

6. FACE TO FACE WITH ASIA

In 1953, a group of recently-arrived Indonesian Colombo Plan scholars waited for a tram to take them into central Sydney. Among them was Sumadi, later to become a senior official in the Indonesian Department of Information: ‘Everybody looked at us, everybody stared. We all joked among ourselves, “No matter how much we dress up we still [felt like we were at] Taronga Zoo ... they consider us the orang-utan.” Everybody always stare ... and we felt there must be something wrong with us. Then we realised that maybe because at that time not many Australians have ever come face to face with Asian students’.¹ The arrival of Colombo Plan students was one of the most striking and conspicuous manifestations of Australia’s foreign policy and the most tangible aspect of Australia’s program of international aid. Privately-funded scholars from Asia

outnumbered sponsored students by five to one, but such was the publicity afforded to the Colombo Plan that when Australians saw any Asian student they invariably assumed they were sponsored under the program, thus artificially magnifying the scheme's impact. While the Department of External Affairs (DEA) spent more on large-scale infrastructure projects, the scholarship scheme had an immediate effect on the lives of many Australians and a lasting impact on Australia's social and political landscape.

The influx of private and government-sponsored students from Asia in the 1950s coincided with the arrival of over 1,000,000 immigrants, mainly from Britain and Europe. While mass migration made Australia more culturally diverse, that diversity did not include Asia. In 1954, just 0.4 per cent of the population was born in South or South-East Asia, only marginally higher than in 1933. By 1961, the figure had increased only slightly, with fewer than 60,000 Asians living in Australia, representing 0.6 per cent of the population. Between 1951 and 1965, Australia hosted nearly 5,500 students and trainees, 16 per cent of the 33,000 places offered by all donor nations contributing to the Colombo Plan. Australia's Colombo Plan scholars came from 15 nations across Asia; three-quarters came from Malaya, Indonesia, India, Pakistan, and Ceylon, while smaller numbers came from Burma, Brunei, Cambodia, Korea, and Afghanistan.² The expansion of the Colombo Plan program corresponded with a dramatic shift in the destinations of private Asian students. By 1965 around 5 per cent of the student body were international scholars — with most coming from South-East Asia. Somewhat shocked by the shift away from Britain and America, the DEA thought that 'something of a revolution' was taking place.³ The rising importance of the Colombo Plan student program corresponded with a declining faith in the ability

of large-scale infrastructure projects to deliver benefits for Australia. Within five years of the inception of the Colombo Plan, the DEA became increasingly worried by negative reports about Australian-funded capital projects. In part, government officials blamed recipient nations for their lack of planning and management, but Australian procedures were also at fault. The DEA's experienced Assistant Secretary, John Keith Waller, told Casey that Australian administration had been 'ill-considered ... cumbersome and slow'.⁴ By contrast, the scholarship program was something of an unexpected success. Australia's High Commissioner to India, Walter Crocker, who usually cautioned his Canberra superiors against expecting gratitude or benefit from foreign aid, was uncharacteristically positive when it came to the scholarship program. In 1953 he reported to Alan Watt, Secretary of the DEA, that 'the best publicity we have received so far has been from students who have been studying in Australia. In fact I am inclined to feel that the only political value which Australia has got out of its Colombo Plan efforts has been from the students'.⁵ The early success of the program was even more surprising because the government had neglected to anticipate the basic needs of overseas students or the problems they might encounter. The cavalier embrace of Asian students was the same in Britain. The goal, reasoned the Foreign Office, was simply to get as many Asian students into the country as possible; it mattered 'much less what they do when they arrive ... as long as they do not waste their time'.⁶ Nevertheless, Asian delegates attending the Colombo Plan Consultative Committee meetings expressed high regard for Australian training, overwhelming Australian representatives with nominations. Cabinet needed little encouragement to trim some of the Colombo Plan's more

profligate capital enterprises. In order to minimise waste, reduce demand on scarce primary materials, and capitalise on the goodwill stimulated by the training scheme, Cabinet insisted on diverting funds from the capital aid program. Over the next ten years, the proportion of aid devoted to education, training and the supply of equipment increased steadily, from 22 per cent in 1954/55 to 46 per cent in 1963/64. By 1970, the government split the Colombo Plan budget equally between capital aid projects and technical assistance.⁷

Australia's scholarship scheme focused on giving Asians skills they could pass on to others once they returned home. Students studied a broad range of subjects, including agricultural production, animal husbandry, fruit culture, textiles, wool technology, food preparation, mining, road construction, civil aviation, railway administration and technology, education, industrial welfare, social services, nursing, public administration, sewerage construction, and water conservation. Courses in science, engineering, health, and education were by far the most popular, with more than 70 per cent of trainees (1,400) taking degrees in these fields by the late-1950s. By the mid-1960s, the number of students acquiring these skills had increased to more than 4,000, but as a proportion of the total number of scholars, it had dropped to 60 per cent. This change did not represent a fundamental shift in attitude or policy; rather it was a consequence of the increasingly diverse number of courses made available, largely in response to requests from recipient nations. Notable growth took place in the numbers of students studying agriculture, industrial production, mining and mineral research, police and legal training, wireless operation and maintenance, journalism, film production and broadcasting. Under pressure to expand the reach of Australian training, the DEA launched

a Colombo Plan correspondence scheme in 1955. By June 1961, nearly 1,000 students had completed a correspondence course and more than 1,800 students were then receiving training under the program.⁸

The basic political and cultural imperatives served by the Colombo Plan scholarship program remained largely unchanged during the 1950s and 1960s. In January 1962, Arthur Tange, Secretary of the DEA, submitted a statement on the demand for tertiary courses from foreign countries to Leslie Martin, Chairman of the Australian Universities Commission. He predicted that Australia was likely to continue to grow as a preferred destination for overseas students in the Asia–Pacific region and explained that the Colombo Plan education program ‘incidentally’ fulfilled political and cultural objectives. First, it was a practical demonstration of Australia’s intention to assist ‘countries geographically near us from which Australia has been cut off culturally until the last 15 years’.⁹ Secondly, students who had lived and studied under the program were generating goodwill and prestige for Australia. As one official put it, returning students had ‘something of a snowball effect’ as they took up positions of influence.¹⁰ At the heart of Australian management of the Colombo Plan student program, however, was a concern to minimise the negative impact of the white Australia policy. ‘Questions of race and colour play a large part in determining the attitudes of the Asian and African States to many significant international problems’, the DEA explained to the Committee on the Future of Tertiary Education in Australia in 1962:

