

Program 1 - Building the Nation

The idea of the nation as something people could identify with and get behind helped to forge national unity in culturally diverse post-colonial states like Indonesia, India and the Philippines. But why have some nations held together while others threaten to break up?

If nations are naturally occurring, then there is little reason to explain the birth of nations. On the other hand, if you think of nations as constructed, then it is important to explain how history and culture created individual nations.

VOICE:

Before Independence, we Southeast Asians could always blame the colonial power for any faults, but there comes a time when nations have to be self-reflective about their systems of government; whether it's benefiting the nation or not. You could say it's all these nations searching for what should be the proper dynamics of the regime; it's all part of nation building; all part of the growing pains of a nation.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Hello, I'm John Westland and welcome to Sharing Power - The Ties that Bind, a series that looks at how systems of government work to bind nations together and the factors that threaten their break-up.

While Australia in 2001, commemorated a hundred years of a federal system of government, countries as diverse as the Philippines, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea have been experimenting with new power-sharing arrangements designed to give people a greater stake in their systems of government.

Today, how particular historic circumstances affect national formation in 'Building the Nation'.

NEWS GRAB:

Tonight, celebration of a nation united.

Australia has established and nurtured one of the best parliamentary democracies in the world.

NEWSREADER:

Australia's first parliament remembered 100 years on.

ELIZABETH WILLIS:

After Federation, the six Australian colonies, British colonies, united in one nation and on the 9th of May 1901, the Federal Parliament first met.

JOHN WESTLAND:

That's Elizabeth Willis, the Curator for Australian Society at Museum Victoria.

ELIZABETH WILLIS:

I think people have seen the federal story as a fairly dry political discussion but in fact this year has brought out a lot of the passion perhaps that people a hundred years ago felt about being Australian and uniting together; just the songs and the poems and the nationalistic sentiments that were part of that.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Perhaps it's because Australia's founding as a nation had no moment of independence that, until now, academics, the general public and certainly republicans have shown little interest in the federal story.

Historian, Stuart MacIntyre from the University of Melbourne.

STUART MACINTYRE:

The Centenary of Federation has certainly produced a number of studies and we're much closer to having a history of federation than we used to be.

I think before, then, there was an ambiguity about federation; the people who were involved certainly wrote about it enthusiastically but it didn't really give easy signals for a later generation to understand or recognise. It didn't alter the attachment to Britain, it didn't remove the existing governments. It simply added another level and it was a fairly undramatic event, long and complicated. That's one reason why the histories don't have great appeal. No one had to fight for federation; it was settled peacefully. I think more recently, people would celebrate it because, indeed, it was a peaceful and democratic form of creating a nation.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Australia didn't have to wage the kind of independence struggle that was so integral to nation-building in other colonised countries.

So why was Britain so accommodating towards her Australian colonies?

Federation Historian, Helen Irving.

HELEN IRVING:

The British had learned their mistakes. They had learnt from their mistakes, in particular in the war of independence with the American colonies. The American colonies had broken away because they had been treated unsympathetically and harshly by the British authorities. And throughout the 20th century it was very clear that if Australians wanted to take steps leading towards their ultimate independence, the British would not oppose that and indeed in many cases facilitated those steps.

ELIZABETH WILLIS:

It was a royal event as well as a national event and the invitations very often reflect that. They often show Australia being depicted as a young woman full of hope and future as against Britannia representing the British Empire who's generally older and reaching out with warmth to this new young daughter who is, in a sense, leaving home but still part of the family.

JOHN HIRST:

When we look back on them we think that perhaps they should have been more assertive against Britain.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Historian and republican, John Hirst.

JOHN HIRST:

But if you look at the world from their point of view they are British colonists, they are proud of their British identity, they belong to an empire which is most unusual in allowing so much self-government. I mean if Britain hadn't allowed self-government there would have been a real battle. But Britain is now an enlightened empire, at least as far as the white settlers of the empire are concerned. They are worried about their security and the empire is top dog in the world. So for all these reasons, they accept their position as being a nation within the empire and were proud to be a nation within the empire and were more grateful to Britain because it had let them be a nation. So it is an odd set of circumstances that they faced.

JOHN WESTLAND:

If opting to remain a part of the British Empire was simply a given in nineteenth century Australia, the decision to federate the six self-governing British colonies was motivated more by the desire to build a nation. Stuart MacIntyre again.

