

NEW ZEALAND'S UNEXPECTED OPENING TO ASIA:
JOHN REID AND THE MAKING OF THE COLOMBO PLAN,
1949-52

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Abstract

Post-war New Zealand was reluctant to follow Australia's activism on combatting communism in Asia through assistance to the ex-colonies. In early 1950 its government was cool towards what was at first known as the 'Spender Plan' for Asia, and refused to commit any money. Nevertheless John Reid, who led the party of NZ officials involved in preparing the agenda for the crucial Foreign Ministers' meeting in Sydney in May 1950, effectively allied with Asian delegates to rescue 'Technical Assistance' from an otherwise disastrous British-Australian conflict. Despite itself, New Zealand played a very constructive role in the emergence of the Colombo Plan.

Keywords: Colombo Plan; John Reid; New Zealand; Asia; Indonesia

My father, John Stanhope Reid (1901-85), used to say that he distrusted the publicity-seekers who made the headlines of state policy, and preferred to do his policy work by just knuckling down with the long hours to draft it. Only recently, in consulting the records to prepare a family memoir, have I realized what he meant. To my surprise, his committee work as an official involved in the construction of the Colombo Plan resulted in New Zealand becoming a pioneer in 1950 in providing training to Asians despite official opposition to the whole 'Australian' idea of this engagement with Asia.

A private lawyer in Lower Hutt, Reid had been brought gradually into the Government by Finance Minister Walter Nash following the Labour election victory of 1935, to help him draft the ambitious Labour programme of social welfare. This began in a part-time advisory role, in which Reid came to work "most mornings" in Walter Nash's Wellington office.¹ Nash encouraged him to apply for government vacancies when they occurred – as Assistant Law Draftsman in 1938, and Treasury Solicitor in 1942, becoming thereby a public servant fully occupied in drafting Nash's reformist schemes. Reid never lost the sense that it was in the detailed writing of policy that important changes were made. He had written the key policy documents regarding a universal pension in the Social Security Act of 1938, hailed by Keith

1 When defending himself against the charge of 'jobs-for-mates', Nash later told Parliament that Reid had received 300 pounds a year for this advisory work in 1936; *New Zealand Hansard*, 29 October 1945, p. 421.

Sinclair as “the first universal pension scheme in the world.... Possibly the most important single piece of legislation in New Zealand history.”²

Reid’s transformation to a pioneer diplomat was again Nash’s doing. In the absence of trusted high-profile figures with international experience, the overworked Finance Minister and Deputy Prime Minister had also become New Zealand’s first envoy to Washington in 1942. He took Reid along with him in on his second visit in late 1943 to staff the New Zealand Legation there (Embassy from 1948) in all kinds of roles. The major initial pretext was (as a Treasury official) to manage the ‘Lend-Lease’ relations governing wartime debt to the Americans, but in the absence of other staff he sat on numerous international committees and was *chargé d’affaires* in the frequent absences of Nash and his successor in 1944, Carl Berendsen. But this ‘outsider’ appointment was opposed by the first Head of the Department of External Affairs, Alister McIntosh, and was publicly attacked as ‘jobs for the boys’ in Parliament.³ McIntosh tolerated him reluctantly as Nash’s responsibility, and refused to accept him into his Department until a late 1944 crisis over whether the four children could join him. The often irascible Berendsen, who had begun in Washington with all of McIntosh’s resentment at Nash’s insertion into diplomacy, nevertheless declared that “after nearly five months experience Reid has been quite satisfactory to me and if ...you should decide that he is to remain I would have no objection to raise”.⁴ He later added that Reid was “very much better than I expected,” and Berendsen could not find “fault of any description” in his work.⁵

McIntosh was then obliged to accept Reid as a career diplomat, and to make him one of the Department’s three Assistant Secretaries on his return to Wellington in 1949, with responsibility for Asia and economic issues. Nevertheless his irritation shows in the later record at this outsider, older and in some areas more experienced than himself, who had also in 1948 provoked a conflict about the remuneration appropriate for this seniority. John Reid’s habit of avoiding clashes over high policy must have been strengthened by his awareness of being a tolerated outsider, not as trusted as McIntosh’s own star protégés, George Laking and Frank Corner, nor of course his mentor Berendsen. He remained a pre-eminent ‘doer’ who implemented his ideas through the committee work.

2 Keith Sinclair, *Walter Nash* (Auckland: University Press/Oxford University Press, 1976), pp.165-6. Reid’s critical role in formulating the scheme is acknowledged by Sinclair and by Elizabeth Hansen, *The Politics of Social Security: The 1938 Act and some later developments* (Auckland University Press, 1980), pp. 55, 114-15.

3 A second debate (after one in March 1944 in Nash’s absence), where Nash defended Reid’s appointment vigorously against the critique of the ex-public servant member for Masterton, Garnet Mackley, is in *Hansard* of the 27th New Zealand Parliament for 29 August 1945, pp.404-423. For McIntosh’s opposition, see McIntosh to Reid 28 Nov 1944, in ‘J.S.Reid correspondence’ file of McIntosh Papers, Turnbull Library MS-Papers-6759-332.

4 Berendsen to McIntosh, 20 Nov. 1944, cable, McIntosh papers, 6759-332.

5 Berendsen to McIntosh, 16 December 1944, in McIntosh papers. I owe this reference, with gratitude, to Ian McGibbon.



Figure 1: Carl Berendsen and his wife (right) arrive at Washington airport, July 1944. To left are Sir Owen and Lady Dixon (Australian Ambassador 1942-4). J.S Reid centre, between Berendsen and South African chargé d'affaires, Jourdain. (AR)

Reid had never travelled further than Australia before the appointment to Washington, and got to know his first Asian friends by representing New Zealand on the UN Trusteeship Council in 1947-8. There he was again a stickler for using the drafting process to achieve a positive and consensual result. In 1948 he had made headlines by casting New Zealand's vote with that of USSR against a messy non-agreement resolution that effectively left Britain's bland defence of its stewardship of Tanganyika unchallenged.⁶ In those early, *ad hoc* days of New Zealand diplomacy, when cables were considered expensive, this type of policy could be effectively made by the man on the spot. When a couple of months later McIntosh himself was in Paris for the General Assembly and acted "as a poor substitute for John Reid" on the Trusteeship Council, he seemed surprised but not displeased to find that "we have fallen out with the other Administering Powers by refusing to follow them on the narrow paths of...self-righteous legality...The Americans are particularly angry that we should be appearing to lead on the score of liberality".⁷

6 *New York Times* 4 August 1948. *Canberra Times*, 5 August 1948. The full record is in United Nations, Official Records, *Trusteeship Council, Plenary Meetings, 26 March 1947 to 1948*, pp. 494-532.