In these circumstances Australian aid programmes like the Colombo Plan ... which gain wide and favourable attention are a valuable testimony to

*the absence of racial prejudice in our foreign policies. The presence of Asian and African students in Australia and their experience of the tolerance and friendliness of the Australian people are an effective counter to the charges of racial discrimination which are sometimes levelled against us.*¹¹

The number of Colombo Plan scholarships on offer rose from 434 in 1959 to 656 in 1965. Despite the steady rise, demand for scholarships always outpaced supply. As numbers of international students increased, naturally so did the pressure on universities to accept them. The principal of Melbourne High School, George Langley, crystallised a fundamental government concern when he told Menzies about the ‘international aspect’ of the failure of some Asian scholars to find places at Melbourne University’s medical course owing to restrictions on the number of places available to foreigners. Langley suggested that, considering the prominent role ‘played by Australia in the launching and implementation of the Colombo Plan’, it was logical for the Commonwealth to fund the expansion of medical education. ‘Panic’ among overseas students, he warned, ‘might lead to ill considered letters home and poor publicity’.¹²

During the first few years of the program, the DEA struggled to integrate the rising numbers of Colombo Plan — and private overseas — students into the academic and social community — sometimes with tragic consequences. Between 1950 and 1951, three Asian students studying at the University of Western Australia committed suicide and another suffered a mental breakdown, all ostensibly suffering from social isolation. The neglect of the growing student body had the potential to jeopardise the guiding

maxim of the student program — namely, the idea that the students' exposure to Australian culture should be a positive experience. Casey raised his concerns with Menzies as early as July 1951: 'My department has for some time been concerned that accommodation difficulties, problems of orientation and a good deal of ordinary loneliness may not only lead to occasional instances of personal tragedy, but also leave the way open to Communist influences'.¹³ Douglas Wilkie, journalist and ex-war correspondent, wrote publicly of the risk to Australia's foreign policy objectives of failing to provide adequate housing. It was, he said, 'anomalous to bring Asian students here and then force them to live in drab boarding-houses or in isolated communities because we could not "afford" an International House'.¹⁴ Ian Clunies-Ross, chairman of CSIRO, exploited Casey's preoccupation with shielding students from communism, when he asked that Colombo Plan funds be applied to the construction of a hostel for international students. He also suggested that by closely integrating Asians and Australians, the government would escape any allegation that it supported racial segregation. The opening of International House in Melbourne in 1957 (built with the help of £A50,000 of Colombo Plan finance) certainly suggested a new-found consciousness of Asia, yet it also reflected the anxiety and defensiveness that underpinned that awareness. Non-government groups moved much faster to fill the growing demand. Keen to awaken the churches' obligations to international education, Anglican Archbishop Howard Mowll moved to create a hostel for overseas students immediately after the establishment of the Colombo Plan. Through his work, the International Friendship Centre officially opened in the Sydney suburb of Drummoyne in 1952, initially housing 19 men, including two Colombo Plan students.¹⁵

The abstract benefits generated by the Colombo Plan did not allay fears that students were a threat to Australia's social and political fabric. During the early years government officials and the media tended to typecast Asian students as potential spies or vulnerable innocents, open to communist blandishments. In federal parliament, one member believed that Colombo Plan scholars might come into contact with 'undesirable elements in our community ... we may be sending back rabid Communists to the South East Asian countries ... I am not ashamed to say that we should also attempt to bring some moral influence to bear on these students'. Lawrence Arnott, who headed the DEA's Economic and Technical Assistance Branch between 1952 and 1956, warned Casey in 1951 that if the government did not protect students from subversive forces, they risked 'nullifying [their] efforts under the Technical Assistance Programme'. The *Daily Mirror* wondered if Colombo Plan students were travelling the countryside taking pictures of airports, army camps, and defence installations, and asked readers to remember the 'bowing Japanese students and businessmen' who had come to Australia before the war. That the Petrov inquiry in 1954 named a Colombo Plan student as a left-wing activist fuelled such perceptions. The DEA even denied a request for financial assistance from the student-oriented East–West Committee to stage an exhibition of Asian culture because ASIO investigators suspected that communists would use the occasion to distribute propaganda.¹⁶

The government's concerns, while understandable, were largely unfounded. In response to a request from the Malayan government, that the Malayan Students' Association and Colombo Plan trainees were falling under the influence of Australian communists, ASIO reported that although the association was left-wing and nationalist,

there was little evidence to suggest a significant communist presence.¹⁷ The anxiety expressed by conservative media about the vulnerability of Asian students was similarly misplaced. For example, the Melbourne *Sun* ran the alarmist headline 'REDS WORKING ON ASIAN STUDENTS HERE' for a story about the failure of communist groups to attract Colombo Plan students.¹⁸ The popular Singapore-based newspaper, *Malay Mail*, reported a more common scenario: after six years studying at the University of Melbourne, 'Anthony' Ng Beh Tong said that his fellow Malayan students were completely absorbed with their studies and 'had no time for politics'. Furthermore, he said, they feared that if they dabbled with leftist politics they might not be let back into Malaya.¹⁹

Private industry was nervous about trainees taking back trade secrets that might be used against Australia. Secretary of the Department of Labour and National Service, Henry Bland, explained in a review of training procedures that 'fear that the knowledge gained will be used in enterprises in Asian countries which, in many cases, are direct competitors with Australian manufacturers, has led to some hesitancy in certain sections of private industry to provide training when requested'.²⁰ The impact of such anxiety, however, proved to be limited, with only a few Colombo Plan students being denied placements in industries where Australia competed heavily with Asia, such as leather goods, tanning and meat-processing.

