

Chapter 7: New Priorities in Action: the Visit of Dr Subandrio to Australia, February 1959

I

The behaviour of the Australian Government during Subandrio's visit – and in particular a joint statement in which Australia claimed it would not impede a solution negotiated freely between the Dutch and Indonesians – was controversial at the time, and has continued to be so since. Four days after the Casey-Subandrio announcement, for instance, an editorial in *The Age* suggested that

On careful examination, it must be said that there has been no change of policy. Australia has always accepted Dutch sovereignty over West New Guinea, and does so still.¹

At the opposite end of the spectrum, journalist Denis Warner wrote that the meaning of the statement was that “Indonesia will eventually get sovereignty over West New Guinea”.² More recently, Peter Edwards has implied that Subandrio's tour was essentially for the purposes of strengthening Australian-Indonesian relations, and that no genuine changes took place in Australian policy.³ In contrast, Viviani has asserted that the *communique* was aimed at altering Australian policy, whilst leaving an escape route if public reaction was unfavourable.⁴ In the face of such widespread disagreement, the casual observer might be forgiven for assuming evidence was lacking for anything other than a speculative conclusion, but this is not the case. Rather, the key to understanding the problem may be found in the changes to Cabinet's outlook which began in 1958, and reached a climax at the meeting of 5 January 1959.

The framework within which the Australian Cabinet had decided to work just prior to Subandrio's visit was that Indonesia was more critical to the country's defence than WNG, though the outlines of NNG policy would not be greatly changed unless interests in Indonesia were deemed threatened by that policy. The immediate objectives pertinent to this plan were to support deterrence and administrative cooperation with the Dutch, whilst at the same time leaving room for diplomatic moves that took account of Indonesia's central importance. Attempts to reach more cordial relations with Indonesia were a necessary part of this policy, and that – as suggested by the fears of serious breakdown which prompted agreement over a visit – was the basic aim of the Australian Government as it approached Subandrio's arrival.

¹ *The Age*, 19 February 1959.

² *The Melbourne Herald*, 16 February 1959.

³ Edwards, *op.cit.*, pp. 202-204.

⁴ Viviani, *op.cit.*, p. 194.

One of the evident problems for the Australians was that aspects of the tactical game designed to protect WNG still had the ability to militate against those geared to furthering interests in Indonesia, and vice versa. This was something that had to be managed during Subandrio's visit (and beyond) if Canberra was not to choose the easier option of abandoning WNG, and configuring policy to what was already the priority – Indonesia. An important letter from Casey to Menzies aptly illustrated the delicacy of the task facing Australia:

we have two interests – that of doing everything possible to deter Indonesia from resorting to force (although the possible deterrents are not potentially very powerful) – to do what we can to keep the Dutch in West New Guinea – but in the whole of this process, I believe that we must not appear to threaten Indonesia with force, nor do anything else to create an antagonistic Indonesia for the future. At the same time, during Subandrio's visit, we have to be careful to avoid giving him the impression that we are getting ready to abandon the Dutch. Similarly we have to let the Dutch know that in our talks with Subandrio we are maintaining our line that sovereignty belongs to the Netherlands.⁵

Four days before Subandrio's arrival, moves were made to remind Cabinet of issues involved with the visit, and to establish more specifically what line would be taken with him. Casey put a submission before Cabinet, and it began with a section entitled the "Importance of the visit to Australian-Indonesian relations".⁶ This made clear to the Ministers the general purpose of the visit, and the difficulty of simultaneously attending to the bare necessities of a continued Dutch presence:

His visit will be regarded by the Indonesians as of major political importance in view of recent developments inside Indonesia and because of the Dutch New Guinea dispute. We should aim to treat Dr. Subandrio during his visit in a way that will have the effect of lessening, or of appearing to lessen, the tension between Indonesia and Australia which results from our support of the Dutch in New Guinea. ...At the same time, it is important that Dr. Subandrio should not appear to succeed in any efforts he may make to drive a wedge between ourselves and the Dutch. It will not be an easy task: to help our relations with Indonesia we do not want him to return home with his mission appearing publicly to have been a failure: but on the big question – New Guinea – he must not appear to have won a victory.

