

3. BUILDING A BRIDGE TO ASIA

In Colombo, on the morning of 9 January 1950, a small crowd gathered to catch a glimpse of representatives arriving for the conference. Delegates posed for a publicity photograph in the gardens opposite the Senate building, unperturbed by a recent theft of explosives and threats to disrupt the meeting. Ceylon's first Prime Minister and conference chairman, the affable Don Stephen Senanayake, moved proudly among the representatives from eight nations and smiled through his magnificent drooping moustache. He knew that the Colombo conference would make headlines and that Ceylon would, at least briefly, be in the world spotlight. To ensure maximum publicity, the British provided confidential daily reports to the US State Department and granted American journalists access to the daily background briefings typically

only open to Commonwealth reporters. The popular press in Australia celebrated the 'frank get-together' as a triumph of the egalitarian nature of the Commonwealth with 'all members ... now equal, irrespective of their size, race or creed'.¹ Australia's Percy Spender, who had only been foreign minister for two weeks since the Menzies government's sweeping victory, also mingled among the delegates from Britain, Canada, Ceylon, India, New Zealand, Pakistan, and South Africa. Following the photo session, Senanayake ushered the delegates and their entourages inside. The sixty-year-old Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, jauntily trotted up the stairs, demonstrating his energy to everyone. By contrast, the infirm British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, his strength sapped further by the tropical heat, was carried from the street to the meeting room atop a palanquin (a chair carried on the shoulders of four men). The image served as an apt metaphor for the end of British imperialism and the rise of Asian nationalism. Indeed, although not officially attending, the Americans saw the conference as something of a last hoorah for the British Empire: 'the dying glow of a setting sun', as one US congressman put it.²

Once assembled, proceedings moved quickly. In the hot conditions, the congenial opening speeches and discussion were disturbed only by the Senate building's resident crows, who called raucously through the open windows. At regular intervals, Senanayake brought proceedings to a halt with a clap of his hands. Almost immediately, barefooted servants dressed in white sarongs and red sashes padded among the delegates bearing trays of iced water and sweet tea.³ In welcoming delegates, Senanayake signalled the central purpose of the historic meeting. The obstacles to regional stability, he said, were economic — not political — and nothing less than the

peace and future of the world depended on helping Asia support her increasing population.

No one knew quite what to expect from the Australian delegation. Spender's wife, Jean, always said that her husband had a knack for attracting public attention. By virtue of his temperament and professional experience, few men were better qualified to raise international interest in Australia's concerns about the political future of Asia.⁴ For Spender, the British Commonwealth Foreign Ministers' Meeting presented a tantalising opportunity to establish Australia as a force in regional affairs; and he made no attempt to disguise the anti-communist sentiment which drove his determination to launch an aid program for South and South-East Asia. Before he left Colombo, Spender told a reporter that he hoped to find a way to support Asians in their bid to 'develop their own democratic institutions and their own economies and thus protect them against those opportunists and subversive elements which take advantage of changing political situations and low living standards'.⁵ In his opening address, he returned to one of his favorite themes and told of the 'inescapable fact' of Australia's geographical proximity and the increasingly active role in regional affairs she wanted to play. Delegates, he said, had a responsibility to determine a clear course of action to help stabilise the region and they must not squander the opportunity. 'Could not the old Commonwealth countries contribute part of their resources for the economic development of this area?' Spender asked, gently preparing delegates for his own prescription for regional development, due to be presented the following day.

According to Spender's own recollection, he began formulating a strategy for bringing Western finance to bear on Asia's seemingly intractable economic problems during the long flight from Sydney to Ceylon. Although the

comment is characteristic of Spender's brusque style, this was, in fact, probably the first time he had a chance to examine his briefing papers in detail. Of course, they were rich with documents on Asian affairs written by some of the sharpest minds in the Department of External Affairs, which would have been unavailable to him while in opposition. Nevertheless, the 'wide authority' Menzies had granted Spender over how to approach the conference undoubtedly enhanced his sense of propriety.⁶ Spender, however, was in for a surprise.

On the afternoon of the second day, Ceylon's unassuming Finance Minister, Junius Richard Jayewardene, stunned everyone, most of all the Australians, when he foreshadowed his own proposal for regional economic development. The essence of Jayewardene's proposal was for Asian governments to draw up ten-year development programs and for the Commonwealth to consider what technical and financial assistance it could provide and guarantee a fixed price for primary exports. A committee of experts would then tour Asia and make recommendations based on what the Commonwealth had made available. Incensed that another delegation appeared to have pipped the Australians, Spender later accused Jayewardene of 'deliberately jumping the gun'.⁷ Spender need not have worried. Delegates responded unenthusiastically to Jayewardene's overly ambitious vision. Moreover, the idea of a regulated Commonwealth trading bloc raised more political and economic complexities than it claimed to solve. That evening, Spender and his advisers from the DEA, Arthur Tange and Laurence McIntyre, retired to the colonial splendor of the Galle Face Hotel to finalise the memorandum they had begun writing on the plane. Around this time, it would seem, they also took advice from senior British officials, who were keen for Australia to take the lead and thus deflect

any expectation that the United Kingdom was about to offer a more substantial financial contribution. On the morning of 11 January the Australians tabled their freshly-completed document ahead of the Ceylonese delegation, thus ensuring that theirs would be considered first.

Like his Commonwealth colleagues, Spender knew that, without a massive injection of funds, talk of an economic bulwark against communism was futile.⁸ As he told Menzies in a telegram from Colombo, his principal objective was to 'show a genuine willingness to meet the serious drift in the political and economic situation in South East Asia, as a basis for an immediate approach to the United States with a view of enlisting their active participation'.⁹ The Australian memorandum was structured around the speedy delivery of financial and technical assistance in order to demonstrate the Commonwealth's resolve to fight communism. Drawing heavily on the work of John Burton, the Australian plan located the provision of aid as an international response to the rise of Asian communism: through economic and social development the 'ideological attractions which communism exerts will lose their force'.¹⁰ It called on the Commonwealth to contribute to the UN's Technical Assistance Program, to provide aid to Asia on a bilateral basis, to coordinate the aid delivery with other Commonwealth governments, and for Asian nations to make submissions detailing their development needs, and for the conference to establish a consultative committee to oversee the logistics of delivering aid to the region. The recipients would be Ceylon, India and Pakistan, with non-Commonwealth Asia to be included as soon as possible.