Information on the academic performance of Colombo Plan students is scarce, although there is enough evidence to suggest that they performed reasonably well. Of the 309 individuals who sat for Bachelor's degrees in 1956, 206 (66.7 per cent) passed. The most successful national group was Malayan, with a 93 per cent pass rate, followed by Ceylon (86 per cent) and Singapore (74 per cent). Pass

rates for post-graduate degrees were higher. As the DEA expected, students who had a greater command of English and were familiar with British-styled education systems fared better. Over the decade the implementation of an increasingly rigorous selection process and compulsory English classes helped to improve academic performance. By 1963, the overall pass rate for Colombo Plan students had risen from 71 to 79 per cent, with the pass rate for those completing the first year of a Bachelor's degree increasing to 77 per cent — higher than the equivalent statistics for Australian students.²¹

The experiences of students in Australia were private and deeply personal, and evade easy generalisation. The case of a group of Colombo Plan students studying in NSW provides an interesting example of problems faced by visitor and host alike. Twelve Burmese students studying mining technology at the NSW University of Technology experienced the ignominy of getting the worst academic results of the 1956 intake, with all of them failing their exams. Although the DEA blamed the students for their general 'attitude to the course', a closer examination of the reports reveals a more complex picture. Language difficulties appeared to be the most significant and persistent barrier to success for the Burmese students. Physics teacher, E.F. Palmer, noted that the natural shyness and 'embarrassing amount of courtesy' displayed by the students was in marked contrast to the 'brusque manners' of the Australian miners who provide practical demonstrations in the mines. Teachers and students frequently misunderstood each other, and the generally passive and withdrawn nature of the Burmese students compounded these difficulties. C. Harrison, the coal-mining instructor, noted that in some cases when 'students received little encouragement' they hid in dark recesses of the mine,

avoiding miners altogether. The students — suffering from sustained exposure to Australian cuisine — escaped to the rear of the hostel on weekends to cook traditional meals on campfires by the riverbank.²²

In addition to the cultural shock, many students faced the difficulty of living on a substantially reduced income, compared to what they might have been accustomed. Students most likely to have the education and language skills to benefit from courses in Australia were likely to come from families which, if not wealthy, at least had been free of basic wants and had a little to spare. Such students were acutely conscious of their need to scrape by and of their poverty in relation to some Australians, and appealed to their parents for funds. Reports of the inadequacy of the living allowance flowed back to the DEA. Patrick Shaw, Assistant Secretary of the Economic and Technical Assistance Branch, wrote to Casey in 1956: 'Dissatisfaction with these rates under present conditions is general and we have received copies of reports to their own Governments from trainees who have returned home, stressing the inadequacy of the living allowance we are paying'.²³ In practice, management of Colombo Plan students was reactive, and turned on considerations about the damage a disgruntled student might do on returning home. But not everyone was aware of, or sympathetic to, their plight. 'Wet-nursed' students, claimed the *Daily News*, were met on arrival, given accommodation, books, travel subsidies, and a living allowance!²⁴ Perhaps expecting scholarship recipients to be more demure and grateful, some government officials interpreted assertiveness as greed. A Commonwealth Office of Education (COE) officer from Western Australia complained to the national director, William ('Jock') Weeden, that 'some sponsored students appear to take everything for granted, and seem to think

that the Branch Office representative has nothing to do but suit their convenience in every detail'. The officer wondered whether, in its approach to the scholarship program, the department had been too eager to please. Stipends were increased, but with the allowance not intended to support a family, the DEA suggested to its Asian posts that they 'discreetly endeavour' to discourage married men and women from applying.²⁵

Student experience became increasingly important, particularly when it came to fulfilling the foreign policy objective of instilling in students an appreciation of Australian mores. During the early 1950s, the administration and integration of Colombo Plan students had been a sporadic, ad hoc affair. In order to create a more flexible, 'less haphazard procedure', the DEA delegated various administrative functions to other government instrumentalities and shifted responsibilities to private community organisations.²⁶ Guided by the COE, the Coordinating Committee for the Welfare of Overseas Students brought together the functions of middle-class community organisations across Australia. Fortunately for the DEA and the Menzies Government, a significant base of support became active. These groups included Rotary Clubs, Apex Associations, the Asian Student Council, the YWCA, the Malayan Students' Association, the Australian-Indonesian Association, the Country Women's Association, the Thai Students' Association, and many others. Together these groups shouldered much of the burden of integrating overseas students into the wider community.

Colombo Plan scholarship holders still occupied a privileged place among the student fraternity, primarily because of the publicity attached to their presence. As Bevan Rutt, head of the University of Adelaide branch of the COE, observed, Colombo Plan scholars were so well provided for that they invariably received more invitations

for holidays and other forms of hospitality than they could accept.²⁷ Private students, on the other hand, received less attention and were often left to their own devices. The potential neglect of the private student body prompted some university administrators to offer guidance to Australians on how to best interact with and support overseas students. The Reverend Frank Borland, Warden of the Union at the University of Adelaide and President of the Australian–Asian Association in South Australia between 1957 and 1958, sent letters to ‘potential hosts’ of Asian students and short booklets to those already providing accommodation, offering instructions on how to prepare their homes and how to converse with Asians. ‘Their happiness and well being is greatly influenced by the hospitality they receive’, he advised. ‘But please do not over-mother them or smother them with attention. They like to be independent, and are able to make their own plans and decisions’.²⁸ Others pointed out that Asians were not that different from Australians. In 1954 C. Sanders told the audience at the Pan-Indian Ocean Science Association and British Psychological Society conference that Asian scholars enjoyed interacting with Australians, were keen to improve their language skills, and preferred to live with private families or in smaller hostels. Sanders also reminded the audience that Australians also ‘suffered emotional upset’ if isolated from familial support and that such feelings were not, as some were inclined to believe, peculiar to the Asian temperament.²⁹

Contact with Australians, especially for those who boarded with local families, was marked by the shyness of students, and their sometimes overly polite nature. Nervous yet congenial encounters were the rule; overt racism or discrimination, the exception. In homes and hostels across the country a more intimate bond formed between Asians

and Australians. Few could have guessed the impact Asian students would have on host families and the community in general. With accommodation shortages a perennial problem, the response from ostensibly middle-class families was striking. The changing sentiment towards Asian students took Meredith Worth, DEA Liaison Officer at the University of Melbourne, by surprise. Placing the first wave of Colombo Plan students in acceptable lodgings had been difficult because the 'right type of landlady' was hard to find and few were even aware of the existence of Colombo Plan students, let alone interested in helping them. Worth informed Casey:

The position now is very different, mainly due, I think to the excellent impression which Colombo Plan students have made here and to their willing co-operation with all efforts to publicise the Colombo Plan and the importance of closer relations between Australia and South East Asia. I now receive many unsolicited offers of good accommodation and the recent appeal in the 'Sun' and over 3DB for hospitality ... has resulted in over fifty offers of hospitality in Melbourne as far afield as East Gippsland.³⁰

Hosts often felt compelled to express publicly their support for Asian students and their discomfort with the immigration policy. Mrs M.G. Swinburne of Surrey Hills in Melbourne provided board and lodging to three Colombo Plan students and in 1954 sent in these observations to the editor of the *Age*:

Our contact with these young men proves to us that they are normal, natural boys from good homes. They have distinct personality, are generally of excellent character, good intelligence,

