Embassy and the New Orthodoxy in Australian-Southeast Asian Relations*

Stephen Frost
Murdoch University, Australia

The dominant Australian discourse on Asia has shifted (as proclaimed on a recent magazine cover), 'FROM YELLOW PERIL TO MAIN GAME' (Australian Left Review, 1992). Asia, once considered the 'yellow peril' by the Australian state, is today redefined as an essential component in its drive for economic recovery and stability. This 'new' Asia is primarily the outcome of an Asia mindedness that is culturalist in its construction of Asia and masks vested interests driven primarily by the doctrine of economic rationalism. Emerging from an economically driven and essentialist Asia mindedness is a 'politics of tolerance'; the formulation of government policy that is sensitive towards and tolerant of the internal and foreign policies of the regimes of our nearest neighbours.

The consequences of foreign policy formulated by a politics of tolerance and driven by economic rationalism are manifold, but the most important is the accommodation of the programme of appeasement that is shaped by business and their allies who link cultural sensitivity to continued trade and investment. This is manifest in the widely held view that Australia has not only failed to understand Asia, but by doing so has jeopardized its economic future.

In 1989 the Garnaut Report provided a blueprint for Australia's economic future with the region. In it, Garnaut (1989:1) predicted that "[t]his is a time of great opportunity of Australia", but only if "professional excellence in the management of our relations with Northeast Asia" is developed and maintained. This policy document clearly articulated the link between specific sorts of knowledge about Asia (Asia literacy) and the ability to enmesh with the region. Groups shaping the policy response to the region have, in a sense, turned Garnaut on his head, and maintain that a lack of knowledge about Asia has directly jeopardized Australian links, particularly economic, with the region.

For example, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) drama series Embassy became both the target of the Malaysian government's wrath and the victim of Asia mindedness in Australia. The show was criticized for its insensitive portrayal of Southeast Asia and in turn was perceived to have jeopardized trade and investment links with the region. This is despite the fact that the series was itself a product of Asia mindedness; part of the push to understand the region.

In dealing with the issues canvassed in the public domain, therefore, Embassy was the cause of its own downfall. Its inherent Asia literacy aimed to develop

* I would like to thank Gerard Greenfield, Tom O'Regan and Richard Robison for commenting on earlier drafts of this paper.
Australians' (or at least ABC viewers') sense of place in the region. Its failure was attributed by representatives of the new orthodoxy to a lack of knowledge about Asia and cultural insensitivity. But Embassy was Asia literate, and the fact that it raised the ire of the Malaysian government was not because it was uninformed, but because it was too informed. The obvious question, then, is whether the new drive for Asia literacy is capable of producing the desired effect; enmeshment with the region.

This paper examines the calls for enmeshment with Asia in the light of the Embassy affair and the link between the culturalist discourse promulgated by representatives of influential groups in Australia whose views are founded on the premises of economic rationalism. It maps the terrain upon which the concept of Asia is constructed and charts the forces that have shaped official policy responses, and asks whether Asia mindedness, as propagated in the new orthodoxy's policy response, will in fact develop Australia's links with the region.

The freeze in relations

Initial screenings of Embassy gave no indication of the impending response from Malaysia. When the ABC first presented the programme on 12 September 1990 it received complimentary reviews. One critic (Harris, 1990) declared that it "really is first-rate", whilst another (Hooks, 1990) enthused that Embassy was "different, original, and the most exciting concept in drama to come our way for a decade". There was perhaps a hint, however, that the show could provide controversy. Barbara Hooks (1990) noted that the story lines were drawn from news archives (a significant point as we shall see), but did not perceive this as a danger. On the contrary, she thought that it rather enhanced the show's appeal. Nevertheless, she clearly misread the Malaysian government's reaction to the telecast when she wrote that the "country [Ragaan was] fictional" (Hooks, 1990).

On the other hand, the Malaysian authorities not only failed to believe that Ragaan was fictional, but perceived it as a direct (mis)representation of Malaysia itself. The response from the government was relatively swift. Karim Marzuki, the Malaysian High Commissioner in Canberra, was reported in the Australian press at the end of October to have indicated that the "suspension of existing and future bilateral projects" was a distinct possibility (Metherell, 1990). At first neither the Australian nor Malaysian governments were forthcoming on whether there was a diplomatic breach or not, and if there was, neither was willing to comment on the reasons for it.

In March, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Senator Gareth Evans, was willing to concede only "something of a problem" between the two countries, but still maintained that the government had received no official directive that Malaysia had indeed ordered a freeze on relations (Metherell, 1991). Evans' counterpart in Malaysia, Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, was equally reticent. In response to questions on strained relations with Australia he maintained that Malaysia's "policy is to be good to all countries which show mutual respect and do not interfere in the other's domestic affairs" (New Straits Times, [NST] 27 March 1991). Dr Mahathir, the