7 McIntosh to Berendsen 19 Nov. 1948, in Ian McGibbon, ed., *Undiplomatic Dialogue: Letters between Carl Berendson and Alister McIntosh, 1943-52* (Auckland University Press, 1993), p.165.

Born into a Petone working-class family, Reid shared with Nash and other Labour supporters of his generation a kind of Christian socialism and a belief in a fair go for the poor and the voiceless. Like many nurtured in church bible classes, the Student Christian Movement and the YMCA, he instinctively sympathised with the newly independent countries of Asia trying to make their voices heard in the councils of the world. Even though there were fewer such people in Holland's National Government after 1949 than in Peter Fraser's Labour one, he was able to make a difference.

New Zealand's reluctant first steps in Asia

John Reid returned to Wellington in 1949 at a time of great change. India, Pakistan, Ceylon (later Sri Lanka), Burma (later Myanmar), Indonesia and the Philippines had all become independent in the period 1946-50, generally supported by the Labour Governments in Australia and New Zealand, both very active in championing the rights of these poorer new U.N. members. But in 1948 the USSR adopted a more aggressive stance towards its 'bourgeois' former allies, while in 1949 Mao's communists took over Mainland China, though the China permanent seat on the UN Security Council remained in the hands of Chiang Kai-Shek's defeated KMT in Taiwan, thanks to the US veto on any change. A turn to conservative governments in Australia and New Zealand, as later in Britain (1951), accompanied the global shift from post-war idealism about a new more equal world to the polarised mentality of the Cold War.

At home, the Labour Party was defeated at the 1949 election by Sid Holland's National Party. John Reid's links with Walter Nash, who took over the Labour leadership on Peter Fraser's death in 1950, might have been even more a liability with Holland and his Foreign Minister Frederick Doidge, had they not been mightily impressed with Reid's skill (or luck) in arranging a half-hour meeting for them as opposition leaders with the new President Truman in Washington in May 1945.⁸ McIntosh probably allocated Asia to Reid's area of responsibility on his return because he felt it of less importance to New Zealand (see below) than the areas covered by Deputy Secretary Foss Shanahan (defence coordination), and the other Assistant Secretaries JV Wilson (UN and Europe) and George Laking (administration), all closer to McIntosh than Reid.⁹

McIntosh, along with most New Zealand leadership and public opinion, appeared sceptical about the newly independent countries, and especially of Australia's wooing of them for fear of Soviet influence. As John Reid put it in a later memoir, "New Zealand still had not realized that we are no longer an offshore island of Europe but closer to Asia."¹⁰ New Zealand had parted company with Australia in 1942, when the Australian Prime Minister Curtin pulled Australian troops out of the Mediterranean

8 McIntosh to Reid 3 Nov 1945, in McIntosh Papers, Turnbull Library MS-Papers-6759-332.

9 When Shanahan was moved out as Deputy Secretary in 1955, McIntosh revealed to Laking, "It is bad enough having John [Reid] as Assistant without having him as Deputy;" McIntosh to Laking, 29 June 1955, ATL, MS-Papers-6759-294. (I am grateful to Ian McGibbon for this reference).

10 John Stanhope Reid, *Autobiographical Notes* (Typescript, c.1980, copies of which are in the Turnbull Library and elsewhere), p.35. Henceforth abbreviated as *JSRAN*.

theatre to take a more robust role with the US fighting Japan in the Pacific. When invited to Canberra to share in Australian discussions about Southeast Asia with the relevant British official, "Mr McIntosh made it clear that the New Zealand Government was reluctant to enter into any commitment which would involve New Zealand directly in the affairs of South East Asia."¹¹

John Reid had none of the European background or war experience that influenced some of the New Zealand elite. His diplomatic experience was all US and UN. In the Trusteeship Council and the broader halls of the UN he had come to empathise with the newly independent Asian countries. Some of these contacts helped with his later warm relations with Asian representatives at meetings of ECAFE and the Colombo Plan. As he put it later, "At the beginning the non-Asian delegations tended to dominate the meetings, but with our colonial history we and the Australians found we had more sympathy with the Asians and they reciprocated."¹²

The economic side of the UN's building of a new post-war world was initially dominated by reconstruction in Europe, spearheaded by Gunnar Myrdal and channelled through the UN's Economic Council for Europe (ECE). Raul Prebisch spearheaded a smaller-scale operation for the western hemisphere through the Economic Council for Latin America (ECLA). The Economic Council for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) became organised as a third regional grouping for economic development in 1948, but was much more limited by political polarization and cold war issues. Indian economics professor Palamadai Lokanathan was its secretary, but appears not to have carried the same clout within UN councils.

The Cold War became a major obstacle to the functioning of the UN in 1948. The USSR was represented on all committees, and was frequently in a minority of one in objecting to the Trusteeship Council's mildness towards the colonial powers. It naturally took the side of the nationalist Left in debates on divided China, Korea, Malaya, Viet Nam and Laos, and their representation in the UN once independent. The Cold War also shifted US and Australian attention to Asia. The victory of communism in China (1949) convinced many that poverty would lead most of Asia to go the same way unless addressed. This gave rise to both the Colombo Plan (1950, discussed below), and Harry Truman's inaugural address as re-elected President on 20 January 1949, boldly setting out an agenda for the US to lead in extending development, science and human rights to the poor world. How this would be organised was unclear, but UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie understood from Washington contacts that the US was sympathetic to channelling this assistance through the United Nations agencies being developed for this purpose. He pushed the global organisation to respond with ambitious plans for global development, increasingly being referred to as technical assistance. On 16 November 1949, the General Assembly adopted this "Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance for Economic Development of Under-Developed Countries".