Central to Spender's tactics at Colombo was his conviction that an expensive and open-ended scheme, such as Jayewardene's 'somewhat grandiose proposal' for an

Asian Marshall Plan, would repel the United States. Although delegates had politely dismissed Jayewardene's ideas as unworkable, Spender feared that any obvious lack of consensus among the delegates would jeopardise the entire conference: the Commonwealth would appear fractured and ill-prepared to meet the task of Asian development with conviction. In private, Spender persuaded Jayewardene to support a joint memorandum based primarily on the ideas circulated by Australia. The British, anxious to avoid accusations of post-colonial domination, were content to let Australia take the lead. For his part, Spender tactfully dampened suspicion of economic imperialism by including a clause suggesting that the form of development 'is for Asian countries themselves to determine'.¹¹ New Zealand agreed to sponsor the proposal, despite private misgivings about Spender, whom the Secretary for the Department of External Affairs, Alister McIntosh, thought 'an absolute little tick', and their doubts about the very idea of an aid program for Asia. 'It is perfectly ridiculous to think that we of the British Commonwealth countries, even with the aid of the United States, can with economic aid effectively stem the tide of Communism', wrote McIntosh; 'for one thing we can't do enough quickly, and for another, what we do is going to be swallowed up and lost in ineffective administration. We haven't a hope in the world'.¹²

Throughout the conference, Spender emphasised the utmost importance of a rapid and enthusiastic response from Western powers. As if on cue, Spender's entreaties about the impending threat of communism and the need for the Commonwealth to move quickly received a timely illustration on the very days delegates were considering his proposals. On 13 January 1950, the Soviet Union's walkout of the UN Security Council, in protest at the failure of the

Security Council to recognise the Chinese communist regime's right to take China's seat on the council, demonstrated Sino–Soviet rapport. However, rising international tension and Spender's determination were not enough to guarantee uncritical support for the proposals. India wanted further research to be conducted before committing to any specific development programs. The British were the most reticent of all, reminding delegates of their government's responsibilities in Africa and the Middle East and of the money already given for the post-war reconstruction in South–East Asia. Nevertheless, publicly, each delegation agreed that communism posed a threat to the region and that economic and social improvement was vital to regional stability. The joint memorandum captured the broad scope of this idea, and showed the right blend of flexibility and precision, which the Ceylonese proposal lacked. Further, the memorandum stressed that the restoration of Asia as an economically productive region would also have commercial benefits for the West. Towards the end of proceedings, representatives voted unanimously in favour of what they now called the 'Spender resolution' — and some even began talking of a 'Spender Plan' for Asia. All agreed to meet for the inaugural meeting of the Commonwealth Consultative Committee in Sydney in four months time. The Ceylonese government capped off the conference by showering upon the delegates a 'glittering series of entertainments', including a rare showing of the sacred relic of Buddha's tooth during an excursion to Kandy, the capital of the hill country — an experience which seemed to fortify the ailing Bevin!¹³

Spender was certainly pleased with the outcome of the Colombo conference, but there was little exuberance. He knew how far he had to go. Upon his return to Canberra, he began a campaign to raise domestic and international

support for an Asian aid program. Specifically, he continued to woo the United States, hoping to win them over to the Colombo proposals and involve them more explicitly in Australia's regional security. Indeed, giving aid to Asia served the dual purpose of building relations with Asia, but also with the United States. It was a policy validated by Australia's ambassador to the United States, Norman Makin, who, in December 1949, told his newly-elected Minister that efforts should be directed towards making Australia indispensable to America's strategic and economic planning. Although sacrifices would have to be made, rendering 'technical and material assistance to the countries of South-East Asia ... would receive the warm approval and goodwill of the US'.¹⁴ Now a decision on the magnitude of Australia's contribution had to be reached quickly in order to demonstrate Australia's commitment to sharing the burden of combating communism in alliance with the Americans.¹⁵ Privately, Spender lobbied Cabinet. Publicly, he adopted a broader strategy that emphasised the growing threat of international communism, regional instability, the inadequacy of the UN, Australian vulnerability, and the necessity of US financial support for Asia.

On 9 March 1950, Spender delivered one of the clearest articulations of conservative foreign policy to the House of Representatives. He told of the growing force of communism and Australia's vulnerability in post-colonial Asia — with Australia drifting within the grasp of communism, without the stability of a resolute and strong ally. The Soviet Union and communist China were to blame for throwing Asia into disarray, casting it and the world into a 'trance of uncertainty, doubt and fear'. Should communism prevail, Spender said, 'and Vietnam come under the heel of Communist China, Malaya is in danger of being out-flanked and it, together with Thailand, Burma

and Indonesia, will become the next direct object of further Communist activities'. The burden of regional security now fell to Australia because Britain and America had 'not yet completed their adjustments to the new situation'. Spender deftly juxtaposed another image of Australia as a purposeful and strong Pacific power which, assuming appropriate and resolute action, could assert a stabilising presence in Asia: 'We live side by side with the countries of South and South-East Asia, and we desire to be on good-neighbour terms with them. Above all, it is in our interest to foster commercial and other contacts with them and give them what help we can in maintaining stable and democratic governments in power'. By developing the proposals endorsed at the Colombo conference, Australia would give to the maximum extent of its capacity 'those resources which will help consolidate the governments of South-East Asia on such a basis that no extremism can flourish'.¹⁶

