

Australian Media and Non-Alignment

When the first Afro-Asian summit was held at Bandung in 1955, it was reported that McMahon Ball and the distinguished China scholar, CP Fitzgerald were there as observers. Prime Minister Menzies was asked whether they were official observers, and he replied: 'No, Australia has no official observers, but if we did it certainly wouldn't be those two!'

My source for this story is impeccable. I was told it by Herb Feith 30 years ago when I was working on my PhD.

I am not sure if it says more about the smallness of Australian intellectual life at the time or of its richness, but I find it amazing to think that in about 1948, the two most important scholarly mentors in my life – Herb Feith and Henry Mayer – were sitting in this university as honours students being taught by McMahon Ball. And I am happy to be here today to honour his memory.

Herb was present at the Bandung conference, working for the Indonesian Government as an Australian Volunteer Abroad.

The conference was an historic occasion, the first coming together of the newly independent African and Asian countries. Herb remembered the great excitement with so many world leaders coming to Indonesia, 'the strong feelings that Asia should not be the cockpit of European struggles, and a sense of overcoming Western-imposed barriers, especially by breaking down the artificial isolation of China.' 'There was a strong commitment to finding Asian solutions to Asian problems, addressing problems of colonialism, racialism and underdevelopment.'

The Australian press reflected none of this 'spirit of Bandung' or the aspirations of its participants. Instead its tone was constantly condescending and critical.

The orientation of the Australian press is illustrated by which of the leaders it quoted. Which leader do you think was quoted most in the Australian press? – Sukarno, the President of the host nation? Was it the other main architect of the conference, India's Nehru? Was it the charismatic Egyptian leader, Nasser? Or perhaps China's Chou En-lai?

No, the leader most quoted in Australian press coverage of the conference was Sir John Kotelawala, Prime Minister of Ceylon. His influence at the summit was minimal, but his strong anti-communism was welcomed as realistic by the Australian press.

Neither did the Australian press give a sympathetic sense of the leaders' anti-colonial sentiment.

On one occasion in the Melbourne Herald, Osmar White, looked back nostalgically to the colonial period:

‘Before the war, Indonesia (was) one of the most prosperous, peaceful and beautiful parts of Asia. ... It would be unhappy to think that self-determination had cost these simple, unpolitical folk the material security and contentment they once enjoyed under the Dutch colonial system.’

None of the rest of the coverage sought to defend colonialism, but equally none of it gave any sense of why Third World leaders might regard it negatively. Their speeches were reported completely in short-hand labels, which were at best uninformative and at worst dismissive: ‘grievance-hugging anti-Westernisms’; ‘vicious anti-Americanism’; ‘every Asian group with a chip on its shoulder has found an unrivalled audience for press conferences’ And ‘some of the more distasteful anti-Westernisms for the sake of appearances won’t be put to a vote’.

This last is a quote from Denis Warner, who returned to the theme of voting at the end of the summit:

‘By a majority of one the anti-communist bloc beat efforts by the Communist-neutralist group to secure an anti-Western bias.’ Then he lists the countries on each side, and writes ‘the defection of Laos and Cambodia to the neutralist group after guarantees of protection by Chou and heavy pressure from Nehru left the anti-communists in a difficult position. The loss of even one would have given the other side a majority’, and produced a much less acceptable final communique.

Readers of this breathless account of the one-vote majority heroically holding firm might feel a bit deflated to know that there was no formal voting at the conference. Rather all decisions had to be by consensus and so unanimously agreed to.

The one vote majority came from Warner’s rich imagination, as probably did the evidence for Chou’s guarantees of protection to Laos and Cambodia and Nehru’s heavy pressure, let alone the imaginary decision to stop the more distasteful anti-Westernisms going to a vote.

Warner’s inventiveness manifested itself in many ways during the Bandung conference, including the following scoop:

‘It’s impossible to obtain conclusive evidence, but Chou and Nehru appear to have decided Vietnam will become a communist state within China’s sphere of influence.’

Readers of the Melbourne Herald in April 1955 would then not have been surprised when 20 years later, almost to the day, Saigon fell.

Jumping forward to 2003, the atmosphere in which the Non-Aligned Movement met in Kuala Lumpur was very different. Not even the endlessly generous spirit of Herb Feith could have conjured up much idealism about the Non-Aligned Movement in 2003. These were not nations setting out on the adventure of independence, and optimistic about future development. The movement certainly had more than its share of long-established dictators and corrupt governments, many of whom were cynically practised at the invocation of Third World symbolism. Moreover, as many

commentators pointed out, the post-Cold War rationale for the Non-Aligned Movement's very existence was open to question.

Nevertheless with 12,000 delegates from 105 countries, including about 60 heads of government, it was by far the biggest international gathering in our region for several years. And of course it was held at a particularly sensitive moment, with the threat of imminent war between America and Iraq.

The Australian press gave only passing attention to the KL conference, although the major quality papers gave it some coverage.

Although neither the Fairfax papers nor the Murdoch papers took a positive view of proceedings, their correspondents, Mark Baker and Kimina Lyall, respectively, stressed rather different themes.

Baker stressed the ineffectualness of the conference, and its deep divisions regarding the war. For example he reported how officials had watered down the draft resolution about the war 'after three days of intense bickering'. It is not surprising that 100+ nations, in a group that ranged from Iraq on one side to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia on the other, could not reach consensus on the war, and this is probably not a fair test to apply to the NAM.

