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The Colombo Plan and ‘soft’ regionalism in the Asia-Pacific: Australian and New Zealand cultural diplomacy in the 1950s and 1960s

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ABSTRACT

The Colombo Plan for aid to South and Southeast Asia, launched in 1951 and continuing today in much-diminished form, is regularly invoked in Australia and New Zealand as a pioneering and progressive project through which closer understanding and engagement with Asia was achieved. It is widely acknowledged that the economic value of the Colombo Plan for developing countries may not have been outstanding, but I argue that Colombo Plan information activities bred a new form of public relations in the foreign relations of its member countries. Especially in donor countries such as Australia and New Zealand, it gave rise to public diplomacy that responded partly to competitive impulses relating to overseas images, and partly to the demands of a centralized information bureau and to regional meetings of a consultative committee. In short, Colombo Plan activities fostered a cultural relations or an early ‘soft’ form of regionalism in the 1950s and 1960s that has been insufficiently understood.

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The Colombo Plan for aid to South and Southeast Asia, launched in 1951 and continuing today in much-diminished form, is regularly invoked in Australia and New Zealand as a pioneering and progressive project through which closer understanding and engagement with Asia was achieved. In recent years politicians on both sides of the Tasman have celebrated their countries' respective involvement in the plan. In 1996 Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer made the Colombo Plan a central plank of his effort to sketch what he called a 'Casey' tradition in Australian foreign policy – Australia's involvement in the Colombo Plan during the 1950s under Richard Casey's leadership as Minister for External Affairs epitomising his efforts to build relationships with Asian nations.¹ The Colombo Plan appeared in the press again in 1998 as the benchmark of what good might yet be achieved again when the Australian government was contemplating a new group of youth recruits to lead aid projects in Asia, akin to a peace corps.² In New Zealand, Prime Minister Helen Clark warmly endorsed a booklet published in 2001 celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Colombo Plan from a New Zealand perspective. In a foreword for the booklet, the Prime Minister welcomed the Colombo Plan's effect of building mutual awareness and a sense of intertwined destinies for Asian and New Zealand peoples; and she praised the vision of those who gave the Colombo Plan life and commented on 'the remarkable degree to which the Plan has met-and exceeded – expectations.'³ Welcoming the same anniversary in the Dominion, Christine Langdon reminded readers that 'India's booming production of buffalo milk, Korea's thriving livestock industry, and the healthy teeth that fill children's mouths in Sri Lanka have an unlikely factor in common' – in each case, but for New Zealand's help under the Colombo Plan the picture might have been different.⁴ The Australians enjoyed a further outing for the Colombo Plan also in 2001 when their government joined the World Bank in launching a new, communications-based 'Virtual Colombo Plan' for the underdeveloped world; and it has occasionally been recalled nostalgically this year, a year in which acts of violence directed at Asian students in Australia has grabbed unfortunate headlines, as evidence of Australians being able to look after Asian students.⁵

While it does not compare with the popular recognition and responses triggered by mention of Gallipoli and ANZAC, there is the feel of a modern legend being told and re-told in relation to Australia and New Zealand in the Colombo Plan. Like good legends, it resists neat analyses from those trained in empiricism and the social sciences. Students who try to assess the Colombo Plan in terms of its initial aims of promoting economic development and providing technical assistance head down a path to frustration. Up to the mid-1970s, before the Colombo Plan was largely overtaken by alternative sources of finance and major shifts in thinking about the role of governments in providing aid and higher education for overseas students, some of the biggest contributions to Asian nations, financially, were either repayments of debts that were owed (ie the British sterling owed to India and Pakistan from service during the Second World War) or American flows of capital that came quite independent from the Colombo Plan but were counted under its achievements by quick-thinking publicists. Asian leaders at the time and economists later pointed out how fixed prices for key commodities would do more for developing economies than most loans or gifts combined, but little progress was made in this realm. In the same vein, a Canadian doctoral student concluded that the Colombo Plan was a showpiece of Commonwealth and western propaganda generated by the Cold War, 'loud, attractive and hollow'; or a 'victory of form over function, of appearances over substance'.⁶

By contrast, Australian and New Zealand historians have tended to be more up-beat about their respective countries' achievements under the Colombo Plan. In the first book-length analysis Daniel Oakman has agreed with other commentators that Australia's contributions, albeit laced with odd doses of imperialism and Cold War politics, represented value for money: for relatively small outlays, the Australians crept their way towards more flexible understandings of social, cultural and economic forms of engagement with Asia;⁷ and recently Lyndon Megarrity has suggested that
when policy towards Colombo Plan students and private international students began to merge in the second half of the 1960s, this hastened the rapid dismantling of Australia’s White Australia policy.\(^8\) In New Zealand, Malcolm McKinnon has written of the Colombo Plan as occupying a central place in New Zealanders’ sense of the best practice in their relations with a decolonising Asia. Although the anti-communist dimension was not hidden, involvement in the Colombo Plan seemed consistent with significant threads in the national story, especially hard won successes in race relations and pioneering achievements in social legislation – themes that the NZ government was also keen to stress at the time of funding projects.\(^9\)

Rather than try to reconcile the sharp appraisals of the Colombo Plan with the more optimistic, I suggest that we consider its significance in the Cold War for the generation of stories and images for public consumption, and with an eye for the emergence of what we might call ‘soft regionalism’. Here, I am blending the general, and now well-known ideas behind ‘soft power’ – the use of sources of persuasion and attraction other than military and economic measures to shape nations’ behaviour - with new spaces being explored by international historians such as Jessica Gienow-Hecht, who points to the role of information provision and dissemination in Cold War examples of cultural diplomacy.\(^10\) Where this information activity develops a regional flavour and a growing sense of its own impact then ‘soft regionalism’, I’m suggesting, is what we might call the result.

**Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War**

The efforts of story and image creators sustained the high profile of the Colombo Plan through the 1950s to the early 1970s. Given this timing, it is not surprising that a good deal of information and activity related to the Colombo Plan bore strong traces of Cold War thinking. Some Australian propaganda and anti-subversion initiatives were carefully planned, and other acts of cultural diplomacy were manufactured on the run, partly in response to new orthodoxies about the value of public relations in foreign policy (and American historians such as Walter Hixson have reminded us just how important exhibitions, fairs, music, media offensives and popular culture were in the struggle between the Soviet Union and the United States);\(^11\) and stories and images were also generated in response to calls for action from a small but active headquarters in Colombo.

One of the biggest historical stories to emerge from considering the role of countries such as Australia and New Zealand in the Colombo Plan is how vigorous was the contemporary history-writing and story-telling around their efforts. The other main suggestion underpinning this paper is that in the generation of both secretive plans and highly public image and story-making the twin contexts of Cold War and membership of the modernising British World establishing ongoing regional relevance were constants.

In brief, the origins of the Colombo Plan have been debated sporadically since its creation. Several of the delegates at the Commonwealth foreign ministers’ conference held in Colombo in January 1950 tried to claim the title of chief architect behind the plan, at the time and especially since then. Australian External Affairs Minister Percy Spender played a prominent drafting role at the Colombo conference and made the early running in the race to be seen as chief architect but, in naming rights, ran into stiff competition from the Ceylonese Minister for Finance, J. R. Jayawardene, who was also an active proponent for a new aid initiative. A New Zealand intervention helped resolve the competing claims. Hunter Wade, a member of the New Zealand delegation at Colombo (and later a Director of the Colombo Plan Bureau) was given the task of resolving the dispute, which he did partly through allowing the protagonists work themselves into a state of exhaustion and partly through coming up with the alternative title of Colombo Plan – so, from the outset, a New Zealand intervention helped resolve the competing claims. Hunter Wade, a member of the New Zealand delegation at Colombo (and later a Director of the Colombo Plan Bureau) was given the task of resolving the dispute, which he did partly through allowing the protagonists work themselves into a state of exhaustion and partly through coming up with the alternative title of Colombo Plan – so, from the outset, a New Zealand intervention helped resolve the competing claims.
Zealander provided a sober alternative to Australian big-noting.12 (Spender was also undermined by his name. Too many Treasury officials lost sleep over the working title to emerge from Colombo of ‘the Spender plan’).13

Through Spender the Australians played a prominent role in what became known as the Colombo Plan, an umbrella structure under which the donor governments could provide aid to Commonwealth, and later non-Commonwealth, countries in South and South East Asia. In terms of organisational framework, a Consultative Committee meeting annually examined beneficiaries’ economic and progress reports and made recommendations, upon the basis of which donor countries such as Australia would provide bilateral aid (it was essentially a series of bilateral aid agreements with a multilateral veneer), which might include capital equipment or the means of financing big agricultural, dam-building and other development projects. A separate technical co-operation arm of the plan facilitated technical and educational assistance.14 Importantly, the non-Commonwealth component soon included key players. The United States joined the list of donor countries at the end of 1951, Indonesia joined as a recipient two years later, and the membership of the plan soon broadened from its Commonwealth South Asian roots into East and South East Asia through the 1950s (including Japan in 1954), and even extended to the Middle East later.

The Australians saw the Colombo Plan as a modest humanitarian end in itself and a less modest vehicle for the acceleration of western strategic and economic planning to counter communism in South and Southeast Asia. In his private and public comments during the first half of 1950, Spender made no bones about the absolute necessity for American involvement if the Colombo Plan was to succeed, and he was delighted when they joined. If anything, the New Zealanders were even more blunt about the broader Cold War context in which the plan should be viewed.15 Minister of External Affairs Fred Doidge described with some horror the scale and depth of poverty throughout Asia, and deployed bacteriological and hydraulic metaphors typical of the day; ‘The ferment that is stirring in Asia is of terrifying proportions’ , he said in April 1951. ‘Communism finds its most fertile breeding ground where the conditions I have described exist, and indeed, in my view, there is no other way of stemming the tide of communism than by raising living standards nearer to the level which we ourselves enjoy, and giving the people those conditions of comfort and decency which would render Communism as intolerable to them as it is to us.’16

