

REPORTING ASIA: COPING WITH DIVERSITY

Address by Senator the Hon Gareth Evans, QC, Minister for Foreign Affairs, to the Reporting Asia Workshop, Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University, 12 June 1995.

I. DIVERSITY

The most striking immediate characteristic of the Asian region is its diversity. In the whole sweep of countries from Japan to Afghanistan there was, before the Europeans, no word for 'Asia', and no 'Asian' consciousness - hardly surprisingly, given the presence of six or more important and distinct mainstream cultural traditions, dozens of cultures of more localised significance, and a multitude of living languages. Centuries of human contact and intermingling have produced a richer tapestry of contrasts - ethnic, linguistic, religious, economic and political - than is to be found in any of the world's other identifiable regions.

There are some who see in that cultural diversity - in Asia, and wherever else it appears in the world for that matter - cause for anxiety. Thus Samuel Huntington's notion of 'the clash of civilisations' - the view that world politics is entering a new phase in which the great division, and the dominating sources of conflict, will be cultural - with potentially bloody fault-lines developing along the boundaries between the major civilisations, identified as four Asian (Confucian, Japanese, Islamic and Hindu) and four others (Western, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and African)

- Owen Harries thinks Australians should be getting very excited about this:

...if Huntington is right in identifying...an emerging Confucian-Islamic challenge to the West as a central fact of the new era, it means Australia is living on the edge of the most dangerous 'fault-line' in the world - and is the softest Western target on that line.

But it is hard to take Huntington's thesis very seriously, either as description or prediction.

- While it is, of course, the case that what Huntington describes as 'civilisations' are very important in defining what are still important differences between peoples around the world, the question is how relevant those differences are, and the extent to which they - and they alone - will generate conflicts and divisions. After all, common Islamic roots did not stop Iraq from invading Kuwait, or most of its Arab neighbours joining with the Western retaliation; common Confucian roots haven't stopped acute tensions between North and South Korea; and common Africanism hasn't stopped endless conflicts in that continent.

- More generally, objections to Huntington include the apparent arbitrariness of the civilisation-boundary lines - the way they seem capable of expanding or contracting to fit the example of the moment; the way in which he ignores the integrative or convergence tendencies at work in the world, which transcend civilisation boundaries; and the way in which he effectively ignores the tendency toward social fragmentation, or retribalisation, within so-called civilisations - and indeed, in a great many cases today, within individual countries - which are a far more obvious source of contemporary conflict.

- One of the obvious threshold problems about applying Huntington's theory to Asia is that the civilisation or boundary lines are already so blurred - with elements completely melded in Indo-China and most of South East Asia, and with many societies (Singapore, Malaysia - not to mention Australia) conspicuously multi-ethnic in character.

Not many people have taken Huntington's ideas too seriously, but there is a softer version which has attracted a considerable following - the notion of what might be thought of as a distinctly 'East Asian' civilisation, combining elements of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism - and, in some versions, a dash of Islam as well.

- The basic elements of this civilisation are said to involve less emphasis on individual rights and freedoms and more on the values associated with the family, the group, education, hard work, obedience, loyalty and discipline - all argued to be less emphasised in the West.

But there is, again, less to all this than meets the eye

- if, as is commonly suggested, this combination of values has been crucial to the recent dramatic economic success story in East Asia why, given all that philosophical tradition working for it for so many centuries, did the East Asian economic miracle not pre-date, rather than post-date, that in the more fickle and individualistic West?

- more fundamentally, Kim Dae Jung points out that the arguments for exclusively Asian or East Asian values have about them a strongly self-serving air, as justifications for authoritarian rule in a number of states:

: They ignore the fact that the will of the people is a tradition in Chinese and other Asian societies which has a very long history - much longer in fact than in the West - in the form of clearly understood reciprocal duties and responsibilities between ruler and ruled;

: They tend to assume, moreover, that Asian societies are standing still and that their cultural patterns and beliefs are immutable, an assumption which is as implausible for Asia as for the West.

The point about Asia - and the larger Asia Pacific region - is that similarities are becoming as important as the differences: the phenomenon of convergence, driven more than any other single factor by the information technology revolution, is alive and well.

- Traditional distinctions between businesses are rapidly breaking down (especially those between the computing, communications, consumer electronics, publishing and entertainment); national boundaries are opening up; markets (eg the Chinese 'language market') and being defined in new ways; and generally more and more, around this larger Asia Pacific region, countries are coming to see and respond to issues the same way, to emphasise shared interests rather than separate interests, and to develop shared institutions and processes.

- Some have gone so far as to suggest that already technological convergence - and all the economic, social and political dynamics that go with it - are leading to significant cultural convergence

: Yoichi Funabashi talks about the emergence of a new "Asia Pacific 'cross-fertilised' civilisation"

: Kishore Mahbubani argues that we are now witnessing "a fusion of Western and East Asian cultures in the Asia Pacific region."