Unlike Evatt and Burton, Spender had grave doubts about the ability of the UN to protect Australian interests, especially considering that it included representatives from those who were 'working to disrupt the order we believe in'. Instead, to avert the communist threat he hoped to create two mutually supportive instruments of Australian foreign policy: economic diplomacy (encompassing a 'policy of good-neighbourly assistance') and a military alliance with the United States. Using the same sentimental tone employed by Menzies to draw Australia closer to Britain, Spender regularly spoke of the United States as sharing a 'common heritage and way of life'. Importantly, he held little hope for a British 'adjustment in Australia's favour' and he considered the United States to be the natural substitute to help Australia secure both the economic and military aspects of its foreign policy objectives:

*I am sure our friends of the United States will not misunderstand me when I say that their great eminence in world affairs to-day not only imposes corresponding obligations upon them, which it should be recorded they have most generously been willing to accept, but it also makes impossible the solution of such problems as we are discussing without their active co-operation.*¹⁷

Few would have missed the point: the era of the Evatt/Burton analysis of world affairs was over and the United States, not the UN, was to be the mainstay of Australia's future survival in South-East Asia and the Pacific. But the prospect of an Asian aid program served the left-wing political agenda equally well. Leslie Haylen — a radical Laborite who led a parliamentary delegation to Japan in 1948 and caused a furore in Australia by shaking hands with Emperor Hirohito — thought an aid program might even realise a new sense of belonging:

We must cast our eyes on the Asian scene and endeavour to understand what the Asian is seeking. We must assist him as far as we can with goods and services, and cease ... this ridiculous habit of looking continually to Atlantic Charters, Atlantic pacts, and other similar regional agreements for our preservation. On the evidence before us we are on our own in the Pacific. Asian nation or Pacific power, what does it matter? We are an outpost of 8,000,000 people dedicated to the task of being good neighbours to the millions of people to our north. We can, here and now, build up goodwill and strengthen the feeling that we are part of the great southern lands of Asia; that we do 'belong'; that we are not antagonistic; and that we are not a handful of white

*people who have come to this country to exploit it
and then to get out. Our interests are those of Asia.*

An insistent sense of cultural and racial vulnerability, combined with a desire to engage constructively with the region, prompted both sides of the house to support the Spender Plan as one way of maintaining 'democracy in Asia' and 'the future of every Australian man, woman and child'.¹⁸

While Spender's efforts were sufficient to convince cabinet to allocate £A13 million for Asian development projects, they were not enough to move the US State Department, which remained equivocal but not dismissive. Acting Secretary of State, James Webb, told his Canberra representative to convey the message that, although they declined to attend the Sydney meeting, America's non-attendance did not imply a 'lack of interest in or sympathy ... with the purposes and objectives' of the Colombo proposals.¹⁹ Even better than diplomatic assurances, the DEA took solace in the United States' expanding, if 'imperfectly formulated' policy towards Asia, notably Truman's announcement of substantial economic aid for Indonesia and the French in Indochina.²⁰ At this point, however, Spender's biggest problem was the caution displayed by the British government.

On Monday 15 May 1950, delegates met at Admiralty House, the Governor-General's Sydney residence, for the first meeting of the Commonwealth Consultative Committee. Before the opening session, delegates had a chance to take in the view across the water, perfectly framed by the Sydney Harbour Bridge, an emblem of Australian industrial and technological prowess. This modern, thriving metropolis was a ready example to the delegates of what 'free men and women' could accomplish, Spender was later to write.²¹ Days earlier, delegates had been treated to much of what

Sydney had to offer: sight-seeing, lavish dinners, and a day at the Randwick races. The largest function was a formal reception at the Australia Hotel. Spender put his cares aside, turned on the charm, and together with his wife welcomed more than 300 guests. At one point Spender cheekily suggested to a Ceylonese delegate and his pregnant wife that if their baby was a boy they should name him 'Sydney', if a girl, 'Canberra'.²² Outside, the atmosphere was less frivolous and police clashed with communist demonstrators, protesting Commonwealth military action in Malaya. In the confusion, Eleanor Hinder of the British delegation (the only female delegate) was mistaken for a demonstrator and was about to be apprehended when another delegate protested her innocence.

Spender's resolve to launch an aid program for Asia had intensified since the Colombo meeting. By the time of the Sydney meeting, he had become consumed with its importance, no doubt helped along by the press, which urged representatives towards more than 'a circumspect elaboration' of the Colombo proposals.²³ By the time of the Sydney meeting, differences between the Australian and British approach to regional collaboration that emerged in Colombo had deepened, in large part owing to their uncoordinated strategies. Indeed, with the Foreign Office concerned not to 'frighten the United States Administration away from cooperation by loose talk of American aid in staggering amounts', they advised their representatives to assiduously 'avoid exchanging ideas with the Australian, United States or other representatives'.²⁴ As delegates arrived, Spender wrote to Bevin and explained his concern that 'the UK government might not be in a position during the Sydney discussions to accept proposals' that he had in mind. 'Quite frankly', Spender threatened, if Britain hesitated to commit funds, he would be 'compelled to

acknowledge publicly that the conference had failed and the Australian Government, for its part, be obliged to indicate that it would now seek to implement a programme of its own in conjunction with whatever other Governments might wish to assist'.²⁵ All this before the conference had even begun! A stoush between Australia and Britain seemed unavoidable.

Over the weekend Spender suggested to his fellow delegates that they should open the first session to the public to generate maximum interest in the meeting. Reluctantly they agreed, on condition that the speech be non-controversial, and they be given a chance to see an advance copy. Delegates were soon astonished to see that Spender intended to use the open session to publicly reveal the most contentious of his proposals. Protest from the other delegations, particularly the British, saw Spender back down. Nevertheless, the open session went ahead and delegates cordially exchanged the usual platitudes. In contrast to Spender's boiling energy, the British arrived in more sombre and cautious mood. Still reeling from the cost of war, Britain saw the Colombo proposals as an opportunity to address their own economic ills and revitalise the United Kingdom as a force in Asian affairs. A desire to use American finance to offset the massive debts owed to India and Pakistan underpinned the British position: for them there was simply 'no prospect of a satisfactory settlement of the sterling balance problem consistent with a continuous economic development in South and South East Asia unless new money can be found for development ... from the United States'. Although the Australians did not see this document, they knew well that Britain had her 'eyes very much on the dollars to be obtained' from the Americans and later dismissed her as being inspired 'more by economic interests than foreign policy'.²⁶ The DEA

never considered the release of sterling debt to India and Pakistan a genuine contribution to regional development, merely an action that they would have taken regardless of the Colombo proposals.²⁷

