



**DEBATE: Should West Papua be independent?
Melbourne University Debating Society v Monash Association of Debaters**

**SAMPARI FORUM FOR WEST PAPUA
ACU ART GALLERY, 26 Brunswick St, Fitzroy (Melbourne)**

Thursday 8 December 2016: 6-8pm

REFLECTIVE COMMENTARY, DR JONATHAN BENNEY

Thank you very much for your attention. I am going to spend a little bit of time talking about the debate that we saw. I'm going to focus a little bit on all of the techniques and structures and skills that make up a debate, and then I'm going to put my academic hat on and look at some of the issues of the debate.

I'm not here to say which side won the debate, or which was the best side, although we often do that when we are judging debates, but I don't want to do that tonight. But I do want to reiterate—I think it's important to do this personally and on behalf of our organization, that I echo what the negative team said, that regardless whether West Papua can or should be independent, we all should stand in solidarity with the identity culturally of West Papuans and the struggles that they've gone through and the harms that they've suffered at the hands of colonialists. I do want to stress that because I believe it's important to start with.

I want to start talking about debate. One very interesting thing is that over the past twenty or thirty years, debate has exploded in popularity across Asia. So in Singapore where I used to live, in Indonesia, right through to Papua, in authoritarian or post-authoritarian countries like China, Korea, or Malaysia, in every country that you can see on the map except for North Korea, has a debating program in which students and young people debate in English or in their own languages. That has been a tremendously interesting and important phenomenon across the whole of Asia, because it means that people in all different types of societies, under all different types of political systems, and from all different backgrounds can voice their views on what are very tough, very controversial, very sensitive, very difficult issues, and hear both sides in a complicated but fair way. So I think the growth of debate in Asia is a terrific phenomenon, and when the speakers from both sides head to the World University Debating Championships next month, they will see and quite possibly be beaten by universities from Asia. I think that's a wonderful phenomenon and it's one of the reasons I continue to be involved in debate.

The next thing to say is about this debate. When we look at debates we look at three things. One is what the speakers say, their content. The next thing is how they present their content in terms of how they speak, and gesture, and look at you, and those sorts of things. And the third thing is how well do they organize themselves both within their own speeches and as teams. I think that in this debate we saw lots of strengths in this regard. We saw many different styles of speakers. Each speaker got up and spoke differently but in very confident and very effective ways. There

was lots of information crammed into the debate, but it was expressed in a very interesting way and an engaging way. Both teams listened to each other and took into account opposing views, and I think as a debate it was a strong debate for those reasons.

So that's just my speech where I want to say that I think debate in general is terrific and very important. From Australia right up to North Asia, across the whole of Asia it's played a very important role, and will continue to do so. And thirdly I think the debaters performed very well tonight and I hope you enjoyed listening to it.

But I will talk about some of the issues in the debate, which addressed questions that apply not just to the question of West Papuan independence, but also to other nations, or potential nations, or cultural and ethnic groups, not just in Asia but across the world. So these are issues that we will see in all sorts of debates, and issues that are very important to be able to think about.

The first question that comes up in this debate is the idea of a unitary state. Is it more viable to have giant states? My expertise is in China, where there are separatist movements around the edges of China that you may not know about. There is the same situation in Indonesia. Arguably we could say it takes place in Australia, or Canada, or Brazil, or any of the other large unitary states that we have. And this brings up a big question. Is the unitary state politically and socially more viable than smaller independent states? And is it more ethical? Does it better facilitate things like human rights than the unitary states? We heard arguments from both teams on this issue tonight.

And then there's another question, because we have these big unitary states because of our colonial legacy. How do we deal with the harms of this post-colonial legacy? What is the best way of responding to these harms? And how do nations, whether they are unitary nations, or the global community, or individuals or smaller groups, how do they engage with these harms?

The proposal was, as we heard from the very first speaker, that one of the ways of responding to the colonial harms visited on West Papua was to become an independent nation, and that was the best way of doing it. But it does provoke an interesting question. Will West Papua, can West Papua erase these harms, or deal with these harms, or limit these harms by becoming independent? Will West Papua be sufficiently united to achieve its aim of freedom if it's independent? Does West Papua actually need to be a state to achieve its aims of autonomy? These are some of the questions that the negative team brought up. What about the ethnicity of West Papua? Is West Papua ethnically coherent enough to become an independent nation, and does that even matter? Does it matter towards West Papua's independence if it is ethnically diverse? Or will it be harmful to West Papua, if as the negative team suggested, the legacy of transmigration remains there. Will West Papua develop a sufficient cultural and national identity that will help it move forward as an independent nation? Or is it a complex diverse nation, where we should just group everybody together as being, say, of a Melanesian culture, when in

fact there are many different tribes in different locations. These are all questions that we can't answer but are crucial to ideas about geo-politics.

