

EPILOGUE

The Colombo Plan still operates and is one of the longest running aid programs in the world. Yet awareness of the Plan has diminished, largely because its main functions have slowly been eclipsed by the multitude of cooperative forums that have emerged since the Second World War. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ECAP), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and regional groupings such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have all diverted attention, and finance, from the Colombo Plan. Greater prosperity in some Asian countries has also reduced the need for external technical assistance. In the 1980s, donor nations even contemplated the end of the historic scheme when Britain and Canada dropped out. But salvation came from Japan, a country that had once struggled to gain acceptance into the Colombo Plan fraternity. In fact,

Japan has been the largest donor nation since 1977, and in 1989 gave more than twice the amount provided by the United States.

The Colombo Plan survived the Cold War and the anti-communist objective foisted upon it by Western donors to become a broader, more permanent international organisation. Today, it still manages to retain a nominally non-political agenda. Membership of the Consultative Committee still includes nations that are geographically diverse and politically divergent. Indeed, having begun with seven founding Commonwealth nations, the Colombo Plan now includes 25 countries stretching from Iran in the west to the Fiji Islands in the east. By 1980, membership included almost every Southeast Asian nation and the Colombo Plan was extended indefinitely. The admission of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in November 2001 left Brunei as the only outstanding regional country. Mongolia attends as a provisional member.

Throughout all these changes in membership, the basic philosophy of the Colombo Plan has remained essentially unchanged. The Consultative Committee serves as a non-coercive discussion forum and member nations negotiate bilateral cooperative programs. More recently, Colombo Plan activities have emphasised human resource management, intra-regional trade, public administration, and private sector development. The drug advisory program, initiated in 1972, continues to work with international bodies and non-government organisations to control the availability of drugs and provide assistance to addicts. Technical training is still supported through the Colombo Plan Staff College for Technical Education, established in 1973 to train management and specialist personnel.

Australia retains its Colombo Plan membership by bearing some of the administration costs of the bureau in

Sri Lanka. But since the mid-1970s, when the Whitlam Government oversaw a major restructure of the aid bureaucracy, Australian aid has been channeled through a wider variety of multilateral and bilateral programs. Since that time, the number of Colombo Plan scholarships has fallen steadily from a peak of over 3,000 per year as alternative means of sponsoring students have become available and, more significantly, demand from Asians prepared to pay for education in Australia has risen markedly.

Yet the legacy of the Colombo Plan is more directly evident in the scope and structure of Australia's current overseas aid program and the language used to promote it. On the 50th anniversary of the Colombo Plan in 2001 the Malaysian–Australian Alumni Council, with support from the Australian government and other organisations, launched the Malaysia–Australia Colombo Plan Commemoration (MACC) scholarship program. Intended to encourage the two-way exchange of students between Australia and Malaya, the inaugural program offered 56 scholarships for undergraduate and postgraduate study. Of the 62 places offered in 2004, 46 were offered to Australian applicants to study at 12 Malaysian institutions. The MACC initiative hopes to build on the sentiment and aspirations of the Colombo Plan by strengthening the educational and cultural links between the two countries. In a similar vein, the Australian government and the World Bank launched the 'Virtual Colombo Plan' in August 2001. The program is intended to provide developing countries with distance education programs and access to Australian research via the Internet and extends as far as East Timor, China, Indonesia, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, the Philippines and some African countries. Here the talk of using information and communication technology to

'leap frog' ahead in the development process is reminiscent of the overly optimistic language that characterised the development models of the 1950s and 60s. Predictably, this revival of the 'Colombo Plan' as a byword for education and positive cross-cultural exchange ignores the scheme's complex history and the self-interested political and cultural motivations that underpinned the program.

Another contemporary incarnation of the Colombo Plan development scheme is the Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development Program (AYAD), launched in 1998 and organised by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID). Drawing inspiration from the Plan's technical expert program, skilled young Australians undertake short-term assignments of up to 12 months in developing countries, often in partnership with Australian companies, educational institutions, government agencies, non-government organisations and community groups. Like the expert program of the past, the youth ambassadors' role as cultural representatives is just as important as the contributions they make to specific development projects.

Certainly, Australian aid providers today place much greater emphasis on cultural sensitivity and tailoring development to the local and national needs of developing countries. But Australia's commitment to the provision of modern infrastructure, the promotion of sustainable development, and the emphasis on technical training, distance education and institutional strengthening, all have strong links to the Colombo Plan's basic vision of regional development. Indeed, the preference for economically tied infrastructure projects, such as the My Thuan bridge in Vietnam, which was built by Australian companies, confirms Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade Alexander Downer's directive that Australia's 'aid program will remain

identifiably Australian — it is a reflection of Australian values and is a projection of those values abroad'.¹ The anti-communist rhetoric that gave foreign assistance its momentum may have gone, but the nexus between international aid and national economic, social and cultural imperatives is as intricate as it was 50 years ago.

Footnotes

- ¹ A. Downer, *Better aid for a better future: seventh annual report to Parliament on Australia's development cooperation program and the Government's response to the Committee of Review of Australia's Overseas Aid Program*, Canberra, Australian Agency for International Development, 1997