Casey gave further space to sketching particular arguments that might be raised by Subandrio regarding WNG, and to what might be said in reply. This was fairly standard material in terms of what had been said between Australia and Indonesia, and at the UN, over previous years, though from the Australian point of view, it was now to be couched in softer language. Casey's precise recommendations were that "Dr. Subandrio should be given no encouragement that our attitude is likely to change", and that "we should be prepared to issue a statement if necessary at any time to correct any false

⁵ Casey to Menzies, 15 January 1959, in M2576/1, 39, NAA. The Dutch were duly assured on 5 February that there would be no negotiations with Subandrio in connection with sovereignty over WNG. See conversation between Lovink, Casey and Plimsoll, 5 February 1959, in A1838/280, 3036/6/1, Pt 34, NAA.

⁶ Submission No. 30, dated 30 January 1959, in A5818/2, Vol. 1, NAA.

impression on our attitude which the Indonesians may seek to propagate". Finally, he proposed that Australia's broad approach should be instructed by the considerations laid out in the submission.

Cabinet "generally endorsed" the line to be taken with Subandrio as outlined in the agenda, adding that "it would be desirable from the Australian point of view to limit the discussion as nearly as possible to action by each side to put on record its views and arguments about Dutch New Guinea."⁷ There were, however, signs that the Ministers wanted to leave open the possibility of showing a slightly less severe face on NG than envisaged in the memorandum; it was remarked that "the extent and nature of the discussion on Dutch New Guinea would depend partly on Dr. Subandrio's tactics." This was to be an omen. Clearly exercised about the state of the bilateral connection, Cabinet later asserted that "Australia should be willing to consider and, as far as possible, to meet any proposals by Dr. Subandrio for assistance to Indonesia or the improvement of Australian/Indonesian relations", and although it was noted parenthetically that this "was, of course, outside the Dutch New Guinea question",⁸ it could not be denied that WNG was the principal obstruction to better relations. There was, therefore, a strong temptation to introduce a slightly more conciliatory note into "the extent and nature" of conversation on DNG.

In response to a request by Cabinet to Menzies and Casey to prepare a brief for the discussions,⁹ Casey put forward another memorandum on the 9th.¹⁰ In again examining issues that might be mentioned by Subandrio, and Australian rejoinders,¹¹ this paper repeated the call both to present orthodox views on WNG and to stimulate greater intimacy with Indonesia. Nevertheless, and significantly, it developed the idea of giving a small concession to Subandrio on WNG. In this context, the final two paragraphs in the section addressing primarily contentious subjects proved to be the most important. In the first, the Minister thought that

In putting the Australian case to Subandrio we should concentrate on the arguments about self-determination and on the legal aspects....At some stage, however, I expect that Subandrio will begin to seek some modification of the Australian attitude. I do not think that he expects Australia will abandon sympathy with the Dutch position. In fact he may well say this. But he is likely to insist that all he has looked for is some reason to hope that Australia will adopt a more passive role in the dispute instead of fortifying the Dutch resolve to stay.

⁷ Minutes of Cabinet meeting, 5 February 1959, in A4943, Vol. 1, NAA.

⁸ The Ministers were eager in discussions with Subandrio to spend time (as had been suggested in the submission) on a series of topics apart from WNG, and intended to promote bilateral harmony and cooperation.

⁹ *loc. cit.*

¹⁰ Submission No. 39 by Casey, 9 February 1959, in A5818/2, Vol. 1, NAA.

¹¹ These included "controversial themes", and "matters on which discussions on cooperation should be possible."

Revealing awareness of the pivotal place of WNG in the bilateral relationship, Casey's second paragraph began: "I believe our attitude on such a proposition by Subandrio – and the way in which our attitude is interpreted and received in Indonesia – could be crucial to the success or failure of this visit and even perhaps to the future of Indonesian-Australian relations." Casey felt that the best way to answer would be to again emphasize that Australia regarded Netherlands sovereignty as well-founded in terms of the law, and that the Commonwealth backed publicly articulated Dutch intentions to develop WNG to the point of self-determination. Still, Casey added, Subandrio could be told that if the Dutch altered their stand *vis-à-vis* sovereignty, "this would present a new situation of which we would necessarily have to take account." In other words, if the bedrock of current Australian policy on WNG – that of support for Dutch sovereignty – were undermined by a Netherlands decision, Australia would reconsider its position.