Yet Cold War realism rubbed up hard against the scale of problems in Asia. The enormity of poverty in much of South Asia made it hard for Australians or New Zealanders to think that they could lead the way in economic development. In fact, the Australians tended themselves to be in short supply of some the capital equipment most likely to assist in development projects overseas…17Estimates of costs attaching to more ambitious development projects revealed even bigger gaps. In October 1950 the first six-year development programmes submitted, which included those of India, Pakistan and Ceylon, totalled £1085 million. At this stage, the responses of the donor Commonwealth countries looked to approach only around £360 million, of which the Australians pledged £25 million, and New Zealand 3 million.18

The New Zealand Government began by approving of the Colombo Plan in theory more than in practice – neither parsimonious Sid Holland nor the press were very keen to embark on what seemed a gross mismatch between Asia’s needs and New Zealand’s spare resources.19 But the Holland government recovered from the initial shock (NZ settled into a pattern of spending roughly 1 million pounds NZ per year) and began grappling with the question of what to offer to whom. Having joined a new venture in Asia, to then fail to achieve at least some modest spending targets worried External Affairs Departments in both Australia and New Zealand. Public opinion, regarded with trepidation when it came to spending money, especially in Asia, could turn sharply against the plan; and Asian opinion would be likely to change too, if promises were not matched by some action.20
Both countries commenced capital aid funding for particular projects. For example, by 1955, the New Zealanders were committed to funding or had funded earth moving equipment for Pakistan, dry-farming research, two technical schools and an ambulance launch and a dental nurses training school for Ceylon, a new medical institute in New Delhi, a railway apprentices' school in Cambodia, and a trade training school in Indonesia. The Australians had, among other projects, funded a hydroelectric and irrigation scheme, and earth-moving equipment for India, diesel electric locomotives, pipe-manufacturing equipment and pumping and communications equipment for Pakistan, and tractors and cultivating equipment for Ceylon. Both countries helped fund a cement factory built in Pakistan; and both provided regular, public updates on new and existing funded projects.

Many of these projects were successful, to some degree, and well-reported; others were far less successful and much-less reported. Ministerial statements, parliamentary statements, press releases and accounts in the journals of respective External Affairs Departments, Current Notes on International Affairs in Australia and External Affairs Review in New Zealand all told of the great changes for the better occurring in Asia, and of Australian or New Zealand involvement. The language used to describe aid efforts was, in both cases, a mixture of neighbourliness; encouragement of self-help; freedom enhancement; progress; modernisation as the key to breaking the shackles of poverty; and growing Australian and New Zealand awareness of the interrelatedness of problems in the world and in the region.

Between 1955 and 1957, both countries decided to place increasing emphasis on their contributions under the technical co-operation side of the Colombo Plan, which meant training for Asian students (including building student hostels in Australian and New Zealand universities), and sending instructors to Asia. This shift, accompanied by the continuing preoccupation with publicity, gave birth to what became an explosion in early forms of cultural diplomacy. There was another source of impetus, too. After a few years of cranking up, an information and publicity unit based in Colombo started to produce bulletins, pamphlets and photo calendars featuring the same type of content emerging from Australia and New Zealand, but drawing on material from all member nations.

In calling the products of such activity ‘cultural diplomacy’, I am seeking a flexible definition of what is, to start with, a rubbery term. The presence of culture in studies of foreign relations has increased at rapid pace in the last fifteen years. Before Gienow-Hecht, Akira Iriye, who has been one of those leading US historians to embrace the cultural dimensions of exchanges between nations, suggests simply that such exchanges occur when a state generates official material for transmitting overseas. Publicity generated under the heading of the Colombo Plan would seem to fall squarely into this category. American historians can chart the growth of this form of diplomacy to the creation of the Division of Cultural Relations within the State Department in 1938, through the huge growth of propaganda generation during the Second World War, and to the vigorous efforts of the US Information Agency/Service in the 1950s. These efforts warrant careful attention for the official images produced and the responses they generate, and also for their less planned and more unanticipated consequences.

Some Australian activity under the Colombo Plan was meant to counter communist-led groups in the region in a very targeted way. Australian historians, including Chris Waters and Oakman, have pointed to instances of the Colombo Plan being wielded for Australian counter-subversion measures in the struggle against communist influence in Asia. Especially after 1954, when a Cold War Committee was established in the Department of External Affairs, the Australians proved themselves ready to blend anti-communist propaganda and training measures with Colombo Plan contributions. The Colombo Plan was seen as a legitimate vehicle for anti-communist propaganda efforts, and the Australian Cabinet was prepared to let External Affairs Minister Richard Casey take the lead in making best use of it and other counter-communist or counter-subversive means to hand.
As we know, Casey delighted in this realm. His experience with deception techniques in the Middle East during the Second World War and his prior induction in public relations techniques with J. Walter Thompson in Washington led him to embrace propaganda and counter-subversion opportunities. His engineering training also bobbed to the surface in his relish of planning big projects that stretched conventional boundaries, and Asia was a good imaginative site where human proportions could always match his ambitious thoughts. From the mid-1950s Casey tried to mobilise a number of public servants in his Cold War Activities Committee, including representatives of the Australian Broadcast Commission and the Australian News and Information Bureau – as well as the new Australian Security Intelligence Service (ASIS) - to the cause. Not surprisingly, some of the results were not publicised and remain hard to discover today.

