

## Cultural relations diplomacy: An Australian angle

**Bruce Bennett, Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra**

### Introduction

The term 'culture' has a variegated history in the languages that contain it. In Australia, a popular rejection of pretentious behaviour led to the widespread acceptance of AA Phillips's coinage in 1950 of 'the cultural cringe': 'Above our writers – and other artists – looms the intimidating mass of Anglo-Saxon culture. Such a situation almost inevitably produces the characteristic Australian Cultural Cringe' (*Meanjin* 1950). Whether in its humble or its strutting form, this 'cringe' continued to characterise many Australians' projections of themselves beyond their shores into the later twentieth century. Moreover, the 1997 edition of *The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary* contains the colloquial expression 'culture vulture' – a term of humorous and critical denigration for a person overly eager to acquire culture. I suggest that the usage of 'culture' in these ways may reflect a perverse hunger for the arts in Australia, however awkwardly it may be displayed, or need to be concealed.

Perhaps 'diplomacy' exhibits a similar set of shifting social parameters. The word appears nowhere in the lexicon of *The Australian National Dictionary*. But *The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary* offers two principal usages: (a) 'the management of international relations and expertise in this'; and (b) 'adroitness in personal relations, tact'. While the naive Bushman tradition of Australian self-characterisation continually plays on a *lack* of tact and a *maladroitness* in personal relations, the pioneer tradition grows in part from a sense of the *excess* of diplomacy among Australians, and perhaps in their international relations as well.

Australians should then be adept at international cultural relations, with a hunger for culture and a well-honed habit of diplomacy.

Are we?

This paper traces certain developments in the history of institutionalised cultural relations through the Australian Government's Department of Foreign (formerly External) Affairs and the role of Australian Studies in cultural diplomacy; and also in the development of international research linkages in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

### Cultural Relations Diplomacy

The history of official cultural relations diplomacy between Australia and other nations became interesting and problematic from the post-Second World War years into the 1970s and 80s. As Alan Renouf noted in his book *The Frightened Country*, a Department of External Affairs had been set up by the Federal Government in 1901, but 'it was small and unimportant because Australia's foreign policy almost always was that of Britain' (Renouf 499). This situation waxed and waned in the inter-war period from 1918 to 1939, but the war in the Pacific and the Cold War period saw the first real stirrings of a cultural diplomacy that reflected a sense of post-colonial independence.

Paul Hasluck, an historian and Minister for External Affairs from 1964-69, made a forward-looking, detailed proposal for a formal cultural relations program and appropriate staffing

when he was a diplomat in 1941-42, but his ambitious project did not eventuate in its original form (Manton 37-40). Nevertheless, an Information and Cultural Relations Branch of the Department of Foreign Affairs from the mid-1960s gave formal governmental recognition to this area, and in the early 1970s cultural exchange programs were proposed in the Arts, Sciences and Education (Manton 50-52).

Despite the 'Cinderella' status of cultural relations compared to political, security and economic issues, a separate Cultural Relations Branch was established in the early 1970s within the Public Affairs and Cultural Relations Division. Noting this fact and its consequences in 1975, Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Alan Renouf, wrote to Heads of Australian Missions in overseas countries that 'the cultural relations field' should be regarded as 'an integral part of our foreign relations and as an area which offers important opportunities for achieving our diplomatic objectives'. Renouf's further stricture that 'competence and expertise in cultural activities. . . at least in some posts, should be regarded as an important part of a diplomatic officer's training' (Manton 58) was never fully realised in any formal way, though recruitment of officers has included some consideration of their cultural interests and activities.

The high ambitions held in the 1970s for promotion of Australian artistic and scientific achievement in overseas countries gained further impetus in the 1980s, especially in the build-up to the Bicentenary of Australia's European founding in 1988. In 1987, the Labor Government's Foreign Affairs Minister, Bill Hayden, agreed to support new country-specific programs in cultural relations, with an emphasis on countries of the Asia-Pacific. From some points of view, the next decade was a high point, with the Cultural Relations Branch as 'a real player in the field . . . [working in] solid partnership with the various Boards of the Australia Council, where projects met each other's aims and objectives – and (sometimes) funding was shared' (Manton 63). The government's prioritising of Asia-Pacific countries was an attempt to reverse an historic neglect of this 'region', but its implementation carried the danger of neglecting friendly Western European countries which were beginning to develop meaningful artistic and cultural programs and exchanges.

