So Long SOPAC

Asia's all the rage. But when it comes to the South Pacific, we just want to wash that region right out of our hair. Rowan Callick suggests this regional monomania is a mite foolish.

It was no coincidence that it was one of the most public proponents of the 'Asianisation' of Australia, Greg Sheridan—the foreign editor of the Australian—who recently urged the government to start to disengage from the South Pacific region. The islands were important, he argued, when the Japanese started seizing them in World War Two, and again when the Soviets started to flirt with them after the war. But now the Cold War's over, it's time for Canberra's last hula. "We seem mostly to get ourselves into strife with our neighbours at the annual South Pacific Forum meetings but to achieve nothing in return for all the trouble."

Mr Sheridan's view of the significance of the Pacific is clear. "As Keating himself might put it himself; it is elevating a tenth order issue to the first order." And who are the "first order", the "countries with which we share crucial interests'? He cites Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines. It is helpful of Mr Sheridan to have brought this thesis into the open, for it has lurked unstated behind much of the 'Asia thrust' of recent years. The thesis goes that Asia is not just the Main Game, to use another Keatingism, but the only game in town. And certainly the only one the Big Boys play.

The RSL blimps and the Toowoomba matrons might still carry a torch for the old country; more recent migrants who can't bear to cut the ties with their past might champion links with greater Europe; Rotarians and the odd colonel or passé businessman might stake a claim for the American Big Brother of the post-war decade. But as for us, the guys at the cutting edge (the thesis goes) we know where we stand—because we've looked at a map. And that means we're Asian. Thank God, too: 'Asia' is a success. It has the face of the future.

How Australia needs its Jonathan Swift. For the new Main Game is simply the old Yellow Peril inverted. For inscrutable, untrustworthy, inferior, read today hard-working, cohesive, superior—especially in economic affairs. It is no coincidence that this formula comes from the Canberra team that brought us 'economic rationalism'—when it was a badge worn with intellectual pride—as the only game. But, of course, we're all interventionists now—and holding up as models the interventionist approaches of our fellow Asians.

This leads on inevitably to a special pleading—to the argument that Asia 'needs to be examined in its own terms'. We might feel squeamish about the odd massacre, execution or expropriation—but if our 'neighbours' (and claiming Thailand and the Philippines as such is perhaps stretching a point) find it necessary, so be it. We are merely demonstrating our cultural insensitivity, so the thesis goes, if we speak publicly on such matters. That the vaunted private diplomacy claimed as an alternative can amount to mere collusion between oppressive elites, is another matter. Yet, in truth, it is Australia as a confident liberal democracy that appeals to Asians and, indeed, to Pacific islanders. This is an essential element of the country's attractiveness, its selling point—even if a sleazy section of Australia's business community would have it otherwise, and would prefer the argument that it is the public expression of concern for human rights that will drag the country down.

Australia only damages itself when it trades its virtues for this kind of narrow opportunism. Its longer-term cause in Asia, whatever that term may represent (the once-vogue, eternally-ugly-and-ungrammatical phrase 'the Asia-Pacific' appears to be falling out of favour—perhaps because the 'Pacific' appendage is becoming an embarrassment) is not truly advanced by such mealy-mouthedness. And this viewpoint overlooks two other things of significance: our dependence on trade, which today means truly world trade, and our relationship with the region which constitutes our only sphere of influence: the South Pacific.

When Sitiveni Rabuka became prime
minister of Fiji in June, he could not have been more wrong to warn Australia against attempting to be the region's Big Brother. The danger is, rather, that it will overlook the South Pacific altogether. Our prime ministers should not go to South Africa, says Mr Sheridan, 'to grandstand on apartheid, nor should they waste their time sitting in long houses on tiny Pacific atolls talking about tuna fish'. The conduct of Mr Keating at the July meeting of the Forum indicated a lack of attention to detail, if not interest, on the part of his team which Sheridan would presumably find gratifying.

Should all of this matter? Of course. It would be tragic to see Australia's influence in its immediate neighbourhood suddenly cut back because an influential Canberra coterie has a one-track mind. When Senator Evans became foreign minister four years ago he said Australia had defined its relationships with the island countries as best served by a strategy of 'constructive commitment' involving partnership rather than dominance, mutual respect for sovereignty and national individuality and the development of shared perceptions of strategic and security interests.