*fine sensibilities and very likeable ... We find that to know these students better is to regret very much that we are debarred by our own immigration law from having them as our real next-door neighbour.*³¹

Swinburne's reference to the 'distinct personality' of her boarders is particularly significant. She simultaneously acknowledges and challenges a version of the nineteenth century 'Asian hordes' metaphor which had been transplanted into a Cold War context, where Asians were seen as being homogenous and vulnerable to communist influence. Swinburne's letter prompted Irtaza Zaidi to write to the newspaper:

*It is through personal contacts that we know and understand each other fully well and not merely by reading in schools and colleges ... I do not want to indulge in controversy on whether Australia should allow Asians to settle here or not — a point raised by Mrs Swinburne — but I think Australia should at least encourage more and more Asians to come and visit Australia on social and cultural missions. At the same time Australians should be encouraged to visit different countries of Asia.*³²

In these two letters the acceptance of Asia is genuine — if circumspect. These personal encounters were perhaps the most important factor in altering Australian perceptions of Asians and their ability to live harmoniously with Anglo-Australians. Their academic success may have given rise to new stereotypes of Asian diligence and dedication, yet it debunked the myth of Asian intellectual inferiority or backwardness. Collectively, Colombo Plan students (and private Asian scholars) were a non-threatening, but powerful, challenge to conventional

stereotypes of non-Europeans and epitomised their ability to adapt and assimilate to Australian conditions. Indeed, their socio-economic background facilitated their ready integration. Colombo Plan students were typically male, from middle-class families, educated, and able to speak adequate English. Importantly, scholarship holders could not take permanent employment (although vacation jobs were acceptable) and were required to return home on completion of their studies. As visitors, they could not be condemned as an economic or social threat; nor did they appear to threaten Australia's racial integrity.

Capitalising on the growing support for Asian students, Worth proposed that the Good Neighbour Council, created by the Chifley Government in 1949 to assimilate migrants, establish a sub-committee dedicated to Colombo Plan recipients. Committee members would greet students on arrival, assist in finding appropriate accommodation, organise social events, help with personal problems, and arrange publicity. In 1953, Casey created the 'Meet Your Neighbours Campaign', whereby Colombo Plan students attended arranged dinner parties with Australian families. 'While they have returned to their home countries armed with much information and professional and industrial experience', Casey said, 'few have known the average Australian working man in his own home surroundings. Yet this is hardly a less vital part of their education'.³³ Casey expected that these 'casual' meetings would counter perceptions that Western citizens led selfish and indolent lives, surrounded by limitless wealth.

Contented and articulate Asian scholars were perfect grist for the government's slick publicity mill. In 1956, the Australian News and Information Bureau published *My life in Australia*, the story of Filipino dramatic arts student Minda Feliciano. Later broadcast through Radio Australia

and local Manila radio, Feliciano recalled that by talking about 'our common interests, our way of life, and our aspirations I found that not only have I told others a great deal about my land, but now I have been indoctrinated in the way of life of this land of which I knew so little'.³⁴ In another government publication about a group of Ceylonese photography students, laudatory justifications of the white Australia policy prevailed. Victor Sumathipala wrote: 'I was aware of the so-called White Australia policy — a term which, I soon learned, has no official existence in Australia'. He went on to say: 'What very few Asians can appreciate until they visit Australia, is that Australia's immigration laws are aimed not at the exclusion of individuals, but at the preservation of national unity among a people faced with great problems in developing their country'.³⁵ Awkward and manufactured as they were, such statements reveal the government's continuing preoccupation with social stability and the idea that Asians would, after a period, uncritically adopt Australian values. Yet using Asians as ciphers for propaganda had its drawbacks and the surge of publicity surrounding the Colombo Plan sometimes offended the very students the government hoped to befriend. This sentiment emerged in a letter to the government-financed *Hemisphere* magazine in March 1959, when a student wrote angrily to the editor: 'I am sick of being constantly asked if I am a Colombo Plan student — a fact which goes to show how poorly the Press in general has informed the Australian public. Probably your magazine can put more stress on the private students and use the words "Colombo Plan" with less relish'.³⁶

Given that the government policy-makers hoped the Colombo Plan student program would minimise negative opinion about Australian immigration and foreign policy, it is no surprise that recipients were officially forbidden

to engage in political activity. But while serious public criticism was unlikely to come from conscientious scholarship holders absorbed with their studies, government attempts at censorship were only partly successful. On 9 August 1965 the Perth *Daily News* interviewed Asian students at the University of Western Australia about the Labor Party's decision to drop 'white Australia' from its policy platform. Although they had some reservations about the political motivations behind the change, the students welcomed the removal of a phrase they found personally offensive and damaging to Australia's international reputation. The article carefully let readers know that their objections to immigration restrictions did not imply that they wanted to remain in Australia. 'We like Australia, and we have had a pleasant time here', said one student, 'but our countries are home to us'.³⁷ One month later, the seemingly unremarkable story was front-page news because senior External Affairs officers visited the two Colombo Plan students quoted in the story. Abdullah Toha and Jimin Bin Idris were both admonished for breaching their undertakings to avoid public statement on Australia's foreign and domestic policy. The *Daily News* claimed the government interrogated the students and threatened them with deportation. While on campus, the DEA officers also took the opportunity to remind the organisers of an upcoming conference of the Overseas Students' Association in Adelaide that Colombo Plan students could not be involved in a proposed discussion of immigration policy. The organisers later dropped the forum from the conference agenda. On hearing about these events, Jimin's anthropology lecturer, D'Arcy Ryan, attacked the government's hypocritical position in an angry letter to *The Australian*: 'The image of Australian democracy and political freedom that we are so assiduously trying to implant in Asian minds becomes a little distorted when

students here are subjected to this kind of clumsy and impertinent supervision'.³⁸ Not surprisingly, the students refused to comment further when questioned by a *Daily News* journalist.³⁹ Toha later withdrew from an unrelated public debate on Australia's economic aid program to underdeveloped countries. When the rights and responsibilities of Colombo Plan students were raised in parliament, the government refused to yield.⁴⁰ The experience of Australia's liberal democracy remained strictly conditional and did not extend to the right to publicly criticise the government.