According to a public paper produced in 2002, *Promoting Australian Culture Overseas: The Role of the Department of Foreign Affairs*, the government's current priority regions are now Western Europe, North America and South East Asia (2). The Department's three-year strategy is to:

project Australia as a democratic, tolerant, vibrant, innovative and creative nation, with a rich and diverse culture – an image that advances our foreign and trade policy interest, and promote the export of Australian cultural products. (2)

An interesting aspect of this plan is that up to AUD\$1 million is available to overseas diplomatic posts for cultural activity and 'discretionary public diplomacy funds'; a basic allocation of AUD\$200 000 a year provides ad hoc funding to individuals and organisations that project a modern image of Australia abroad. The emphasis on decision-making by the overseas posts in the cultural arena is intended to enhance the relevance of cultural activities to perceived needs and the interests of audiences in those parts of the world, including programs of continuing relevance, such as Australian Studies. At the same time, it is clear that international cultural relations occurs under many auspices, including state and federal arts organisations, schools and universities, with some minor

support from the business community. University-to-university linkages and networks provide a further level of activity.

### **Australian Studies Initiatives**

In October 2002, a conference on the past, present and future of Australian Studies was held at the University of Newcastle. One of the guest speakers at this conference was Ms Susan Ryan, who was Minister for Education in the Hawke Labor Government in the 1980s which instigated a major review of Australian Studies. This review, carried out by Kay Daniels, Humphrey McQueen and Bruce Bennett produced the report *Windows onto Worlds: Studying Australia at Tertiary Level* which was tabled in the Australian parliament in 1987, and has influenced the study of Australia both within Australia and abroad over succeeding decades. Susan Ryan (formerly Senator Ryan) summarised its impact:

*Windows onto World* delivered on the government's expectations and went far beyond them. From this distance, having observed the growth and dramatic expansion of fine Australian scholarship in the intervening years, I can say confidently that *Windows onto Worlds* changed the way Australians learn about themselves and the way they see themselves ('Making the Idea Real' 5).

The international dimensions and potential of Australian Studies were dealt with in Chapter 11 of *Windows onto Worlds*. The Committee recommended enhanced co-ordination and funding for Australian Studies programs on a variety of fronts. In addition, the committee commissioned the publication of a booklet *Australian Studies Overseas: A Guide*, which was compiled by Amanda Lohrey. A key consultant was Gay Andrews from the highly effective Cultural Relations Section of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Programs in Australian Studies were identified in China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam, West Indies. In Europe, courses or programs were identified and described in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK and Yugoslavia. Courses were also described in the Middle East, Canada, the USA and South Africa. The provision and updating of course materials and the knowledge of teachers were seen as priorities.

Unlike Canada, with an even wider range of universities teaching Canadian Studies abroad, the support from successive Australian governments has lacked scale, stability and continuity (Bennett, *Australian Studies and Canadian Studies*). Yet many teachers about Australia have enthusiastically carried the flag, teaching history, literature, linguistics, film, anthropology or other courses about Australia, and have supervised theses on Australian topics with little obvious encouragement from Australian sources.

Although the Department of Foreign Affairs has been the main governmental instigator and supporter of cultural relations activity in overseas countries, the Department of Education has also been a leading player in Australian Studies, as Senator Susan Ryan's intervention in the 1980s demonstrated. In 1994, the Department of Employment, Education and Training commissioned another landmark report, *Internationalising Australian Studies: Strategies and Guidelines*. The report recommended a global approach to Australian studies, including Europe and North America as well as Asia. Four broad programs were proposed: (1) an advisory body; (2) an international exchange program; (3)

a capability-building program aimed at strengthening and building institutional, material and human resource capacity abroad; and (4) a research and development program. While the federal Department of Education and especially Australian Education International, has funded certain initiatives under these heads, their drive towards Australian Studies programs abroad has been fitful and uneven.

