

Australia and New Zealand selling education to Asia-Pacific societies —a saga of self-centredness?

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Several years ago, the Professorial Board of the University of Tasmania had on its agenda the issue of selling education to Southeast Asia and the Pacific. There was pressure from the Federal Government to undertake this, but the incentives were that the Universities would have extra monies to spend as they saw fit. I don't recall any accompanying threats - it was before the carrot and stick tactics of the Dawkins grand plans, and the University felt relaxed enough to put the proposal to the Board as a question of educational philosophy. That sounds quaint in these times of shotgun-wedding amalgamations, economic rationalism and managerialism, but they were gentler times, and we did (at least some of the time) take seriously the proposition that decisions should be taken because they were educationally sound, without considering politics.

In this mood, I thought that it may be possible to stretch the scope of our considerations to encompass that which might also be moral and socially responsible, so I took my feet for one of the few addresses I had the temerity to launch upon that august body. First, I spoke of the questionable morality per se of selling education only to those that can afford it, with merit being a secondary consideration, and with the poor being excluded. When I say that there was no spontaneous applause for that proposition, it is fair to point out that there weren't (perhaps still aren't) a large number of egalitarians, let alone socialists, in our professoriat, so perhaps I should have known better than to wheel that past them. Moving on quickly with what I hoped was a smooth delivery, therefore, I explained that I work regularly as an anthropologist in Fiji with indigenous people, and that among those I work with, the annual income for a nuclear family seldom exceeds \$1,000, and is often a lot less. Such groups can never contemplate purchasing an education for their members, no matter how brilliant the scholars might be. I suggested that much of what I regularly observed applied equally to most of the islands of the Pacific and also to countries of Southeast Asia such as Malaysia. I pointed out that there are, of course, wealthy individuals and families, frequently concentrated in certain nonindigenous ethnic groups who already have great power and often exercise de facto if not actual control over the societies in which they reside. These groups would of course be in a position to benefit from our cash sale of higher education, and this, I pointed out, could only entrench their positions, and the social problems of the disadvantaged groups, still further. This, I argued, constituted very questionable social engineering on our part, even if it was merely an unintentional by-product of our actions. When I had finished speaking, it is fair to say that there wasn't a damp eye in the house, and the Board promptly voted to commence targeting Southeast Asia, while reserving its fire in the Pacific largely because that was seen as a less wealthy, and thus less probably productive, market. It was felt that the University could not afford to pass up the income it might generate from those we have all come to speak of as Full-Fee-Paying-Students. Come to think of it, the times weren't all that much gentler after all, were they?

I would hate it to seem as though this is a whinge about my having been bounced by my colleagues in the University. This was by no means my finest hour in that respect, and there have been other matters about which I felt even more passionately and over which I have suffered much more resounding defeats than this! But just before I leave my little moral tale, it is worth mentioning that it all occurred before the Fiji military coup, one contributory component of which was the mounting frustration of the indigenous people over the usurpation of all power from them by non-indigenous groups.

The self-interest which our university displayed was not unique of course - there isn't a university in the country that isn't seeking students from this quarter. To seek them from the USA and Canada, or from Britain and Europe, would have some of the same effects but with fewer overtones of intrusion into societies with ethnic sensitivities. But it would be harder work for us precisely because it is the "edge" such education can give the recipients in these countries, that makes them eager to buy from us. An American has to be convinced that the education he or she will get is equal to that available domestically, is competitively priced, and perhaps therefore worth buying for the exotic experience of living and studying outside the States. A much harder "sell", particularly at the fees we charge.

Selling education is of course basically the same as selling any other commodity, and as such it is merely an extension of the commercial self-interest which caused Australian and New Zealand companies to

peddle their wares in the Pacific (in some cases during last century including slaves snatched from the islands and sold to other islands or to Queensland). One could fill a book with the history of self-interested business ventures throughout the Pacific, originating in our two countries as well as in others, and leaving a legacy of problems for their "hosts".

Again, however it may have been justified as paternalism (not considered a dirty word in those days), it was in the end self-interest which caused the same two countries to accept mandated sovereignty over certain islands after World War I, thus becoming surrogate colonial powers. It is interesting that the legacy of this period sometimes causes difficulties for the intrusive power; in the case of New Zealand, it takes the form of an islander population which is now in some cases greater in New Zealand than it is in the parent countries, with not insubstantial pressure on the domestic jobmarket and burdens on social welfare.

Nor, since they moved away from their "colonial" role, have our government policies been consistently commendable. Our involvement in their affairs has often been ill-timed or ill-considered (such as the timely Australian gift of helicopters to PNG which were then used as gunships against the Bougainville "rebels" - whose prime target, perhaps coincidentally, was the Australian sponsored Ok Tedi copper mine. The Australian Minister concerned was on the back foot and being castigated by the ABC over this issue as recently as last week, following the PNG military killings of civilians in the Solomons). On the other hand, we have ignored pleas for moral or practical help when to have at least shown strong and unwavering support would have been morally justifiable and very possibly effective (such as the urgent pleas for assistance from the constitutionally-elected Prime Minister of Fiji when he was imprisoned by members of his own race, and in due course deposed when it became obvious no external intervention beyond mild rebuke would be forthcoming. Nor was he shown any but perfunctory civility when he came to Australia subsequently - a fact that even some of his political enemies in Fiji noted with distaste. The only rebuke forthcoming from Australia was the suspension of foreign aid provisions, now re-established). We have, indeed, used foreign aid as a reward or an inducement, and withheld it as a punishment. At all times the essential issue has been our own self-interest, whether or not this has coincided with islanders' perceptions of their best interests. They send conflicting messages, and it is not untrue to suggest that both Australia and New Zealand, and most particularly Australia, are viewed with caution by many of their Pacific neighbours today.