What we do know is that aid allocated under the Colombo Plan included the provision of generators for Army wirelesses in Vietnam, the training of Thai and Vietnamese security forces in counter-subversive techniques, and visits by to Asian countries by anti-communist union-leaders. Casey linked the Colombo Plan with the expansion of Radio Australia activity in Southeast Asia and pet projects such as his ‘Cheap Books’ scheme – almost 10,000 copies of wholesome Australian books, including Casey’s own *Friends and Neighbours: Australia and the World*, were lined up to be distributed throughout Asia and Australia in the late 1950s, but the scheme was never carried out, mostly because those responsible could never agree on which books to send.

*Hemisphere* magazine, an Asian/Australian student magazine established with Colombo Plan funds in 1956 aimed at promoting more than Asian-Australian understanding. The first edition began with an editorial explanation about the need to engage with the thousands of Asian and Pacific Island students at Australian universities and technical colleges, and hoping that the content would also be of interest to Australians. In an echo of the ‘Australian way of life’ rhetoric that permeated official and popular culture during the 1950s, editor Selwyn Speight, proclaimed that one key aim of the journal was to demonstrate that Australia’s outlook was distinctly Australian. His quick sketch of the Australian story told of a nation rapidly developing beyond its colonial circumstances and adapting quickly to its unusual environment – with the suggestion that this was an exemplary story for new Asian nations to note.

Around 5,000 copies per annum of *Hemisphere* were sent to Asian students in Australia and to those who had returned home, as well as education institutions in Australia and abroad, and overseas posts. Its editorial board was very conscious of the millions of Russian and Chinese cheaply produced books and pamphlets flooding South Asia by the late-1950s, and decided quickly not to try to compete. We have to question *Hemisphere*’s impact, given that it was not translated into other languages. Speight was sympathetic to political objectives lying at the heart of the enterprise, and in his review of the journal’s performance at the end of 1959, he suggested Australian themes that should feature boldly: the worth of Australian values as shown in the lives of ordinary Australians; pride in British and European heritage not preventing the emergence of an independent and special character; Australian interest in and respect for Asian values and cultures; immigration policies designed to preserve inherited culture; Australia’s academic and technical capacity to help Asian countries through aid with strings; Australia’s lack of water restricting its population; and Australia’s lack of association with imperialism (although if mention of imperialism must be made, then point out that, historically, Asian forms were usually nastier than European ones).

The Cold War Planning Committee within the Department of External Affairs also saw the Colombo Plan as a means of cover under which the ASIS might recruit returned Asian students or spread anti-communist propaganda. Archival records do not bear evidence on their success or otherwise. Casey pinned special hope on radio broadcasts to beam stories of Australia and Australian assistance for the region into Asia, and thereby ensured an ongoing struggle with the ABC over
the independence of Radio Australia content. Something of a compromise emerged, with the ABC agreeing to consider more recommendations from Casey about suitable commentators and stories; and Australia’s Colombo Plan spending on transmitters and receivers for countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, India, Pakistan and Indonesia, increased ten-fold from 1955 to 1964 when it was more than 2.5 million pounds.\textsuperscript{32}

Not surprisingly Australian and New Zealand contributions to Asia under the Colombo Plan looked small in comparison with the aid provided by bigger nations. Domestic factors accentuated the problem of scale. In Australia, Casey was a poor performer in Cabinet and lost every battle he waged with Treasury to increase Colombo Plan appropriations.\textsuperscript{33} Much to his frustration, he struggled to make favourable comparisons between Australian and other donors’ contributions under the plan. Measured on the basis of cost per head of population or as a percentage of national budgets, Australia’s contributions were less than those of the United Kingdom, Canada, and arguably New Zealand.\textsuperscript{34} By the mid-1960s the Australians had settled on a reliable boast – they had trained, they calculated, roughly one Colombo Plan student for every 1,000 in the Australian population, which was higher than any other country.\textsuperscript{35}

There is no comparable boast emerging from New Zealand, but in regular instalments of the New Zealand story there is particular pride in how two of the early initiatives, dentistry training and dairy production, led to further successful projects through South and Southeast Asia in these realms (As the \textit{Dominion} suggested in 2001, NZ seemed to capture the early high ground in teeth and milk). But in New Zealand the limitations on Colombo Plan spending were also formidable. Both New Zealanders and Australians were very good at celebrating milestone moments, especially relating to students. The 5,000\textsuperscript{th} Colombo Plan student to arrive in Australia, for example, a 31-year old mineralogist from Pakistan, was met by Minister for External Affairs Sir Garfield Barwick in 1964 with a gift of Australian books (the Dept probably had a stockpile of un-sent books by this stage) and a kangaroo hide briefcase amidst flashing cameras and journalists on hand.\textsuperscript{36}

The mid-1950s shift towards technical co-operation, or the education of students, came in the wake of a gloomy conclusion by the Colombo Plan’s Consultative Committee in 1955 that the gap between the costs of development programs and the resources available seemed to be widening.\textsuperscript{37} It also coincided with a Cold War shift in cultural diplomacy more generally. By the mid-1950s, most forums trying to nurture cultural internationalism in the wake of the Second World War had, after persisting valiantly for a time, succumbed to Cold War alliances and retreats to nationalism.\textsuperscript{38}

As the above discussion suggests, there were two general ideas that shaped most Australian public projections into Asia. One was the message that Australia was a country in development, and shared some of the concerns of developing countries in Asia. This was a change in emphasis – most likely a welcome one for Asian leaders - from some of Casey’s speeches in the early 1950s which were more inclined to emphasise Australia as a product of enlightened imperialism, among other nations that had experienced different forms of imperialism. The other big theme was the embrace of modernisation, the equation of development with progress.

