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OVERSEAS SERVICE BUREAU  
AUSTRALIAN VOLUNTEERS ABROAD  
DINNER, MELBOURNE, 10 OCTOBER 1997  
BEING AUSTRALIAN - MAKING A DIFFERENCE

The Hon Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG

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AVA's - MAKING A DIFFERENCE

I want to talk about making a difference. Making a difference to our country and to the world. That is what Australian Volunteers Abroad do. It is what they have been doing for thirty years.

The idea was conceived in the aftermath of the Colombo Plan. As the dawn of the post-colonial world became clearer to us, Australians began to face what we then saw as the great "problem" of our geography: a transplanted European community in the wrong part of the world. Our government

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\* Justice of the High Court of Australia. President of the International Commission of Jurists.

began giving aid. Our universities invited the students and educated them for the positions of leadership they now hold in neighbouring countries. And the Overseas Service Bureau (OSB) was established with its unique Australian Volunteer Abroad (AVA) programme as its principal activity.

The AVA programme has contributed enormously to Australia's changed relationship with its neighbours - and by that I mean with Southern Africa as well as Asia and the Pacific. Setting up the AVA programme required a long-term vision. The people who did it are national treasures. They join the pantheon of the many unsung heroes whom Australia neglects.

There have been more than four thousand returned volunteers. But to that number must be added the families and friends whose lives have been illuminated by the experience. This has been an important human face - an Australian face - for Australia's international aid. This is the means by which leaders and ordinary citizens in neighbouring countries have received a tangible idea of what Australia is like. What to be an Australian is like. What the values and attitudes of our much blessed country involve. The AVA programme, by adding the human element, has complemented the official aid programme. It has given it an extra dimension.

We live in a time when, in matters of overseas aid and everything else, economics is all. In our monarchy, the economists reign - absolutely. Achievement is too often equated

with economic gain. Insufficient account is taken of the long-term social impact of human contacts. Whenever I go to Malaysia and Singapore (and meet old friends now in government or the judiciary who studied in Australia when I was studying), I know that the link with them and its dividends in friendship to Australia, cannot be measured solely in economic terms. So it is with Australian Volunteers Abroad. They leave and constantly renew friendships in the countries of their service. But when they return to Australia, they bring back enlightenment and new perspectives which enrich our country that, like all islands, is given to insularity of outlook. Returned volunteers of the AVA programme are now engaged in many fields of endeavour in Australia. They are leaders in education, health, business and in the professions. Their experience has helped to lift the scales of ignorance which once clouded Australian perceptions of Asia, the Pacific and Africa.

The AVA programme is one of the most respected national volunteer programmes in the world today. Its success can be seen in terms of the partnership between a body built on community and individual enthusiasm and successive governments which, sometimes reluctantly, but with a steady forward motion, has come to understand that our geography is not our problem. It is our opportunity. And our destiny.

EVERY VOLUNTEER CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

I did not have the marvellous advantage of participating in the Australian Volunteer Abroad programme. Yet I feel that I know quite a lot about it. As a Patron I have been closely concerned about it. In my own way, I have tried to be an Australian Volunteer Abroad. All of us, when we go abroad, should remember that our country is judged by our attitudes. Generally speaking, I think Australia enjoys a good reputation abroad, although every one of us could certainly mention horrible exceptions. The President of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, told a graduation ceremony at his *alma mater*, Sydney University, on 30 September<sup>1</sup>:

"The remarkable thing is that as I travel around the world, I am received as an Australian, everywhere, and, as an Australian, people regard you as being fair, being straightforward. Not being lumbered with being an American or being British or being Dutch or being anything else. Australians have a remarkable, unique position. People like Australians. People care about Australians."

I agree with this. Wolfensohn's experience has paralleled my own in the thirty years of my peregrinations. The first of them, back in the early 1970s, involved travel in a Kombi van over two

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1 J Wolfensohn, "Do We Have the Courage to Grab our Chance in Asia?", Opinion (extract from an address at the University of Sydney), *The Australian*, 30 September 1997 at 15.

periods, each of a year, up the spine of Malaya, into Thailand, around the Indian subcontinent and across the great Asian plateau to Europe. This was at the time when the first AVA programmes were being realised. There has always been a tendency of young Australians to want to go beyond their own comparatively quiet and stable country to the perils and excitement and challenges of life in more teeming societies.

In recent years, I have had my fair share of opportunities to volunteer and to serve, just like the AVAs:

- To help in Lesotho as that country moved to democracy. To chair the constitutional conference in Malawi, when the locals could not agree on a local chairman. To go for the ILO to South Africa, on the cusp of Nelson Mandela's election, to help with labour law reform.
- To serve in Solomon Islands as President of their Court of Appeal, joining the band of active and retired judges from Australia and New Zealand who travel throughout the Pacific, helping our neighbours to build and strengthen the rule of law which is a great blessing of our own country.
- Returning to India to lecture at the National Law School in Bangalore. Conducting a mission to Palau for the International Commission of Jurists. Participating in countless conferences throughout Asia on HIV/AIDS - trying to bring some of the reality and honesty that we have

learned, in Australia, is the best weapon to combat that frightful scourge on humanity. And serving for three years, before my appointment to the High Court, as Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations for Human Rights in Cambodia.