Casey's intention in advancing this line – and he probably had clearance from Menzies in doing so¹² – was not to employ the emergency alternative of acceding to the 'loss' of WNG as a means of addressing a dire situation in Indonesia. Instead, it was probably conceived as a clever pseudo-concession to Indonesia on Irian (the heart of Australian-Indonesian tensions) that would not damage the Dutch, and that contained the hidden bonus of being useful if Australia did have to liquidate traditional WNG policy at a later date. In other words, it was viewed as a step that in one clean movement accounted for the needs of a Dutch WNG, for the essentiality of concurrent recognition of Indonesia's centrality, and for the option of leaving the territory to the Republic.

II

After landing in Sydney on 9 February, Subandrio met with Cabinet in Canberra on the 11th. Following preliminary banter, Menzies began by saying that his Ministers were concerned that Australia and Indonesia not concentrate on the WNG issue at the expense of their common interests and agreement on all other matters. Beginning on the point where differences did occur, the Prime Minister said that the Australian position arose out of respect for the principle of sovereignty – a principle that favoured the Dutch in this case. None of this was particularly novel, and nor was the general idea

¹² Circumstantial evidence for this view is provided by Cabinet's request on 5 February that both Menzies and Casey prepare a "further paper which would serve as a brief for the discussions." (See minutes of Cabinet meeting, 5 February 1959, in A4943, Vol. 1, NAA). Thus, although the resulting paper was signed by Casey alone, it is likely he had discussed its contents with the Prime Minister.

that WNG was the only point of difference in the bilateral relationship and must not be allowed to dominate. His next comments, however, were different:

although it is the Australian view that sovereignty in West New Guinea belongs to the Netherlands, it is also the Australian view that settlement of the problem that has arisen is, in essence, a matter for the Netherlands and Indonesia, and not for Australia. It is certainly not Australia's desire that this New Guinea matter should develop as if Australia were one of the principals to the dispute, or that the state of relations between Australia and Indonesia should be judged by statements from other sides about it.¹³

This represented a development of the fundamental idea put forward by Casey beforehand (and was, in fact, a basic outline of the most controversial part of the Casey-Subandrio statement). Casey had indicated Subandrio would be given a hint that change in Dutch policy would not necessarily mean Australia would maintain its current line. Now, Menzies had gone on to say that a solution was for the Indonesians and the Dutch to work out, and basically had nothing to do with Australia. He had evidently come to the conclusion that something sounding a little stronger than previously envisaged was needed for a positive affect on the Indonesians. He would not have thought the move substantially changed the intentions of the original proposal; the Dutch would be protected – they could not be forced to negotiate – Indonesia would be given the impression that the Australian position was, and always had been, eminently reasonable (Australia recognized the legality of properly conducted negotiations, yet had to support the Dutch because of their legally watertight case and political necessity), and the precautionary groundwork for abandonment of the WNG cause was in place. His mistakes, unrealized at the time, were that the latent bias of Australian policy could now be glimpsed by the Indonesians because Australia had always opposed negotiations and claimed to be a vitally interested party; it would never have given up these strategic points before. Menzies had tried to marry the decision for greater recognition of Indonesia in current WNG policy with the contingency plan favouring Indonesia, and it had not worked. Exposure of this bias in turn had important and immediate practical implications. The Indonesians could be emboldened to attempt rapid isolation of the Dutch, the Dutch might be fatally discouraged, and Australia had weakened its ability to intervene.

