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AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR UNESCO
DELEGATION TO THE 22ND SESSION OF THE GENERAL
CONFERENCE OF UNESCO

UNESCO AT THE CROSSROADS - REFLECTIONS ON THE 22ND
OF THE GENERAL CONFERENCE

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UNESCO AT THE CROSSROADS : REFLECTIONS ON THE 22ND SESSION

OF THE GENERAL CONFERENCE

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PURPOSE OF NOTE

With the notification of the intention of the United States of America to withdraw from Unesco at the end of 1984 and the apparent consideration in the United Kingdom of a similar course, it is being said that Unesco has reached a crossroads. The purpose of this note is to provide members of the Australian National Commission for Unesco with a brief and handy resume of some of the chief developments during the 22nd Session of the General Conference in Paris in October and November 1983. The Australian Delegation was led by Senator Susan Ryan. The Deputy Leader was Mr EG Whitlam. For the first time, a comprehensive report of the Delegation is to be tabled in Federal Parliament by the Minister. That report will contain detailed information about the 22nd Session and Australia's part in it.

The purpose of this briefing note is to provide a short summary of the main points of the Delegation report. The aim is to ensure that members of the National Commission will be able to respond to questions or comments they may hear concerning Unesco.

The paper has been scrutinised by all Australian-based members of the Australian Delegation. It has also been seen by Mr Whitlam and it is understood that parts of it may be used in connection with the forthcoming Delegation report. It is supplied now to National Commission members as a handy summary of some of the chief themes. The purposes are to:

- . draw attention to the importance of the General Conference in the context of the circumstances now facing Unesco;
- . provide background to the Organisation which is often misunderstood or ill understood, including in Australia;
- . identify some of the principal achievements of the 1983 General Conference;
- . list some of the contributions by Australia to the Conference; and
- . identify some of the problems which need to be frankly discussed and resolved to the advantage of Unesco and the world community it serves.

AT THE CROSSROADS

Why is it said that Unesco is at a crossroads? Although the General Conference of Unesco concluded in Paris on 26 November 1983, no reflection on Unesco at this time could ignore the events that have occurred since the meeting. At the turn of the year the United States of America gave notice of its intention at the end of 1984 to withdraw from the Organisation. A year's notice is required by the statutes establishing Unesco. The United States is not only a major financial contributor to the Organisation, providing approximately 25% of its budgetary funds. It is also, by reason of its wealth and the intellectual distinction and variety of its people, a major force in the work of Unesco. The notification is therefore one of great significance. The United Kingdom has also seen debates, including in the Parliament, concerning British membership of Unesco. In Australia, critical editorial comment concerning Unesco continues to be published, some of it supportive of the decision taken in the United States and apparently under consideration in the United Kingdom. Australia shares with the United States and the United Kingdom foundation membership of Unesco, which was established in 1947 in the wake of the Second World War. When one such foundation member gives notice of withdrawal and another contemplates it, it is clear that a critical phase for the Organisation has been reached. In that phase, Australia must play a constructive and useful part. Although this note details events that occurred before the United States' notice of withdrawal, it is impossible to ignore this development. It is a backdrop against which the report of the Australian Delegation, the achievements of the General Conference, the contribution of Australians to that Conference and the problems identified, must all be read.

PURPOSES OF UNESCO

It is timely to remind the reader of the purposes that caused the United Nations to establish Unesco. Its purposes are stated in Article 1 of its Constitution to be:

To contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture, in order to further universal respect for justice, for the Rule of Law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion, by the Charter of the United Nations.

Unesco is prohibited from intervening in matters which are 'essentially within domestic jurisdiction'. It is organised to include:

- . the General Conference which consists of representatives of the 161 Member countries;
- . the Executive Board which comprises 51 Members elected by the General Conference and distributed among the voting regions of the world. Australia is not at present a Member of this Board but has been in the recent past;
- . the Director General who is the chief executive and who heads the Secretariat of staff appointed to carry out the program settled by the General Conference.

As with most Members of Unesco, Australia has established a National Commission comprising 58 Australians from various backgrounds in the fields of competence of Unesco. That National Commission scrutinised the proposed Program and Budget put forward by the Director-General for the work of Unesco during 1984-1985. This contribution in turn was reflected in the brief for the Australian Delegation. The brief was a document of high professionalism and permitted the Australian Delegation to play an active, critical but positive part in scrutiny of the Director-General's priorities. Many of the suggestions made by the Australian Delegation were adopted in the reports of the General Conference. They will undoubtedly be reflected in the final work program of Unesco and in the activities of the Organisation.