The second issue is principles versus practicalities. From the affirmative side, we heard broad principles: freedom, sovereignty, self-determination, connection with the land. It was very powerful, I'm sure you'll agree, when the affirmative team brought up these notions of freedom. We want West Papua to be free. That is something that appeals to us emotionally, and in some ways philosophically.

The negative team didn't disagree with these principles, but they began to talk about how they could actually be facilitated. Would West Papua be politically and economically successful? The affirmative team told us that there were practically enough resources, both in terms of natural resources like the mineral wealth and human resources like the potential government to make West Papua independent. But then the negative team pointed out many small problems. I don't think there was one single problem that the negative team brought up that on its own meant West Papua couldn't be independent. But if we took all of those small problems together, perhaps they call the idea of West Papua independence into question.

The third issue is, where would West Papua fit into the global world? It was an assumption of the negative side that global recognition of West Papua was crucially important to its sovereignty. There are examples that support that in our global world and there are examples that don't. If we look at Taiwan, for example, where I am going to spend some of my time next year, it is a nation with very little international recognition, but a high level of political and geographic coherence and a great deal of sovereignty. Does recognition matter all that much? How can we tell? How would West Papua fit into the global and regional network? Should we consider West Papua part of Asia, Melanesia, Pacific, or a global community which isn't linked by geographic regions at all? It was very difficult for either side to explain how West Papua would fit into the geo-political scene.

And that brings me to the fourth issue, which is, if West Papua did become independent, what would the consequences be? How would people react and how do we know how people would react? Both sides have to look into a crystal ball here. They have to be able to say, on the affirmative side, that everything is ready to go, West Papua is rich in natural resources and rich in human resources, and it's a coherent nation, and on the whole everything will be fine. And there was lots of evidence provided for that, and in some ways that evidence was very plausible.

The negative team looked into the crystal ball, and said the future will be very different. There will be a violent protracted conflict. Indonesia would react negatively and it would be very harmful to West Papua. That was a question where I wondered ... well there are a few things that I could say about this in terms of argumentation on the negative side, but I will speak very briefly about it. We know that Indonesia would react, but as for how Indonesia would react, and as for the form that the reaction would take, that's where the argument becomes very speculative

and unclear. And I think that while the negative side provided lots of information, I don't think I left the debate feeling absolutely sure that I knew that that would happen.

And then there was a question of would an alternative be better. Could there be some kind of intermediate path to independence that might include greater sovereignty and greater autonomy? The negative team suggested things were changing in Indonesia, and that West Papua was likely to get greater autonomy. The problem is that if we accept what the negative team said was true, it would suggest that the risk of violent was lessened, and that it might be easier for West Papua to become independent in the first place. So that argument is not necessarily water tight. But then there's the question of how the global community would react. Would anybody defend West Papua if there was war? How do we know, and how can we tell? We had conflicting evidence from both sides on this issue, and I think it's an issue that is very difficult to adjudicate.

So these are four issues: What's the role of the unitary state? Are principles more important than practicalities? How do nations in our global world fit together? How important is sovereignty? And what happens, and how do we predict what happens after a nation declares independence? These are all crucial geo-political questions. These are all questions that we could apply to Tibet, Jinjian, or Crimea, or Taiwan, or other parts of Indonesia... the list is almost infinite.

What I'd like to do now is handover to people who really do know about West Papua. And I don't say that to criticize the debaters. But I think thanks to Louise and the West Papuan community, they've actually learnt a lot about West Papua, and I'm very impressed with that. And I can't claim to be an expert on West Papua either. What I'd like to do is invite questions from the audience to our expert panel. And the questions can include things that were in the debate or other questions about West Papua. If you'd like to direct them to specific people we have Jacob Rumbiak and Isaac Morin, and Bishop Deakin and Lance Collins. I for one would be very happy to hear their opinions. And I invite the debaters to ask questions as well.