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Don't Preach To ASEAN Without Heeding Own Advice

This article is reproduced from a column "Personally Speaking" in New Straits Times (September 5, 1997). It is a commentary by editorial consultant, Mazlan Nordin, on the articles by Australian academics Damien Kingsbury, Philip Bell, and Eric Louw published in APME, Issue No.2, 1997.

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O ften advised on how to do their job by non-professionals are newspaper journalists. The discourse would come from ministers, politicians including those in the opposition, government functionaries and academics, among others.

An example of the critical academic discourse is of articles in the Asia Pacific Media Educator published by the Graduate School of Journalism, University of Wollongong, Australia; International Centre of Media Studies in Malaysia, and City University, Hong Kong.

Of relevance to Asean is a piece on how Australian journalists should report their country's Asian neighbours, namely Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. It begins with the finding that since the 1970's, their reportage has been regarded as a source of friction between the governments of the three countries and Australia.

Mentioned was Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's complaint about Australian journalism then, especially with the raising of environmental issues and human rights.

There was Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's criticism of the Australian media for "preaching" and his view of Australia as little more than an economic, political and social basket case. And that if Australians were not careful, they would become the "white trash of Asia".

There was also the criticism from Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong about some Australians talking too much and doing too little.

The writer, Damien Kingsbury is a freelance journalist and has written a doctoral thesis on Australian reporting of Indonesia.

Of interest, therefore, would be his views on measures taken later by Paul Keating, then the Australian Prime Minister, to establish a sort of special relationship between Australia and Indonesia.

Touching on censorship Kingsbury quotes a Singaporean journalism student in Australia whose class assignments included "fairly simple and relatively uncontroversial stories in Australian terms" which she thought would preclude her from becoming a journalist in Singapore. Would it really be so? Would such simple and uncontroversial items not find space in *The Straits Times* ? As visitors to the republic will note the paper is doing tremendously well.

Comes then a story about a Malaysian journalist. Quote: "And then there was a Malaysian colleague who reported from Kuala Lumpur and was torn between the requirements to report for an Australian news service and domestic restrictions on the media. His position had become increasingly tenuous and some Australians in Kuala Lumpur had arranged a bolt-hole for the colleague in the event that the Malaysian Government tired of warning him and decided to act. The plan was that he would be spirited to Australia as a political refugee. As it turned out, he jumped before being pushed and is now an Australian resident."

There we have it again. One of hundreds of Malaysian journalists, and out of 20 million Malaysian, flees to Australia and it becomes a big story to the Australian writer. And we ask: any other "bolt holes" being readied? Do be careful, chums. Pauline Hanson will clobber you for bringing more Asians to Australia.

Advice of another hue is given by Eric Louw, lecturer in media and cultural studies, Charles Sturt University, Bathurst as he writes on *"Parallel media response to racial policies in Malaysia and new South Africa"*. In his view the *Bumiputera* (indigenous Malays) policy as developed in Malaysia in the 1970s seems to have been exported to South Africa where it is called affirmative action. Mention is made of African National Congress personnel visiting Malaysia to learn about the *Bumiputera* policy.

In implementing the policy, Louw explained, the ANC government has replaced white employees with blacks in the government service, state enterprises, police and the armed forces. By 1996, the proportion of general jobs occupied by black people has risen by 50 per cent since 1993, and is expected to rise over the next three years.

Touching on the media in South Africa the writer said that both President Nelson Mandela and Deputy President Thabo Mbeki had warned the press for "not representing the views of the (black) majority", and for not having "too white" an ownership and staffing structure.

Meanwhile in the Government-owned broadcasting

corporation more than 900, mostly white, employees had quit and 68 percent of the replacements were blacks.

Louw argues that claims about the New Economic Policy benefiting Malays and affirmative action benefiting blacks "is nonsense". In his opinion those policies are "to the benefit of a small group of Malays and a small group of black South Africans".

Asked then by him is how journalists should respond to such situations. Should journalists "assist" governments in the midst of difficult social transformations and should they consider the past when reporting on the present.

But surely for journalists in Malaysia and the new South Africa there is no turning back to May 13, 1969 and the daily trauma of apartheid rule imposed by whites?

In the prevailing circumstances discussions on matters vis-a vis Australia - Asia center on what is now "widely known as the Hanson debate". Phillip Bell from the University of New South Wales comments on the Australian media coverage on Pauline Hanson since her maiden speech in the Australian parliament on Sept 10, 1996.

Speaking as a "businesswoman running a fish-and -chip shop" Hanson said that she had won her seat on an issue which resulted in her being called racist. "That issue related to my comment that Aboriginals received more benefits than non-Aboriginals."

Bell contends that the Australian media amplified some, but not all of her opinions. He writes: "Significantly they largely ignored her suggestions that Australia withdraw from the United Nations, prepare for invasion from Asia and reintroduce national service."

His commentary was written before Hanson's more explosive statement that Christians be given priority in the migration intake and that Jews, Muslims and Hindus might find it tougher to enter Australia under her party's policy.

Reported in the Malaysian media just last week (August 25-31, 1997) was Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer's criticisms of foreign correspondents and blaming them for projecting the image of Australia as a "narrow minded inward-looking" country led by Hanson. According to him, Hanson represented just five percent of the country's population and that 95 percent rejected her views.

The news agency's report on his speech noted that in a separate new poll last year 48 percent indicated support for Hanson, and 38 percent opposed. Last Sunday (August 31) came news about Australia's outback Northern Territory voting in an election dominated by the divisive race issue. Out of its 190,000 population, about a quarter are Aborigines.

Winning the election was the Conservative Liberal Party with a campaign which opened the extension of native land titles to Aborigines.

In as much, therefore, as Australia does not want foreign correspondents to present a wrong picture of the country and a jaundiced view of its policies, so would Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia not want Australian journalists and academics to "preach" as Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew once said. Or to arrange another "bolt-hole". ■

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