Convinced that the best way to persuade the United States to join was to show an immediate commitment to putting money into Asia, Spender proposed the immediate formation of a technical assistance scheme and an emergency aid pool, which both Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth Asian countries could draw upon. The Australian delegation intended these two schemes to supplement a much longer-term capital aid program. The British opposed both proposals because more planning was required and they would not extend further finance on top of their already heavy debt. Worse still, their arguments helped persuade Asian representatives — initially attracted to the concept — to reject the idea. The argument that long-term economic planning would be more likely to attract a greater portion of American aid impressed the Indian and Ceylonese representatives. The Canadian delegation, also under instructions to avoid extended commitments, simply did not see the value in building an interim program. By the close of the meeting ‘the Australian band wagon’, reflected the Canadians, ‘seemed considerably less crowded than it had been earlier in the afternoon’. Only Pakistan stood by the Australian delegation, primarily because it needed immediate finance to resettle eight million refugees from India.²⁸

As self-appointed taskmaster, nothing infuriated Spender more than the apparent lack of commitment on the part of delegates towards the meeting’s high purpose. By the afternoon of the first day of the meeting, he could no longer disguise his contempt for Britain’s lack of commitment. During a secret session, Spender lambasted those who

criticised his proposals and then, according to a British report, 'made a slashing attack on the United Kingdom attitude which he suggested had no regard to the Colombo resolution'. Spender then warned delegates 'that if the Australian resolution was not adopted he would have to report the full facts to his Parliament'. Stunned, the Canadian delegate felt the display was 'more intemperate than any [he had] ever heard except at conferences where Soviets were present'. Another wondered if the Australian minister had somehow imbibed the spirit of his predecessor, Doc Evatt.²⁹

For his outburst, Spender earned the tag the 'cocksparrow'. The Australians parried by nicknaming Lord MacDonald, the leader of British party, 'No Commitment Mac'. And before long both delegations were invoking national stereotypes in their now public dispute. Australia played the role of cajoling dominion — the Empire's *enfant terrible* — while Britain played the reprimanding parent. Australia accused Britain of timidity, stand-offishness, and following a 'typically narrow Treasury approach'. The British followed up by suggesting that Australia was 'betraying signs of youthful impatience'.³⁰ Ted Williams, the British High Commissioner in Canberra, delivered a scathing report card:

The most disappointing delegation was the Australian. It was their misfortune ... to feel compelled to take the initiative to a degree for which they were inadequately equipped, and it was still more unfortunate that the proposals which they advanced so vigorously ... should be revealed on examination as shallow and lacking in substance. Worst of all, these proposals seem to be regarded by the Australian Delegation themselves as closely linked with Mr. Spender's personal prestige ... Less

*happily it must be added that Mr. Spender's hopes that his reputation as an international statesman would be firmly established by the Sydney meeting have been completely disappointed. It is to be expected that other Delegations will in reporting to their Governments not fail to comment not only on his arrogant and willful conduct and undignified withdrawals, but also on his patent failure in the ordinary duties of a chairman.*³¹

But a crisis in Commonwealth relations was averted when delegates reached an easy consensus over the proposal to provide long-term capital aid. Delegates agreed that each recipient country should produce comprehensive six-year development plans for consideration at the second meeting of the Consultative Committee, scheduled for September 1950. As it stood, the principal donor nations were Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Canada. Recipient nations included India, Pakistan and Ceylon. Non-Commonwealth Asian countries were soon encouraged to join the program. But the issue of supplying technical assistance would not go away. Later, Spender dropped the original proposal in favour of a fresh memorandum. The Australian delegation suggested a technical assistance program running for three years from 1 July 1950. At a cost of £8 million, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom would each contribute one third. After a number of amendments, delegates finally agreed and the British and Canadian delegations reported that they were authorised to contribute. However, that same evening, Spender revived the emergency credit proposal, thereby throwing the conference into disarray. Afterwards, Lord MacDonald explained privately the British objections to the new proposals.³² Not to be dissuaded, a relentless Spender submitted yet another paper on emergency credits. This time

Robert Mayhew of the Canadian delegation told Spender that there was insufficient time to discuss his proposals and they must wait until the September meeting of the Consultative Committee in London. Before the close of the conference, Spender withdrew.

In his memoirs, the cocksparrow admitted that he had not been 'the easiest, nor perhaps the most urbane, of chairmen'. His greatest sin, however, was to have upset Washington, who thought Spender was 'heavy-handed and tactless', intent on establishing 'a foreign policy independent not only of the UK but of the entire Commonwealth in those areas where it cannot obtain general agreement'. By casting aside the 'soft language of diplomacy', as Spender called it, he almost destroyed the collaborative atmosphere he thought so crucial to getting the United States involved. And at the conclusion of the meeting a solid commitment from the Americans remained outstanding.

The stress of the Sydney conference inflamed Spender's duodenal ulcer and forced him to convalesce in Bowral, in the southern highlands of New South Wales.³³ Given his tenacious approach, Spender may have thought it entirely appropriate that the program bear his name. But when the Consultative Committee convened for the second time, in London between 25 September and 4 October 1950, the 'Colombo Plan' emerged as the preferred label; talk of the 'Spender Plan' was quietly forgotten by all but a few.