Subandrio picked up the signs of change and their ramifications, but did not immediately draw on them. He began with the claim that Indonesia was “seeking to develop confidence and friendship with Australia”, and that he “had not made the visit

¹³ Minutes of Cabinet meeting, 11 February 1959, in A4943, Vol. 1, NAA. For comparisons with previous statements on Australia's direct interest in WNG, and antipathy to negotiations, see Spender's comments to the First Committee, 24 and 29 November 1954, in *The Question of West Irian in the United Nations*, pp. 77, 124.

with the intention of negotiating some manner of bargain involving the New Guinea issue but to discuss the facts, exchange views and to seek through commonsense an eventual solution to this problem.” He then skillfully touched on two issues at the forefront of Cabinet thinking in 1959; the value of Indonesia to Australia, and the dangers of communism in Indonesia. On the first, he said that Indonesia was “important to Australia from the point of view of Australia’s security.” Asia, he continued, was in a “fluid and unpredictable” state in the post-War era, and in the not impossible circumstance of aggression threatening Australia, “Indonesia can provide a first shield in Australia’s defence”. He seems to have implied, by soon moving to the communist problem, that the possibility of a ‘red’ Indonesia was a difficulty for Australia here. The domestic communist threat, moreover, could only be defeated by the central government by maintenance of links with the West, and by combining economic measures with political ones. Australia’s friendship – involving a “background of understanding...and not of suspicion” – was significant in all these respects. He did not go on to say that this friendship was, in turn, only capable of development if Australia did not continue to oppose Indonesia over WNG, but the thought can not have been far from his mind or that of his audience.

When Subandrio later moved on to discuss Irian specifically, he was careful not to threaten the Australians. He assured Cabinet that the Indonesian Government was “fully convinced” that “no territorial dispute can nowadays be settled through the use of force.” Continuing in a moderate vein, he said that Indonesia understood the Australian viewpoint and accepted that Australia could not “swallow” its convictions. Still, he felt that the current situation produced “an atmosphere of difficulty...especially in the public mind.” Seizing on Menzies’ earlier comment, he asked if – for the generation of a better atmosphere – the Prime Minister could say Australia did not oppose a solution to the problem of sovereignty or even an outright transfer. He also wondered if the Government could not even state that it would be “very glad” if a settlement was reached.

The remainder of the Cabinet meeting involved various questions such as reference of the dispute to the International Court, the security of ENG, and the early stages of disagreement between the Netherlands and Indonesia – none of which brought forth anything new. Casey did, however, re-emphasize the Prime Minister’s initial statement by saying that “Australia is not a party principal to the dispute” and that it “has never taken any lead or initiative.” Additionally, Menzies noted that the retirement

of Drees – who had had a “galvanising influence” on Dutch policy – might have an important effect on the Netherlands position. Spender, and then Casey, had in the past been careful not to give any impression that Australia was anything but strongly committed to the idea that it should have a central part in the resolution of the problem, or to expose their fears that the Dutch might give in, thus revealing cracks in the Dutch-Australian front. It is doubtful that this indication of shift went unnoticed by the Indonesians either.

The slant of comments in Cabinet certainly did not pass unobserved in External Affairs. In a memorandum for Casey and the Prime Minister entitled “Subandrio’s Visit – Next Steps”, Tange wrote that the meeting was excellent in creating a cordial atmosphere, but he expressed concern that Subandrio had gained an advantage at a number of points.¹⁴ Firstly, he thought that the Foreign Minister could declare that Australian Government policy was now founded entirely on a “legal interpretation...of Dutch rights”. Secondly, it could be said that Australian Ministers had seen the possibility that the Dutch might alter their position on these rights, and that, apart from the legal issue, they had not raised any objection to Indonesia acquiring the territory. Final concessions that Subandrio could claim were that Australia did not consider itself a party principal in the affair, that it would not attempt to act as one, and that the Ministers had not disagreed with the idea that the Netherlands should negotiate with the Indonesians.

Tange recommended that the defence of the Australian position should be widened beyond the legal by stressing that the Commonwealth Government was not sure incorporation of WNG into Indonesia took heed of native welfare or the right of self-determination. Perhaps in recognition of the fact that the Government had now reduced its room for manoeuvre, the Secretary also admitted that the best reply to the now real possibility that Subandrio would ask Australia to encourage negotiations on WNG would be silence and the (rather diversionary) comment that Australia would have to oppose Indonesia if the matter was raised in the UN. He concluded:

In short, I do not think the Cabinet should go any further towards providing Dr. Subandrio with the “gleam of hope” of a change in the Australian attitude: but rather that Ministers need to say other things and, in addition, tie him down to an agreed communique to avoid misunderstanding with the Dutch and/or public disagreement with Indonesia as to what our real attitude is.