\section*{The ‘pull’ from Colombo}

Some of these features of Australian and also New Zealand foreign and aid policies have been explored in more detail. Much less explored has been the role of Colombo Plan bureaucracy. It is probably safe to conclude that one of the main reasons for the growth in publicity efforts surrounding the Colombo Plan was that the main piece of multilateral machinery, the Consultative Committee, needed something to sustain its existence. The Committee had no real influence on
how aid was distributed, as this took the form of many bilateral arrangements. In fact, the few more adventurous attempts to mobilise members of the Colombo Plan for new multilateral and centralised machinery usually failed. In the mid-1950s, an American plan to turn to the Colombo Plan into something resembling the OEEC in Europe with a mandate for integrated investment and economic strategies, as well as distributing huge amounts of aid, frightened members away; as did an even more daring US proposal soon afterwards for the establishment of a nuclear energy centre for Asia. The only new architecture arising with multilateral agreement was a Staff College for Technical Education, agreed at a Consultative Committee meeting in Wellington in 1973, to supplement the training programs already in train.39

The small Colombo Plan bureaucracy responded to what was a predictable questioning of its future after the first few years of pioneering aid opportunities had taken bilateral forms. The real drive towards information and publicity becoming a core concern of member countries arose from the 1953 meeting of the Consultative Committee in New Delhi. The Indian delegation pushed successfully for the creation of an Information Unit to be set up in Colombo, to act as a central point for the collection and then distribution and exchange of information about Colombo Plan activities to all member governments – and to the press and public. The kinds of activities envisaged included publication of a fortnightly newsletter, a quarterly journal, occasional pamphlets, and a repository of films and photographs that was to be updated regularly.40 Australians and New Zealanders obliged, not always happily, but, especially in New Zealand’s case, not wanting to be the odd one out.

There was, in fact, considerable ‘pull’ from Colombo, as well as nascent efforts, especially on the part of the Australians, to ‘push’ information and images into Asia, in the context of the Cold War struggle for hearts and minds. This ‘pull’ factor arose from two main sources. The first was an Information division of the Colombo Plan which, in the absence of a permanent secretariat, seized an opportunity and set about building a mini-empire and justifying its role by requiring ever-expanding amounts of information from members of the Colombo Plan. The second source of momentum came from the practice, championed vigorously from the Ceylonese, of including exhibitions with the annual meeting of member countries – the meetings of the Colombo Plan’s Consultative Committee. Exhibitions were mostly small scale during the 1950s (with two exceptions), but at the 1961 meeting in Kuala Lumpur, marking the tenth anniversary of the Plan, there was a major photographic exhibition on the progress of the Colombo Plan, with contributions from all member countries – and this set the pattern for the next six years. (The tenth anniversary celebrations of 1961 also saw a campaign to have 1 July declared Colombo Plan Day in member countries – not sure of how long this lasted, but there are references to it being marked in small ways for at least the next decade).41 There is more research needed on how the Colombo Plan provided a new, postcolonial context in which to continue the well-established practice of national image projection through exhibitions – those organising the first exhibition, held in Colombo in 1952, stressed that it was, like the Festival of Britain one year earlier, ‘a new experiment in putting a mirror in front of ourselves for our own benefit as well as that of the outside world – not in a spirit of competition but co-operation with various participating countries’.42

Generally, western nations were building bureaucratic support for information and propaganda activity during the 1950s and 1960s. Although much of the increase was Cold War fuelled, this was not only source of impetus. The emergence of new nations sensitive to colonial and or racial condescension, especially in Africa and Asia, also prompted careful tailoring of official representations of government positions and more popular national outlooks. Increasingly, in the British world foreign offices and overseas posts provided direction to central information offices in Britain and the old white dominions. In Britain, for example, the Foreign Office directed much of the
Central Office of Information activity during the 1950s and 1960s, and in Canada, the Department of External Affairs itself produced all the publicity material distributed overseas. In the background, a 1952 British report into the role of the UK Overseas Information Service provided encouragement—the main conclusion of the Drougheda Report being that while the effectiveness of information programs overseas would always be hard to gauge, there were circumstances in which adroitly used propaganda could tip the balance in favour of diplomatic success.43

Similar patterns of information production and dissemination emerged in Australia and New Zealand. In Wellington, the Information Division of External Affairs realized quickly that the publicity material produced by the government’s Tourist and Publicity Department was intended overwhelmingly for European and North American eyes; and, in the wake of Colombo Plan projects, officers intervened to change content and arrange for translation into different Asian languages.44

The Colombo Plan featured prominently in this NZ and Australian work. In Canberra, under Casey’s direction, the Department of External Affairs worked closely with the new Australian News and Information Bureau (ANIB) to amass impressive statistics and draft official interpretations about Australia’s involvement in the Colombo Plan. The Head Office of the ANIB had its own Asian section which concentrated especially on Colombo Plan activities, and the Bureau’s Director, Mel Pratt, was a prominent participant at the first Colombo Plan Conference of National Information Officers, held in Singapore in 1958—a Colombo-based initiative repeated two years later.