ACHIEVEMENTS OF GENERAL CONFERENCE

The General Conference in 1983 saw a number of important achievements:

- . The Budget. The dispute concerning the budget was largely resolved by consensus, although the United States persisted with its disagreement. As a result of a move by Nordic countries, a compromise was struck which was generally accepted under which a small increase in the Unesco budget was permitted, reducing the increase that had been originally proposed by the Director-General. Only the United States cast a vote against this proposal.

- New world information order. Similarly, a large measure of consensus was achieved in respect of another highly controversial matter before the General Conference, namely the questions of a new world information order. This proposal has attracted a large measure of attention in the media in Western countries where it has caused anxiety about possible interference in the free media and freedom of speech.
- Peoples' rights. Another matter of concern, voiced by the United States and also by Australia, relates to the call by some countries for a recognition of 'peoples' rights' in the program of Unesco. Concern was expressed by Australia and is detailed in this Delegation report, lest 'peoples' rights' should be an excuse for ignoring individual human rights and the fundamental freedoms that are referred to in Article 1 of the Unesco Constitution. However, as a result of a further compromise it was acknowledged that there were differences of view on the subject and that the concept of 'people's rights' would continue to be studied.

ACHIEVEMENTS OF AUSTRALIA

There are a number of achievements of the Australian Delegation that should be listed. They include:

- Minister's attendance. For only the second time, the relevant Australian Minister attended the General Conference and led the Australian Delegation. The Minister for Education and Youth Affairs (Senator the Honourable Susan Ryan) addressed the General Conference and outlined important comments of the Australian Government and initiatives in Australia relevant to Unesco. It is not at all unusual for Ministers to attend the General Conference. However, Australia in the past has failed to take advantage of this important international forum. The Minister's presence at the General Conference of Unesco significantly raised attention to the positive but not uncritical role which Australia plays in the Organisation.
- Brief. As stated above, the Australian Delegation brief was of high quality, particularly because of the contribution made to it by numerous distinguished Australians both through the Australian National Commission for Unesco and in consultation by that Commission with non-governmental organisations. It is believed that the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Education Youth Affairs deserve approbation for the high professional standard of the Australian brief. On some occasions the facility was taken to provide note material from the brief to the Unesco Secretariat in order to influence program and policy work of the Unesco staff in directions urged by Australian experts in the fields of education, science, culture and communications.

- Move to Group IV. For some years Australia has been a Member of the Asia and Pacific Region group of countries for the purposes of the program of Unesco. In recent years the decision has been taken that Australia should move, for voting purposes, from the Western European and Others Group (WEOG) to the Asia and Pacific Region Group (Group IV). It had been hoped that this move could be accomplished in 1983. However, because of concerns expressed in some other groups about the overall impact of a move by Australia (with New Zealand) to the Asia and Pacific Group, the final decision on this move was postponed until the next Session of the General Conference. Nonetheless, it is plain that the move, so natural for Australia's future in its region, has a growing body of support not only within the Asia and Pacific Region but also in other Groups.
- Elections. Australia's high standing was reflected in its election to membership of some of the committees and councils established under the auspices of Unesco. The details are set out in the full Delegation report. On the Committee on Informatics, Australia came close to election and it is believed that an increase in Australia's involvement in the Unesco programs relevant to information technology will contribute to its election to this committee in the future.
- Human rights. One of the most controversial aspects of the Unesco program relates to the items in Commission V. This Commission dealt with such issues as discrimination, apartheid, world peace and women's rights. In this Commission too, the General Conference exhibited a high level of agreement, although there were inevitable differences of emphasis. The Australian contributions which were put forward by Justice Kirby and Mrs Whitlam (Members of the Delegation) laid emphasis upon the positive achievements of Australia relevant to these issues. Reference was made to the initiatives on multiculturalism, including multicultural television, on human rights protection and antidiscrimination legislation. The Australian Delegation stressed the importance of examining cases where success had been achieved in reducing discrimination. It also stressed the importance of examining the many forms of discrimination and combatting stereotyping generally, whilst permitted people as much freedom as possible to be themselves.
- Procedural. The Australian Delegation made a number of useful contributions to the improvement of Unesco procedures. In the place of lengthy oral interventions, Australia initiated procedures for the handing up of written supplements to the oral statement. These were then noted in reports and by the Unesco Secretariat. It is believed that in this way there may be an improvement in the procedures of the General Conference and the Australian innovation was favourably commented upon by a number of other Delegations. Furthermore, positive steps have been taken by

members of the Australian Delegation to report to colleagues throughout Australia on aspects of the Unesco program that might not be fully known but might be relevant to Australia's initiatives. For example, steps have been taken to establish contact between the Copyright Law Review Committee recently established in Australia and the Unesco Division on Intellectual Property Rights. It is in this way that much of the good work being done in Unesco will be precisely directed, in the future, to the advantage of Australia.

