

Julie Bishop's speech to

The New Colombo Plan roundtable

22 March 2013

Thank you Don. Ladies and Gentlemen, I add my welcome to you all to this policy development round table in our national capital. I am personally delighted that so many people have seen fit to take time out of their busy lives to be here; to help develop what we hope will be a signature policy of an incoming Coalition Government.

I particularly want to acknowledge the Ambassadors and High Commissioners from China, from India, Indonesia, New Zealand, Singapore, Papua New Guinea, Timor Leste, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Deputies from Japan, South Korea, Fiji and Malaysia and representatives from Hong Kong. You are all most welcome here.

I also want to acknowledge the presence of representatives from our universities, from our student bodies, from our NGO's, from organisations across the country who feel passionate about deeper engagement with our region.

I want to make a personal thanks to James Packer, and to Tony Shepherd for taking time to be here today. It's deeply appreciated. Australia is a global nation with global interests in what must be the Global Century. Yet we are a nation bounded by the Indian Ocean on the west, the Pacific on the east and we are unmistakably located in Asia.

Australia's strength as a nation and our reputation in the world is at its highest when our influence in our region is at its strongest. That is why a Coalition Government will focus our foreign policy assets, not exclusively, but as a priority, on our region - whether it be our military and defence capability, our economic and trade capacity, our diplomatic and foreign aid efforts. Our region is where we live, it's where we can have the most influence, it's where we can be a positive force for good.

Let me put it another way. I'll read you a quote.

"Geographically Australia is next door to Asia and our destiny as a nation is irrevocably conditioned by what takes place in Asia. This means that our future depends to an ever increasing degree upon the political stability of our Asian neighbours, upon the economic well being of Asian people, and upon the development of understanding and friendly relations between Australia and Asia. Whilst it remains true that peace is indivisible, and that what takes place in any part of the world may affect us, our vital interests are closer to home. It is therefore in Asia and the Pacific that Australia should make its primary effort in the field of foreign relations".

Those words were spoken on 9 January 1950 by Percy Spender, the Foreign Minister, or Minister for External Affairs in the Menzies Government on the eve of his departure to a meeting of Commonwealth Nations in Colombo. Since that time the Liberal Party has continued with this open, outward looking, optimistic world view. We have based our economic model on being an open export orientated country.

The Menzies foreign policy found its expression in an education initiative, a student program, the Colombo Plan which brought to our shores the best and brightest students from our region. Australia reached out to the world and in this way engaged on a people to people basis with our region.

Over thirty years some forty thousand students came to Australia, lived in our homes, studied at our universities, engaged with our people, came to know us and forged deep and lasting friendships. That is why the Coalition believes that if we are truly serious about broadening and deepening our engagement in Asia, we need a grand initiative, a signature policy hopefully that will go on in perpetuity. And that's why

an incoming Coalition Government will seek to establish a new Colombo Plan, a government backed scheme that provides our students, our best and brightest, with the opportunity to undertake study at a university in our region.

The hallmark of this proposal, the part that sets it ahead of anything else, is that we want to partner with business so that students who are part of this scheme will also have the opportunity, while they are studying at a university in the region, to undertake an internship or a mentorship with a business working in that country, the host country.

Let me explain our thinking behind this business/government /higher education partnership. When I was the Education Minister I hosted an international education conference in 2006. The idea was to showcase Australia as a destination for students in the region to come to our universities and we had education ministers from as far as Turkey in the west through to the Marshall Islands in the east.

Through the course of the day it came apparent to me that there was an underlying issue and that was the number of students from Australia who were studying in countries in our region. Education minister after education minister mentioned the fact that, whilst they had thousands or hundreds of students studying in Australia, there were virtually none studying in their universities.

I saw this as a public diplomacy issue that Australia should address and so I got the Department of Education to carry out a survey of universities students across the country. The results unfortunately came at the same time as the 2007 election so there wasn't much I could do with them except to say I read the survey! The results showed that students didn't make the connection between studying overseas and getting a job at the end of their undergraduate years, that they couldn't see the point in spending time at a university in our region while they were getting a degree at an Australian university.

The Coalition wants it to become the norm rather than the exception for Australian students to undertake part of their undergraduate studies at a university in our region. We want it to be seen as a rite of passage for young Australians so that we can build up a large body of people who have experienced living, working, studying in another country in our region and learning the language, forging friendships, exchanging ideas and then coming back to Australia with skills and perceptions and ideas that will boost our innovation and our productivity.

That's how we came up with the idea of the new Colombo Plan.

Today we seek your ideas, your advice, and your direction so that we can make this plan a reality.

Ladies and gentlemen I want to assure you that an incoming Coalition Government has the energy, the political will, and the leadership to make this happen. To prove that, I now have great pleasure in inviting my leader, the Leader of the Opposition, Tony Abbott, to say a few words.