11 Secret minute, Canberra 11 November 1949, in David Lowe and Daniel Oakman (eds.) *Australia and the Colombo Plan, 1949-1957* (Canberra: DFAT, 2004), p.3.

12 *JSRAN*, p.35.

ECAFE was mandated to “initiate and participate in measures for facilitating concerted action for the economic reconstruction of Asia and the Far East”, as well as conducting the necessary research. It embraced all Asian (narrowly defined) UN member countries, including as well the permanent members of the Security Council (US, Britain, France, USSR, China), and Australia, New Zealand and Afghanistan as ‘non-regional’ neighbours.¹³ New Zealand was reluctant to undertake the commitment of membership at all, but eventually did so “with some misgivings and under pressure from the Australians”.¹⁴ But unlike Australia and the Asian members, New Zealand had no representation in Asia until 1955 except Tokyo, where Gordon Challis was trade representative (1947) and then chargé d’affaires (1952). It therefore fell to John Reid to fly up to Asia for each of the meetings after New Zealand joined. He was usually the sole New Zealand representative in conferences of around 200, other countries sending up to a dozen. He was at the fifth ECAFE meeting in Singapore (October 1949), the sixth in Bangkok (May 1950), seventh in Lahore (March 1951) and eighth in Rangoon (February 1952). He was also the only New Zealander at its ninth in Bandung (Jan-Feb 1953), though then representing the UN rather than New Zealand. The Bandung meeting (Indonesia’s first hosting of a major international gathering) was notable for a sustained Soviet attack on foreign aid as part of a system of capitalist exploitation and domination,¹⁵ but also for a rare family insight on Reid’s style. His teenage daughter Sally was allowed to sit in the audience for the final session, where her diary exuded pride that his was the speech that seemed to wake up the delegates—“magnificent Papa!”¹⁶

Reid made some lifelong friends among the Asian representatives at these meetings, including Burma’s Saw Tun. During the Rangoon meeting Saw Tun worked out at dinner that Reid was born on a Tuesday like his own daughter. Reid was invited to go with the family to the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, where he and the small girl made offerings at the shrine for those born on a Tuesday. The Burmese family provided a ‘bridal crown’ for the impending wedding of Reid’s eldest daughter.¹⁷

Reid later claimed with pride that the Asian delegates tended to seek him out for diplomatic guidance to avoid having to call upon their former colonial overlords. When Pakistan undertook to host its first ECAFE meeting in Lahore, they needed advice on what the foreign delegations would require. He emphasized the need for a hotel suite with a western-style flush toilet for each delegation (which proved difficult to deliver in full), and “that it would be a happier conference if delegates were able to procure liquor in this officially dry country.”¹⁸

13 C. Hart Schaaf, ‘The United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East,’ *International Organization*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Nov., 1953), pp. 463-4.

14 *JSRAN*, p.35.

15 Schaaf, 1953, pp. 477-8.

16 Sally Reid’s Jakarta diary for 12 Feb. 1953, courtesy of her daughter Mary Rawson.

17 *JSRAN*, p.36.

18 *JSRAN*, p.35.

In the mid-fifties the professionalization of Technical Assistance through the UN Agencies, national aid organizations and the Colombo Plan made ECAFE less central as a planning vehicle for the region. In any event Cabinet decided in 1953 to discontinue its representation to save costs.¹⁹ Belated New Zealand representation in Singapore (Foss Shanahan, 1955) and Bangkok for SEATO (1956) also reduced the need for Reid to make these frequent conference visits.

John Reid and the Colombo Plan

Involvement in the Colombo Plan followed naturally from these ECAFE meetings, and John Reid responded to the challenge with enthusiasm. McIntosh was happy to leave it to him. McIntosh himself, together with three officials, had supported Foreign Minister Doidge at the Colombo meeting of Commonwealth Foreign Ministers in January 1950 -- dominated by Britain's Ernest Bevin and India's Nehru. Here the Minister for External Affairs of the new Menzies-led Australian Government, (later Sir) Percy Spender, launched his ambitious idea of a kind of Marshall Plan to boost development and resist communism in Asia. McIntosh found Spender "very quick, intelligent, as great an exhibitionist as [his Labor predecessor Dr] Evatt and just as keen on press publicity." Spender clearly outshone his "inordinately vain" New Zealand counterpart, former journalist Frederick Doidge, who "took an instant dislike to him."²⁰ McIntosh was not impressed with his new Minister, who made a "silly speech" on the folly of the Western Powers getting out of Asia "before the people were ready for self-government there."²¹ Doidge and McIntosh stopped for brief visits on the way home in Singapore and Jakarta, where they were charmed by Sukarno and impressed by the beauty of the rice-fields. But this did nothing to convince either of them that there was any merit in Spender's visionary scheme.

On the contrary, McIntosh's letter confiding his impressions of this trip to Berendsen developed his argument that the corruption and inefficiency of the new Asian governments would swallow up any Western aid, and that all would inevitably fall to communism no matter how much aid was thrown at them.

Corruption and bribery will almost certainly bring about the downfall of the existing regimes in the same way as the Kuo Min Tang fell in China... It is perfectly ridiculous to think that we of the British Commonwealth countries, even with the aid of the United States, can with economic aid stem the tide of Communism. For one thing, we can't do enough quickly, and

19 McIntosh to Foreign Minister Webb 11 December 1952; Bodkin to Webb 17 December 1952; Undated Minute from Prime Minister Holland; all in McIntosh Papers 6759-065, 'Papers relating to ECAFE and the Colombo Plan'.

