

# 1. INTRODUCTION

For most of their history, Australians have seen themselves as a beleaguered white outpost of the British Empire, perched precariously between the hordes of Asia and the edge of the world. They looked north with a mixture of ignorance, wonder and fear, and always through the prism of imperial design and racism. But by the middle of the 20th century the turmoil of the Second World War, communism and decolonisation had ended any possibility that the region could be ignored. ‘No nation can escape its geography’, warned Percy Spender, Australia’s Minister for External Affairs, in 1950, ‘that is an axiom which should be written deep in the mind of every Australian’.<sup>1</sup> Threats that seemed to emanate from Asia compelled Australia to take action and reassess its place in the region: Britain’s ‘Far East’ became Australia’s ‘Near North’. And so, in the early 1950s, Australia embarked on its most ambitious attempt — outside of war — to engage with Asia: the Colombo Plan.

Once a conspicuous symbol of Australia's engagement with the region, the Colombo Plan has since faded from popular memory. But many Australians remember the Asian students who came — first in their hundreds, then in their thousands — to study at Australian tertiary institutions. Those students, along with privately-funded Asian scholars, were among the first people from South and South-East Asia whom Australians encountered. For those who taught, befriended, or provided board and lodgings for these students, the impact on their lives was personal, immediate, and enduring. But few Australians are aware that the Colombo Plan extended far beyond the giving of scholarships. They do not know how and why the Colombo Plan was created, nor how it served as an instrument of Australian foreign policy in the fight against communism, or what the political and racial anxieties were upon which the scheme was built.

Historians of post-war Australia, too, have overlooked the Colombo Plan. They have considered it, and all forms of foreign aid, as tangential to the history of Australia's foreign policy and relations with Asia. Instead, attention has been devoted to relations with the Western world, particularly the desire to cement a military alliance with the United States, at the expense of Australian efforts to engage with the region. Another reason for the Colombo Plan's minor place in post-war historiography is that it was an international creation, established by Commonwealth, and not exclusively Australian, policy-makers. Australia certainly played a prominent role in the creation of the Colombo Plan, but it was not 'our' aid program. Later historians have interpreted the seemingly inconsequential volume of funds spent by Australia as an indicator of political and cultural insignificance. This book seeks to address these oversights and explain how giving financial and technical assistance to Asia — a region hitherto ignored

or reviled — became an indispensable plank of the Menzies Government's policy towards Asia.

For Percy Spender, the man who pushed the idea of an aid program for the region through to reality, the Colombo Plan became a feather in his cap. It was, he wrote proudly in his memoirs, 'a dramatic example of how a small nation ... may influence history'.<sup>2</sup> Setting aside the egotistical fervour, his assertion captures the degree of hope and confidence invested in the plan. Part of the Colombo Plan's success came from its longevity (still operating today, it is the world's longest-running bilateral aid program), but also because it crossed deep divides in Australian politics. Although grounded in Cold War politics, the Colombo Plan was one of the few post-war creations that achieved consistent, bipartisan support and allowed the humanitarian internationalist and the Australian nationalist, fearful of the outside world, to come together.

The Colombo Plan reached into almost every aspect of Australian foreign policy, from strategic planning and diplomatic initiatives, to economic and cultural engagement. More generally, it encouraged officials and politicians to define an Australian approach to the Cold War and the challenges of decolonisation. This book explores the public and private agenda behind Australia's foreign aid diplomacy and reveals the strategic, political and cultural objectives that drove the Colombo Plan. It examines the legacy of the Second World War, how foreign aid was seen as crucial to the achievement of regional security, and the debates which led to the establishment of the Colombo Plan in the early 1950s. The book gives particular attention to Spender's successor as foreign minister, Richard Casey, and his role as chief defender and promoter of an Australian aid program. Other themes touched on include the way the Colombo Plan was sold to Australian and Asian audiences, the type

of assistance offered under the program, the limitations and effectiveness of Australian aid projects, and the changing nature of Australia's attitude towards its connections with the Empire, the British Commonwealth and the United States. Also considered are questions about sponsored Asian students: who they were, what they studied, what community support they received, and what impact they had on Australia's reputation as a racist and anti-Asian country. Encompassing all these issues is the question of how Australia sought to assert a stronger international presence and project itself into the region; in effect, how Asia was introduced into Australian consciousness.

The Colombo Plan was a cultural creation as much as a political and strategic one. As such, it offers an important way to investigate Australian hopes and assumptions about their future next to Asia. Indeed, this book tries to capture the wide-ranging impact of Australian assistance to Asia and locate the Colombo Plan not only in national history but in the lives of those who helped create it. It aims to deepen our understanding of the relationship between aid and foreign policy and to illuminate the complex mix of self-interest, condescension and humanitarianism that characterised Australia's early ventures into Asia. Most of all, this book tells the story of how an insular society, deeply scarred by the turbulence of war, chose to face its regional future.

### Footnotes

- 1 *Commonwealth parliamentary debates: House of Representatives*, vol. 6, 9 March 1950, p. 628
- 2 P. Spender, *Exercises in diplomacy: ANZUS and the Colombo Plan*, Sydney, Sydney University Press, 1969, p. 200