STUART MACINTYRE:

It used to be said that there were a series of practical needs that made them do so. They would include the worries about defence, as European powers other than Britain came into the South East Asia and Pacific region; or migration, as they often suggested that concern to control migration was a reason for federation; or the need to construct a common market. Now I think as we look back on it, the need to construct a common market was undoubtedly there but you don't need to create a commonwealth to do that. You could have simply had trade treaties between the existing colonies. And indeed most of the things that the Commonwealth secured could have been or had been secured by arrangements between those self-governing colonies. And the emphasis I think probably correctly is now put on the desire to be a nation in itself. Nationalism as an ideology and a popular movement was growing in the late nineteenth century and it was thought that you were incomplete unless you fulfilled your national destiny. And I think that element of the federal process is probably the most important.

JOHN WESTLAND:

You're listening to Radio Australia, 'Sharing Power' - and today: 'Building the Nation'.

While the Australian colonies had self-government and saw no reason to break with the British Empire, that was not the case for Britain's so-called 'Crown Colonies', like India. Helen Irving.

HELEN IRVING:

Australia, like most of the other white colonies, was self-governing from very early on. The Australian colonies had been self-governing from the mid-19th century on. Whereas the so-called 'Crown Colonies', the coloured, colonies did not have that sort of encouragement of a slow development towards independence that the white self-governing colonies were given.

JOHN WESTLAND:

In India, the British were confronted by a strong nationalist movement and while they'd instituted some measure of self-government, it wasn't until after the Second World War, nearly half a century after Australia had become self-governing, that Britain finally granted India its independence.

NEWSREEL:

On June 3, 1947, a great Indian leader and patriot, Jawaharlal Nehru, broadcast his acceptance of the British government's formula for the transfer of power.

NEHRU:

We are little men serving great causes, or because the cause is great, something of that greatness falls upon us also. Mighty forces are at work in the world today and in India and I have no doubt that we are ushering in a period of greatness for India.

NEWSREEL:

Wednesday June the 9th, 1950, a most memorable day in the short history of the young Indonesian Republic. A nation of 70-million, proud of its achievement of freedom is ready and waiting to receive its best friend, Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India, himself known as one of the most ardent fighters for freedom.

NEHRU:

(applause) I should like to convey to you and through you to those whom you represent, the salutations of the people of India to this newest republic of Asia and to those who have struggled to bring it about. Merdeka.

Newsreel: Mr Nehru has ended with a national Indonesian salute 'Merdeka' which means 'freedom'. The symbolic parliament session is over and Premier Hatta of Indonesia leads his guest to the exit.

JOHN WESTLAND:

India was one of Indonesia's strongest supporters in its quest for independence from Dutch colonial rule. Although the Dutch had not prepared Indonesia for self-government, Dutch power was destroyed during Japan's wartime occupation of the archipelago. Indonesia's 'freedom struggle' united the diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious groups in the nationalist cause.

ROBERT CRIBBE:

Some people these days write as if Indonesia is only an empire that's been imposed on the people of the archipelago. But when we look at most of the 20th century, Indonesia was really an exciting endeavour, it was a project that united most of the Indonesian people, that was actually the vehicle for all sorts of noble ideas.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Historian, Robert Cribbe from the University of Queensland.

ROBERT CRIBBE:

I think it became the vehicle for aspirations for justice and prosperity. The local and regional identities looked very much oppressive in those days; they seemed to be the domain of old feudal

elites, of narrow mindedness, of narrow sectional interests. Whereas when people gazed at the Indonesian framework they saw massive possibilities for achieving justice and prosperity for the Indonesian people. There's a big academic debate of course over what the effects of colonialism were in Indonesia, but for Indonesians it was absolutely clear that the Dutch had brought poverty, that they had sucked resources out of the archipelago, and also that they had isolated Indonesia from the mainstream of world history. One of the nationalist leaders complained that it was bad enough being colonised, but to be colonised by a second rate power, like Holland, was even worse. Of course the Dutch didn't see it like that but many Indonesians did see it like that.

JOHN WESTLAND:

But while Indonesians could set aside their differences during the anti-colonial struggle, soon after independence, a chorus of voices from the outlying regions reproached the Centre for not giving them enough power or money.

And though a federal system of government might have seemed like one way of fostering diversity within an inclusive national identity, the term 'federalism' had little appeal to Indonesia's independence leaders.

Dr. Ruslan Abdoulgani was an official in the 1945 provisional government of President Sukarno and Vice President Hatta and he explains how 'federalism' was associated with Dutch divide and rule tactics.

DR RUSLAN ABDOULGANI:

There was at the beginning of our freedom movement there were two ideas: for instance, Vice President Hatta is in favour of the word 'federalism' but we had the bad experience introduced by Van Mook, who gave an interpretation as if 'federalism' was Balkanisation. It is not federation of provinces but a federation of artificial states. And that is why we are against the word 'federalism'. But it doesn't mean, it does NOT mean that we are against autonomy.

