse of their economy, by the secession of East Timor, and by the need to have foreigners to keep order there, were now subject to further humiliation by the Australian Prime Minister.' That's how it felt to me as well."

Sipping on his beer, Jacob gazed out into the darkening sky. We sat in silence allowing this discussion and its implications to settle for a moment.

Finally Jacob spoke, "I suppose many Indonesians worried that the whole operation was just a covert Australian attempt to break up the country. You know, to surgically remove East Timor and then maybe West Papua. Like an oil and resources grab."

"No doubt. And in Australia, there is a small lunatic fringe that envisages a greater Australia including Timor and West Papua. In my opinion, Howard's triumphalism and culturally superior tone fed into this delusional thinking."

Again the conversation lapsed as we struggled to make sense of just how far the Howard doctrine had shifted Australian foreign policy. Once Australia was so trusted by Indonesia that it was called upon to represent the fledgling republic in the United Nations as it struggled

to deal with Dutch military pressure. The Howard government's grave political mismanagement and incompetence was plain. Restricting Radio Australia's Indonesian broadcasts created a news vacuum of sorts. Indonesians were forced to find alternate sources of news not all of them particularly favourable to Australia.

"Another problem for me, Jacob, was Australia's Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer. You know I was involved in educational and cultural initiatives with Indonesia. Well, I couldn't believe how inept he was. I don't know whether you recall this but at the 2000, Asian Leaders' Forum in Beijing, he announced that Australia could not so much view regionalism as cultural but practical, not something built on common ties but only mutually agreed goals. Now just think about that."

Jacob didn't answer. As if following my suggestion, he leaned forward sinking his chin into his hand raising his eyebrows. He sat for a few moments then leaned back in his chair. "It seems he was ignoring our significant Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese and Khmer Diasporas and that's just a few. Then there are the large numbers of Melanesians and Polynesians playing prominent roles in sporting codes like rugby. What on earth did he really mean?" Jacob answered his own rhetorical question with an ironic chuckle.

"I can only conclude that it's Anglo or Eurocentric ideology. This diminution of culture speech coincided almost exactly with the Pentecost in 2000. This is a significant date because it marked the beginning of a new role for Radio Australia's transmitters on the Cox Peninsula. Now the crusading zeal of Bob Edmiston's Christian Voice replaced the kookaburra's call, beaming an evangelical message across the old footprint. Anyway, you having another one, Jacob? It's my shout."

"I'll sit on this one, thanks. I have to drive tonight."

Jacob toyed with his almost empty glass, head to one side and silent for a moment before continuing. "I'm still thinking through this idea of triumphalism," he said. "Howard is skilful in connecting it all with the ANZAC narrative; well, a version of it. It's a dangerous mix. What do you think?"

"He uses it but he also works with the fear of the unknown. Asylum seekers have been ruthlessly exploited. The 'Children Overboard' scam was an appalling and shameful business."

Jacob nodded then went on, "His support peaks every time he manages to inoculate the minds of electors with fear and insecurity. Then once he's infected people, he proffers his own particular brand of political snake oil to remedy the problem."

"Yeah, that's for sure," I affirmed.

"Mind you, the material he's had to work with has given him a lay down *tnisere*. Being in New York during the World Trade Centre attack put wind in his sails. We were in with the Coalition of the Willing right from the start. It was as if the wick was lit and to hell with the UN, we were all the way with the USA again."

"Yeah, once fear and xenophobia were activated, extremism began to rise."

"I agree with that, Russ, it's been very obvious. Didn't you tell me about someone you knew who wanted to respond by bombing the *Ka'aba*?"

"I did. Having lived and worked with Muslims, I was shocked at his extremism, but it cut both ways."

"How do you mean?"

"I spoke with a Javanese Muslim friend in the weeks following the attack. Her concern was the sharpening of attitudes amongst otherwise moderate friends. She felt their responses were partly a reaction to careless statements like George Bush's. He said 'this crusade, this

war on terrorism, is going to take a while/ That was a week after the World Trade Centre attack and the use of the word 'crusade' was a major problem."

"Osama Bin Laden was quick to pick up on it. He said something like 'We will fight the Crusaders and continue our Jihad/ It was an appeal to medievalist Wahabism a turning away from the 21st century and moderation. He even tied Australia in to some of his rhetoric."

"Yes," I said, "and during all of these utterances the voice of Radio Australia was was muffled in Indonesia."

For both of us, the world had changed greatly since we first met at university. Once the world was simple and as the Vietnam War finally drew to an end, we looked forward to a future of peace. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Arms Race inspired further confidence in a peaceful future but again, things were changing. A post Cold War future was simply a struggle between new fundamentalisms.

"I'm not optimistic about the future, Jacob. Apart from this new polarisation of the world, there is still an obsession with armaments, an increasing disparity between rich and poor, total denial in many quarters about climate change and an intractable resistance to the notion of environmental sustainability."

"All big issues."

"I can't let go of this Radio Australia issue and Downer's handling of Foreign Policy. How could he believe that our interests remain strategic and not cultural? What century is he living in? There has been more than 20 years of growing contact with Indonesia through tourism plus extensive educational and cultural contact. Places like Bali are shared spaces, in a sense both Australian and Indonesian, like a type of a third space. These aren't spaces that Alexander Downer is likely to visit, much less John Howard. Clearly they don't have a road map."