It would be unfair to deny, however, that some Australian and New Zealand actions are motivated by neither financial nor political self-seeking, and are genuinely altruistic. The area of culture surely seems to be safe enough. Let me tell you another little moral tale...

In the Sigatoka valley in Fiji there is an ancient ceramic tradition. Potsherds scattering the coastal sand-dunes have been carbon-dated to around 1250 BC. It is almost certain that the ceramics being made there today are not in an absolutely unbroken line of descent from those, but even if not, their continuous pedigree is probably at least as ancient as any Britain or Europe can boast. The women there make water-vessels, cooking pots and other utilitarian articles using the paddle-and-anvil technique, and bonfire the product in the open air. Sadly, the tradition is in decline - there is little use of the pots for cooking where aluminium is available and won't break, and water is carried in plastic containers. There is, however, a small market to Europeans and other Fijians who value their heritage, and this has sustained a few potters down to the present, passing their tradition from mother to daughter. In the late 1970s, the US Peace Corps sent to Fiji as two of its volunteers a husband and wife pair of potters. Not exceptional potters, it seems. More your mug and ashtray type of potters in fact. These worthies homed in on the Sigatoka valley as an ideal place to show the locals how to upgrade their skills and be as good as western potters - well at least as good as some. They brought with them a kick-wheel and they built a small kiln. The only thing that saved the Sigatoka women from falling prey to these improvements was their stubborn pride in their ancient craft. They watched the demonstrations politely, even made the odd ashtray, then returned to their old ways. The Peace Corps workers went away. A few years later, I read in a Fiji-based magazine of a ceramic workshop being set up in Suva with government support, I understand using some assistance money from New Zealand, and with a principal potter trained there. They stated their intention as being to use contemporary methods to imitate the traditional forms, for sale to tourists. Horrified, I wrote to the magazine saying they should by all means make coffee-mugs and other articles Fiji imports from abroad, but that under no circumstances should they compete with the few struggling traditional craftswomen for the small market for traditional ceramic ware. My letter was read by the minister concerned, and they were instructed to limit their production to the articles I

had suggested. To the best of my knowledge, there are about two dozen women spread through three main producing areas in Fiji, still making traditional pots and water-vessels. Until the next Peace Corps mission, or until the next cultural assistance grant?

I often think of the first actual encounter between Europeans and Aboriginals in Tasmania. A boatload of officers stepped ashore, and were greeted by a timid group of Aboriginals, one of whom overcame his fear, stepped forward and presented the captain with a bundle of sticks. Not understanding what he was meant to do, the officer arranged them in a heap and set them alight. The aboriginals hurled spears at them, and several were shot in retaliation. History had been set in train. But the gift of sticks, leaves, and earth is a common gesture in tribal societies signifying the sharing or giving of rights to use the land, and as such was the most profound and touching gesture that the occupants of the land could make toward strangers who had come amongst them. The response was of course incredibly shocking to them. Perhaps the Europeans, new to the Pacific and unschooled in anthropology, could be forgiven for their ignorance. But too often today we still burn the sticks of others' cultures, and we no longer have any excuses.

The points I am making with all of the foregoing are fairly simple. British- and European-stock Australians and New Zealanders are descended from the most aggressively imperialistic societies the world has ever seen, which between them have seen fit to impose their will on virtually every other society in the world. Our own short history shows how blood will out, and we still too often view our neighbours either with fear and suspicion, or as fruit for the plucking. And, apart from almost always seeing self-interest as no more than good business, we frequently mistake cultural imperialism for benevolent sharing of our knowledge and discoveries. Ours is a highly eclectic society, deriving our culture from many sources and welcoming change and innovation. It is sometimes difficult for us to realise that such an approach may prove fatal to traditional cultures such as those in the Pacific—our well-meant offerings may be a poisoned chalice.

We can't turn back the clock to undo past wrongs, and there is no value on our part to breast-beating about it, or to recriminations on anyone else's part. What is required is not a sense of guilty obligation to expiate the past, but rather a recognition of responsibility to *now* be considerate and sensitive, and where necessary helpful, members of the neighbourhood. In no sense should we be ashamed of our own achievements, values and aspirations, but we must not be presumptuous about our right to impose these on our neighbours, even when we believe our intentions to be commendable. We should attempt to be sure that we are considering things from their perspective as much as from our own, and if we are not equipped to take such a view, we should hold back until we become so. And whenever we do venture into their ground, let us try to be careful about where we place our feet.

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