20 McIntosh to Berendsen 1 Feb. 1950, in Ian McGibbon, ed., *Undiplomatic Dialogue: Letters between Carl Berendsen and Alister McIntosh, 1943-52* (Auckland University Press, 1993), p. 203.

21 *Ibid.*, p.204.

for another, what we do is going to be swallowed up and lost in ineffective administration.²²

He returned to the theme in March, repeating his total opposition to Technical Aid and to the whole ‘Spender Plan’.

I shall be very sorry to see New Zealand embroiled in these types of foolishness...we have absolutely nothing to offer, and even if we did I don’t think such offers are the slightest use ...Of course the communists must triumph in Asia,”

since democratic institutions were simply not working in the new countries.²³

He left John Reid to carry the New Zealand flag at subsequent meetings about what was initially called the ‘Spender plan’, beginning with the Commonwealth Foreign Ministers’ “Consultative Committee on Economic Development in South and South-east Asia” in Sydney in May 1950. McIntosh recorded his hostility to the whole extravagant Australian project, and especially technical advice by travelling New Zealanders.

“I don’t like this dragging along at the heels of Australia, and more particularly in pursuit of aims which I consider foolish so far as New Zealand is concerned. I landed poor John Reid with this one and he seemed none too pleased when he went off, having found that we just didn’t have a card in our hands worth playing”.²⁴

Percy Spender pulled out all the stops to make a triumph of the meeting at Admiralty House in Sydney, a grand setting at Kirribilli Point across the harbour from the city. The official proceedings with the Ministers were from 15-19 May, but John Reid and his counterpart officials from the seven countries involved (always listed alphabetically: Australia, Canada, Ceylon, India, New Zealand, Pakistan, UK) arrived on 9 May to do the preparatory work. The New Zealanders were placed with the huge Australian delegation at Usher’s Hotel in Castlereagh Street (Georgian revival, today’s Castlereagh Chambers), while the British and others were mostly in The Hotel Australia.

Differences between Britain and Australia intensified in the build-up to the meeting. Spender was determined that Britain commit substantial funds to match Australia’s, while the British could see no way out of their own indebtedness save by the generous involvement of the US. McIntosh had feared that his own Foreign Minister might be “gulled” into the belief that some kind of aid would stem the communist tide in Asia, but the New Zealand Cabinet as a whole was unimpressed and agreed to put

22 *Ibid.*, pp.205-6.

23 McIntosh to Berendsen 6 March 1950, in *Undiplomatic Dialogue*, p.218

24 McIntosh to Berendsen, 12 May 1950, in *Undiplomatic Dialogue*, p. 226

no money into the scheme at all. He envisaged that New Zealand's delegation (Foreign Minister Doidge and six officials, led by John Reid) would support the United Kingdom and Canada, "against Australia and the Asian Dominions."²⁵

The conflict between British and Australian positions certainly marred the conference and came close to wrecking it. The British High Commissioner to Canberra delivered a damning verdict on Spender's "arrogant and wilful conduct and undignified withdrawals, but also ...his patent failure in the ordinary duties of a chairman."²⁶ The meeting was largely saved by agreement to back a scheme for in-kind technical assistance and training. This had been a minor strand in Spender's ambitious plan for infrastructural support to fragile governments. Despite the determination of Wellington to commit no funds to the scheme and simply keep a watching brief, John Reid played a remarkably positive role in turning near disaster into the success that Technical Assistance became.

When the officials gathered on 11 May, a week before the Ministerial meeting, they decided to create two working committees to draft documents for the Ministers to consider. Since the Australians (led by Arthur Tange) were chairing the plenary officials' committee, the UK representative Clarke was elected to chair the major (in Australian eyes) sub-committee on economic development. John Reid of New Zealand was surprisingly elected to chair the Technical Assistance sub-committee.²⁷ Despite McIntosh's expectation that New Zealand would support the negative UK stance against Australia and the Asians, Reid already showed enough sympathy for Asia's desperate need for expertise to mediate this need to the broader meeting. Pressured by the Asians for concrete action, his sub-committee demanded that there be an ongoing sub-committee or bureau to administer technical assistance, matching needs with available experts. This had not been part of the advance planning documents, but John Reid argued in introducing his report,

technical assistance ... could not operate satisfactorily without an organisation. This body should study needs and availabilities, receive applications from countries requiring technical assistance, match such needs and availabilities, and take executive action to arrange the supply of the necessary assistance.²⁸

When drafting and defending the Technical Assistance sections of the final report for the Ministers to endorse, John Reid took this further in specifying how this standing committee might work, as either a periodic meeting representing the seven countries,

25 *Ibid.*, p. 226

26 Cited in Daniel Oakman, *Facing Asia: A History of the Colombo Plan* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2004), pp.50-51.

27 *JSRAN*, p.35.

28 Record of first meeting of sub-committee of officials, 18 May, 1950, Series A9879/1 . Control symbol 9121/22B Part 5, National Archives of Australia (NAA).

or a small group of permanent officials.²⁹ His strong set of recommendations was embodied in the final report. The Ministers agreed that a Commonwealth Technical Assistance Scheme be immediately established, to provide up to £8m over three years starting on 1 July 1950. Contributions from member governments should “comprise the provision in kind of the services of technical personnel to applicant countries, the training of personnel in their own countries, the payment of the cost of equipment and of any other costs.”³⁰

John Reid later remembered that his sub-committee was less harmonious than it appeared in the official record.