On the whole, however, the reporting of Lyall and the *Australian* was much more negative. The first story appeared under the headline 'Global bad boys gather for gobfest'. In journalistic jargon a gobfest must rank a step below a talkfest, both words which probably didn't exist in the 1950s, both showing a contempt for meetings which produced rhetoric rather than action, but both also demeaning labels which conveniently excuse the journalist from having to write about content.

The article began 'Call it a gathering of the bad and the worst', and reported the participation of the world's pariah nations such as Zimbabwe, Burma, Iran, Iraq and North Korea. She thought that the 'only basis for some unity in the grouping' was anti-American sentiment.

Apart from quoting Mahathir's opening statement, the only other speeches the *Australian* reported were those of Mugabe, North Korea's Kim Yong-nam and Cuba's Fidel Castro. In terms of news values, there was some basis for this selection, but it was hardly representative of the group.

By far the most spectacular story from the conference came from Mahathir's opening speech. The speech was apocalyptic in tone, and an interesting insight into how deeply pessimistic and anti-Western his view of the world has become as he nears the end of more than two decades in power.

It ranged widely over the history of terrorism, he denounced it, rejected any idea that it was unique to Islam, and then also gave what he saw as the West's hypocrisy regarding Palestine.

About one third through his very long speech, he explicitly denounced the 'blatant double standards' of the West, that it was indifferent to the suffering of some while

highlighting the suffering of others. He continued – in a sentence that begins with the key, but unreported word, ‘if’, he says that if the innocent dying in Afghanistan etc can be considered collateral damage in the larger cause, then so can the dead in Bali and New York. He then immediately follows this by declaring that ‘actually the life of any human being is sacred’, and denouncing war as a solution.

The report in the *Australian* began ‘The victims of the Bali bombings were simply “collateral” casualties in the war over Palestine ...’. It was a difficult speech to report, with Mahathir’s convoluted logic and skipping between a huge range of examples and themes. However apart from the introduction other sentences in the *Australian*’s report appear more outrageous than they were in the original because they are stripped of their logic and context.

A companion analysis by Kimina Lyall began ‘if ever there was a sign that Mahathir Mohammad had an ambiguous reaction to the Bali bombings, it was this.’ She noted he was one of the few regional leaders who failed to offer condolences to Australia for the lives lost. Then she reviewed his actions and statements on terrorism and American policy, and related them to his domestic political circumstances, before concluding ‘The 202 Bali victims are simply expendable casualties in Mahathir’s own political battles.’

There then followed a predictable outcry in Australia against Mahathir’s callousness. Prime Minister Howard refused to dignify his statement with a comment; Opposition Leader Crean condemned him, as did some press editorials. The press gathered understandably angry reactions from families of those killed in Bali.

Unaccustomed as I am at jumping to the defence of Prime Minister Mahathir, this was all based on unfair reporting. I do not want to suggest that I agree with his wider analysis, or to picture him simply as the injured innocent. I think he was deliberately being provocative in putting those victims and the phrase collateral damage in the same sentence. None of this, however, excuses the misreporting.

At the end of the conference, poor old Mark Baker, whose more accurate report of the speech had not created any reaction wrote a penetrating piece on Mahathir’s extravagant invective, its lack of acceptance in the summit and his diplomatic isolation in his views of America. In the middle of the article he bemoans that the Prime Minister had been ‘widely misreported in Australia as belittling the Bali bombing victims.’

However my strongest criticism of the Australian press’s approach to the KL summit is not so much what was reported but what wasn’t. Here was an opportunity lost. Gathered in one place were representatives from over 100 nations, and so a unique chance to explore the range of international opinion regarding the looming war with Iraq. I do not know the security arrangements around the summit, but there was no sign of any Australian journalist seeking to interview anyone. Neither was there any attempt to mine their public statements and speeches.

The Australian press is much more of a political chameleon than you would ever guess from its own declarations of adversarial independence or from the howls of governments, which are not getting the press coverage they want. As the Howard

Government's priorities in foreign policy have become so Washington-centered, and centered upon a Washington which has itself become so much more unilateralist, so the media's judgements of newsworthiness seem to have narrowed. There was little news interest in uncovering and charting our relative diplomatic isolation.

Australian press coverage of Kuala Lumpur was not characterised by the outright distortion and invention that marked the treatment of Bandung half a century earlier. However from this very small but revealing case study, several conclusions about contemporary Australian news values emerge:

- There is still a difference in the way the Australian press covers a meeting of Third World compared with First World leaders. It is difficult to imagine them calling a meeting between North American and European leaders a gobfest or describing their negotiations as bickering.
- The prism of newsworthiness in covering the Third World is still extremely selective. Essentially these leaders were considered worthy of press attention when either they or their regimes were outrageous or when they said something outrageous.
- There are at least some occasions when it is more journalistically rewarding to be inaccurate but newsworthy than to be accurate but less newsworthy. There were no punishments and many rewards for News Limited in misquoting Prime Minister Mahathir.
- The Australian press still takes its cues of newsworthiness, its centre of gravity in judging political relevance, from the Australian government. There was not much curiosity in trying to gauge the weight of international opinion regarding the war against Iraq, or of conveying the range and content of the views of these 105 countries.

So to conclude. Come back McMahon Ball. We still need you.