PROFESSOR RUTH MCVEY:

However, the tradition of the Indonesian state so far, is highly centralist, and furthermore, the military which has played such an important role in Indonesian politics, and even though right now it doesn't seem so prominent, it's still extremely powerful, it's something that has to be taken into account. And just by nature, militaries aren't federalists, they're highly centralised and they look with suspicion on anything that they think might give a foothold to an eventual separatist move.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Emeritus Professor Ruth McVey gave the keynote address at an Australian Conference on Indonesia called Autonomy and Disintegration.

PROFESSOR RUTH MCVEY:

Now the question of federalism is arising again and there's a great deal more support behind it because now in the outer islands you have really substantial middle classes, educated people, people who are quite capable of running a moderate political and economic system and they want more of a voice of their own.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Just as the fall of the Suharto regime led to demands from people outside of Jakarta for a greater say in running the country, the ousting of the authoritarian Marcos regime in the Philippines, a decade earlier, prompted similar calls.

The Philippines, like Indonesia, is a unitary state but did not have to fight for its independence. Just as Australia opted to remain a nation within the British Empire, the Philippines emerged as a nation within the American sphere of influence.

PROFESSOR ALEX BRILLANTES:

We inherited some kind of democratic form of government from the United States, one that upheld the values of check and balance, one that supposedly upheld the values of participation and all that. But in implementation, I guess being a newly independent country in the mid-40s, although we actually gained our independence in the late 1900s, we had largely a centralised form of government; most of the decisions both politically and administratively were mostly done in Manila.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Professor Alex Brillantes from the University of the Philippines has been actively involved in the post-Marcos decentralisation program.

And while there were concerns that devolution might simply put more power into the hands of the legendary Filipino warlords, Dr Brillantes maintains it's created a more accountable and responsive system of government ...

PROFESSOR ALEX BRILLANTES:

Looking at our local political and administrative structures from north to south one can easily rattle off the names of families that have dominated the local politics. However I guess what we should look at is when we transferred powers and authorities to the local governments we also transferred answerabilities. To a certain extent 'dynasty-ism', if you may, is here to stay even if you look at the members of congress, you've the children, you've the wives, you've the brothers. Look at our local governments, you have exactly the same dynamic. And that might not be exactly good but it is a reality that we have to address. And let me hasten to add, that not all of those who come from these

political families are bad, we have seen many of them who have come from traditional politically-dominant families who are doing very good, who are very development-oriented. So I guess the agenda would be to see how we could make them more development oriented. And as I said, when we transferred powers and authorities over to the local government, something that was not done before, we also transferred accountabilities and answerabilities. I'm not romanticising it, OK, but I guess what I'm saying is that today you can have the people calling for a recall of the local leaders where people get together and sign for the recall of abusive leaders which was unheard of. Today, we have a provision that enables people to enact laws on their own initiative, we didn't have that before, so I guess the institutional mechanisms are in place and fortunately we have seen some of them work. So there is hope.

JOHN WESTLAND:

After decades of authoritarian rule many Filipinos and Indonesians are wary of further political manipulation from the Centre.

NYOMAN RIASA:

As a Balinese, as a Hindu Balinese, we were taught that we should respect the elderly. You know, here, you've got Balinese terms, in Hindu Balinese terms, what is called a 'catur guru' and 'guru' means teacher. And who are the teachers? The teachers are our parents which is what we call 'guru rupaka'. It means literally someone who makes you. And the 'guru pengajian' is the academic teachers and 'guru wisesa' is the government and 'guru astawara' is the Almighty God. Now, we are supposed to respect them and to be submissive to them. Now I am very suspicious, actually, that some politicians have probably manipulated this.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Nyoman Riasa co-ordinates student exchanges between Australia and Bali.

NYOMAN RIASA:

You didn't question the teachers because you were seen as challenging them, it's not polite to challenge your teachers, and you do not question the government policy when you don't agree because you do not show yourself to be a Balinese person when you question them. That can be manipulated. Now I think when more and more Balinese are educated, whether they studied overseas, maybe they studied in Java, they learn something from different perspectives. We hoped that with this regional autonomy and democracy we would ask a lot of questions because it's good to ask a lot of questions so that we get a better understanding, otherwise you just keep your feelings in and then you express them violently. So we don't want that, you know we've learnt a lot from that, so we don't want to do it again.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Next week more on systems of government.

'Sharing Power' is produced by Radio Australia's Sue Slamen; academic consultant is Dr Richard Chauvel from Victoria University in Melbourne. Technical production by Ryan Egan ...

I'm John Westland; I hope you can join me again next week.