In addition to the rise of officially sanctioned cultural diplomacy, a measure of jostling careerism with bureaucratic consequences helped produce a small beast in Colombo that needed lots of feeding. The Information Unit that was set up in 1953-54 was merged with the Bureau for Technical Co-operation four years later. And each of the annual meetings of the Consultative Committee provided for a Subcommittee on Information featuring Information Liaison Officers of the member countries.

Those in Colombo knew of the concerns held by representatives of Australia, New Zealand and other member nations about the amount of busyness they generated. Beginning as a small group, they needed to keep justifying their existence in a ‘Plan’ that had little central co-ordination and nothing in the way of a permanent secretariat. By the late 1960s, however, there were 30 staff in the Bureau and it had assumed some of the functions of a secretariat, addressing the capital aid concerns of the Consultative Committee as well as the technical co-operation. A monthly magazine and an annual calendar were the two main products of information officers, supplemented by other special projects.

Heightened expectations in Colombo about a greater flow of information were not always satisfied quickly. Soon after the Information Unit had been set up, at the 1955 meeting of the Consultative Committee, Ceylonese Prime Minister Jayawardene asked New Zealand delegate, T.L. Macdonald if New Zealand could prepare an information pamphlet which could serve as basic orientation information for all those going to New Zealand under technical assistance schemes. Macdonald remarked that something similar had been done to prepare US soldiers for their time in New Zealand during the Second World War, and he promised to take up the issue upon his return home.45 (And indeed, some ten years later, the New Zealanders produced a handbook preparing students and trainees for their arrival in New Zealand.46)

There are many illustrations of the busyness inspired partly by donor nations but also significantly by clarion calls from the information hunters and collectors in Colombo. To provide something of an Australian snapshot, Mel Pratt in the ANIB summarised his Bureau’s efforts for 1959 as: sponsoring a major tour of Colombo Plan countries by Australian journalist Osmar White who would, upon his
return, generate stories about Australian aid at work for the press, radio, newsreel and television, and also prepare his own booklet; sending a steady stream of photographs of Colombo Plan projects to the Plan’s Bureau in Colombo; organising Australia’s own exhibition of photographs to mark the approaching tenth anniversary of the plan; and preparing a film strip and poster.47

It seems that, however often they risked exasperated retorts from diplomats and foreign offices about priorities for time and resources, the Colombo Plan Bureau officials had to keep probing for more sources to feed their ever-increasing amounts of information gathering and distribution. ‘The need for a constant flow of material from all member countries’ noted the Bureau in 1963, ‘has been emphasized time and again’.48 Judging from some of the asides and marginal notes adorning Australian and New Zealand memoranda on the Colombo Plan, it is likely that this comment would have generated knowing agreement. By this stage the photographic exhibitions had become an integral part of the annual meetings of the Consultative Committee, and, not surprisingly, an element of competition had crept in to respective members’ efforts. The Australians soon developed a reputation for making the most of their opportunities. In fact, within the space of the first year of the Colombo Plan the British were also taken aback by what they called the Australian ‘showmanship’. They were offended by publicity-minded gestures such as leaving behind after a meeting an aeroplane taken to Pakistan to demonstrate spraying techniques. Nor did they British enjoy the way in which Australians grabbed the headlines with gifts and training measures that involved much less expenditure than the British were providing under the plan.49 New Zealander diplomats also felt exposed by Australian efforts and turned up the heat on their unfortunate departmental Director of Information, Sid Odell, who responded with a flurry of photographic and other activity from the late 1950s.50

Both Australia and New Zealand produced films on the Colombo Plan on the occasion of the Tenth Anniversary in 1961 (as did Britain and Canada). By the time of the Bureau’s 1963 report, eleven member countries had produced films on Colombo Plan Themes (including the US films produced by the powerful US Information Service) – after the US, Canada topped the list with nine films, then came Australia with five (Across the Frontier, Our Neighbour, Asian Students in Australia, Australia, Friend and Neighbour and The Builders), Japan with four, and a number of countries with two, including New Zealand (South-East Asia is Our Neighbour and New Zealand Colombo Plan Aid Projects).51

The Australian government-sponsored Osmar White tour of Asia of 1959 yielded especially rich returns. Three extracts from the documentary film, The Builders, were produced while White and his cameraman, Jim Fitzpatrick, were still on tour. They were syndicated to the BBC, the Canadian Broadcasting Commission and the NHK National Network of Japan. One extract traveled also to Switzerland, the Netherlands, France and Mexico. The full film became a television documentary screened throughout North America and Europe, and by March 1960 it had reached fifteen European nations. A potential audience of 75 million viewers heard the narrator conclude;

‘the people of South, and of South-East Asia, are climbing out of the valley.

