AUSTRALIANS & ASIA

As a general rule Australians know far too little about their neighbours in South East Asia. We know next to nothing of their past history, we understand little of their future hopes and aspirations because, in large measure, many of us have not bothered to find out what the problems of South East Asia are and what various Western type countries, including Australia, are trying to do to overcome it.

This apparent lack of interest begins pretty well at school age. I don’t know if things have altered very much since I left school, which was only twelve years ago, but I never learned one word of Asian history, we were taught about early British history, the British Empire and the tempestuous Lord Palmerston who conducted and won a short quick war against China. A little later we were taught of the Boxer Rebellion, but we are told of these things from an entirely English point of view, I am quite certain that children in Asian schools being taught of the same incidents would not realise that their history books were describing the same events.

Australia, of all western countries, should try to look at the problems of Asia and its people from the point of view of an Asian because, if our customs, our manners and our skins are western our geographic position is Asian and this makes us Asians because, quite certainly, our fate is ultimately bound up with events in this part of the world.

Since the war a great deal has been done to try and overcome mistakes of the past. There is the Colombo plan, which has done a considerable amount of good, not only in helping to promote material well being, but also in promoting a feeling of goodwill. In addition to this, the United States has poured millions of dollars into various South East Asian countries to help them bolster their economies and to help them fight invidious and subversive threats of communism.
When Communism is mentioned Australians generally shrug their shoulders saying "oh, that's boloney, it would never happen here." But would we take the same attitude if every country between Darwin and Peking was under communist control? Western countries have spent an enormous amount of time, money and effort in trying to help these young South East Asian democracies in their fight against Communism. We are learning from the mistakes made in the past, but often the fight has not been as successful as it should have been because communist agents have been ruthless and unscrupulous. Russia, admittedly, at times has also had superior and better trained agents. For instance, every Russian employee and Embassy official and agent in these countries must speak the language of the country to which he is accredited. They go through years of intensive training, they learn the local customs, they learn what the local sensitivities are so that they will not unwittingly offend. It is sufficient to say that Western countries have not always been as thorough and as efficient.

Here is an example of the kind of thing which Western countries have to combat. A Western country donated a large number of agricultural tractors to a country in South East Asia, the local communists heard of the gift, announced to the locals that Russia would shortly be making a large gift of tractors to them. When the tractors arrived and before they were delivered some communist agent painted a hammer and sickle on every flat surface, the locals of course could not read the hard to see "made in some Western country" but they could understand the hammer and sickle. There was another instance, there was a famine in a country in South East Asia, a Western country quickly organised relief ships. Russian agents again heard of this and announced that shortly Russia would be relieving the famine with gifts of rice. As the rice was unloaded the bags were individually weighed and cleared through the Customs. As each bag was loaded on to a truck a man stepped forward and chalked a notice on the bag. Westerners who could not understand the local language thought it was a Customs clearance, in fact the sign read it was a "gift to the starving people of so and so from their friends in Russia."
Quite naturally again the local people thought that the gift came not from the West but from the communist powers. These two instances show all too clearly that it is no gentleman's game in South East Asia.

Australians should take a much greater interest in what is going on and in what the Western countries are doing to try to preserve democracy in these countries. Our fate is tied to the fate of what has been called the Far East of Asia, we should learn much more than we do of the problems and difficulties of the people of this area. One day our survival as a people may depend upon a sympathetic understanding of their problems and attitude.