



**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)**

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Audience, the West Papuan struggle for independence has been a long and arduous one, with many people being imprisoned, tortured and even killed in the process. Despite this the West Papuans have continued fighting for independence. Why? Because they believe that freedom is something that is worth fighting for. And that is something we are very proud to stand behind.

I'm going to be doing four things in this speech. Firstly, providing a bit of the historical backdrop. Secondly, explaining what we see as the path to independence. Thirdly, explaining why West Papua deserves independence. And finally explaining the practical benefits thereof.

So beginning with the historical context. Prior to Dutch colonisation, West Papua was a traditional tribal society for the most part. With Dutch colonisation came the inculcation of Christian values through missionaries.

In World War 2 we saw that West Papua was a vital battleground in the Pacific for the Allies, and after World War 2 there was a movement towards independence under the Dutch, but this was opposed by Indonesia who wanted to claim sovereignty of this territory after itself having recently been freed of Dutch colonialism. Their efforts were supported by the United States at the United Nations—given the wealth of resources that existed in West Papua. So transitional power was then given to Indonesia which was then ratified by the Act of Free Choice in 1969.

Since then West Papua has been governed by Indonesia, and has been partitioned into two sections. For a period a special autonomy zone was tested, but failed due to poor implementation. And in terms of movements towards independence, there have been some in the form of the Forum Reconsiliasi Rakyat Irian, and the Presidium, and more recently by the Federal Republic of West Papua, National Parliament of West Papua, and West Papua National Coalition for Liberation, as represented by the United Liberation Movement for West Papua. We see that they have made some movements towards the path to nationhood, including a declaration as a state, and they have received some international recognition from the Pacific Island Forum and also from the Melanesian Spearhead Group.

Now what we propose is a continuation of this non-violent non-confrontational approach to political change embodying traditional Papuan values of not necessarily being in direct opposition, and also Christian values. We see this approach being effective in other instances, such as Mahatma Ghandi's movement in India. What we support specifically are things grass-

roots activism, a push for greater international recognition by bodies such as ASEAN and the UN Decolonisation Committee, renegotiation of resource contracts with United States companies, and eventually a peaceful transition of power to the West Papuan people under a West Papuan government.

Now in terms of principle reasons why, we think there are two justifications for West Papua being free. Firstly the process of acquisition of sovereignty, and also the acquisition of rights over minerals was flawed. So with regard to the Act of Free Choice I referred to earlier. The time is actually rather ironic, as has been posited by many academics, in that firstly it wasn't a representative sample. Only one-thousand of the approximately 700,000 West Papuans at the time were invited to participate. And these one-thousand West Papuans were then coerced into saying 'yes'.

Secondly with regard to the resource contracts, we think there are three points to be made. It occurred before the Act of Free Choice, which means that they were giving away property that didn't belong to them. We think there was an asymmetry of bargaining power in that the state at the time had only recently come out of colonialism itself—as exemplified by the split of profits with 90% going offshore, 9% to Indonesia, and 1% to West Papuans, little of which actually trickles down. And finally there have been numerous changes of government so that it is not necessarily true that this should be binding on the present government given the political turbulence in the meanwhile.

But we think that another perhaps more compelling reason is the injustices suffered by the West Papuan people. So at the hands of Indonesia the civil rights abuses that have occurred have attracted international condemnation. As stated already, people are imprisoned, tortured and killed in efforts to suppress political dissent. We think that has also been an exploitation of the resources located in West Papua. And things that are expected of say the United States that derived benefits during World War Two in that many West Papuans fought and died on behalf of the Allies. We think that they have indirect responsibility for the human rights abuses that have occurred under the Indonesian regime in that they facilitated Indonesian control by supporting its resolution at the UN. And they also fought a proxy war during the Cold War era by giving them a mandate to fight communism, which was then usurped and used to further suppress political dissent. Finally we think they exploit the resources in the area through a foreign directed company.

As such, we think that the West Papuans having suffered so much are entitled to a right to self-determination. This is well enshrined in international law, including in the 'Declaration of the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples' and the 'Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous peoples'. It is also consistent with the developmental paths of both Indonesia and the United States, in that Indonesia having come out from colonialism under the Dutch, its constitution says 'independence is the inalienable right of all nations and therefore all colonialism must be abolished'. We see it as being a modern-day form as colonialism.

Moving onto the practical benefits. We see the key stake-holder being the people of West Papua, and we think that as a general rule self-determination is going to benefit the country, in that it's government by the people for the people, where they are more likely to act in the best interests of the people on the ground, as opposed to a situation of moral hazard, where they are not directly affected, or worse the situation of exploitation where you are able to benefit by exploiting the people of West Papua, which is what we believe is occurring under the status quo.

So politically we think that the West Papuan people currently have a limited political voice. Whereas under our model we think that greater international recognition would bring with it a platform to advocate for their interests.

But in terms of human rights. It is actually quite hard to get information about what's occurring in West Papua as the Indonesian Government has suppressed the media, has kicked out missionaries, and prevented UN fact-finding missions from entering West Papua. Under these conditions we think it is probably fair to say it is because the information wouldn't be favourable to them. What we think is that greater international recognition would make it harder to kick the media out, and the media could serve as a source of accountability. But we also believe that the incentive for oppression under the status quo and the abuse of human rights is to prevent West Papua becoming a separate state. Once that occurs the incentive will no longer exist.

Demographically we have some things to say in that West Papuans are ethnically and culturally distinct being predominately Melanesian and have Christianity as their main form of religion in addition to some traditional tribal beliefs. Whereas Indonesians are majority Asian and Muslim. Now what we see is there has been a huge decrease in the proportion of Melanesians, due to both deaths and migration and an agenda of Islamization. We think that this Indonesian concept of a unitary state is unsustainable given the size of the population, and cultural differences within it. What we believe is that having control over its own borders would allow West Papua to prevent cultural erosion.

But finally we see there are some economic benefits under the status in that despite being one of the most resource-rich areas in the world, West Papua is the second poorest Indonesian district. This is because the wealth is being transferred overseas, so we think they would be better able to negotiate a more equitable distribution if they had their own sovereignty.

So in conclusion I would like to borrow the words of Lech Walesa who fought for workers rights in communist Poland. "We hold our heads high, despite the price we have paid because freedom is priceless."