4. THE SEED OF FREEDOM

'Hungry people are dangerous people', exclaimed the Melbourne correspondent for the *Eastern World* journal, 'the East keeps clamouring for rice and more rice and the bullock cart and the wooden plough are poor instruments in breaking up virgin land quickly enough to supply the need — only the bulldozer and the tractor plough can hope to win in this race for food'.[1] The remedy for socio-political instability in Asia seemed profoundly simple: if the people were hungry and restive then feed them, or at least provide the technology for them to do so themselves. 'The key to the political problem of South–East Asia is food', said Kim Beazley (Snr) during a parliamentary debate.[2] But how could an aid program such as the Colombo Plan remedy a problem of such magnitude? And what exactly was Australia's obligation to the starving millions to the north?

Humanitarian duty to poor Asians was a relatively minor feature of Spender's effort to garner support for the Colombo Plan. His preoccupation with geo-political security meant that, if anything, he deflected suggestions that charity formed the basis of Australia's aid program. The provision of aid, he said in parliament, is 'not a policy of mere humanitarianism; it is also a policy of serious self-interest'.[3] Striking a harder line, Department of External Affairs officials did not consider 'appalling poverty … sufficient grounds for a government program'.[4]

The earlier concern with establishing the Colombo Plan and attracting the interest of the United States also precluded any serious political analysis. Only after the program had been in operation for a year did the DEA begin to appraise the various objectives Australia's foreign aid program was to achieve. Working in secret, DEA officials determined basic policy objectives that were animated by a deep unease about living beside a region they saw as poverty-stricken, unstable, vulnerable to communist takeover, and lacking the steadying hand of colonial rule. Through the Colombo Plan, they aimed to influence Asia's economic and political future and secure Australia's place in the region.

By 1950, the idea that aid would buttress South–East Asia against communist ideology thus strengthening the 'spine of resistance from Delhi to Djakarta', as one parliamentarian put it, was already widely publicised by the Australian media.[5] In the minds of DEA policy-makers, this was the Colombo Plan's fundamental *raison d'être*. The aid program, they wrote:

> *may be justified as a counter to communism in fairly simple terms. On the assumption that low living standards — or even more so, declining living standards — provide communism's most*

> *fertile ground, effective action to raise living standards or at least prevent present standards from falling, will weaken the appeal which communist agitators are able to make.*

Equal to these anti-communist ambitions was a more secretive agenda to use aid to 'modify any resentment arising from differences between Australian and Asian living standards' and 'strengthen or develop amicable political relations' by using economic and social instruments to assert political and cultural pressure on Asian people and their leaders. Specifically, aid should 'not interfere with the established governments or existing constitutions or political institutions and procedures', and while there was 'a tacit understanding that no assistance will be given to communist governments', potential aid recipients have been 'encouraged to believe that they need no political qualification for assistance'. Furthermore, the DEA, like most people at the time, felt uneasy about the existence of great poverty next to great wealth. In a politically unstable climate, they believed that the 'proximity between Australia, with its high living standards, and Asia, with its extreme poverty, easily arouses resentment'. Economic aid was one way in which Australia could make a gesture towards Asia and take the 'edge off Asian resentment'. In order to achieve these covert objectives while maintaining the Colombo Plan as a symbol of non-political union between Asia and the West, a public image distinct from private understandings became essential. 'In any public discussion', Tange recommended, 'it is desirable to avoid any reference to the political and strategic objectives of the plan, or at least to make references only in the most cautious terms'.[6]

A cohort of DEA staffers, however, expressed a moderate and less interventionist approach. W.T. Doig from the Economic and Technical Branch, which managed the

Colombo Plan, explained his views directly to Spender. Australians, he said, ignored the history and culture of Asia:

> *We understand them possibly as much as they understand us — only a little. The political objectives therefore of our policy should be not to secure complete and full understanding immediately or quickly; not to expect in return for economic and technical aid, an identity of viewpoint with our own on all current and international issues.*

Doig suggested that the Colombo Plan would better serve Australia's long-term regional interests if it played a more organic role by providing a framework for continuing relations, as opposed to the mere provision of assistance, which would facilitate further regional cooperation and develop 'greater understandings of attitudes, prejudices, fears, motives, customs, etc, between East and West'. Specifically, the Plan should not take a coercive approach but aim to 'convince Asian countries that we do not expect them to adopt our systems, our ways of life, our customs, or our religion, and that we are on their side against Soviet imperialism'.[7] Only later would the DEA incorporate Doig's idea into the Colombo Plan and, more broadly, into Australian foreign policy. In the early 1950s, the urgency of the international situation called for a more forthright approach.

However, the ability of Western aid to increase agricultural and industrial production and thus affect the political future of Asia was always questionable. Both the government and the DEA knew that the Colombo Plan's failure to deliver quantifiable change would contradict the basic principle on which the program rested. 'The ordinary Asian is likely to suffer considerable disillusionment, if he has heard about the plan, when he sees what little it

achieves, in terms of Asian needs, and how thin the chances are that it will bring about … real development and capital investment, as opposed to an occasional first aid operation'. The DEA advocated caution. If no tangible evidence of progress could be identified then 'emphasis on developmental aspects for propaganda purposes [was] likely therefore to return to plague the inventor'. Of course, simply establishing contact and providing financial aid did not guarantee a positive rapport with a recipient nation. Indeed, if the funds were misdirected or mismanaged, aid might have little impact or contribute to a deterioration of relations. By the same token, the domestic political arena of a recipient nation had to be examined closely. Contrary to public assurances, certain 'political qualifications' were required:

> *It would be logical to increase economic aid to those countries where the threat of communist disruption was especially acute. [However] without any control of the domestic policy of recipient governments, the benefit of any external aid could be completely offset if the recipient government's domestic policies were reactionary or unimaginative. Even though 'average' per capita income in the underdeveloped countries may be rising, with national income increasing at a greater rate than population, effective internal policies of income distribution are essential to ensure that the benefit is passed on to those sections of the population most susceptible to communist propaganda.*[8]

Goods entering Asian countries under the Colombo Plan certainly raised the prospect of securing longer-term commercial markets for Australian exports, but over the decade it became more important not to 'supply foodstuffs