There have been some emerging straws in the wind in this respect even so far as the very sensitive issue of human rights is concerned, with increasing acknowledgment by Asian leaders that there is a common core of universal values, going to individuals' needs not only for security and property, but for dignity and liberty as well. Thus Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in Hong Kong last December:

If we in Asia want to speak credibly of Asian values, we too must be prepared to champion those ideals which are universal and belong to humanity as a whole. It is altogether shameful, if ingenious, to cite Asian values as an excuse for autocratic practices and denial of basic rights and civil liberties. To say that freedom is western or unAsian is to offend our own traditions as well as our forefathers who gave their lives in the struggle against tyranny and injustices. It is true that Asians lay great emphasis on order and societal stability. But it is certainly wrong to regard society as a kind of false god upon whose altar the individual must constantly be sacrificed. No Asian tradition can be cited to support the proposition that in Asia the individual must melt into the faceless community.

- Looking around this larger region, as indeed around the world, one cannot help but be struck at the way in which governments are increasingly being judged the same way - not by their claims to ideological rectitude, but by their performance. Are they promoting or inhibiting economic development? Are they ensuring a fair distribution of the benefits of economic growth and protecting the weak? Are they improving the quality of life for ordinary people and protecting the environment for their children? Are they conducting their nations' foreign relations in ways that reinforce or undermine their security and pride? Is government being run in the interests of the governors or the governed?

: the urge for genuine democracy, for responsiveness in government on all these fronts, should never be underestimated. It is one that cuts across traditional cultural boundaries. It is difficult to believe that the democratic instinct shown in May 1993 by the people of Cambodia, against formidable odds, does not exist equally - and would not be as vigorously exercised if given half a chance - in other nations in the region, and outside it, where democracy is yet to be fully realised. And developments in Japan over the last two years are an instructive illustration of another aspect of how long-established political moulds are being broken.

II : COPING

However we define the region for present purposes (as "Asia", "the Asia Pacific" or - as I think might be most useful given today's participants "the East Asian Hemisphere") it is easy to exaggerate both the extent of diversity and the extent of convergence. Both tendencies are evident in discussions of the media's role and responsibilities:

- One tendency is to become preoccupied with diversity, to exaggerate its extent and significance and to assume that it is somehow static and not subject to the forces of change. Outdated and somewhat stereotyped images of diversity are still about, many of them emanating from the media itself, and they are not helpful, either to understanding between the region's people or to efforts to strengthen regional cooperation: images of occident and orient, "them" and "us", "their" values and "ours", bear little relation to a much more complex, and shaded, reality.

- The other tendency is to exaggerate the extent to which technological convergence has already produced cultural convergence. Sometimes its effect, on the contrary, has been to put cultural diversity between various nations of the region into stronger relief, and to produce clashes. Over time, countries of very different backgrounds are developing - under the particular impact of modern communications technology - information bases, practices, institutions, tastes and outlooks that are ever more similar. But for the time being, and we are in that respect very much within a transitional period, the media in this region are still, voluntarily or not, very

much state-bound in their outlook. They still work within a national frame of reference and, consequently can sometimes find it difficult, when reporting on their neighbours, to cope with cultures that are still significantly different.

If the truth is, as it usually tends to be, somewhere in the middle ground - meaning that there are still important cultural differences in the region, but that we shouldn't overstate or be overwhelmed by them - what prescriptions follow for those reporting Asia? While I am deeply conscious, from long personal experience, that any politician is in no-win territory whenever he or she pronounces upon the media's role and responsibilities, let me offer three propositions which I think have general applicability, not just for Australians reporting Asia, but for everyone in the region reporting everyone else.

Observe Normal Neighbourhood Civility

I argued in my book *Australia's Foreign Relations*, in the context not specifically of the media but of wider international relations, that for Australians to approach the region with confidence that we can operate successfully within it does not mean we have to thwart our own national values or deny our history. But it may make sense, I said, in Asia, to moderate some of the directness, or brashness, that we might routinely deploy in encounters within Australia or with North America or Europe. But that is simply a matter of learning the business of normal neighbourhood civility. It does not mean moderating our commitment to values which are at the core of our sense of national identity and worth - in particular those of democracy and individual liberty.

- It is important for us in Australia to constantly remember that we are not the only country with a strong sense of identity or worth. Evatt made the point back in 1955 that

Our relations must...be based on a scrupulous regard for the self-respect and dignity of these Asian nations [who] have a civilisation which has endured longer than our own.

I think these strictures do have applicability to the media as well. It is not a matter of being trapped into embracing a crude relativism. The media should, of course, be prepared to raise issues another country in the region might not like: human rights issues will often be high on the agenda in this respect. But it is the

way they do it that is important.