Out of the valley of the past into a future of their own building. A building in which we, their friends and neighbours, are playing a part. This future has its roots and foundations in freedom to worship, each after his own fashion; to give praise and thanks for the gift of life in a world of widening horizons.’52

In the other major product of the tour, a short book titled, The Seed of Freedom, Prime Minister Menzies’ short foreword stressed what publicists had been working at for some time: the need to celebrate the human stories amidst the statistics that could dominate accounts of the Colombo Plan. He also stressed the freedom that was being enjoyed by the new nations of South and
Southeast Asia, and how greater well-being could be attained without loss of liberty or endangering the spiritual heritage built up in Asia over centuries.\textsuperscript{53}

While the early momentum was hard to sustain into the 1960s, representatives from both countries were sustained by linking the Colombo Plan to some of the prevailing orthodoxies about the potential good of modernization driven by English-speaking peoples. Prime Minister Walter Nash, for example, opening NZ sponsored faculty of Agriculture at the University of Malaya in 1960, drew on Toynbee’s judgement that this century would be remembered not for its political conflicts of technical inventions but as an age in which human society dared to think of the welfare of the whole human race as a practical objective.\textsuperscript{54}

\textbf{Impact?}

One of my aims has been to reveal the extent of publicity and image-generating activity surrounding the Colombo Plan. The volume of publicly distributed information is considerable, and much of it can now be found in the least frequented sections of university libraries or in government departments anxious to clear some space. The volume clearly created tensions at the time of publicity material production. Although some opportunities for propaganda were seized with relish, especially by Casey, there is between the lines of recorded exchanges between officials, a mild panic about the ever-increasing demands on information efforts – a sense of ‘what on earth have we got ourselves into?’ The Australians, proud of their close association with the origins of the plan, took annual meetings of the Consultative Committee seriously – it was not until 1971 that they failed to send a Minister.\textsuperscript{55}

While it remains hard to evaluate the impact of the information officers in Colombo they generated cultural diplomacy. Aided by gentle competition among members, they provided significant impetus towards aid and public relations for countries such as Australia and New Zealand whose levels of diplomatic representation in Asia were modest or less and who were conscious of the potential for loss of face if their early high standing among the Plan’s members be seen to be sagging. Occasionally, the pull of the Colombo Plan even had a big influence on the expansion of diplomatic representation overseas, the story of New Zealand’s representation in Indonesia starting with a Colombo Plan mission in 1957 before building up to embassy status being the prime example.\textsuperscript{56}

By the late 1960s, the British approached Consultative Committee meetings wondering if they might be the last ones, but also conscious of the sustained levels of interest from Australia and New Zealand and also certain non-Commonwealth recipients of aid. If the Colombo Plan vanished, the flow of aid might not be much affected, but the regular meetings provided a veneer of multilateralism that was domestically convenient for certain Asian countries not wanting to seem too beholden to any one donor, and they also provided a non-threatening opportunity for international dialogue.\textsuperscript{57} Certain aspects of the Consultative Committee meetings suited the relatively small bureaucracies in Canberra and Wellington. Australian and New Zealand delegates to meetings conducted important bilateral discussions about aid with Asian delegates there that they were not always able to facilitate through their overseas posts; and they were able to demonstrate to suspicious Treasury officials at home that this work was central to an ongoing aid program.\textsuperscript{58} Meetings of the Consultative Committee were accompanied by dinners, exhibitions, excursions and other events that gave them enduring status on the diplomatic calendar; and they were conducted with a mixture of often tedious set-piece speeches formality, behind which lay many informal opportunities to discuss aid projects and opportunities, and to craft further the story of the Colombo Plan, both centrally and from different national perspectives.
From either an Australian or a New Zealand perspective we can, and probably should, conclude that, given the resources available, participation in the Colombo Plan, while not without problems, created important opportunities for constructive engagement with Asia and for promoting mutual understanding with Asian peoples. But we might not stop there. The bigger story of cultural diplomacy in the Cold War, currently dominated by American historians providing examples of how cultural activity during the 1950s and 1960s helped build popular narratives of freedom, progress and happiness, requires Australian and New Zealand perspectives. In the case study of the Colombo Plan, building the legend of the Colombo Plan, this type of language was used freely too, but given trans-Tasman twists.

It remains difficult to credit Colombo Plan-inspired cultural projections into Asia by Australian and New Zealand governments with much influence; and the same might be said for the Colombo Plan Bureau, which sent its publications primarily to a public service-government-education elite in the region. But the projections aimed domestically had more telling effect. In the late 1960s, by which time the number of private Asian students dwarfed the number of government-sponsored Colombo Plan students in Australia and New Zealand, officials in External Affairs departments in both countries were remarking how, in the public mind, every Asian student on the street was assumed to be a Colombo Plan student. This type of result might not be easily calculable in Cold War terms, but given the amount of work needed to inform Australian and New Zealand publics about Asia, it should not be underestimated. And given the importance of the ‘pull factor’, the Asian origins behind the identified need to produce such extensive information about the Colombo Plan, the ‘soft regionalism’, however unanticipated in places such as Australia and New Zealand, was one of the other more notable results.

