

## The Wrap



**NORTHERN EXPOSURE:** *More contact key to improving ASEAN ties*

# Cultural links open doors in Asia

ASEAN delegation seeks deeper ties.

**B**uilding trade and people-to-people links between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and Australia was the focus of an ASEAN parliamentary delegation which recently visited Australia.

The parliamentarians from Brunei Darussalam, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines and Singapore visited Melbourne, Canberra and Wagga Wagga to learn about Australia's political system and build ties with government and industry.

Indonesian MP Adisatrya Suryo Sulisto said the visit had been very fruitful for the delegation members, who represented many of Australia's closest neighbours and most important trading partners.

Working to improve regional trade relations is of particular interest to Mr Sulisto, who focuses on trade and industry in his parliamentary work.

He said the recent ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement has opened up Indonesia to Chinese imports, presenting challenges for Indonesian manufacturers and leading to widespread de-industrialisation.

"Many entrepreneurs would prefer to become traders rather than being creative or innovative, so that is a big issue," Mr Sulisto said.

He said Indonesia has responded to this challenge by appointing a Minister for Creative Industries, who is working to encourage youth to be more entrepreneurial and create Indonesian products to sell domestically and to export.

Harnessing the power of youth in her country is also the focus for the youngest member of the delegation, Singaporean MP Tin Pei Ling.

"As the youngest member of parliament, I have a deep understanding of the concerns of young Singaporeans," Ms Ling said. "Young people have to work doubly hard because we don't have the years of wisdom of more senior people, to prove our credibility and to earn the trust that people have bestowed on us.

"But I think that youth is not a disadvantage – because of the energy, ideas and the potential that we can bring to an otherwise ageing population."

In particular, Ms Ling advocates for better health care for seniors in Singapore, and the de-stigmatisation of those with mental health problems. She also believes that immigration, infrastructure and an ageing population are "hot button issues" for Singapore as it expands and grows as a society.

Both parliamentarians believe stronger political and trade ties with Australia are vital as ASEAN deals with the challenges and opportunities of economic development.

However each delegate also believes more needs to be done to encourage closer people-to-people links between Australia and its Asian neighbours.

As Australia and Indonesia are direct neighbours, Mr Sulisto thinks people-to-people links could be improved.

"We need more education and cultural exchanges in order to understand each other better, as this will lead to a better political relationship, and in the longer term increase our trade," he said.

Ms Ling said ASEAN can play a role in further developing these international relationships, not just to increase trade between ASEAN members and countries like Australia, but more importantly to maintain stability in the region.

"We see Australia as a friend to Singapore and to ASEAN," she said. "Beyond trade, the figures, its deeper than that, it's cultural as well, and I think there is long-term interest because strategically if we can build on this relationship it will help to ensure greater regional stability and security which will allow us to prosper together in the future." •