Before the London meeting, a standing committee convened in Colombo to establish a Council for Technical Cooperation and discuss the technical aid bound for India, Pakistan and Ceylon. On the more difficult issue of the capital aid program, Commonwealth officials had to reach important and politically complex decisions about the way donor nations would provide and coordinate their aid programs. Although the Commonwealth unceremoniously

rejected Jayewardene's dream of an Asian Marshall Plan, they might have forgiven him for drawing the parallel. After all, as the first major multilateral program of foreign assistance after the Second World War, the Marshall Plan initially appeared to offer a practical model for the delivery of aid to the region. Through the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), the United States spent billions on reconstruction in order to foster economic and spiritual resistance to the attractions of communist ideology.³⁴ The OEEC had a decentralised governing agency with power residing with national delegations, and it promoted international cooperation, but not economic and political integration. It also had a weak secretariat and a secretary-general with limited authority.³⁵ Of course, the situation in Asia was radically different. In Sydney, Spender acknowledged the 'great divergence' in economic and social development within Asia and recognised that the physical and human infrastructures of Europe did not exist on the same scale in Asia, and that there was no pre-war precedent against which to measure the goals of reconstruction. In what can best be described as a profound understatement, Spender summed up by saying that 'economic planning for a region so diverse as South and South-East Asia will not be easy. There are no ready-made guidelines'.³⁶ To make the Consultative Committee mechanism flexible and robust enough to tackle such a task, Commonwealth policy-makers faced numerous obstacles. Not only did the Consultative Committee have to remain a tacitly non-communist avenue for regional cooperation, it had to be free from political qualifications in order to attract Asian countries, and represent nations of varying political persuasions that were at substantially different stages of economic development. Overlay the political and strategic goals Western policy-makers hoped to achieve through the provision of aid, and the challenges facing the Consultative Committee were immense.

In the first flush of excitement to attract additional donors, the DEA planned to persuade Asian governments not to 'raise obstacles to the inclusion of France and the Netherlands'.³⁷ But the endeavour proved ill-conceived, and France and the Netherlands were quietly sidelined from the Colombo Plan negotiations. In such a sensitive climate, Australia dropped the idea, regarding it as 'premature and impolitic'. With French troops still engaged in Indo-China and the imbroglio over West New Guinea far from over, the inclusion of these powers had the potential to jeopardise the entire program. Later, the DEA determined that the inclusion of France and the Netherlands would alienate Burma, Indonesia and Thailand, leaving a scheme 'preponderantly for Commonwealth-Asian and "Western" governments, which was not and is not the intention of the Plan'. Further, pressure for their admission would 'provide ammunition for communist propaganda ("new form of colonialism") against the Plan'.³⁸

In Sydney the Consultative Committee had proved itself a robust, if somewhat unwieldy, forum for discussing regional issues. But why was it necessary to duplicate established UN mechanisms, such as ECAFE, which already funded Asian development programs? Or, as Canada's Minister for External Affairs, Lester Pearson, explained when he returned home after the Colombo meeting to address parliament: did the world need a new committee to bring aid to Asia 'merely because it looks like an attractive piece of international furniture for an already cluttered-up home'?³⁹ While the exact nature of the Consultative Committee was determined in private discussions between Australian, British, and American officials, parliamentary discussion presented Spender with an opportunity to garner government and opposition support for the new venture. Spender used the debate to reinforce his conviction that the

communist threat required a rapid response, and, once again, he attacked the excesses and inefficiencies of the UN multilateral aid agencies. More to the point, he deemed ECAFE an inappropriate mechanism for the delivery of aid because the Soviet Union and China were both members and Canada and Ceylon were not — a clear violation of the Commonwealth's anti-communist agenda.⁴⁰ With the Consultative Committee framed as an independent (i.e. non-UN) and tacitly non-communist development forum, Australia had a more direct aid relationship with Asia. The informal structure established a congenial and non-threatening forum outside the communist gaze and, as Spender suggested, filled a 'conspicuous gap in an area of profound interest to Australia'.⁴¹ Most importantly, Australia's limited aid budget would not be subsumed under the mantle of another UN program, thus giving Australia the freedom to use aid for specific political, strategic, and diplomatic objectives. British thinking ran on similar lines. Not only did the forum give Western powers the chance to bring 'discrete [sic] pressure to bear on the underdeveloped countries to tackle the problems of development planning in a realistic and energetic way', it provided a venue where Asian countries could discuss development issues 'frankly and without publicity (or polemical interference from the Russians, who are members of ECAFE)'.⁴² Although communist powers expressed little interest in joining the Colombo Plan, which they considered an imperialist ruse, in 1952 the Consultative Committee invited ECAFE representatives to observe the annual conference. The decision amounted to a tactful compromise because Western powers considered it decidedly easier to manage the Russians and Chinese within the confines of ECAFE, than risk having them joining the Colombo Plan and compromise its non-communist exclusivity.⁴³

Australian parliamentarians and bureaucrats hoped that the United States would broaden its cold war economic and military strategies to include Asia. The outbreak of the Korean War on 25 June 1950, by amplifying fears of a wider regional conflict, lent greater urgency to Commonwealth plans to apply financial and technical assistance as a containment strategy. And Australia's speedy despatch of force to the Korean peninsula served as a tangible expression of the commitment to fighting communism and its support for US foreign policy, as did withholding recognition of communist China, and granting recognition of Vietnam's anti-communist leader, Bao Dai. These decisions would eventually help secure the second arm of Spender's regional security strategy, namely the ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, and United States) Treaty, officially endorsed in February 1951. But Spender also hoped that the United States would now be far more predisposed to joining the new aid program. Behind the scenes, US officials began talking more freely about the possibility and implications of funding: that US foreign policy should rely on something more than military might in order to contain Asian communism, and that cooperation would build a link between east and west 'more powerful than guns and more precious than gold'.⁴⁴

