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Of 'glocalisation' and the east west power game

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THE story goes that someone once observed, in the company of Robert Menzies, the longest-serving Prime Minister that Australia ever had (1939-41; 1949-66), that Perth was three hours behind Canberra.

"Oh, yeah," Menzies is said to have yawned, "three hours and 20 years ..."

Apocryphal? Perhaps. Trumped up by the snobbish triumvirate in the east as a put-down of their "country" cousins out west, maybe.

But you know what they say about a story. Repeat it enough and it assumes a veracity of its own.

Everyone down where I am - in Melbourne - when they hear I'm heading out west, wonder aloud why I'd want to jet 3,300km "and 100 years" back in time.

I put it to T. Puvirajasingam at the Sparrow (Indonesian) Restaurant in fashionable Northbridge, North Perth.

He laughs. Nonsense; he's lived in Perth for 17 years. Melbourne briefly, and seven years in Sydney before that. He's never felt like wanting to go live anywhere else.

Puvi, as I still insist on calling him, is an "old" colleague from the New Straits Times. He's a big-time influence pedlar out in the west these days. As foreign editor of the biggest-selling newspaper in town - The West Australian.

If you don't like The West, go without a paper.

It's the only daily newspaper in town. Or wait until Sunday, for the only other paper.

Calls himself P.T. Singam these days, Puvi. Mr Singam. Some things change. Others don't. Like Perth being "three hours and 20 years" behind.

No wonder why "the west" has never produced an Australian Prime Minister.

(Hang on, you hear the protests from "out west". "We" have John Curtin - Prime Minister in the War years, from 1941-45. Born in the eastern state of Victoria. Need the east say more?

Don't believe it? The "snobs in the east", I mean.

Well, listen to Richard Court, Premier of Western Australia:

"What we refer to as the Melbourne-Sydney-Canberra triangle is a fact of life.

Court's is a story that's not been told - anywhere.

Letter From Australia hardly ever "scoops" anybody. What we choose to write about, our peers don't seem to think worthy of their time.

This is one Letter that may be different. It's exclusive, we know.

Others who share the information, we know, don't see it the way we do. That's why it's a story that's never been told - anywhere.

It seems the Government of Richard Court thought it was about time those "ignorant and prejudiced" editors of newspapers in the east were brought out west to learn a thing or two about the west.

So a bunch of "senior journalists" from the east were flown out west - for a week's visit.

The first stop for the visiting journalists, we have learnt, is a breakfast briefing by Court. He breezes in, absent-mindedly plonking before him two texts.

It takes the practised eye of an espionage writer to pick the texts out.

London-based writer Philip Knightley is known for his Philby: KGB Master

Spy (1988).

"What is this you've brought in with you?" Knightly is said to have tentatively put the question to Court. Or words to that effect.

On the spine of one text are the words "The Case for Secession (1934)". On the cover of a 489-page monograph are the words "THE CASE OF THE PEOPLE OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA in support of their desire to withdraw from the Commonwealth of Australia established under the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act (Imperial), and that Western Australia be restored to its former status as a separate self-governing colony in the British Empire - 1934".

"There's a lot of talk about the republic and the like," Court said.

"I think that is a relatively small one compared to the effectiveness of (the Federation of Australia)."

He goes on: "We believe that the Federation has been severely weakened for many, many decades with the centralisation of more and more of the financial power in Canberra.

"There is - and you will hear this as you travel around the place - it's not just a distrust of Canberra.

"But when you produce 26 per cent of the country's export wealth, someone should be ringing us up every now and again to ask us how we're going."

But no. Nothing. Court is said to sound almost bitter.

Still, does that neglect add up to grounds for secession? Absolutely not, Court is emphatic, Letter is given to understand.

"Our Federation would operate much more efficiently if there was more autonomy in decision-making here (Western Australia)."

Official statistics have some telling figures. According to the Western Australia Year Book 1998, total state exports in 1996-97 of almost A\$80 billion (RM200 billion) had grown 2,395.6 per cent from the A\$3.2 billion exports of 1978-79.

Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show that between 1984-85 and 1996-97, gross state product in Western Australia grew 172.8 per cent from A\$19.9 billion to A\$54.4 billion.

The comparable aggregate (national) gross domestic product grew 134.7 per cent, from A\$217.1 billion to A\$509.7 billion.

"Our economy has been growing strongly, but we haven't been getting the growth revenue that comes from it," Court is quoted as saying.

"As our royalties (to the national coffers) grow, our (returns) are cut.

"For six years in a row now, we've had major cuts in our grants coming through."

No wonder he's exasperated: "People say that secession is always a popular issue in Western Australia, and it is."

The Court story (of 1999), by all accounts, was carried back to editors in the east. It just never saw the light of print.

Why? It appears Court's worst fears have been affirmed: Western Australia just does not register on eastern radar screens - the (eastern) politicians', and those of their media.

So what's this to you in Malaysia?

The letter to the editor from Johan Adam Wong of Petaling Jaya caught my eye the other day (NST May 17, 1999): "Social Darwinism alive and well in the West".

Johan in essence says no more than what the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, advances in his two-part series on globalisation (NST, May 7-8). Only in high-faluting words.

The thrust is in the subjugation of the weak(er), and the marginalisation of the voices of the weak by the entrenched power elite.

The Western Australian experience shows the universality of this power

relationship. It's the same power game anywhere in the world.

The East-West rhetoric in our part of the world just gives it a sharper edge.

Funny: in Australia it's the other way around - eastern subjugation of the west!

Oh, and as for the demonisation of globalisation, there are those academics who say: never fear.

They have coined a word for what they call the hybridisation of global culture - "glocalisation" - a melange of the global and the local.

Malaysians can be confident enough in their own culture projecting their (share of) values on the global stage.

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