I had enough trouble keeping order between the Australians and the British, but India and Pakistan were still very bitter over the violence on each side after the grant of independence...Our meetings were held in the Hotel Australia and I frequently had to adjourn the meeting to a private bar on the top floor...We did, however, produce a unanimous report committing every country to providing technical assistance and that included the Asians, who were delighted to be treated as donors as well as recipients.³¹

Since the poor Asian countries were eager to be considered donors, Reid could convincingly tell his Minister that New Zealand could hardly refuse to take part. The huge gap between Australia and UK on the bigger issues of capital assistance was papered over in the final public session of the conference, when the Technical Assistance success was fortunately given more attention than the stalemate elsewhere. Then the senior members of the delegations went to Canberra for the weekend of 20-23 May, where John Reid and his Minister Doidge were accommodated at the Hotel Canberra. In a subsequent statement to the New Zealand Parliament, Doidge repeated as firm policy that New Zealand would contribute only in the form of the direct technical assistance that John Reid had been negotiating. “We cannot, and will not, make any contribution at present in the nature of capital equipment or finance.”³²

Although the next decision-making event for the ‘Consultative Council’ was a Ministerial meeting in London in September 1950, in connection with other meetings, New Zealand did not send anybody from Wellington for that. In fact the locus was shifting to Asia. The ‘Standing Committee’ proposed in Sydney took on a life of its own, eventually becoming the Technical Assistance Council of the Colombo Plan,

29 Record of 3rd meeting of sub-committee of officials, 18 May, Series A9879/1 . Control symbol 9121/22B Part 5, NAA.

30 David Lowe, & Daniel Oakman (eds.), *Australia and the Colombo Plan: 1949-1957* (Canberra: Dept. of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2004), pp.152-3.

31 *JSRAN*, pp.35-6.

32 Doidge in Parliament 12 July 1950, cited by Jim Rolfe, ‘Coming to Terms with Regional Identity’, in *Southeast Asia and New Zealand*, ed. Anthony Smith (Singapore: ISEAS, 2005), p.34.

separate from the Commonwealth conferences that had given it birth. Reid represented New Zealand at its initial Colombo meeting in December 1950, and its second in June 1951. The 'Consultative Committee' itself had its third meeting in Colombo on 13-20 February 1951, and its fourth in Karachi in March 1952. The Ministers did not attend these, and John Reid led the New Zealand delegations to both.

He arrived a day late for the third meeting in Colombo and thereby missed the initial drafting sub-committee seeking agreement about the ongoing organisation of the Plan. Nevertheless he launched a critique of the sub-committee's first cautious effort. "At first glance the Report seemed to recommend that nothing should be done in the meantime."³³ He ended up penning a rival draft of his own (perhaps encouraged by his Ceylonese friends), much of which was incorporated into a stronger position insisting that there should be another meeting to finalise arrangements as early as could be arranged, and thereafter at least annually. In fact he appears to have chaired the eventual sub-committee drafting the report considered by delegations at their final meeting, since when it came before the final meeting, the Ceylonese Chairman expressed "his gratitude to the drafting team, and to Mr Reid in particular," for putting it into final shape.³⁴ Some of this activism in successive meetings came from his acknowledged experience of drafting complex legislation. But he also appears to have sought, even more actively than the original Australian movers, to accommodate the sensitivities of the Asians. At one point he is recorded commenting, "He would...like to be guided by the views of the Asian Delegates on the proposals."³⁵

He played his usual active role in the drafting of resolutions and in keeping alive enthusiasm for the big idea, even while having so little to offer in terms of money. Moreover, although New Zealand still had made no formal commitment, he used his Colombo trip to make the final selection of six trainee dental nurses from Sri Lanka whom New Zealand's Dental School Director, Dr Saunders, had "rather prematurely offered to train."³⁶ Reid must have hustled for the money to fly them to Wellington well before the Colombo Plan was inaugurated, though from what source is unclear. He was able to announce in Colombo that they would leave Ceylon for New Zealand on 3 March,³⁷ and arrive in time for the beginning of the Dental School course on 8 March 1951. Since the Colombo Plan was not officially inaugurated until 1 July, and Doidge's public statements had been largely negative, the government may well have

33 Minutes of 4th Meeting of the Third Consultative Committee on Economic Development in South and South East Asia, Colombo, 16 February 1951; NAA Series A10617, Control symbol 1951/1.

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*

36 *JSRAN*, p.36.

37 *Indian Daily Mail* 25 Feb. 1951 (listed in NewspaperSG at eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/)



Figure 2: Prime Minister Holland greets the first Colombo Plan trainees in NZ in July 1951 – six Ceylonese Dental Nurses arranged months earlier by John Reid (Colombo Plan Secretariat).

been caught off-guard at this speed. They kept the reception low-key.³⁸ Only in July did the Prime Minister greet them (pictured), while Foreign Minister Doidge made it a matter of national pride, announcing to Parliament, “I think we will be the first member of the Commonwealth actually to take action”.³⁹

Despite this practical initiative, New Zealand continued to drag its feet in making explicit commitments to the overall scheme. At the 1951 meeting Canada agreed to match Australia’s 25 million pounds for the whole Plan over six years. The British estimated that they would provide over 300 million over this period, though only by releasing the sterling balances that essentially belonged to Malaya, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka anyway. All John Reid could offer was that “The Government of New Zealand is urgently considering the extent of their financial support and hopes to make an early

38 Jenny Collins, “Perspectives from the periphery? Colombo Plan scholars in New Zealand Universities, 1951-1975”, *History of Education Review*, Vol. 41 Issue: 2, (2012) p. 131.

39 12 July statement to Parliament, in *New Zealand Foreign Policy: Statements and Documents 1943-1957* (Wellington 1972), pp. 209-13;

announcement.”⁴⁰ Yet the modest Technical Assistance side of the Plan, intended to provide eight million pounds over 3 years beginning 1 July 1951, was its only real success. By 1953 it was identified as “co-terminous with the Colombo Plan itself.” For New Zealand, and to a lesser extent Australia, this was the principal economic input to the Plan, though Canada, the UK and the US contributed to technical assistance only a fraction of what they had promised by way of capital. The Headquarters of the Plan in Colombo comprised a Council and staff, responsible to a Consultative Committee of all national participants meeting roughly every year.

