

July 27, 15:30~16:30: Plenary Lecture III, Room 2-1702

David LOWE, Deakin University, Australia

“Australian Colombo Plans, Old and New”

Key words

overseas aid, education, public diplomacy, people-to-people connections

Abstract

Australians have developed a strong sense of pride in their country’s prominent role in the Colombo Plan for aid to South and Southeast Asia which was at its height from 1951 to the early 1970s. In particular, they recall and celebrate the higher education and training opportunities provided to students from developing Asian countries. The recollections and ‘lessons’ drawn from Australia’s sponsorship of Asian students tend to draw two positive conclusions: that a significant number of Asian students who studied in Australia during the 1950s to 1970s returned home and rose to positions of prominence in public life, including some politicians, while sustaining warm memories of their indebtedness to Australian educators; and that a more general ‘people-to-people’ connectedness was forged, with lasting friendships and increases in mutual interest and awareness between Australians and citizens of Asian countries.

At the end of 2013, the Abbott Government invoked the memory of the Colombo Plan by launching a ‘New Colombo Plan’, aimed at the reverse of the original plan, and sponsoring Australian students to spend time at an Asian university, and, ideally, a complementary internship experience in the country of study. Recalling the ‘old’ Colombo Plan involved an act of historical sketching and drawing on memories. It can also be seen partly as a continuation of Australia’s ‘history wars’ of the 1990s – the original Colombo Plan owed much to Liberal Party Ministers for External Affairs, Percy Spender and Richard Casey, and to recall it now erodes Labor Party claims to have pioneered positive relations with Asia under Gough Whitlam in the 1970s and/or economic alignment with booming northeast Asian economies under Bob Hawke in the 1980s. But, in the context of the 2012 White Paper on Australia and the Asian Century, and the strong but often inchoate concern for ‘people-to-people’ connections, the New Colombo Plan carries more intent and portent than tussles over history. When she launched the New Colombo Plan in December 2013, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said she hoped that Australian tertiary students would come to see a period of study at an Asian university as ‘a rite of passage’ associated with their transition to adulthood.

This paper suggests that much is being asked of the New Colombo Plan. In the context of Australian thinking about public diplomacy and people-to-people connections in Asian-Australian relations, historical narrative looms logically as significant. But much has also changed for connections between Asia and Australia since the early 1970s. One of the most enduring sources of narrative, and one that taps directly into memories of the original Colombo Plan, is that of shared learning and life experiences – the personal narratives that continue to feature in AusAID-now DFAT stories about student experiences. In new forms, with logical connections to older stories of Colombo Plan students, such life -story material has significant

potential to carry forward at least some of the current hopes of the Australian government for the New Colombo Plan.

LOWE, David

David Lowe is Director of the Alfred Deakin Research Institute at Deakin University. He was awarded a PhD from the University of Cambridge in 1991. He has published on the history of Australia in world affairs, including several articles and chapters on the Colombo Plan for aid to South and Southeast Asia, and a recent biography of former Minister of External Affairs, Percy Spender (*Australian Between Empires*, Chatto and Pickering, 2010). With Tony Joel, he is series editor of the Routledge series, *Remembering the Modern World*. He recently published the first volume of this series, with Tony Joel, *Remembering the Cold War* (2013).