CURRENT PROBLEMS

The above review is not to disguise the several problems that exist in Unesco at the present:

- . Budget and efficiency. There is a constant need for an improvement in the efficiency of the Organisation. In fact, this has lately been acknowledged by the Director-General in a response to the United States notice of withdrawal. The Australian Delegation emphasised the essential obligation of Unesco to be vigilant in the expenditure of its funds and to be cost-effective. It is realised that there are legitimate criticisms of Unesco in this regard. However, it is the Australian view that the Unesco Secretariat has had brought home to it the strong feelings in numerous quarters concerning improvement in efficiency and budgetary practices.
- . Group IV transfer. Although, as stated above, some positive steps have been taken towards Australia's transfer to Group IV (Asia and the Pacific) it must be acknowledged that the hoped-for transfer during the 22nd Session did not succeed. Furthermore, it is plain that at least some important Members of the Asian and Pacific Region may have concerns about Australia's decision to change from WEOG to Group IV. It is clear that greater efforts must be taken by Australia to convince friendly countries in the Region of the mutual advantage that lies in Australia's coming fully to terms with its place in the world. Similarly, it is believed that Australia can contribute usefully, as it has been doing for some years in regional programs, as a full and wholehearted Member of the Asian and Pacific Group of Unesco countries. Successive Australian Governments have recognised that Australia's future for political, economic and cultural terms lies in its geographical region. It is to be hoped that the moves to Group IV will come to fruition at the next Session of the General Conference in 1985.
- . Venue for meetings. As disclosed in the Delegation report, it was decided that the next Session of the General Conference would take place in Sofia in Bulgaria. This was not a unanimous view and on the resolution for the change of venue from Paris to Sofia, Australia abstained. It is the view of the Delegation that it is generally

in Australia's interests, and in the interests of economy and efficiency in Unesco, for the General Conference to take place in Paris at Headquarters. The implications of changing venues go beyond Unesco and need to be very carefully considered in the context of all international agencies. Careful thought will need to be given before future meetings sessions of the General Conferences are held out of Headquarters. Those countries which, like Australia, have reservations about the growing tendency to so transfer the meetings, should take steps to ventilate that concern more effectively.

Knowledge in Australia. It is acknowledged by the Delegation, which spent many weeks examining the detail of Unesco's programs, that insufficient is done within Australia to inform the community concerning the positive work of Unesco. Publicity tends to be disjointed and to focus upon negative factors, such as the concerns that led up to the United States notice of withdrawal and Unesco's work on the New World Information Order (which is not unconnected). Because of the concern that the positive aspects may not be sufficiently known and publicised in Australia, the Minister has authorised consideration by the National Commission for Unesco of the ways in which that body could be reorganised. There is apparently a need to provide more information concerning the good works and practical contribution of Unesco in Australia. There is also a need to provide better links between the Permanent Delegation at Unesco and the numerous agencies and institutions throughout Australia that could share in Unesco's work. Such an interaction exists in many other countries. It is the hope of the Delegation that it can be improved in Australia.

OECD co-ordination. Some of the work of Australia in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in Paris, is relevant to Unesco concerns, particularly in the fields of education, science and informatics. It is the view of the Delegation that there is insufficient attention being paid to co-ordinating the Australian participation in these two bodies. Fortunately, at the level of the respective Ambassadors to OECD and Unesco, there is now a keen appreciation of the need to provide better co-ordination. As both institutions are in Paris, the opportunities for co-ordination should be maximised. In particular, Australia, as a Member of each organisation, could provide an informal bridge for similar programs of OECD and Unesco. This could help to make OECD more sensitive to the concerns of the developing world. But it could also help to minimise duplication of institutional effort, reduce institutional rivalries and provide to Unesco some of the work of high quality that is already done within OECD.

CONCLUSIONS : CHANGE FROM WITHIN

This brief note calls attention to the work of an important international agency whose purposes remain as valid today as they were in 1945 when the decision was made by the United Nations to establish Unesco. Indeed, the purposes are more important today because of the growing tensions in the world and the risks of conflict and hostility. Wars still do begin in the minds of people. It is therefore important to bring those minds together and to work positively in areas where experts can share knowledge and experience and see the advantages of co-operation. Although there are doubtless many things in Unesco that can be improved, its useful contribution to mankind and to Australia is undoubted. Although the frustrations that have led the United States of America and perhaps other countries to consider withdrawal are sometimes understandable, Unesco remains a true microcosm of the world as it is. In terms of international institutions, that world is a different one than the world in which United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and other countries established Unesco in 1945 and joined as founding Members in 1947. The fact remains the world of Unesco is the world we live in. Australia's role should be to stay firmly in the institution — a critic where it is seen to be inefficient, liberal or misguided. But an active participant at all times. If the brave idea of Unesco fails, the world will be a more dangerous place.

M D Kirby

26 March 1984