The extension of the Plan to the non-Commonwealth Southeast Asian countries was a very high priority because of the communist threat and the fragility of most governments. The French-backed governments of Indo-China were eager to join but distracted by internal conflict and perceived dependence on France. Burma and Indonesia had emerged from the colonial cocoon through Japanese occupation and armed revolution, and remained wary of any return to western paternalism. All were however in the Plan by 1953. In some countries, including those that would eventually make up Malaysia, the technical assistance was for several years the most significant source of foreign aid and training.

After the first decade of its operation, the Colombo Plan Bureau congratulated itself on the way the Plan had managed the interests of richer countries, soon including the US, as well as those of “Asian countries meticulously determined to become indebted in no way to anyone.” The Consultative conferences were relatively cordial despite the hostility of governments to each other. This surprising mystique,

springs apparently from a deep-rooted respect for sovereignty, an ingrained concern for constitutional forms, a studied and implacable egalitarianism that was lent by the British ethos to the Commonwealth and by the Commonwealth to the Colombo Plan.... It remains one of the most successful ventures in international trust and community that the post-war world has seen.⁴¹

The same report probably had John Reid in mind when it came to discussing the small but significant contribution of New Zealand, by 1960 surpassed financially even by India's aid to Nepal. Nevertheless the overall success of the Plan was something “of which New Zealanders are doubtless proud, as testifying to the success of an idea they did much to nourish.”⁴² Nourishment, one should add, in the face of a quite opposite stance by the foreign policy establishment.

40 ‘Report of the Consultative Committee...in Colombo from February 13 to 20, 1951’, in David Lowe & Daniel Oakman (eds.), *Australia and the Colombo Plan: 1949-1957* (Canberra: Dept. of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2004), p.335.

41 *The Colombo Plan Story: 10 Years of Progress, 1951-1961* (Colombo: Colombo Plan Bureau, n.d.), p.42.

42 *The Colombo Plan Story*, p. 43.

New Zealand and Southeast Asia

This positive contribution to the success of the Plan was achieved despite the continuing establishment view that engagement with Asia was a waste of slender resources. McIntosh 's cynicism was clear, even as he allowed John Reid to attend the critical meetings. He confided to Berendsen that the Cabinet "are prepared to harbour a few benighted savages and Orientals for the purpose of giving them technical training, [but] they will not have New Zealanders joy-riding around the Far East ... giving unwanted advice."⁴³ His more measured star protégé (and later Secretary of Foreign Affairs), Frank Corner, laid out a similar view in a reasoned policy paper he penned from London in mid-1953. "I am convinced that our future should be made to lie with the Atlantic Community," meaning especially Britain, America and Canada, and not with Asia, "let the Australians howl as they will." He endorsed views already advanced by the most experienced of New Zealand's diplomats, J.V. Wilson, that "We stand only to lose in South East Asia. The more we are known the more we shall be disliked-- for our prosperity, for our racial exclusiveness (we are worse than the Australians), for being white." Expenditure on the Colombo Plan had been "of doubtful benefit to us or to the recipients."⁴⁴

The McIntosh correspondence does not show John Reid as the overt champion of the opposite view within the Department. When senior New Zealand diplomat Lloyd White visited Jakarta during Reid's period as UN Representative there, he appears to have left it to his New Zealand friend Arthur Wallbank over lunch to attack New Zealand's shameful neglect of Asia, especially Indonesia, and its failure to send any representative to the ECAFE meeting in Bandung.⁴⁵ Within the Department, Reid's own tactic was just to get on with building relationships.

A more explicit pro-Asian counter-narrative eventually began within the New Zealand Government, but was initially more connected with Defence and New Zealand's eagerness for a US security guarantee in the Cold War than with the vision of the Department of External Affairs. New Zealand did speedily respond to the UN call for a US-led rescue of South Korea from the North's attack in June 1950, which helped support its case for an ANZUS Treaty, signed in 1951. New Zealand's participation in the South East Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) from 1954 was lukewarm, but British ties brought some informal involvement with the region, beginning with a few Dakotas attached to the British Far East Air Force in Singapore (1949-51). It became more substantially involved in the British Commonwealth Far East Strategic Reserve in 1955, intended to "deter communist aggression in South-east Asia", particularly Malaya.⁴⁶

43 McIntosh to Berendsen 4 July 1950, in *Undiplomatic Dialogue*, p.232

44 Corner to McIntosh 13 July 1953, in *Ian McGibbon* (ed.), *Unofficial Channels: Letters between Alister McIntosh and Foss Shanahan, George Laking and Frank Corner, 1946-1966* (Wellington: VUW Press, 1999), p.145. (Wellington: VUW Press, 1999), p.145.

45 Jakarta diary of Sally Reid for 17 March 1953.

46 'Malayan Emergency,' in *New Zealand History*, accessed online 17 Apr 2019 at <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/the-malayan-emergency>

The Colombo Plan was more important, however, precisely in breaking down the mutual incomprehension that Corner described and exemplified.

The arrival of 'overseas' students in an insular New Zealand society... heralded a remarkable shift in this country's conception of its place in a post-colonial world. From seeing themselves as 'a beleaguered white outpost of the British Empire', New Zealanders began to see international educational aid as crucial to developing positive relationships with Asia and to economic development and regional security.⁴⁷

New Zealand remained a minnow in the extent of its aid, but increasingly focussed it on the more vulnerable Southeast Asian countries, where it seemed able to make a difference. Malaya, Sarawak and North Borneo/Sabah, served only by the infant University of Malaya in Singapore (founded 1949) had a special need for basic undergraduate education. By 1961 there were 285 Colombo Plan students at New Zealand universities, a much higher proportion of students than in Australia or elsewhere, nearly half from the future Malaysia (Malaya 84, North Borneo 28, Sarawak 14).⁴⁸ Several went home with New Zealand wives.