Some of the most promising Australian Studies courses and programs abroad have been those supported, in small but significant ways, by the bilateral councils of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. These include the Australia-India Council (AIC) and similar councils for China, Indonesia and Japan. The Australia-India Council, for example, has developed a scheme to fund five or six junior (usually PhD students) and senior scholars working on Australian subjects (such as literature, the environment or indigenous governance) to visit and carry out 'field work' at Australian institutions for periods of up to two months. In precise and practical ways as well as in broader humanitarian ways, such visits contribute – along with Australian teachers' and scholars' visits to India – towards enhanced cultural relations between the two countries. The additional pay-off for Australia in such schemes is a longer-term, in-depth knowledge and understanding of Australia with a multiplying and ramifying effect among students subsequently taught by these scholars and teachers. Seed funding for such programs and projects in Australian Studies can also lead to longer-term links between Australian and overseas institutions.

### **A Broader Picture**

International relations never remain still. The Australian Centre in Berlin, for example, supports a continuing series of Australian Studies lectures along with special visits by high-level political, academic and bureaucratic figures for conferences on topics of interest to both countries. (An October 2003 conference on the funding of higher education is an example of a topic of mutual interest in which Australian expertise can contribute to German policy-making and vice versa.) These are the kinds of 'second-track' diplomacy which can deepen the relationship between our two countries beyond the strictly political, economic and security concerns which often dominate the relationship. An engaged and interested Association for Australian Studies in Germany contributes significantly to this 'second-track'.

In a broader context, Australia's relations with Western European countries such as Germany can contribute to Australia's changing relationship with the USA, as negotiations move towards some version of a 'free trade agreement'. Jose Borghino, spokesman for the Australian Society of Authors, has summed up the cultural dilemma for Australians:

Australians have a fatal attraction for globalisation. We fear it because we are a small player in this worldwide poker game. But we also desire it because we recognise that for Australian culture to evolve it needs to be global. So do you join in because this is the only game in town, or do you hold out and hope that there might eventually be a space for something other than endless re-runs of *Gilligans Island*? (*Newswrite* 7)

It is crucial that international cultural relations help to offset a narrow-minded drive towards purely economic outcomes. There are many areas of affinity for 'old' Europe and 'young' Australia in complicating and enriching the cultural lives of our citizens. The key to successful cultural relations activity in Australian Studies, for example, is for

participants to be active partners in projects with relevant and recognised medium and long-term goals, which we can justify to ourselves, our universities and our governments.

## REFERENCES

- Bennett, Bruce. *Australian Studies and Canadian Studies: Reports, Responses, Prospects* (Brisbane: Institute for Cultural Policy Studies, Griffith University, 1990).
- Borghino, Jose. 'Culture and the Australia-US Free Trade Agreement' *Newswrite: The NSW Writers' Centre Magazine* 128, July 2003, 7, 28.
- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. *Promoting Australian Culture Overseas: The Role of the Department of Foreign Affairs* (Canberra, 2002).
- Internationalising Australian Studies: Strategies and Guidelines*, by K R McKinnon, B H Bennett, D G Blight and L E Howell (Canberra: I D P Education for Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1994).
- Lohrey, Amanda. *Australian Studies Overseas: A Guide* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1988).
- Manton, Neil. *Cultural Relations: The Other Side of the Diplomatic Coin* (Canberra: Homosapien Books, 2003).
- Phillips, A A. 'The Cultural Cringe', in *The Australian Tradition: Studies in a Colonial Culture* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1958) – first published in *Meanjin* 1950.
- Renouf, Alan. *The Frightened Country* (South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1979).
- Ryan, Susan. 'Making the Idea Real: Australian studies and the Hawke reform agenda', unpublished paper, 2002.
- Windows onto Worlds: Studying Australian at Tertiary Level* by V K Daniels, B H Bennett and H McQueen, the Committee to Review Australian Studies in Tertiary Education (Canberra: 1987).