Criticism of Australian policy, especially by Asians, invariably drew a nationalist and racist ire, often from those at the forefront of Australia's relations with Asia. Indeed, some of the more conservative and reactionary views came from articulate and experienced diplomats. Roden Cutler VC, war hero and Australia's High Commissioner in Colombo, reacted defensively to a local newspaper article critical of Australian immigration law. In a brusque memo to Canberra, he said that Asians saw Australia as a Garden of Eden where jobs were plentiful and well paid:

*It has not occurred to those who declaim against the Australian immigration policy that they are in effect asking for a share in the fruits of labours of the Australian people from the pioneers until the present time, without the Asians being prepared to contribute the same qualities as the pioneers, namely initiative, hard work and perseverance against difficulties. These qualities, if they existed amongst the Asians who desired to migrate to Australia, could be used to sound advantage in the countries of Asia.*⁴¹

It is important to remember that Cutler's views, and their many variations, were commonplace — those who believed in racial equality and cultural pluralism were still in the minority. But these conceptions of racial inferiority, which rejected the possibility of Asians ever having the necessary moral and physiological rectitude to share Australia's bounty, were already being quietly undermined.

For their part, Asian commentators did not always rally behind their students. Endorsing the government's policy, the editor of the Singapore daily *Straits Times* wrote that Malaysian students 'grumble too much and too publicly' and that disputes should be settled in a 'quiet and friendly manner'. As guests, the article went on, there are 'rules of propriety which they must learn to observe. To criticise the host country harshly and publicly offends against the very first of these rules'.⁴² Nor was it in the interests of Asian governments to recommend obstreperous students to represent their countries. Recipient nations enforced their own regulations regarding the conduct of Colombo Plan scholars. For example, in June 1953, after two Ceylonese students made disparaging remarks about Australia, the Ceylon Government sent warnings to each of their Colombo Plan scholars that they would be immediately recalled or fined if they defaulted under the conditions on which they had been sent abroad.⁴³

In response, Asian students discovered more constructive and unrestricted avenues for expression. From the 1950s on, newsletters and journals dedicated to Australian and Asian affairs sprang up on campuses across the country, and many overseas scholars contributed to established university newspapers. These journals combined articles from prominent journalists, academics, diplomats, as well as Asian and Australian students. Free from the editorial distortions of the major daily newspapers, Asian students

wrote considered and critical pieces about Australia and their own countries. They commonly used pseudonyms, especially if their material was too politically charged for the ever-watchful DEA. The founding editors of such journals aimed to deepen the nascent interest in Asia they sensed among their fellow students. One such journal was the attractively produced *Asiana: Asian–Australian forum*, sponsored by the Asian Students' Council of NSW and the National Union of Australian University Students. Rumoured to be a potential rival to the external affairs brainchild, *Hemisphere*, *Asiana's* mission was 'to make some contribution towards a deeper understanding between a relatively homogeneous "western" Australia and a kaleidoscopic rising Asia'. The time had come, wrote the journal's editor and former Colombo Plan student Mr Oedojo, 'to have a literary medium ... to complement the oral interchange that has already become a daily occasion'. The editors of the short-lived journal *The Asian*, published by the University of Melbourne Asian Students' Federation, emphasised the importance of 'understanding and goodwill — goodwill which is spontaneous and real, and not necessarily on paper only'. The University of New England Overseas Students' Association periodical *Small World*, also guided by an idealistic and humanitarian ethos, aimed at bringing a degree of critical awareness to Australian understandings of Asia and the problems associated with cross-cultural education.⁴⁴ Most of these journals quietly disappeared after a few years. *Hemisphere* carried on — aided by a stable government subsidy — and became the pre-eminent forum for Australian–Asian writing.

There were always Colombo Plan students prepared to brave the public arena. Lee Yee Cheong, a Malaysian electrical engineering student at the University of Adelaide, thought that Australia had missed an opportunity to gain first-hand information on Asian affairs:

Asian students have found that the Australian's home is too much his castle. Although they have the opportunity of meeting many Australians through being invited to picnics, garden parties and other social functions ... very few Australians have seen fit, after an hour or so of handshaking and small talk, to invite the students home and develop more personal and deeper friendships.

Some might have seen his letter as simply a comment on Australian insularity, but others might have interpreted it as a deft metaphorical jibe at immigration policy. Taking the less controversial interpretation, the editor of the *Adelaide Advertiser* responded somewhat cryptically. He agreed with Cheong's sentiments and put it down to 'mainly shyness and thoughtlessness' on the part of Australians. It was more common to see Asian students socialising together, he suggested, because they 'naturally find more in common with each other; there is something missing somewhere. It is nothing to worry about, but it deserves some thought'.⁴⁵

Asian students politicised the image of Australia that government officials hoped to project, both domestically and internationally. For example, in 1957 the government of Ceylon marked the sixth anniversary of the Colombo Plan with an international exhibition. Promoted as an opportunity for all donor nations to demonstrate the nature of their regional aid projects and to present an informative display about their own domestic economic development programs, the Australian Cabinet appointed an inter-departmental committee to consider possible ramifications. With respect to the display on Papua New Guinea, the Department of Territories thought it 'preferable only to refer to white people' lest it 'create confusion in the minds

of the audience, particularly as photos would be shown ... of Asian students taking part in various activities on the mainland'. In a similar vein, the designers felt that references to Aborigines should be avoided. They felt that audiences might raise awkward questions, such as, 'if there are dark-skinned people in Australia why are Asian people excluded?' Any 'long explanations' of Australian history were likely to raise more questions than they could answer. Officials also feared that any mention of dependent people under Australian trusteeship would give the impression that colonial exploitation underpinned Australian prosperity. Furthermore, the stark contrast in development between the mainland and Papua New Guinea might lead to a potentially embarrassing offer of aid from India or Japan!⁴⁶ Clearly unsettled by the prospect of international attention, the exhibition forced government officials to recast their representations of Australian life. The avoidance strategy the DEA chose to adopt and the conscious presentation of white Australia marked the realisation that the presence of Asian students, and the attention that generated, had drawn Australia into a much murkier and problematic arena.