Diversion to United Nations work

When a New Zealand post in Delhi was belatedly being considered in 1960, John Reid wrote to McIntosh from Tokyo that "For a long time I have, as you know, pressed for a post to be opened in India and rather hankered after it myself."⁴⁹ Apart from this evidence in the McIntosh papers, I have not probed the archives sufficiently to be sure whether Reid's pioneering work with the Colombo Plan and ECAFE made him a standard-bearer for Asia in Wellington. In general his sense of marginality in relation to McIntosh and the National (conservative) Government appears to have made him reluctant to take on high policy. His Asian contacts instead propelled him offshore, to become the first United Nations Resident Representative in Indonesia in 1952-53. Too early for any Asian posting on behalf of New Zealand, he became instead an Asian pioneer for the UN.

President Truman's inaugural address of January 1949 and the UN General Assembly resolution of 16 November 1949 had proclaimed an ambitious agenda of assistance to the poorer countries embarking on the uncharted waters of independence in Asia. The UN took up the challenge, partly through its specialised agencies such as WHO, FAO, ILO and ICAO, with their longer histories of establishing global norms for health, agriculture, labour conditions and civil aviation respectively. Meanwhile the broader strategies of defining capital needs and planning priorities for the new countries were debated in forums like ECAFE.

47 Collins, 'Perspectives' (2012), p.143; also Rolfe, 'Coming to Terms', p.35.

48 Collins, 'Perspectives', pp.131-3.

49 Reid to McIntosh 18 February, 1960, in McIntosh Papers.

The newly independent former Asian colonies began requesting UN aid in 1949-50. The UN responses were initially ad hoc, but gradually became organised through a UN Technical Assistance Administration (TAA), supervised from 1950 by a Technical Assistance Board. Requests were made on the understanding that local costs payable in the home currency would be chiefly met by the recipient country, a limitation that discouraged struggling new nations such as Indonesia. Yet Indonesia was recognised as not only a very needy case, but also a particular responsibility of the UN, which had mediated and enforced the compromises that brought about the formal transfer of Dutch sovereignty to an independent Indonesia (initially federal, but only for 7 months) on 1 January 1950. It joined the UN late that year. Indonesia was delicate, however, because of both its nationalist distrust of powerful foreigners, and the dearth of Indonesians able to operate the international system in one of the UN's recognised languages.⁵⁰

The UN sent the 'Rosenborg Mission' to Jakarta in May 1950 to establish priorities for assistance, leading to the first UN-Indonesia Agreement on 2 November 1950. This provided for a UN Resident Representative assisted by 8 experts. The salaries and other 'international' expenses would be covered by the UN, and local expenses including accommodation by Indonesia. Turkey had been the first country to receive a UN Resident Representative, in 1950, since it was another important but sensitive case. The new Burmese government was seeking a UN Resident Representative sympathetic with its socialist aspirations. Post-revolutionary Indonesia was seen as another government distrustful of patronizing figures with colonial attitudes, particularly from the pre-war Dutch establishment. Candidates for the position from any of the European colonial powers were thought to be unacceptable.⁵¹ The hunt began for an appropriate high-level Resident Representative in Jakarta, "a senior man with broad practical experience".⁵²

The earliest record of John Reid's being mentioned for this position was in September 1951, when Elaine Hinder, head of the Projects Planning Division of TAA, recommended him as having "a sensitive understanding of the views of Asian countries."⁵³ After again seeing him at work at the eighth ECAFE Conference in Rangoon in February 1952, she pushed harder for his appointment to Indonesia. He not only had extensive experience of ECAFE and the Colombo Plan. He could be a perfect fit for the position because "he is sensitive to the attitudes of Asian people....He is creative and could assist in the development of a sound programme."⁵⁴

In July 1952 John Reid assumed his position as United Nations Resident Representative in Jakarta. He was responsible to the Technical Assistance Board, but had to make the job up as he went along. He soon became caught in the cross-

50 Anthony Reid, 'Djakarta in 1952-3: A moment of nation-building optimism,' in *Indonesia* (Cornell University SE Asia Program), forthcoming 2020.

51 Memo Whitelaw to Mandereau 21 Feb 1952, UN Archives, New York, 0441-0316-22082.

52 Whitelaw cable 10 October 1951, *idem*.

53 Hinder memo to Mandereau 18 September 1951, *idem*.

54 Hinder, memo to Mandereau 21 March 1952, *idem*.

cutting interests of the parties, particularly between the technocrats who largely staffed the Cabinet and welcomed foreign aid, and nationalists like President Sukarno very distrustful of it -- Herbert Feith's 'administrators and solidarity-makers' respectively.⁵⁵ Although eager to get out of Jakarta to visit his experts or potential projects in Java, South Sumatra and Kalimantan, most of his time appears to have been taken up dealing with the practical difficulties of placing experts and finding them accommodation in a country short of everything. Daughter Sally noted in her diary that "Dad really does have a hard time here; people coming to complain about everything under the sun."⁵⁶

In his final report to the UN, however, he mentioned none of these headaches. On the contrary, he was generous with praise and gratitude for his two Prime Ministers (Wilopo and then Ali Sastroamidjojo) and their Ministers, who "have always been readily accessible and have paid us the compliment of discussing our programmes and our problems frankly and with the keenest sympathy and understanding." Both Cabinets he dealt with were meticulous in carrying out their part of the bargain, while their officials in Jakarta and the provinces had been unfailingly helpful.⁵⁷ This was not just diplomatic politeness. John Reid was impressed, as were others, at the way post-colonial nation-building had thrust a tiny Dutch-educated elite into high office, and their enthusiasm to welcome "the disinterested and effective character of United Nations assistance" (as distinct from both the Dutch old hands and the sometimes overbearing American newcomers seen as serving their own national interests).