Like the AVAs, I knew through all of this work as a volunteer, what enormous privilege I had been afforded. To help shepherd countries in Africa to the democracy which we Australians take for granted when not so far away other nations were engaged in brutal war and genocide. To have the rewarding glances of the litigants in Honiara who just knew that I, an Australian judge, would be striving with all my might, to bring justice according to law to the resolution of their cases. To feel in Cambodia the trust and confidence of human rights workers and downtrodden people who had faith in the United Nations and confidence in this Australian who was trying to serve its noble cause.

You will therefore understand why I feel an empathy with the AVAs. I have been a kind of intermittent reliable old workhorse of an AVA. Like the AVAs I have served in Africa, the Pacific and Asia. And like them, I am convinced that my best years of voluntary service still lie ahead.

The latest issue of *Interaction*, the quarterly publication of OSB, is full of the stories of AVAs. A Melbourne doctor in Western Samoa. A film crew in Laos and Solomon Islands. Educational help in Zimbabwe. Health services in Mozambique.

Nursing in Vietnam. Naturally enough, the editorial on Cambodia's search for a civil society caught most of my attention<sup>2</sup>. Its reflection on the endless struggles of that much suffering country took my mind back to the wonderful Australians, most of them volunteers, whom I saw in Cambodia during my service as the UN Special Representative.

- The UN Volunteers who were working at the Centre for Human Rights in Phnom Penh - surveying the needs of the prison service and the education of prison guards in the basic human rights of prisoners.
- The worker for UNESCO who spent endless hours trying to train young journalists in the requirements of accurate reporting and fair comment, and the difference between fact and opinion in a society which was previously (and perhaps since) unused to free speech.
- A Catholic Sister of the Josephine Order working in a Buddhist ashram in Northern Cambodia teaching women that they had basic rights which they could assert even against the all-powerful village headman.

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2 Editorial, "Cambodia's search for a civil society" in Overseas Service Bureau, *Interaction*, August 1997 at 3.

- And the young Australian soldier training, ever so patiently, the mine clearers of the Royal Cambodian Army. Centimetre by centimetre the land is being cleared of the vicious mines which even now claim their terrible toll on playing children and workers in the fields.

I can tell you how proud I was, as an Australian, to see these marvellous people at work. This is the real work of human rights. Much more important than mere speeches of mine. This is the patient, unsung work of heroes and heroines that brings lasting, deep and indelible affection for Australia in a people thirsting for a concept of a society which is just, fair and governed by law. This is the work which AVAs perform to the great credit of Australia.

#### FOUR LESSONS IN SPRINGTIME

In a sense, I have said everything that I needed to say. But as a lawyer, I am always tempted to say more. I want to put the work of AVAs in the wider context of our country's relations with its neighbours, and particularly with the neighbours in Asia who, until recently, were seen as irrelevant to us or, worse, our threat, danger and problem.

Over the past few weeks I have observed (as doubtless many of you have) the continuing dialogue in Australia about our country's place in the world and its relationship with its

neighbours. Four items I wish to call to your attention. They are relevant to my present discourse:

- In late September<sup>3</sup> the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported about the drastic fall in Australia's investment in the Asian region over the past fifteen years. Despite the extraordinary economic growth of Asia in that time, and a distinct increase in our exports to that region, Australian investment in ASEAN countries actually fell from 46% of the total in 1980 to a mere 6% by 1995. In short, our capital outflow continues to run to Britain, the United States and New Zealand. A mere trickle finds its way to the region which we are constantly told offers us (like other investors) enormous potential and challenge. Australian trade officials in Asia were said to be shocked at this news, particularly because of the great boom going on in China and in the newly industrialising economies of Asia. The basic question which is raised as to whether Australians have the interest and imagination to become part of that steady boom. Of course, smart money searches out safe targets. Perhaps in the short run, our capital investments will be seen as prudent. But near withdrawal from our region looks like something else. Does this lack of

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3 "Australians may talk about Asia but we don't invest there, UN finds", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 September 1997 at 8.

entrepreneurship betoken a deeper malaise in our national attitude to Asia? Are our entrepreneurs smart or are they still wearing the leftover mental blinkers of the white Australia era?

- Some of these questions are also posed in an article by Professor Alan Patience in the current issue of *Quadrant*<sup>4</sup>. He tackles head-on the stereotypes about Asia that exist in many quarters in Australia, even today. He suggests that Australians should have the confidence and the courage to be themselves and to seize their opportunities in Asia. They are opportunities as a major resource supplier, as a supplier of professional and skilled labour, but above all as a political and social model. Our democratic institutions, however infuriating at times, remain solid and strong. So is our constitutionalism and separation of powers and regard for human rights and freedoms. The way we have built a still largely tolerant and economically successful multicultural society presents one example to Asia that Australians can be proud of. It surely has lessons for the militarism, racism, autocracy and xenophobia of certain parts of Asia. Professor Patience makes practical suggestions which include ideas that really build on the

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4 A Patience, "Why Asia Needs Australia", in *Quadrant*, Vol xli No 339 (September 1997) at 21.

experience of the AVAs. He urges that Australians should enmesh themselves in Asia by developing academic, artistic and media contacts and exchanges. A majority of tertiary students, he says, should be expected to spend a year in exchange programmes in Asian institutions of learning. Every major organisation, banks, media companies, hospitals and retailers should be working at exchanges of staff on a regular basis. All of this grows out of the conviction that links of this kind are good for Australia because, generally speaking, our neighbours like what they see in us.

