

02/11/2003

Dialogue to pick best of all worlds

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A BOOKSHOP is an unlikely place to undermine the euphoria of a Prime Minister riding the crest of a foreign policy wave. It wouldn't have been the intention, but it would have crossed the mind of some of those present at the launch in Melbourne of an academic tome on regionalism.

Strategic analyst Professor Desmond Ball was launching a book by international relations expert Professor Joseph Camilleri.

Regionalism in the New Asia-Pacific Order: The Political Economy of the Asia-Pacific Region, Volume II comes in the wake of an eventful two weeks that Prime Minister John Howard would like to believe vindicates the foreign policy of his conservative Liberal-National coalition Government.

For Howard's supporters, the events represent the coming of age on the international stage of a politician who had come into office seven years ago on his domestic credentials, largely looked upon as no more than a student of foreign policy.

There was the leaders' summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum in Bangkok (with the signing of a free trade agreement (FTA) with Thailand on the sidelines), the simultaneous visits to Canberra of US President George W. Bush and Chinese President Hu Jintao, and the completion on an upbeat note in Canberra of the fourth round of negotiations with US negotiators on an Australia-US FTA.

For Howard, the two weeks would add up to his claim that Australia's relationship with the US "has never been better ...but we've been able to do all that without making it difficult with our relationships with countries in Asia".

It's a "rebalancing act" of Australia's external relations that Howard had set course on, on his coming into office, but one that his detractors - among them Camilleri, and Australia's former top diplomat Richard Woolcott - would say Howard has overcorrected in favour of the US.

It goes against the fundamentals that Camilleri sets out in Regionalism, which places Australia's interest around the challenge and opportunities of Asean at the core of Asia-Pacific regionalism.

Against the challenge of the oft-misrepresented "clash of civilisations", Camilleri is persuaded by a dialogue of cultures as the basis for a regional organisation that would best serve Australia.

It is a challenge often distracted by the focus on personalities, as one commentator noted of Howard's performance at the Apec summit in Bangkok.

Mark Baker, Asia editor of The Age in Melbourne, takes the view that Howard played the man and dropped the ball to the detriment of Australia's longer-term interest, after Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad had left the scene.

At the core, Regionalism suggests that there is more in common than there are differences between Australia and its neighbours. Or ought to be, the way Camilleri would like to see society organised.

It's not evident at the book launch. By design or by force of habit of academicians, Ball's address and Camilleri's remarks in reply are couched in studied objectivity. Beneath the academic-speak are ideas subversive of simplistic notions of Western social organisation.

The underlying thesis in Camilleri's two-volume enterprise is in what he refers to as the "triadic connection between state, market and civil society".

That's putting it in terms that Western society, not least Australian,

might identify with.

Many of Australia's neighbours would recognise that as the whole-of-community approach on which their national life is founded.

Separation or connection between state, market and civil society goes to the heart of policy differences between Australia and its neighbours, at times giving rise to acrimonious exchange.

Western society is founded on the separation of church and state, and separation of the legislative, executive and judiciary. This informs, and is in turn reinforced by, a culture conditioned to a reflex of the binary logic of black and white distinctions.

Among Australia's neighbours, social delineations are a lot more blurred.

On this difference, suggestions of connection between state and nonstate stakeholders, as they have long applied among Australia's neighbours, have often been reflexively represented as corruption, nepotism and money politics to maintain the power of the ruling elite.

How does one reconcile the tensions between the benefits of separation and connection, picking the best of both worlds? How might Camilleri sell this idea to Australians sold on the idea of separation?

For Camilleri, professor of international relations at La Trobe University, the connection between state, market and civil society is evident at every level of human organisation: local, national, regional and global.

He acknowledges there are profound tensions between state, market and civil society.

"Ultimately the state and the market must operate in ways that respect human dignity and satisfy human needs," Camilleri tells the New Sunday Times.

He says that it is often thought that Western societies, Australia included, are highly democratic.

"The problem is that they are no-where near democratic enough. The idea of democracy has been corrupted to mean 'liberal individualism', which in practice reduces the human person to an atomised consumer in the marketplace.

"What we need in Australia, as elsewhere, is a new participatory ethic, whereby people in all their various groupings address the challenges of a rapidly changing world, and increasingly do so in the context of intercultural dialogue.

"This is the great opportunity facing Australia - to engage with Asia, its cultures, languages and religions. If this is to happen, the initiative cannot be left to the state or the market. Civil society has a crucial role to play."

Relations with Malaysia, viewed through the prism of attitude towards Dr Mahathir, would be an example.

Dr Mahathir's final day in office drew wide attention in the media. Camilleri counsels caution for Australia putting too much store by individuals.

"For some time, senior ministers in the Howard Government and supporters of the Government's position have sought comfort in the claim that criticism of Australian policies is somehow confined to Dr Mahathir - that his views are not representative of Asian sentiment more widely," says Camilleri.

"This is not a convincing account of Australia's relative isolation in the region. Despite lucrative trade agreements with China, and workable relationships with a number of Southeast Asian Governments over a range of practical issues, the fact remains that Australia has come to be seen by many as insufficiently attuned to the interests, priorities and

aspirations of Southeast Asian societies.

"Dr Mahathir's retirement will of itself do little to alter the way Australia is perceived in the region. It is for Australians to demonstrate in words and deeds that they have the will and the capacity to engage in an imaginative and constructive dialogue with their neighbours, and in particular with Malaysia and Indonesia."

Camilleri would like to see more of the intercultural, interreligious and multi-faith links that he has been so much a part of between Pax Christi, of which he is president, and the Malaysian-based International Movement for a Just World.