Washington's decision to appoint a liaison officer to the London meeting of the Consultative Committee was the clearest indication yet of America's changed attitude towards Asian development. Yet, British and Australian representatives knew there was no guarantee of US endorsement and that the results of this meeting would be more important than those of the previous two.⁴⁵ The first job faced by delegates was to assess the development questionnaires (similar to those used by the OEEC) distributed after the Sydney conference on the suggestion of

the British official Robert 'Otto' Clark.⁴⁶ The economic and technical blueprints submitted to the meeting, however, proved to be little more than an attempt to give the impression that donor nations were making a genuine attempt to quantify Asia's economic needs, while providing a convenient means of arriving at a total figure with which to approach the United States. Revealing attitudes underwritten by no small amount of paternalistic condescension, most thought Asian governments ill-equipped to assess their own developmental needs. In August 1950, James Plimsoll, Australia's representative to the UN, reported to Burton's replacement at the DEA, Alan Watt. A senior official from the Economic Cooperation Administration explained that he had little 'faith in questionnaires' because 'most under-developed countries [were] unfitted to estimate their needs accurately or sensibly'. He also suggested that the Commonwealth and the United States should determine the total amount of assistance to be allocated to Asia and leave decisions on 'the nature of that assistance' to their representatives 'on the spot'.⁴⁷ The fact that the Commonwealth had to postpone the London meeting by two weeks after it became obvious that Asian non-Commonwealth governments were struggling to complete the questionnaires on time reinforced the apparent ineptitude of aid recipients. In any event, the simple attendance of non-Commonwealth Asia was more important than completion of the six-year development plans and, regardless of what they specified, there was no time for 'substantial modification' of the programs already planned by the UK Government.⁴⁸ Malcolm MacDonald, the UK Commissioner-General in Singapore, reasoned that by at least appearing to be responsive to these blueprints, even if they proved irrelevant, donor nations avoided 'the psychological error of

arousing suspicion amongst these sensitive peoples'.⁴⁹ Despite the extension of time, the first report of the Consultative Committee included Commonwealth Asia only. Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam each attended the London meeting without lodging formal requests for assistance. Burma and Indonesia, still wary of post-colonial domination, attended as observers only.

The economic blueprints served a more useful tactical purpose in persuading the United States that joining the Colombo Plan would not bind them indefinitely to underwriting Asia's journey to modernity. During an informal meeting between Treasury, the Foreign Office and the US Department of State, Clarke reported that in drawing up their economic blueprints since the Sydney meeting, Asian governments had 'scaled down the size of the development programs to a point considerably below what we would originally have desired to undertake ... [and] they have recognised that the limiting factor is the amount of external financial assistance likely to be available'.⁵⁰ By suggesting that Asian governments had exercised restraint and did not see the offer of aid as an opportunity to profiteer, British officials sought to allay American fears of an expensive, politically-charged and long-term assistance program. Nevertheless, Commonwealth donor nations could only provide £362 million of the £1,085 million required and now waited, as Spender put it, for the United States to 'fill the political and economic gap'.⁵¹

The major concern for the Commonwealth was that any public presumption of American finance might offend Washington and jeopardise the entire program. Indeed, Spender feared the United States saw the entire conference as a ham-fisted attempt by the Commonwealth to 'impose a commitment upon the United States in the form of a report already prepared for publication'.⁵² The Americans suggested

that the Commonwealth aid scheme should not appear to be dependent on US aid; that it should emphasise discrete 'project based' development rather than continuous financial support; that it not imply the US aid would be used to solve the United Kingdom's currency difficulties; and, finally, that the report should not mention a 'gap' to be filled by a third party. Tiptoeing around the US sensitivity to 'the gap' prompted the plain-speaking Tange to report that '[n]evertheless the fact of the matter is that there is such a gap and, unless it is filled the plan could not be implemented without drastic modification'.⁵³ With US aid integral to the successful launch of the program, the London meeting was intended to suit an American vision for Asian economic development. The report concluded with the inevitably ambiguous statement that the Consultative Committee 'could review progress ... draw up periodic reports, and ... serve as a forum for the discussion of developmental problems'; yet the precise 'form of such an organisation cannot be determined until it is clear what the sources of external finance will be'.⁵⁴

Just as Commonwealth policy-makers worked to get the United States involved, they nevertheless worried that the sheer volume of US aid, in addition to the concessions made to secure that aid, had the potential to distort the Colombo Plan's economic and developmental objectives. In particular, concerns were raised about American insistence on tying the bulk of their aid contribution to the purchase of US supplies, which would effectively stem the expected flow of dollars that might otherwise be spent on British and Australian goods. Project aid of this kind would not meet India's need for food imports that could be sold on to finance their own development plans with minimal inflation. Large-scale infrastructure projects, and the inevitable bevy of Western expertise that came with them, were also more

liable to bring accusations of post-colonial interference. Compromise was reached on most of these issues; in operation, the Colombo Plan involved a range of aid programs, from externally-funded 'tied' infrastructure projects and 'locally-funded' development, through the sale of donated commodities, to collaborative projects between local technicians and workers, and international staff. In general, American policy-makers insisted on a large measure of independence from the Commonwealth organisation in order to meet their own strategic and economic objectives, and maintain congressional approval. The United States eventually agreed to join the Colombo Plan in November 1950 (they were officially admitted in February 1951), on condition the scheme remained informal, exploratory, advisory and consultative.⁵⁵ It was indicative of the control the Americans hoped to retain over their aid allocations that they demanded that word 'Commonwealth' be omitted from the Consultative Committee's official title — the final price of US involvement.⁵⁶

It is important not to overstate the degree to which Australian (and British) leaders danced to Washington's tune. At all times, Australia pursued an aggressively self-interested policy, based on a distinctly realist interpretation of its own political and strategic imperatives. Indeed, subservience to the United States sharpened Spender's sense of what the Colombo Plan meant for Australia's own political, military and social objectives. He had a strong sense of the Colombo Plan's significance beyond its role in securing American finance. In addition to helping cement the ANZUS Treaty, the scheme was to have the wide-reaching — if ambiguous — goal of neutralising anti-Western sentiment directed towards Australia. He cabled Menzies from London, explaining that Australia should use the influence of the Commonwealth 'as a

cohesive force progressively to bind Asia to the West in a way which has so far been impossible by direct political pressure in a region whose rationalism is founded on reaction against the West'. Where the United Kingdom was anxious to 'be quit of responsibilities' in Asia, Australia should be ready to take charge: 'deliberate Australian isolation from Asia while we are achieving our small population increases seems to me to lose us the opportunity of using foreign policy effectively in our long term defence'. Again, the vulnerable outpost mentality, which dominated so much of Australian foreign policy, reared its head. At this stage, Spender prescribed very little in the way of a constructive engagement strategy for Australia. Rather, he saw the Colombo Plan as an instrument deployed as 'part of a foreign policy designed to deny this important part of the world to Soviet Russian influence'.⁵⁷