Reid saved all his fire for the UN administration itself, in a 'Private Report' to the UNTAA, the UNTAB, and the Directors-General of the five specialized agencies of the UN operating in Indonesia. The biggest problems arose from the way in which these autonomous agencies had moved quickly to offer experts to the Indonesian government according to their own sense of what was needed. This frequently violated the principle of the General Assembly resolutions "that the initiative should come from the government concerned and that the specialised agencies...should proceed only on the request of governments." The separate initiatives of the agencies had "created a whole range of contradictory conditions which are most bewildering to recipient governments." Indonesian officials felt that agencies were pressing their programmes on them, and "a distinct resistance developed." He had needed "two years of very tactful and careful handling" to convince political leaders that the government itself should and did entirely set the priorities.⁵⁸

The Resident Representative's position was undermined by the way the agencies dealt directly with Indonesia, and with some exceptions did not regard him "as their

55 Herbert Feith, *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962), pp.113-122.

56 Sally Reid, Jakarta diary, 13 Jan.1953.

57 John S. Reid, 'United Nations Technical Assistance Mission to Indonesia: Final Report', Djakarta, December 1953; UNTAMI/3287.

58 Reid, 'Final Report' part VIII: Private Report; Anthony Reid, 'Djakarta in 1952-3'.

representative". The high-level Indonesian 'Coordinating Committee for Foreign Aid' specifically requested a single point of contact between the government and the whole UN operation, as John Reid thought proper. As it stood only the UNTAA itself and ILO accepted that the Resident Representative was directly responsible for their staff as chief of mission. WHO and ICAO did not even introduce their new officers to him or make use of the local expertise his office had built up. Indonesia's unique dearth of adequately-trained local counterparts after a decade of war and revolution, and the complete rupture with the former Dutch administration, created a special need for a coherent national approach by the UN, yet the reverse was in danger of becoming the case.

This strong protest probably explained why Reid did not continue in the UN, and why the original vision of a Resident Representative was lost. In the longer term foreign aid became a vast, highly plural industry, largely carried by national governments with their own interests. The autonomy as well as the number of UN agencies and other international bodies only increased. Resident Representatives were reclassified as only 'Resident Coordinators'.

In the field Reid took a distinctly pragmatic approach, judging experts by seeing them at work in the field. He saw technical education as the most desperate priority for UN Assistance, quoting Finance Minister Sumitro Djojohadikusumo's dictum that human investment would be even more important than capital investment for the next five years.⁵⁹ He emphasized the same desperate need when the Australians asked his advice about priorities for Australian assistance.⁶⁰ He encouraged the establishment of three government Vocational Training Institutes in Jakarta, Bandung and Malang.

New Zealand and Indonesia

Not surprisingly, New Zealanders were overrepresented as the third largest national group among the UN experts appointed to Jakarta on Reid's watch, with Wellington friend (and VUC academic) Tom Smith in Public Administration, Arthur Wallbank and two others. Indonesia also joined the Colombo Plan during Reid's time in Jakarta, no doubt with his encouragement. In January 1953 he wrote to McIntosh in Wellington extolling the heroic efforts of the Indonesian leaders against great obstacles, and pleading for New Zealand support. It was "a great opportunity for New Zealand to show how a democracy can help".⁶¹ Despite his earlier scepticism about the Plan and other such entanglements, McIntosh sent Lloyd White to Jakarta in March to explore options for aid, of course in consultation with Reid. The upshot was a New Zealand commitment to the capital cost of establishing the Vocational Training Centre in Malang, with contributions of 128,000 pounds in 1953 and 100,000 the following year.⁶²

59 JSR, 'Final Report', II-5, III-5.

60 Furlonger to Gilchrist 13 January 1953, in *Australia and the Colombo Plan*, p.521.

61 Reid to McIntosh, Djakarta, 30 Jan. 1953, Turnbull Library, McIntosh Papers 6759-332.

62 JSR, 'Final Report', III-11. Lloyd White's reports of 27 and 31 March are referred to in Green, p.194, n18.

Reid's enthusiasm for the benefits of New Zealand's scheme of government-funded dental nurses, shown when he had organised Sri Lankan dental nurses as the first recipients of New Zealand's Colombo Plan aid in 1950, was no doubt in play again in his advice to the Indonesian Government. Jakarta sent a dental mission to New Zealand in 1953, leading to "the reorganization of the Indonesian School Dental Service on New Zealand lines".⁶³ The emphasis on health and education of New Zealand's Colombo Plan aid to Indonesia (second only to the aid to the British territories that later became Malaysia) was very much in line with Reid's thinking. Another personal connection was the friend and Wadestown neighbour C.E. ('Beeb') Beeby, Director of Education 1953-7, who made an exploratory visit to Indonesia in 1956 that led to an extensive program of seconding New Zealand English language trainers to Indonesian Teachers' Colleges.⁶⁴ New Zealand's aid program was its only substantial link with Indonesia in the years before the establishment of a consulate general in 1961.

Reid returned to his Assistant Secretary position in Wellington in 1954, now dealing with a larger set of engagements in Asia. The UN called on him again later that year to lead one of the triennial missions of the Trusteeship Council, to investigate progress in the Trust Territories of Tanganyika, Somalia, Ruanda and Urundi. Despite being chair of the four-man committee, he felt obliged to submit a minority report in conflict with the other three, eventually endorsed by the Trusteeship Council.⁶⁵ Only in 1956 was he sent off as first Minister (later Ambassador) to Japan, the largest of New Zealand's then three Asian posts.

Taken overall, New Zealand's stance towards Asia in the immediate post-war period was lukewarm and its representation minimal, particularly in contrast with Australia's. Yet despite Wellington's official stance, New Zealand did play a major role in shifting the emphasis of the 'Spender Plan' to the highly successful education and training role of the eventual Colombo Plan. For this, much credit goes to John Reid.

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63 Green, 'New Zealand and Indonesia' (2005), p.152.

64 Green, 'New Zealand and Indonesia', p.152. Beeby's involvement in Indonesia continued, leading to the publication of his *Assessment of Indonesian Education: A guide in planning* (Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research in association with Oxford University Press, 1979).

65 *JSRAN*, pp.45-8. The committee's reports are at T1142 and T1168 in the *Official Records of the United Nations Trusteeship Council*.

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