Australia's commitment to the South Pacific region is modest enough—with the exception of the $300 million a year aid to Papua New Guinea, with which trade reached $1.7 billion, and investment about $5 billion in 1991 (a considerably greater sum than that provided to most of ASEAN). But personal contact, only made meaningful over a length of time, and established through a number of informal meetings such as the one Mr Keating failed to attend before the Forum, are the glue that keeps Australia's influence in place.

In security terms, thanks to painstaking diplomatic work there is now a network of Australian-built patrol boats in place throughout the Pacific islands, providing intelligence which is made widely available about adverse influences—drift-net fishing boats, drug-runners, pirates. Insofar as the American relationship is deemed by the Asians to count, it assumes—as Defence Secretary Mr Dick Cheney pointed out on his recent visit for the Coral Sea anniversary—that Australia takes the lead, and is responsible for 'managing' the region peacefully. The South Pacific is an ideal 'nursery' for exporters, a source of access markets which are mainly English-speaking and familiar with Australia. If products can't sell in the islands, it may well be hard to sell them anywhere.

Oceania (which includes New Zealand) is the biggest single destination for Australians working overseas for more than a year. (Also overlooked by the Asianisers, of course, is that other South Pacific power, New Zealand, for long the butt of Hill humour, is today taking on a massive significance as a model of what Australia might soon become—according to your ideological perspective, either a disaster zone or a surprise success.) The truth is that if Australia cannot maintain its influence—which requires its presence and attention, for only thus will trust be gained—in the South Pacific, it cannot do so anywhere. Indeed, it may be least of all able to do so in an Asia which is gaining a global perspective just as Australia appears at risk of determining to narrow its own focus.

And part of the price of maintaining that influence is participating in regional events—such as the Forum. If Australia takes Mr Sheridan's advice and opts out, this may, as he notes, lead Fiji (for instance) to forgo closer ties with the Malaysians. Should we really be worried about this, he asks? The answer is yes. The Fiji government has already signed a deal guaranteeing exclusive purchase of all its oil from the Malaysian government. This has cut out the Australian-based companies which previously supplied oil to Fiji, and it has raised the price of oil, not only to Fijian consumers but to other islanders who have no choice but to buy from the storage centre near Nadi in Fiji. The Malaysian connection has encouraged Fiji to reallocate resources and priorities, Malay-style, towards ethnic Fijians—creating the conditions for a climate of tokenism, inefficiency and corruption within which Australian companies are unlikely to prosper.

Like Australians in Asia, Asian business people in the South Pacific—usually less than blue chip—have often found mutual cultural barriers an irritant. But unlike those Australians, they have, on the whole, increasingly sought to solve the problem by moulding the islands' embryonic commercial practice to their own. Sweeteners such as 'familiarisation visits' to east Asian capitals, all comforts provided, are now common. Australians who fail to make similar offers are seen as tight-fisted. In politics and armed services alike, islands leaders are too often being suborned, seduced by Asian contacts into considering themselves a species apart from, and no longer accountable to, their own people. This is a recipe for long-term instability and friction which will do neither the islands nor Australia much good.

Mr Sheridan and his fellow-travellers appear remarkably assured that the region's parameters will now forever stay the same—that post-Pacific War, post-Cold War, the South Pacific will never again be disturbed by the outside world. In this frozen landscape Australians can comfortably withdraw and make, instead, for the 'real world'. This is similar to the viewpoint which, struck by the beauty and isolation of the region, leads too many observers to write it off patronisingly as a 'paradise', as if it were not populated by real people beyond the resort staff.

Yet who knows what train of events—an ecological scandal; another coup somewhere, this time threatening Australian tourists; the incursion of militant Islam—might palpably require again close attention by Australia, for our own good. Yet such relationships as would then be required cannot be developed instantly. That is the lesson of the relationship with Asia, too, of course. It cannot be built as a fad. Mercantile self-interest, regional security including assuring our shipping routes, international reputation and sheer altruism—Australia's huge resources should surely be capable of ameliorating the insular poverty of the region—combine to require a continued Australian commitment to the 'tenth order' peoples of the South Pacific.

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