With his plan for emergency credits and a technical aid pool subsumed beneath the Colombo Plan's twin prongs of a capital and technical aid program, Spender was forced to revise the total amount of Australia's contribution to the plan. Of course, he took the opportunity to try to secure even more. The stakes could not have been higher, he told Menzies from London, with an early indication of Australia's generous support 'essential if we are to carry to success the initiative we have taken'. He suggested that wool export earnings supported an initial contribution of around £A10 million. Although he did not spell it out, the implication was that this level of funding would be sustained over the six-year life of the scheme. This £A60 million ambit claim was sternly rebuffed, first by Menzies, who thought the idea 'quite impracticable' in view of Australia's heavy defence commitments and the future rehabilitation of Korea, and later by Cabinet. Instead, Menzies restricted Spender to a total of less than £A25 million and advised that the grand

gesture of £A10 million in the first year set a dangerously unrealistic precedent. Although conciliatory in defeat, Spender said that a first contribution of just £A3 or 4 million would be 'conspicuous in its inadequacy', and he pressed for permission to make a much higher first offer, with the proviso that subsequent allocations would be considerably reduced. Nevertheless, just as Australia rebuked the tight-fisted British, other delegates looked askance at Australia's lack of charity. The Canadians, for example, privately suspected that Australia overstated the financial hardships she would incur through her involvement with the aid scheme. In late 1950, the economies of Asia and Australia received a sudden, if short-lived, boost from US spending and stockpiling programs induced by the Korean War. With good prices for wool and rising sterling levels, Lester Pearson explained to his finance minister, 'the Australians are not going to have to pull in their belts this year in order to meet their contributions to the Colombo Plan'. In December, with America having just agreed to join the Colombo Plan, Cabinet approved Spender's recommendations, adding that the terms in which the formal announcement would be expressed would first need approval from the Prime Minister and that 'care must be taken to avoid raising the expectations on the part of the proposed recipients'.⁵⁸

In the estimation of the British Chancellor of the Exchequer and conference chairman, Hugh Gaitskell, the London meeting of the Consultative Committee was characterised by a 'striking sense of common purpose', assisted by the fact that Spender adopted a lower profile and was in a 'much more constructive mood than at Sydney'.⁵⁹ Some of the enmity present in Sydney re-emerged in London, albeit in muted form, when the Australian delegation chided the United Kingdom for rushing

discussions which did not concern British interests and for their otherwise 'lukewarm' attitude towards the inclusion of non-Commonwealth Asia. Australia 'found it necessary to insist on more emphasis on the "humanitarian" approach' in order to make it easier to bring other Asian countries into the program. Gaitskell conceded the point, but saved his disapproval with the Australian delegation — and, of course, its leader — for his diary. Spender, he wrote, was 'like a little terrier, self-important, talks a good deal ... He has no inhibitions about raising awkward subjects and is what you call fairly crude ... but then so are most Australians'.⁶⁰

Since 1945, Australian policy-makers and politicians knew that many Asian governments feared that a commitment to a Western aid program entailed strategic and military entanglements with the anti-communist bloc. Nevertheless, some Australian politicians leapt on the emerging mechanism as an opportunity to restore the prestige and 'historic destiny' of the English-speaking world. The conservative Alexander Downer, for example, suggested that the Consultative Committee would blossom forth into a 'permanent Empire Secretariat' responsible for law and order, and offered the chance to 'adopt a more forthright attitude' over territorial disputes, such as Indonesian designs for West New Guinea. 'In our desire to help the peoples of South and South-East Asia', he continued, 'we should set out not only to feed them but also to lead them'.⁶¹ Downer's muscular approach was, in fact, a neat caricature of what Australia hoped its aid program might achieve under the best possible conditions. However, the Australians would need to exercise a little more tact and diplomacy, even by Spender's standards, in their efforts to entice Asian leaders into the Colombo Plan.

Australian and British policy-makers were concerned to expand the Consultative Committee beyond a kind of

confederacy of Commonwealth nations, but without appearing to dominate or compromise Asian economic and political sovereignty. Spender told Menzies during the Sydney conference that, with Asian leaders wary of economic imperialism, it was crucial 'not to appear to infringe the sovereign rights of states which had acquired their independence'.⁶² For should independent Asia fail to join the scheme, the Consultative Committee's symbolic role as a unifying bridge between post-colonial Asia and the West would be jeopardised, and in the DEA's estimation, it might then be 'regarded as a purely British or Commonwealth "show"'.⁶³ Fear of offending Indonesia's sensibilities and thus pushing them away from Western influence, for example, tempered Australia's impatience with the tortuous negotiation process. Australian officials juggled their rising frustration with Indonesia's neutral foreign policy — which Hugh Gilchrist, the First Secretary of the embassy in Djakarta, derided as a position of 'superficial neutrality between the Soviet and anti-Soviet blocs' — and their unease at forcing Indonesia to make a commitment to the Colombo Plan.⁶⁴ Asian assertiveness had direct ramifications for Australian efforts to engage with the region, and the increasingly assertive behaviour of many Asian governments, with their apparent solidarity against the Western and Eastern political blocs, made Australian and British representatives nervous. John Hood, Australia's Ambassador to Indonesia, told Casey that the 'sense of solidarity which appears to be growing among South-East Asian peoples' meant that 'any attempt to bustle them into an anti-communist camp may well have the effect of uniting them in an angry reaction against all Western influence'.⁶⁵ After much diplomatic wrangling, Indonesia's decision to join the Consultative Committee in late 1952 proved an important step in the development of Australian–Indonesian relations. In the estimation of the

British Ambassador to Indonesia, Derwent Kermode, the Colombo Plan's mantra of 'aid without strings' proved to be 'a useful weapon in the prime task of breaking down the walls of suspicion and distrust of the West with which many Indonesians still surround themselves'.⁶⁶

