

Initiatives of Change Conference:

"AUSTRALIA AS A NEIGHBOUR"

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Jim Coulter :

Was it Mark Twain who observed: "Love may be blind; but the neighbours ain't"? Anyway, not a bad way of summing up the theme of this conference.

This last year my wife, Rita, and I spent two periods in Fiji – a country we know well. Some twenty of those we worked with there are here today – perhaps you would care to stand up? The theme of the conference they ran in Suva last November was: "Can Fiji and the South Pacific Surprise the World?" Well that certainly happened – perhaps not quite as we envisaged.

When I told them in Suva that the next of these Pacific conferences would be here in Melbourne with the aim of making Australia the right sort of neighbour, I was challenged by the enthusiasm of the response. The implication was the "humble Australian" was a fairly rare species.

I was conscious that people knew we had not been good at neighbouring when we moved into a continent that had been inhabited for 60,000 years. There were a large number there from the Solomon Islands who remembered our practice of "blackbirding" - forcibly taking 1000s from their islands to labour in our canefields. And there was the deeply remembered stain of the White Australia Policy.

But sometimes our part in doing something about these "biggies" start in unexpected ways. My first encounter with God was about the same time that I volunteered to be a pilot in WW2. Prayer was a new thing to me but I had the thought: "If you find it more helpful to pray on your knees at home, that should also apply in the Air Force!"

I did not envisage that the first months of training for air crew would have us billeted in tents barely adequate for six but with seven crammed in. There were no beds, just sacks filled with straw. Each night as I knelt to pray it provoked a muscular miner from Kalgoorlie to swear loudly at me throughout. The man who slept between us used to pull the blanket over his face during these nightly confrontations.

Little did I envisage what happened 30 years later. Walking down a corridor in Parliament House, Canberra, a man waved to me – and when I drew nearer chided me for not remembering the face of a former tentmate. Perhaps I had an excuse, for it was the man who had pulled the blanket over his face each night. He proved to be Senator Bob Cotton, then Minister for Civil Aviation. We had a great catchup, but I laughed when he volunteered that he would help me if we ever needed a charter plane to help in the world outreach of MRA.

But it was not long after that he helped us engage in what proved to be a bit of pioneering neighbouring as Australians. We chartered a Qantas aircraft to attend the 25th anniversary of the MRA conference centre in Switzerland. We invited people from across the Pacific to join us, and then more from Malaysia, India and Iran. Some of the party went on to Ireland and at the height of the violence there, those from Papua New Guinea really made an impact when they told the Revd. Ian Paisley and others how they had renounced "pay back killings".

I was struck by the way neighbours from countries with simpler backgrounds can help those of us who have lost our bearings in a morass of sophistication. Similarly at the time of the original hostilities on Bougainville I remember Paul Lapun, later to be the Papua New Guinea Minister of Mines, saying to our Prime Minister John Gorton: "We feel God has put the copper into the ground, but we haven't found His way of getting it out yet and we would like your help to do it." And so he did!

Most of us have known discomfort, perhaps shame or even anger about some national policy we find morally repugnant. Such was the White Australia Policy. It became personal for me in the Philippines. I was living with a Filipino family and most nights I had dinner with the nephew they were putting through university. We had become good friends. Then one evening he asked me if I would mind spelling out in what particular ways I felt superior to him. It was as if I had a knife stuck in my ribs. But then he told me they had been studying the White Australia Policy at university and he felt that such a policy could only come out of a deep seated superiority.

MRA and others campaigned to have the policy repealed. We put it to those in the Cabinet we knew that our immigration policy should be based not on colour, but character. Years later Phillip Lynch, then Treasurer and Deputy Leader of the Parliamentary Liberal Party rang to tell me that the Cabinet had finally scrapped the White Australia Policy. When I commented that there was nothing in the media, he said they did not want to publicise it. I was vigorous in saying that it was the one thing most Asian countries knew about us. He told me later that the Cabinet meeting drafting an announcement acknowledging the change had been much more heated than the previous one actually scrapping the policy.

For me this confirmed a wartime hope that MRA could be used not only to bring changes to human nature but also to national policies. One morning, just before I was leaving Britain after 2½ years war service there, I woke with the thought that I was meant to resign my job on the West Australian in Perth to take up the challenge. I did not have any sense of this being particularly heroic, because I was conscious of the number of my friends who were not returning from the war.

A wartime meeting in London with Prime Minister Curtin, and then an apparently chance meeting with his successor Ben Chifley gave me a sense that I was meant to try to help politicians create statesmenlike policies. I told Ben Chifley of my wonderings, but confessed my fear. That leaving a well paid job I would be dependent on God's provision. "My touch with God is pretty flimsy; I don't really think I am the type", I told the P.M. I can see him now as he took the pipe out of his mouth, and with a warmth of eye, said: "If I were you, young fella, I would back your hunch and give it a go!"

I felt both of these men had really cared for me, and it made me wonder how many of us really cared for those at the "pointy end" of national policies. Nor is it our job to try to pick "winners". Harold Holt seemed a much less substantial figure following in the wake of Prime Minister Menzies' very long stint in the top job. Yet it was Harold Holt opening an MRA conference who was the first Australian P.M. to state that we were, and wanted to be part of Asia. It proved a turning point in our relationships with our neighbours.

Even in my lifetime we have come a long way in terms of being someone the neighbours feel at ease with. When we went to Britain during the war we were given a set piece lecture that we were to tell people there that we were "of 98.6% British heritage". Now people from 160

countries call Australia a home and those waves of so-called “boat people” have produced children who top our academic marks.

Often it is not our so-called leaders who set the pace of change. And thinking of our Aboriginal friends, the 300,000 from all backgrounds who unitedly marched across Sydney's Harbour Bridge and similar throngs across the land spoke for the millions who do not recoil from the word: “Sorry!”

And could we be better neighbours to all those in the Pacific? Our government has deplored the coup in Fiji, but had we cared consistently would things have been different? Over the years New Zealand has had a heart-to-heart relationship with the nations of the Pacific. If we had humbly sought their help perhaps together we could have spelt out plainly the moral changes necessary for our full support. It may have got traction on key issues such as exposing those who were behind previous coups and tackling corruption at the highest level if we had been honest about our own flaws.

We have proclaimed we will decide who sets foot on our country. Perhaps we have to move on to the realisation that it is God's country – and we neither discovered it nor do we own it. Perhaps we need the wisdom of the original inhabitants and our neighbours to know how best to use our bounty for the good of all.

Finally, I am especially conscious of six young people who at this time are trying to decide how best to use their lives. To them, and for all of us, John Newton's words point the way:

*You are coming to a King
Great petitions with you bring
For His grace and power are such
None can ever ask too much.*

Jim Coulter is a World War II pilot and a journalist. After the war he followed a calling to help “win the peace” by working full-time with Moral Re-Armament / Initiatives of Change. He pioneered many of MRA/IofC's initiatives in Australia, often at the political level. He is the author of a memoir: *Met along the way...in war and peace.* (Grosvenor 2003).