- The media need to understand the values of the countries in the region, respect their uniqueness, and appreciate the very real sensitivities of other countries with different cultural traditions. Rather than strident chest-beating, which can often be quite counter-productive in its impact, the media may be equally or more effective by presenting facts in a thoughtful, unsensational fashion. The substance may have to cause offence; but the style needn't.

Be Well Informed

If offence is inevitably going to be given from time to time, at least it should not be given inadvertently. And for that to be guaranteed, it is necessary that media organisations make a more systematic effort - in their recruitment and training - to ensure a high level of regional cross-cultural and political awareness among their professionals. If this was important in the past then, with new technology constantly expanding penetration capability and with interest rapidly growing, it is now critical.

Increased people-to-people contacts can go a long way towards improving our understanding of each other. That was certainly borne out by the recent meeting of Australian and Indonesian editors in Sydney, and I am certain it will be here as well. Special media visitor programs run by governments, cultural foundations and media organisations themselves have never been more important.

- Some interesting insights can be gained by these kinds of meetings and exchanges. For example, at the last month's editors meeting in Sydney I am told that one Australian newspaper editor (Hywood) was strenuously making the point that Australian society is confrontationist, so our media report in a confrontationist way. The results, he said, should not be taken personally by the country receiving unfavourable publicity.

- I note that at least part of this message seems to be getting through in Singapore with the *Business Times* of 7 June quoting approvingly Mr Stephen Mulholland's observation that:

I've never come across anything like the Australian media.
They're rapacious, noisy and inaccurate. It really is a

remarkable collection of vociferous people who think they are very, very important.

Mind you, I am not sure that the Singaporeans were keen to draw only a positive, educative moral by publicising this quote, but I suppose you have to start somewhere...

One of the best ways of improving the quality of the information stock is for media organisations to base correspondents in cities around the region. The editor-in-chief of *The Australian*, Paul Kelly, said at the Indonesian editors' meeting that "there is no substitute for having people on the ground covering a story" and he was right: although quality, of course, remains as important as quantity in this respect. I am pleased to see that this workshop will be examining that issue.

- Of course, sometimes there are problems with some countries limiting the number of resident foreign correspondents. Travel can also be restricted. But that is just a fact of life of reporting in some countries.

- I am not suggesting that the international news agencies are filing inaccurate or incomplete copy. But the picture conveyed by a professional journalist to his or her own media organisation will invariably provide us with broader news and analysis, and therefore greater insights into our neighbours.

Be Professional

Being well informed is really only part of the larger media responsibility to be, simply, professional. There will always be a temptation for commercial imperatives to encourage sensationalism, and for that sensationalism to come at a price not only in terms of wounded personal sensitivities, but - in an international context - wounded national sensitivities.

A lot of the problems that arise in cross-reporting around the region could be avoided or minimised simply by rigorous attention to the kind of injunctions which are part of journalists' Codes of Ethics everywhere (and if they are not, should be). For example:

- to report and interpret the news with scrupulous honesty, striving to disclose all essential facts, and clearly differentiating between news and comment;
- not suppressing relevant, available facts or distorting by wrong or improper emphasis;
 - correcting inaccurate published information;
 - being sensitive to questions of race, gender, religious belief and the like; and
 - respecting personal privacy, and resisting the compulsion to intrude.

Within countries, these professional standards are sometimes monitored and, with varying degrees of gentleness, enforced by Press Councils or similar organisations. But there is no similar mechanism - other than intergovernmental complaints - for helping to redress lapses of basic standards across countries. It is probably impractical to contemplate any such mechanism, but the question is one that could perhaps usefully be addressed by this workshop.

- What could also usefully be addressed is the utility or desirability of the kind of guidelines for cross-cultural journalism that have been prepared, for example, by the ABC for those making programs for the Australia Television regional satellite service.

At the end of the day the primary need is simply for better training, and on-going training, of media professionals in what it is to be a media professional. (I won't try and wrestle with the further question as to who should train the trainers...)

For all its lapses and shortcomings, there can never be any doubt that a free media is a force for good both within and between countries

- not only in continuing to press governments to account for their performance in all the ways I mentioned earlier;
- but also in creating a healthier and more harmonious international and regional environment - through better educating us all about the political

and economic realities around us; assisting our peoples to become less exotic and alien to one another, by creating a greater awareness and understanding of our region's varied societies, traditions and practices; enabling people to more readily appreciate the similarities, rather than simply differences, between them; and, in general just eliminating some of the distance, psychological as well as geographical, that keeps us apart.

: As Dr Johnson said about the dog walking on its hind legs - the important thing is not to fuss too much about how well it is being, or could be, done, but to appreciate that it's being done at all.

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