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Endnotes


2 Australian newspaper, 3-4 January 1998, ‘Youth recruits lead Asia aid corps’, p.1


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15 Spender; McIntosh’s undated memo (May 1950), ‘Colombo Plan’, McIntosh Papers, MS6759-182, National Library of New Zealand (Alexander Turnbull), Wellington.

16 New Zealand External Affairs Record, no. 1, April 1951.

17 ‘Report on First Exploratory Discussions Among Departments on Questions Arising from an Economic Programme in South and South-East Asia’(unsigned, undated; but based on a meeting held 20 March 1950), CRS A1838 item 381/3/1/3 part 1A, NAA; ‘Notes supplementary to interdepartmental discussion on supplying goods to South East Asia’(unsigned), 24 March 1950, CRS A5460 item 301/5, NAA; submission SEA 1, by DEA, 20 March 1950, CRS A4933/XM1, vol.1, NAA.

18 Draft Paper by UK Economic Policy Committee, July 1951, DO 35/2774, PRO; Australian Cabinet meeting, decision 37A, CRS A4638/XM1 set 1, NAA.

19 McKinnon, Independence and Foreign Policy, p. 116


23 For example, see two examples from 1960: Richard Casey, CNIA, vol. 31, no. 1, 1960; and Walter Nash, EAR, vol. X, no. 6, June 1960, 11.


28 Minute for Overseas Planning Committee meeting, 2 February 1962, item 1(b) Cheap Books, 26 January 1962, CRS A1838/287 item 2048/2 part 9, NAA.

29 *Hemisphere*, no. 1, 1957

30 Speight, ‘Editor’s Report at the End of 1959’, no date, CRS A1361 item 50/1/1 part 1, NAA.


33 Cabinet submission no 10, ‘Australian Contribution to International Economic Aid and Relief’, by Casey, undated (probably June-July 1954), CRS A4906/XM1, vol 1, NAA; Cabinet meeting, 30 July 1954, decision no 19, CRS A4910/XM1, vol 1, NAA; Cabinet submission no 409, ‘Australian Participation in the Colombo Plan’, by Casey, 21 June 1955, CRS A4906/XM1, vol 17, NAA; Cabinet submission no 416, ‘The Colombo Plan’, by Fadden, 27 June 1955, *ibid*; Notes on Cabinet Submissions nos 409 and 416, ‘Australian Participation in the Colombo Plan’, no author, undated, *ibid*. It was agreed that the wheat and flour would be sold by the Indian government and that the proceeds would be used to help finance a large hydro-electric and irrigation project in Hyderabad, and the Pakistan government accepted their wheat under similar arrangements. All three South Asian members of the Commonwealth benefited from developmental equipment such as Australian made earth-moving equipment (for India), pumping and communications equipment, diesel electric locomotives, and pipe-manufacturing plant (Pakistan), and tractors and cultivating machinery (Ceylon).


35 Statement by Minister for External Affairs, Paul Hasluck, 20 Nov 1964, CRS A1838 item 555/10/17 part 1, NAA.

36 Note by ANIB, undated, 1964, CRS A1838 item 555/10/17 part 1, NAA.


39 Oakman, *Facing Asia*, pp 116, 281

40 Press communiqué, Secretariat of Consultative Committee, New Delhi, 17 October 1953, and undated Indian paper, ‘A Scheme for Setting Up an Information Organisation of the Colombo Plan to be considered at the next meeting of the Consultative Committee, EA1 W2619 item 118/8/11, Archives New Zealand, Wellington (hereinafter, ANZ).

41 A.B. Connelly, Director of Colombo Plan Bureau, to Council Representatives and all Member Governments, 6 August 1969, FCO 15/800, NA.


43 Oakman, *Facing Asia*, p 168.

44 Secretary External Affairs to Minister of External Affairs, 3 August 1960, 118/7/17/12, ANZ.

45 Foss Shanahan (Singapore) to MacDonald (Office of High Commission for New Zealand in Southeast Asia, 4 November 1955, EA2824 118/7/77, ANZ.

47 Mel Pratt to Secretary Department of External Affairs, 8 January 1959, CRS A1838/294 2024/2 pt 7, NAA.


49 TC(SA)(51)29, Action Arising from the second Meeting of the Council for Technical Co-operation, 21 July 1951, DO 35/2716, PRO. There was some resentment too, in Whitehall, at the enthusiasm shown by Asians for Australian offers of aid, which were smaller in value, but in more attractive forms than British releases of sterling balances: Minute by J.B. Hunt (CRO), 21 May 1951, ibid.

50 Jack Shepherd (Office of Commissioner for NZ in South East Asia, Singapore) to S. Odell, 10 May 1957, EA1 W2824 item 118/7/17/4 part 1, ANZ.

51 Ibid.

52 K. Fraser to Mel Pratt, 7 May 1959, CRS A6895 item 58/134 part 2, NAA; J.S. Allen to Director ANIB, 10 March 1960, ibid; text of narration for The Builders, undated, ibid


58 Ibid, The Future of the Colombo Plan, 8 October 1968, FCO15/800, NA.

59 B. Angus (for Secretary of Foreign Affairs) to W.J.D. Minogue (Senior Lecturer, University of Auckland), 11 June 1970, AAEG WH4627/950 box 3065 item 118/7/4, ANZ