The draconian nature of Australia's immigration restrictions meant that Asians expected a chilly reception. As Walter Crocker explained to Casey in one of his fulsome despatches, students had such low expectations that 'they have been surprised and gratified by the friendly reception ... Their gratification is the greater because they go half expecting to encounter something in the form of a colour bar'.⁴⁷ Foreign students almost certainly encountered discrimination and intolerance on a personal and institutional level during their time in Australia. Yet they were also significant witnesses to Australian tolerance and adaptability. Student associations, church groups, and the

official Colombo Plan Liaison Office organised picnics, dinners and formal evenings as a means of facilitating social interaction with Australians. Significantly, overseas student groups themselves, such as the Colombo Plan Fellows Association of Sydney, established in June 1953, staged parties, cultural evenings, film nights, and excursions for Australian and overseas students. Newspapers acknowledged the difficulties faced by visiting students and appreciated the gradual nature of the changing attitudes: 'Obviously it isn't easy for Asians to settle into life here', confessed one writer in the *Adelaide News* in 1957, 'but it is probably easier than it was, say, six years ago', with instances of 'abysmal ignorance and intolerance [having] grown less'.⁴⁸ Cases of extreme alienation and personal hardship brought to the DEA's attention also declined, in large part because of the work of community support networks. The DEA rightly interpreted the rising level of academic success among the students as evidence of their ability to overcome intellectual and social obstacles present in Australia. A more worrying trend for the government was that the Colombo Plan might become a victim of its own success. For now, the DEA feared 'the reluctance of students who have become over-identified with the Australian way of life to return to their home countries'. The corollary, according to the DEA, was the possibility that by allowing Asians to linger too long in Australia they would develop unrealistic expectations for their own country and resent Australia for its prosperity.⁴⁹

It was inevitable that many Australian students would begin romantic relationships with Asians they met on campus and elsewhere. Mariam Manaf, a distinguished scholar from Malaysia, won a Colombo Plan award to study medicine at the newly-founded Monash University in 1963. There she met fellow medical student Tim Hegarty.

The couple began courting in the mid-1960s and married before final year exams in 1969. Obligated to return home on finishing her degree, Manaf began her compulsory residency at General Hospital, Kuala Lumpur. Hegarty, who began his residency at Queen Victoria Hospital in Melbourne, convinced his employer to allow him to join his wife and complete his 'housemanship' in Malaysia. Although formally required to remain in Malaysia for five years, Manaf, like other Colombo Plan students, opted to repay part of her award in order to leave the country early. In 1971, having both completed their internships, they returned to Australia — and stayed.⁵⁰ In similar fashion, University of Western Australia student David Rome followed his girlfriend Daraka ('Dara') Vajarapan when she returned to Thailand after a year-long stay in Australia. An architecture graduate from Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, she was awarded a Colombo Plan scholarship to study English at Perth Technical College in the late 1960s. Rome first saw Vajarapan when she appeared in the daily press with other Colombo Plan scholars shortly after their arrival in Perth. They met later through the Thai Students' Association. Obligated to return for a minimum of 12 months by the Thai government, Vajarapan worked as an architectural drafter with an American company based in Bangkok, before returning to Perth with Rome in 1970. They married shortly afterwards.⁵¹ These encounters were not exactly what DEA officials had in mind when they warned of potential 'over-identification' with the Australian way of life.

The phenomenon of cross-cultural education sparked interest from social scientists, demographers, and psychologists. In 1969, Daphne Keats, from The Australian National University, conducted a follow-up study on Australian-trained Colombo Plan students. Among other

things, she found that 83 per cent of the 503 respondents kept in regular contact with Australians.⁵² Interestingly, the number of former students who maintained contact with formal graduate associations of ex-Australian students was much lower. This can be partly explained by the absence of such associations in some countries, but it might also suggest that personal relationships were a more enduring and meaningful basis for continued contact with Australia.

Another important dimension of the Colombo Plan and the cultural exchanges it fostered was the supply of technical expertise. Australian technical experts may have been lost among the growing contingent of international advisors, administrators, and technicians that descended on Asia in the 1950s, but they played a conspicuous role in the delivery of Colombo Plan projects and were therefore at the forefront of cultural interaction between Asians and Australians. By the mid-1960s, over 500 Australian experts had completed around 650 assignments in Colombo Plan countries. Over 40 per cent of Australian personnel contracted under the auspices of the program went to Malaysia. Singapore and Thailand received 116 and 105 experts respectively. Smaller numbers travelled to Indonesia (64), India (37), Ceylon (65), Pakistan (58), and Cambodia (33).⁵³ The DEA paid experts a basic living allowance for the duration of their assignments, and they typically continued to receive their normal wages and conditions. But they volunteered for these physically and emotionally demanding assignments, some going on for years, not for financial gain, but because they genuinely believed they were fulfilling part of Australia's obligations to its regional neighbours.

For many, it would be their first trip outside Australia to a region they knew little about. Norman Stringer, agricultural adviser with the South Australian Department

of Agriculture, travelled to the Mianwali district of Pakistan in March 1954. Commissioned to monitor the Thal irrigation project, costing nearly £A1 million, Stringer approached his task with enthusiasm, diligence, and fortitude. He wrote to his boss in Adelaide:

*the place was in a terrible mess both from an administrative and cropping or agricultural aspect. My first job was to rectify the errors that the Australian had made before me and to try and retrieve the good name for Australia ... bringing sand dune country into an irrigable state and crop sufficient area to feed 400 head of milking buffalos [sic] and Dhni cattle, 1,000 head of sheep and produce sufficient grain for 1,000 head of poultry ... Being a foreigner not speaking the language all this has been no easy task particularly during the summer months with the shade temp. for several months over 120 degrees mark and at times getting up to 128 degrees in the shade.*⁵⁴

At the request of the Pakistan government, the DEA extended Stringer's assignment for 12 months. While it was inconvenient for Stringer's department to be without him for another year, his director felt it 'was one way in which the state can make some contribution to under-developed regions'.⁵⁵ In his final appraisal of Stringer's work, Eric Harrison, from the DEA, told South Australian Premier Thomas Playford that Stringer had 'established excellent relations with Pakistanis of all grades and this contributed greatly to his achieving the maximum success possible in the circumstances in improving farming'.⁵⁶

The government also actively encouraged high-profile Australians to show off their technical prowess under the Colombo Plan mantle. In 1954, Casey

approached prominent plastic surgeon Benjamin Rank about the prospect of travelling to Asia to do a 'series of ... operations on local people whose faces had gone wrong in one way or another'.⁵⁷ Rank, who famously performed reconstructive surgery on John Gorton during the Second World War, undertook a three-month tour of Singapore, where he completed over 80 operations and lectured on his surgical techniques. According to Casey, Malcolm MacDonald and Gerald Templar from the UK High Commission were 'falling over each other with enthusiasm'.⁵⁸ Even Walter Crocker, who was usually hostile to this style of Colombo Plan venture, saw the potential for a similar visit to India and asked the well-connected Casey if he might persuade Rank or other notables. The following year Rank completed an assignment in India, as did the acclaimed virologist and bacteriologist Macfarlane Burnet. The surgeon Sir Edward ('Weary') Dunlop and the physician Clive Fitts were among other prominent Australians to complete assignments under the Colombo Plan.⁵⁹

