

**REV'D DR GORDON PREECE, Debate-speech, Yarra Room, Melbourne Town Hall,
30 October 2022 (video-recording 00:11:32—00:21:06)**

Sarah Muyunga: Thank you Ms Goulding and good afternoon everybody. Revrend Doctor Gordan Preece is the first speaker to assert that Australia is providing enough assistance to West Papua. Reverend Preece is Senior Policy Officer of Catholic Social Services Victoria. He serves in the Anglican Diocese on the Social Responsibility Committee. He is the Director of the Ridley College and University of Divinity Centre for Applied Christian Ethics; and Director of the Evangelical Alliance Centre for Christianity and Society. Greetings to Reverend Preece.

Gordon Preece

Thak you for that welcome. And thank you everyone for coming here.

Is Australia doing enough to support West Papua? Well as facebook says, our relationship status of Australia, Indonesia, and West Papua is complicated. We are triangulated. Perhaps each member of that trio is triangulated in some ways. We are a middling Pacific power, with West Asian pretensions, and we don't want to be meddling in Melanesia seems to be the prevailing attitudes.

Arguing for the affirmative, my colleagues Ross and Chris and I will argue that we are now, with a new government, doing enough, for now; not the past, nor necessarily the future.

In terms of definitions, these are always contextual, but 'enough' and 'support' are comparative, not absolute terms. Yes, things should have been a lot better for West Papuans from an absolute human rights perspective. But modern human rights and democratic language originate in a political and an historic context, involving practical conflict, negotiation, and cooperation hopefully, and not just high ideals.

Politically, democracy is a numbers game, and Indonesia has the numbers; about ten times Australia's population. The West Papuans have been marginalised by waves of Indonesian transmigration, a government policy in the big archipelago and in the number of islands that constitute Indonesia.

People who are seeking land and prosperity and occupy at least sixty percent of the coastal cities, outnumber the West Papuans. The coastal cities are obviously, in just about all cases, are the critical ones in terms of communication, trade and defence.

And culturally and linguistically Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world, and culturally very different in terms of the Indonesian migrants who have come. But we should remember that there are shared Abrahamic roots between the Christian population—now minority Christian population but was almost overwhelmingly Christian population—and so there are still some hopes for peace and reconciliation in that sense of Abrahamic roots.

When we look at the current situation we realise that history moves and can't be easily undone. We can only make the best out of the mess in retrospect; perhaps the lesser evil. Engaging in negotiation with Indonesians and West Papuans. And despite the claim that we are only 67kms away, an important claim about the ethics of proximity, think of something like the Good Samaritan story which is about the ethics of proximity, not necessarily loving everyone, none of us finite beings can actually do that at any particular time the best that we can hope for is an approximate justice; some sort of approximation to what might be justice, particularly when we look back.

Time is of the essence regarding doing enough. Without an anachronism we can say that we didn't do enough at the time of the forced fake plebiscite that took place in 1969. This was not

tragic to use that over-used word which describes faith and inevitability (something that cannot be avoided), but a deliberate travesty of justice by Indonesia. The UN was complicit; it was one of the UN's greatest ever failures. But Australia wasn't necessarily a big player in that. We were one of the figures in the US amongst others pulling the strings in relationship to the cold War.

Fifty years later, to use the classic post-modern phrase, we've moved on. We didn't do enough then, but we have moved on now. Millions of Indonesians have been moved in terms of transmigration, and they've made their lives, and they've put down roots.

Our question is about: Is Australia doing enough *now* to support West Papuans? Present tense.

Our new government's first indications are promising. It's put a high priority on relationships with Indonesia. There's been an overdue visit by the Prime Minister. Penny Wong literally speaking their language for a whole speech. I presume she, being Chinese-Malay, had adapted from bahasa-Malay to bahasa-Indonesian. We also find that Chris Bowen has taken a diploma in Indonesian as well. And the first Cabinet Muslim Minister, Ed Husik, went to Jakarta as well for that visit.

It's important to remember how important the religious issue and the cultural issue is in relationship to the two peoples. We are not talking about a flat kind of shallow secularism. We are talking about deep multi-culturalism, which is inevitably religious just about anywhere in the global societies that we operate in.

Our often tear-and-repair relationship with Indonesia has been marked by controversy regardless of who has been in power. Asylum-seeker boats, spying, live cattle export bans, travel warnings, terrorist attacks, capital punishment for drug smugglers, and West Papua and East Timor issues as well. But we need to manage the inevitable differences and seek reconciliation. It is difficult but not impossible. Especially cultural and religious differences, complicated by colonial and indigenous and historical relations. Especially as the past is in many ways a foreign country as they say.

We need to learn that learning the language of our big regional brother is beneficial wherever possible. But wherever possible that growing dialogue, when it comes to the little brother West Papua—and I'm not meaning this in a patronising sense, but population-wise comparatively—needs to be a triologue, not just a dialogue, and that is devilishly hard without being triangulated.

I think the best thing that we can do is: if we can model indigenous relationships and reconciliation with our Voice from the Heart, and model what real dialogue is like, then that maybe the current government's best thing that they can do in providing a model for a very different situation but nonetheless an incredibly important situation.

We'll hear further from Ross via video particularly about the geo-political situation, and from Chris about economics and trade. Thank you.