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Binary logic and wayang view of the PM

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THERE is a school of political study that chides the binary logic of Western philosophy, describing it as characteristic dualisms, of paired opposites.

Thus, Western thought is criticised as being limited by social constructs of black and white, subject from object, male from female, left from right, and North from South.

There is no grey in between.

Within the Asia-Pacific region, criticism of Australia's neighbours inclines towards the other extreme. Straight-talking Australians cannot get their heads around the Javanese wayang - beating around the bush in shadow play, which gives more scope for grey.

So we have this argument between absolutism versus relativism, universal ideas of social conduct against claims to cultural-specific practice conditioned by history - dynamic practice not cast in stone.

At a point in Australian history characterised by Foreign Minister Alexander Downer when he launched the White Paper on foreign and trade policy two weeks ago, of a nation occupying a unique intersection of history, geography and culture, the tension between binary logic and the wayang illustrates a challenge for Australia and her neighbours to find common ground.

How different sections of the Australian public deal with this tension is reflected in the way the media reported the remarks of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Western double standards, which he made at the opening of the 13th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement in Kuala Lumpur.

It was the front-page lead in The Australian.

"Bali bomb victims just collateral," the head-line said. "Mahathir blames West for terror".

The Sydney Morning Herald had it as its second lead on page nine, with a photograph of Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf and Philippine President Gloria Arroyo standing beside a seated Dr Mahathir and Cuban leader Fidel Castro, the four in animated conversation.

"West bent on domination, says Mahathir", said the headline, as did the headline in the single-column report in Melbourne's The Age, also on page nine.

The two headlines reflected the emphasis of the reports filed by the correspondent shared by the two sister papers in the Fairfax stable.

However, Dr Mahathir's address at the summit did not rate a mention in the third newspaper in the stable, The Australian Financial Review.

The Australian radio and television took their cue from The Australian.

The different approaches the media have taken in their reporting of Dr Mahathir's remarks is a study in binary logic.

The concept of left and right does not resonate among Malaysians as a whole. Positions Malaysians take on issues are not seen in such light.

The Australian puts everything in neat boxes. Thus, one is left-wing or right-wing, Keynesian interventionist or free-market economic rationalist.

Otherwise you feel obliged to spell out what you are. Just as Prime Minister John Howard describes himself as an economic progressive and a social conservative.

So the media see themselves - or are seen - in such light.

In the Sydney-Melbourne-Canberra triangle of influence in Australian

national life, The Australian, SMH, The Age and the Financial Review represent the opinion leaders.

They are the "quality" broadsheets, even if the Financial Review comes in commuter-friendly tabloid size.

On the right is The Australian, quality flag bearer of the tabloid conglomerate News Ltd, owned by Rupert Murdoch.

The SMH stands right of centre, soft as it may be. The Age is instinctively left even as it feels duty-bound to present every side of a story. The Financial Review leans to the right by dint of its business constituency.

So it is that the readership (sales, circulation, ratings, advertisement dollars) determines what makes the headlines as much as the editors in the evening news conference.

On Dr Mahathir's remarks, The Australian would take the populist line.

Australians would take exception to any description of their 88 mums and dads, sons and daughters lost in Bali - and the 3,300 at the World Trade Centre - as "collateral" to the reaction of Palestinians and Muslims to Western hegemony.

Multicultural Australia would take issue with any suggestion that Howard's handling of the war against terrorism - however at odds with public opinion - is being waged along civilisational lines, and that it is anti-Islam.

Few would see any connection between Dr Mahathir's remarks, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund facts and figures.

US lobbyist Edward Gresser came to Melbourne sharing some of that information. Gresser, of the Progressive Policy Institute in Washington, worried that the Bush policy of signing a number of bilateral free-trade deals with countries around the world risked America isolating Muslim nations.

He said US tariffs were already high on goods from the Muslim world, and plans under way to remove trade barriers centred on non-Muslim regions.

"I'm really worried about the potential to push industry and jobs away from Muslim nations by failing to open up trade with them," he told The Age.

"In a lot of these countries, you've got a lot of young people going to the cities looking for work and they've got nothing to do. That's a dangerous situation."

Gresser is a director of the Progressive Policy Institute, a think-tank that advises the Democratic Party on trade issues.

Data on world imports, exports and foreign investment show the Muslim world losing ground.

"As a percentage of world imports, the western Muslim world accounted for seven per cent in 1980. By 2001, it had fallen to 3.2 per cent."

Muslim share of world exports at 13.5 per cent in 1980 had fallen to 4.6 per cent by 2001. The 4.8 per cent of global foreign investment that went to the Muslim world in 1985 had shrunk to 1.5 per cent by 2001.

Gresser said he hoped Congress would do a better job of looking at the economic consequences of bilateral free-trade agreements.

"A black-and-white world is uncomfortable in the face of facts. There is the exception.

"Why are the Iraqi civilians who will die in a US-led attack merely collateral, while those who died in the New York and Bali attacks victims?" one letter to The Age said about Dr Mahathir's remarks.

"I have never been a fan of (Dr Mahathir) but I respect the fact that he has the courage to stand up to the US and its allies and highlight this hypocrisy."