

AUSTRALIA'S REGIONAL RELATIONSHIP IN UNESCO

Australia was a founding member of Unesco having signed the Constitution on 4 November 1946 - the same day as China, India, France, the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States and others. For almost all of the next 30 years Australia was identified in Unesco as one of the Western group of countries. Our contacts with the Asian region were cordial but our involvement was very limited.

In 1964, a system of regional groups was instituted for the purposes of arranging participation in 'regional activities in which the representative character is an important factor'. In other words the right to participate in regional activities. At that time Australia was not allocated to either the Europe region or the then Asia and Oceania region.

However our position as one of the Western Europe and Others Group (WEOG) was temporarily settled in 1968 when Unesco introduced a formal system of groups for the purposes of elections to the Executive Board.

In the early 1970s our situation was therefore rather unsatisfactory - in Europe for elections and nowhere for program participation. The Whitlam Government in 1974 took the initiative to rectify the latter situation in line with the wider initiatives in foreign policy. By a resolution of the 1974 Session of the General Conference Australia was included as a member of the Asia and Oceania program region. (It was the same resolution which added New Zealand to the Asia and Oceania region, and Canada and the USA to Europe, but left Israel out of any region).

Since 1974, Australia has provided ample evidence of our commitment to the Asia and Pacific program region. The Australian National Commission for Unesco, the Government's advisory body on Unesco matters, has given regional program activities first priority in the decade both through hosting activities forming part of the Unesco international program and conducting its own projects in response to regional priorities. Hundreds of participants from the region have joined in activities in Australia in the ten years since 1974.

Australian membership of the Asia-Pacific Electoral Group is a more complicated matter. Participating in joint program activities is something to which all countries can easily subscribe. Voting for election to the controlling bodies of an organisation is a matter which impacts on wider foreign relations issues. Action in Unesco on such matters cannot be confined to Unesco. Arrangements made across the United Nations system are affected

The 1983 attempt by Australia and New Zealand to regularise their regional group arrangements by shifting to the Asia and Pacific Electoral Group was not successful.

Notwithstanding the majority support of countries in the Asia/Pacific Group and the widespread acceptance among Unesco's members generally that our transfer to this Group would be a logical reflection of the regional forms of Australia's foreign policy, this step has so far been frustrated by the continuing concerns of some Unesco countries about the size and composition of the Organisation's Executive Board.

An increasingly important part of our Unesco regional relationship is with countries of the Pacific. At present four Pacific countries are members of Unesco - Papua New Guinea, Western Samoa, Tonga and Fiji. Their membership of Unesco, and the possible future membership of other Pacific countries, places new responsibilities on Unesco. By recently opening a representative office in Apia, Western Samoa, Unesco has begun to respond to the needs of the new members.

Widening Pacific membership of Unesco will also have implications for Australian membership of Unesco. It will be a particular responsibility of the recently restructured National Commission for Unesco to respond to the needs of the new members - to consider the involvement of the Pacific in all their co-operative projects. As in our relationship with the Unesco member states in Asia, size, population or affluence are relatively unimportant. The commitment to participate/co-operate as equals is what is essential; it is this characteristic which makes our membership of Unesco so valuable.

(Statement by the Hon. Susan Ryan,
Minister for Education, 11 February 1985).