The very nature of the Consultative Committee as a malleable and non-coercive forum helped reassure tentative governments that joining the new confederation came without strings, military or otherwise.⁶⁷ Other regional development forums oriented toward bilateral cooperation, such as the South Pacific Commission (SPC) — which had no formal connection to the UN and was mandated only to correlate and disseminate information concerning Pacific countries, to make recommendations for the promotion of economic and social development, and to facilitate the discussion of problems of mutual concern — provided a useful template.⁶⁸ Publicly, the Consultative Committee echoed the spirit of the SPC. Like the SPC, the Consultative Committee had no supra-national powers, took no collective decisions save for voting in new members and deciding the location of the annual meeting, and only made recommendations to participating governments. As donors and recipients negotiated their aid projects on a bilateral basis through standard diplomatic channels, the Consultative Committee simply became a public discussion forum and clearing-house for the admission of new members and the consolidation of national development reviews in the annual report. Not only was this an appropriate and workable forum considering the various agenda the committee was forced to bear, but it proved sufficiently benign to attract most of South-East Asia over the next four years: Indo-China (1951), Burma and Nepal (1952), Indonesia (1953), Thailand and the Philippines (1954). Japan also joined in 1954, but as an aid donor.

Throughout the Commonwealth in the 1950s, the words 'Colombo Plan' became synonymous with aid initiatives for South and South-East Asia. The diverse nature of projects financed under the scheme and their wide geographic distribution lent credence to the image of the plan as a systematic and integrated approach to regional development and cooperation. Donor governments used the relaxed nature of the proceedings to further political and economic ends. On one level, the annual meeting offered an ideal opportunity for the promotion of Western political objectives. As one Foreign Office appraisal claimed, 'the meeting of the Consultative Committee is the major event of the year so far as the Colombo Plan is concerned. It is an occasion of worldwide interest and the fullest possible use should be made of the publicity opportunities'.⁶⁹ The Colombo Plan forum also provided an attractive package for Australian generosity and helped disguise the limited nature of the early donations. The DEA quietly confessed that Australia's early effort, which consisted primarily of a donation of wheat and flour to India and Ceylon, would have been sent 'whether there had been a Colombo Plan or not'.⁷⁰ These contributions were sold to pay for major infrastructure programs, such as railways, roads, dams and hydro-electric power plants. Beyond this, Australia typically directed its capital aid contributions towards the creation of more efficient, mechanised agricultural production. For example, of the £A10 million in capital assistance provided by Australia to Pakistan between 1950 and 1957, 62 per cent went towards irrigation projects, and a further 13 per cent was devoted to the supply of tractors and refrigeration plants. Just 2 per cent went to increasing power generation capacity.⁷¹ But the Colombo Plan was not a coherent program for regional development. It featured no centralised or multilateral

institutions, no blueprint for integrated economic regionalism, and it had no substantive decision-making power. The 'whole enterprise', wrote Canadian academic William Harrison, 'was something of a misnomer ... a co-operative and co-ordinated study of a number of economic situations, too varying as to stages and patterns of growth, and too immense in the aggregate, to be considered amenable to any centrally planned and directed scheme of development'.⁷²

Talk of a military defence strategy was taboo during the formation of the Colombo Plan. Spender and other Commonwealth officials tactfully avoided the thorny issue of collective military defence by proposing a course towards regional integration through economic cooperation.⁷³ It is hardly surprising the Colombo Plan emerged as a nebulous and relatively benign regional forum. Arguably, Commonwealth policy-makers could not have achieved these complex, intertwined objectives within multilateral agencies under UN control. Yet, loaded as it was with political and military objectives, the welfare of Asian people now assumed a greater significance than ever before. This occurred, not because of a groundswell of humanitarian sentiment, but because their well-being was now seen to impinge on the post-war order imagined by Western powers.

To some extent, the Colombo Plan was a façade, a device intended to lure independent Asia into an alliance with the Western bloc. Its congenial unity was calculated to entice non-Commonwealth Asia, secure the material might of the United States, and marginalise the Soviet Union. On 1 July 1951, the Colombo Plan finally lurched into existence with its public symbolism intact. As Tange's appraisal confirmed, the result was tantamount to a diplomatic sleight-of-hand. The Colombo Conference, he wrote, 'proved an opportunity for creating a piece of Commonwealth

machinery devoted specifically to a purpose which, in the minds of the public in the Commonwealth, was straightforward and uncomplicated by any doubtful political motives'.⁷⁴ From Australia's perspective, Asia's economic progress, cold war anxiety, and a deep concern about the consequences of decolonisation for political stability, all coalesced beneath a malleable regional forum, ostensibly dedicated to economic progress. The Menzies government hoped that relations augmented under the Colombo Plan would rejuvenate the Commonwealth bond between Australia and the governments of South Asia and help to install Australia as a regional authority free to pursue its interests alongside a compliant Asian elite.

Although Spender offended the sensibilities of Western allies, he infused the right degree of urgency and desperation into the proceedings in order to get Australia — and otherwise unenthusiastic Commonwealth powers — to commit finance and technical resources to the struggle against communism. By virtue of his rumbustious diplomacy, Spender galvanised Australia's role in the formation of the Colombo Plan and as a force in regional affairs. Yet early reports from among Australia's more idealistic diplomats revealed a degree of doubt about the capacity of an aid program to stabilise the region and bolster Australia's regional profile. In 1950 Francis Stuart, now Official Secretary at the Australian High Commission in New Delhi, wrote of a widespread 'public curiosity' about Australia and the 'remarkable extent to which Australia's existence as something of a power in the world is known and accepted'. However, in the longer term he was less sure: the 'conduct of South East Asian relations with Australia is likely to present something of a continuing dilemma to South East Asia's leaders; events compel them to cooperate with us, but we must not believe that their hearts

are really in it.⁷⁵ But for now — with the question of just how the Colombo Plan might achieve its breathtakingly ambitious goals still unanswered — the optimists could ignore the doubters.

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