- Then at the end of September a report<sup>5</sup> also appeared of the new book by Reg Little and Warren Reed, *The Tyranny of Fortune*<sup>6</sup>. This dynamic duo has been thinking and writing about Australia's relations with Asia for years. Everyone should read their earlier book, the *Confucian Renaissance*. This time their thesis is that Australia has lived too long dependant on natural resources. This has led to an under-valuation of human resources which we must quickly turn around if we are to seize the opportunity

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5 P Roberts, "Australia a victim of 'the tyranny of fortune'", *Australian Financial Review*, 26 September 1997 at 10.

6 R Little and W Reed, *The Tyranny of Fortune - Australia's Asian Destiny*, Business and Professional Publishing, 1997.

presented by our geography. Little and Reed conclude that Australians have "not provided an education in the talents, toils and street wisdom necessary to prosper in a global labour market where there are now hundreds of millions of minds bustling to seize all available opportunities". Until now, Australians have been obsessed with racial or military threats from the north. But the challenge of the future is economic and intellectual. Remaining ourselves, we must participate actively in our region. And that too is precisely what AVAs have been doing for thirty-five years.

- The fourth and final contribution is the one I have already mentioned. The speech by James Wolfensohn, the Australian graduate who now heads the World Bank. He laid it on the line, as Australians are wont to do. Australia, he said, is not an Asian nation. But it is next to Asia. It must engage in "a real sort of outreach in terms of Australian leadership". But Wolfensohn cautioned<sup>7</sup>:

"What troubles me is whether we really believe it - whether Australia really believes that it is [next to] Asia, whether it really believes that our future is linked with Asia."

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<sup>7</sup> Wolfensohn, above n 1. See also Editorial, "The worries of Wolfensohn", in *Australian Financial Review*, 30 September 1997.

The World Bank President dismissed contemptuously the notion that Australia could become an honest broker between the ever growing power of Asia, on the one hand, and the Western democracies of Europe and North America on the other. Putting it quite bluntly, he called that nonsense. The Asians need no broker. And we in Australia have to face the danger of becoming marginalised:

"Ten years ago there was only one country in Asia bigger than Australia in terms of GDP and that was Japan. In five years, it will be China, Indonesia, India: these countries are growing at 9% a year. We may grow at 3.5% a year."

And what is Wolfensohn's solution? What is the way in which he would suggest Australia should reach out to Asia drawing on its own unique strengths? Listen to him:

"What we have to do is show some caring ourselves. We don't just have to receive foreign students to study here. We should send students abroad. How wonderful it would be if we could send five thousand kids every year to Asia for two years as a sort of Australian outreach corps, to learn about Asia ... and it would change the fabric of society. What you cannot do is to lead without involvement. You have to get involved. And there is no chance for Australian leadership unless there's involvement, unless there's belief, unless there's a real desire to say we're going to change. We're strong enough and we're tough enough. And we're self-confident enough to be Australian and to be open to outside influences - then we can lead."

And this is not all he is saying. At the annual meeting of the World Bank and IMF, even more recently, he made the point

that reaching out is not simply to get part of the economic action. It is a moral and social imperative. Listen to Wolfensohn again<sup>8</sup>:

"We must recognise we are living with a time bomb [of poverty] and unless we take action now, it could explode in our children's faces."

This, in my estimate, is what Australian Volunteers Abroad have been doing for thirty-five years. For a remarkably modest national investment, they have been deeply involved in our country's future. They have been reaching out. They have been caring. They have tackled the fruits of poverty. They have been confident and open to our neighbours. They have been Australians abroad. As a nation we can be proud of them. We should continue to support them. They help interpret Australia to our neighbours. But, what is equally important, they help interpret our neighbours to ourselves. They have been the vanguard of Australia's effort to seize the unique opportunity which its geography thrusts upon it. Not a *problem*. A precious *chance* given to us by history which we must be bold and brave enough to grasp. Every one of us should be ready to serve as an Australian Volunteer Abroad. The rewards do not come in money or even tangible things. They come in glances and smiles

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<sup>8</sup> L Elliott, "World Bank warning of poverty time bomb", *Guardian Weekly*, October 1997 at 19.

and handshakes and respect, in friendship and in affection for Australia. In helping poorer brothers and sisters from the richness of Australia's experience.

As a citizen of a special country, I express to Australian Volunteers Abroad - a citizen's grateful thanks. Every Australian who can do so should become part of this involvement in our future. In microcosm, Australian Volunteers Abroad presents the example to our country which we should all follow. Three precious words to represent our country's future: Australia. Volunteering. Abroad.