Distinguished visitors such as Rank became conduits for the government's heavy-handed message about Australian values and the significance of Australian–Asian relations under the Colombo Plan. Leaving nothing to chance, the DEA gave Rank a ready-made speech, intended to help him answer any curly questions about the aid program or immigration laws. The speech emphasised the 'good neighbourly feeling' demonstrated by Australian aid, the presence of Indian students, and shared environmental problems, notably that large tracts of Australia remained 'incapable of supporting life and cultivation'. At its most sanctimonious, Rank's mock-speech explained that while Indian men had long been accustomed to avoiding 'manual work', through the scholarship program 'many Indian

students in Australia have learned from us the dignity of labour'.⁶⁰

Just as the presence of international students challenged racial stereotypes, so the expert program changed Australian perceptions of Asian people and work practices. In 1954, S.W. Dunkerley, a refrigeration expert from Melbourne, undertook an assignment to advise the Pakistan government on the creation of a cold storage industry and to determine what technical equipment Australia might supply. Accompanied by his wife, who proved 'an effective brace' to Dunkerley's morale, he travelled to Karachi, Hyderabad, Lahore, and other provincial cities. Much to his surprise, Dunkerley met intelligent, courteous, English-speaking Pakistanis, and 'big-hearted and big-thinking' Pakistani scientists, all of whom afforded him a warm welcome. He commented in his report to the DEA: 'Like many Australians, I knew little of what goes on inside the Eastern countries which are our neighbours'. While Dunkerley worked, his wife spent her time visiting places of interest and shopping in the bazaars, but 'never at any time did she experience fear or apprehension'. With his perceptions of Asia substantially de-mystified, Dunkerley returned to Australia with the 'conviction that the people of Pakistan are worthy of all the help that can be given them. Our Colombo Plan aid should be extended to the utmost, and Australians should see to it that it is so extended'. Maybe this would 'force the man in the street out of his sense of glorious isolation'.⁶¹ Casey could scarcely have written a better promotional article for the plan himself. Yet neither Casey, nor anyone at the DEA, tampered with Dunkerley's impressions. Following a now well-established pattern in Casey's approach to the Colombo Plan, he welcomed Dunkerley's 'frank enthusiasm' and then saw to it that copies were sent to major Australian newspapers!⁶²

Australian officials searched for a politically and culturally appropriate way of working with Asians. The DEA was particularly aware of the potentially damaging nature of the technical appraisals provided to recipient governments. Overly emphatic reports and 'undiplomatic language' had caused offence to Asian officials in a number of cases, so in 1956 the DEA instructed technicians to first send their 'tactful reports' to Australian diplomatic representatives in their respective countries. The intention, Arnott explained to Australia's diplomatic posts across Asia, was not to stifle criticism, but to 'ensure that they did not contain offensive remarks' or promise further assistance that Australia might not be willing to give.⁶³ The DEA also watched for signs that its experts were losing their cool in often testing working environments — such as the technician sent home for taking on the role of colonial overlord and attempting to 'discipline local labour with his foot'.⁶⁴

While technical aid and the scholarship program were valuable precursors to deeper professional and political links, the use of Colombo Plan experts as cultural ambassadors was as much an attempt to reduce latent anxiety over whether Asians would accept Australians as it was an attempt to promote Australian generosity. Professional exchanges (through the expert program), and the personal relations that contact inevitably fostered, became an important measure of the effectiveness of Colombo Plan aid and a litmus test of Australian character. In 1959, H.W. Moegerlein, an engineer with Commonwealth Railways, surveyed the use of Australian railcars and rolling stock in Singapore, Malaya (Malaya incorporated with Singapore, Sarawak and Sabah into Malaysia in September 1963), Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines. The practical problems he encountered proved manageable, and local authorities made good use of

Australian equipment. However, the highlight of his trip came when he met eight Thai engineers who had studied in Australia. 'As important as the service they render to their country is the goodwill they are spreading', he wrote. Moegerlein's pride was palpable: 'anyone who had doubts about the success of the Colombo Plan training scheme ... should have seen the expression on their faces when they were talking about Australia'.⁶⁵ An equally relieved — although slightly more muted — response came from the Prime Minister when in 1955 he told Thomas Playford that 'independent Australian observers [Colombo Plan experts] are now returning with reports that Asians are realizing that the Australian people are friendly and sympathetic to their aims and aspirations'.⁶⁶ The anxious search for approval spilled over into the wider community and was most evident in respect to the student program. 'Do they like us?' asked a headline in Perth's *Daily News*. Reassuringly, they did. But the sting for Perth readers was that while the students liked 'us and our way of life', they found the city 'dull and unsophisticated'.⁶⁷

Rather than averting scrutiny, Asian students, the expert program, and the ubiquitous propaganda campaign that accompanied them actually exposed Australia to international censure. Few could ignore the invective coming from respected Asian media. The *Times of Indonesia*, for example, attacked the Colombo Plan as empty tokenism: 'the Australians cannot do enough to show how much Australians like Asians in absentia. The Colombo Plan and other such schemes are a kind of blood-money paid by the Australian to silence his guilty conscience towards Asians and Africans'.⁶⁸ At the same time, however, diplomats such as Tom Critchley, Australian High Commissioner in Malaya, could suggest that Colombo Plan students were Australia's 'most signal contribution to

Australian–Malayan amity’. And Peter Heydon, High Commissioner in New Delhi, could tell Canberra about a team of Indian editors who toured Australia and on their return to India wrote enthusiastically about the student scheme, ‘the hard-working character of Australians generally and our egalitarianism’.⁶⁹

The incongruous and contradictory relationship between immigration restrictions and the personal interactions between Anglo–Australians and Asians grew into the decade. By the mid- to late-1950s, diplomatic correspondence, student writings, and media coverage drew a distinction between the welcoming and positive reception Asian students received while studying in Australia and the harsh rigidity of the immigration restrictions themselves. Asian writers struggled to come to terms with the possibility that although protected by racially-based immigration laws, Australians themselves were not necessarily hostile or overtly racist. In 1955, after spending three years in Australia, writer Tennyson Rodrigo returned to Ceylon and reported that Asian students and educated Australians were convinced that a colour bar did not exist. The white Australia policy, he wrote, ‘is purely a government policy and it does not point to the attitude of Australian society towards Asians’, and the awkwardness that characterised encounters between non-Europeans and Australians was due to anxiety, unfamiliarity, and ignorance — not race. In a similar vein, the Indian daily paper *Hindu* explained quizzically, ‘many forward Asian students find no difficulty in getting Australian girl partners to dance with them and a small number of Australian girls have married Asian husbands. The term colour bar is positively misleading when applied to Australia’. Asian diplomats in Australia, while ever critical, also appreciated the subtlety of social change. In 1960, the Indian High Commission in Canberra

reported that despite continued intransigence over immigration, Australia's 'impregnable insularity' was beginning to subside and 'the Asian facet of the Australian personality has been taking clearer shape'.⁷⁰

