

OPINION: ACSSO guest columnists address values-driven issues in education

Ignorance as a second language

We need to beef up knowledge about the region and its people's tongues

Robin Jeffrey: 08 June 2007

THE Dutch do it. The Norwegians do it. Even the French and the Canadians do it. The Indians do it a lot. They all learn second (and third) languages. Australians do not. Yet there's broad though passive agreement: Australia's capacity to understand and talk with Asia and the Pacific is deficient, even pathetic.

Federal Education Training Minister Julie Bishop asserted that the Government was trying to do something about it by spending \$112 million on school language programs. Federal Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd promised \$65million towards learning the languages of Asia.

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry called for more language teaching in a report in April. So have the Australian Council of State School Organisations and the Group of Eight universities.

The Australian Federal Police, the Australian Defence Force and non-government aid organisations cry out for linguists. The Flood report on intelligence did the same.

Although Australia has never been more enmeshed in Asia and the Pacific, its capacity to speak the languages and know the cultures is probably less than it was 15 years ago.

The consequences are evident. Would the ill-fated encounter with Jakarta Governor Sutiyoso last week, when police in Sydney apparently entered his hotel room unannounced, have happened in quite this way if senior officials had realised where he fitted into the politics of Indonesia?

This is not to argue that Australians should overlook bad acts for the sake of a gooey cultural relativism. It is, however, to state the obvious: if you choose a fight, know the ground.

Michael Wesley's new book, *The Howard Paradox*, argues that Australia's economic and security relations with the countries of Asia have prospered under the Howard Government. What's missing in such discussions, however, is recognition of the small cadre of Asia-knowledgeable diplomats, defence, police, business and non-government organisation people who have guided policy.

Peter Cosgrove is a well-known example. Another is Michael Stone, an army officer featured in the ABC's *Australian Story*, where he demonstrated his knowledge of Tetum and his joy at being able to talk to the people of East Timor.

You'd think the numbers of such people would grow steadily. But, if anything, they are shrinking. The number of students studying Indonesian in Australian universities fell by more than 20 per cent between 2001 and 2005, to fewer than 5000 students

at any level of expertise.

In schools, fewer than 1900 Year 12 students did Indonesian in 2005, less than 1 per cent of all students in Year 12. More than 5400 did Chinese and more than 5300 did Japanese. But many of these students were from Asian countries and will return home after their study. They won't augment Australia's global capacities.

Study of Asia in Australian schools suffered a severe setback when the Government scrapped the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools program in 2002. The premature end of the program, which was conceived to take a generation of children from Year 1 to Year 12, not only ripped money out of Asian studies, it demoralised teachers and told principals and parents that the federal Government did not think the study of Asia was important.

So what's needed? First, leadership. A few prominent Australians in business and government should say over and over again what James Wolfensohn said in March this year: "We must invest in an Asian future." ACCI chief executive Peter Hendy provided a welcome echo when he released a report on education in April: "We think it should be compulsory that by at least seven, each child who can is learning a foreign language."

Then we need policy. Australia has some of the most imaginative and dedicated language teachers in the world. They have to be; they've survived against heavy odds for years. What's required is to unify and unleash their talents.

As an example, languages that attract small student numbers are often deemed too expensive for a single university to sustain, even though they are spoken by tens of millions of people.

One answer is to create a national program to make Australia a leader in the global teaching of languages such as Hindi-Urdu, Korean, Pidgin, Thai and Vietnamese. For the cost of an Abrams tank (about \$10 million), you could afford to offer all these languages to the whole of Australia (and the world) for five years.

Such languages would be available in a variety of formats: on the web for distance learning; as intensive short courses; and through well-organised programs in their mother countries. Some of this already happens but it is piecemeal and under-funded.

A second example of where policy is needed is in the renewal of the pool of scholars who teach about the politics, history and societies of Asia and the Pacific. In 1988, 15 of Australia's 19 universities taught courses about India and its South Asian neighbours; today, no more than a half-dozen universities do. Yet state and federal governments rush to embrace India as the next global powerhouse, and Pakistan's North-West Frontier hasn't been so famous since Ronald Colman was a Bengal lancer.

In 2002, the Asian Studies Association of Australia argued for a program developed by the Luce Foundation in the US that offered incentives to universities to hire scholars of Asia and to make commitments to teach about the region. The price of a second Abrams tank would put 20 such scholars in Australian universities for five years. The pool of Australians capable of interpreting the region is tiny. We lost five such people among the dead in the Yogyakarta plane crash in March (two police, a

diplomat, a journalist and an aid worker). Such shoes today are hard to fill.

As Australia is drawn into closer connections with Asia and the Pacific, it is essential to have growing numbers of people with the language and cultural skills to enjoy working with the neighbours. We need Australians able to talk, listen, understand and act. We don't have nearly enough.

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