Increasing professional and commercial contact with Asia, the influx of students, and a growing regional awareness, deepened the cultural tissue of Australian society. The immediate and tangible contact facilitated by Asian students built momentum for a campaign to dismantle the white Australia policy. The *Ceylon Daily News*, for example, reported the radical views of the Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane, Reginald Halse, who supported the recognition of communist China, welcomed Colombo Plan students, and wanted to admit a quota of Asians 'who would add something to our way of living'.⁷¹ The Reverend Thomas Rees-Thomas of the Brisbane City Congregational Church denied that a quota system would reduce living standards. According to a report in the *Brisbane Courier-Mail*, the Christian church believed that throughout 'universities and colleges ... there were thousands of educated and cultured Asians who could not only live up to Australian standards, but could elevate them'.⁷² The basic sentiment expressed by Halse and Rees-Thomas took a more politicised form when the influential Immigration Reform Group (IRG) used the Colombo Plan to expose the dangers of maintaining a policy offensive to Asian nations. The group, citing the cases of prominent Asian leaders educated in British institutions, asked rhetorically, 'could they have felt the same if the atmosphere of freedom and racial equality which they experienced in Britain had been tainted by an immigration policy that seemed to them a denial of the fundamental equality of mankind?' The IRG deliberately refrained from condemning the Colombo Plan as a total failure. Working

from an assimilationist perspective, they proposed that Asian students had demonstrated their capacity for ready absorption into Australian society. Indeed, this integration would be enhanced if they could remain permanently: 'Australia cannot become "home" in their minds ... Knowing that their stay here must be temporary, they have little encouragement to develop a sense of affinity with or affection towards this country'.⁷³

Popular attitudes towards Asian immigration only began to soften from the mid-1950s. In 1943, 51 per cent of respondents to a Gallup Poll fell into the 'Keep Out' category. In 1954 it was 61 per cent. The number of respondents in this category fell steadily throughout the decade and stood at 33 per cent in 1960. After increasing to 39 per cent in 1961, it fell sharply to 16 per cent in 1965.⁷⁴ The pattern described here mirrored a gradual reduction in the number of respondents who believed that overall migration numbers were too high. That shift over a decade was a fundamental change in both national attitude and people's perception of what their nation should be. The government followed by making minor changes to Australia's immigration regulations, notably the scrapping of the infamous dictation test in 1958 in favour of a simpler entry system.

By the late 1950s, with the white Australia policy under regular attack, Asian students and the Colombo Plan played a crucial role in facilitating the turnaround in the government's immigration policy. In 1958, Harold Holt, Minister for Labour and National Service (he was Minister for Immigration between 1949 and 1956), dodged the accusation of racism by suggesting that the Australian people 'had no better ambassadors' of their tolerance and friendliness 'than those Asian students who come here to be trained'. Exclusion, he said, merely acknowledged 'the

difficulties of assimilation for those with different racial and traditional backgrounds and customs'.⁷⁵ But with the idea that non-Europeans were unable to assimilate so visibly discredited, by 1966 Holt, now Prime Minister, emphasised, in an unabashed *volte-face*, the cultural affinity between Asia and Australia as a major reason to abandon the white Australia policy. As he explained in parliament:

*Australia's increasing involvement in Asian developments, the rapid growth of our trade with Asian countries, our participation on a larger scale in an increasing number of aid projects in the area, the considerable number of Asian students — now well over 12,000 — receiving education in Australia, the expansion of our military effort, the scale of diplomatic contact, and the growth of tourism to and from the countries of Asia, combine to make such a review desirable in our eyes.*⁷⁶

Although the 1966 reforms did not see the end of the white Australia policy, they signalled its imminent departure. The changing nature of Australia's interaction with Asian people during the 1950s and 1960s is succinctly encapsulated in one of Casey's diary entries. The day after a difficult meeting in October 1953 with members of the Ceylon Cabinet, Casey wrote:

Some things a good many people in Australia should learn about Asians
 – not to patronise them
 – not to believe we're superior to them
 – not to misinterpret their good manners
 – not to underrate their ability⁷⁷

By the end of the 1960s, Australia had indeed taken note of Casey's patrician reprimand. The nation's cautious

embrace of Asia — both officially and in the wider community — was sufficient to allow the liberalisation of immigration law without significant political or social disruption.

Through the Colombo Plan education program and the broader integration of Asian scholars, the Menzies Government unwittingly unleashed a quietly subversive force upon the Australian community; a force made more powerful by its non-confrontational and temporary nature. Socio-cultural engagement between Asians students and Australians helped to change imperial accounts of Asian dependence and passivity into more complex and intimate appreciations. It also dented Australian dreams of racial superiority and regional dominance. The assimilationist credo that underpinned the embrace of the Colombo Plan and private scholars allowed Australia time to adjust, understand, and accept radical social and cultural changes associated with immigration. Interaction between Australian technical experts and Asians was an important factor in facilitating a change in outlook among the Australian people, and broke the myth — at least for middle-class Australians — that Asians were anathema to the ‘Australian way of life’. Even Menzies, who had largely ignored Asia throughout his career, remarked in his memoirs that the ‘daily association of Australians with students and scholars from Asian countries has greatly widened the experience and understanding of our own people’.⁷⁸

With few exceptions, the experience of Asian students in Australia proved illuminating and beneficial, for student and host alike. Official reluctance to look beyond the narrow frame of foreign policy and cold war politics

stood in stark contrast to the willingness of the Australian community to accept and engage with Asian students. Students may well have become 'valuable testimony' to Australian tolerance, but instead of generating sympathy for immigration policy, it intensified domestic and international criticism. But while international condemnation of racial discrimination was instrumental in encouraging the attitudinal changes that swept the country, international pressure alone would not have led the government to dismantle the white Australia policy. The ideals of equality, tolerance, and understanding were rendered less abstract by Colombo Plan students and the thousands of private scholars who spent time in Australia. The number of Asian scholars may appear small, but they marked a watershed in Australia's cultural development and their appearance on university campuses and in private homes across the country provided a sustained challenge to Australian insularity.

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