¹⁴ See draft by Tange, 11 February 1959, in A1838/276, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1, NAA.

The cautionary note sounded by Tange alarmed the Ministers.¹⁵ They did not know how Subandrio had read the concession, but they saw that there were four possibilities: Subandrio might now misinterpret Australia's preferences over WNG; he might deliberately misrepresent these preferences; he might not care what these preferences were, knowing that Australian policy now contained an inherent weakness; and any of these responses by Subandrio might allow the Dutch to see for themselves that Australian policy was more conditional. On an international scale, these possibilities could result in a crisis in either Jakarta or The Hague, or further damage Australia's already weak ability to influence events. It had to be rammed home to Subandrio that Australia was thoroughly against any change in WNG, a statement had to be constructed to make sure the concession was not misused (and was blurred) – and hopefully both these moves would, if Subandrio had seen the deeper outlines of Australian policy, make him forget (as the Ministers initially had) that revelation of non-interference indicated a dormant bias in Australia's attitude.

Casey tried to make progress on these objectives a day later on the flight to Melbourne. He proposed to Subandrio that a joint *communiqué* be formulated, and later in the conversation he said that he would like to add to the Cabinet discussion by making it clear that self-determination “was a very important consideration in Australian policy.”¹⁶ In a moment of wishful thinking, and perhaps wanting to jettison the concession completely, he also said that “Australia had hoped, and continued to hope, that the Dutch New Guinea question might be allowed to rest for a period – perhaps two or three years.” Subandrio said politely that he was personally trying to “prevent tension” concerning WNG, and that there was no intention of placing the issue before the UN in 1959, but it was clear he would not agree to Irian returning to ‘cold storage’. Sensing that the Australians were tightening, neither would he allow development of a situation in which the concession could be diluted beyond recognition. He said his acceptance of a joint *communiqué* would depend on how DNG was treated. He asked Casey to repeat his joint statement with Anak Agung (a former Indonesian Foreign Minister) of late 1955,¹⁷ whilst going “further”. He hinted at what

¹⁵ It is not clear what Tange's personal opinion of the state of Cabinet policy was, but there is evidence in his memorandum that he was not fully cognizant of the fact that Cabinet would now choose relations with Indonesia or a non-communist neighbour in an emergency. Whatever the case, his description of the way Subandrio could use what had been said was enough for Casey and Menzies to see that they had dangerously laid bare secret policy. For confirmation that Cabinet reassessed the position between the first and second meetings, see Casey's conversation with a member of the British Embassy recorded in telegram 96 from Canberra to CRO, 17 February 1959, in FO 371/144082, PRO.

¹⁶ Conversation between Subandrio and Casey, 12 February 1959, in A1838/276, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1, NAA.

¹⁷ The relevant portion of the Casey-Anak Agung (Indonesian Foreign Minister, 1955) statement read: “The two Ministers agree that whilst maintaining their respective views on the West New Guinea

was meant by this when, later in the conversation, he said that “the main thing he hoped to get out of his discussions...was an understanding that Australia would not object to the West New Guinea dispute being settled between the Dutch and Indonesia.” Realizing that Australia was now faced with considerable difficulty, Casey made no comment.

Casey had cleared away potential misconception about what Australia wanted for WNG, but because Subandrio had taken some control over the wording of a statement, the chance of deliberate misuse of the concession still existed. His firmness and perspicacity also suggested that he knew something of the real outlines of Australian policy, both present and contingent. And as for the Dutch, all this obviously meant they might still work out what Cabinet had said in secret on 5 January. The only choice, it turned out, was to give the Foreign Minister a version of the concession that put far greater emphasis on technical aspects, whilst thoroughly hedging it, in word and speech, with traditional WNG policy platitudes. This would not erase the possibility of Subandrio distorting Australian preferences over WNG, or of the Dutch seeing a shift in Australian policy. However, Subandrio might be encouraged again to forget what the concession showed of Australian policy, and be given less room to bastardize the *communiqué*. He could also still take away the feeling (as originally intended) that the Australian Government was not against Indonesia *per se*. The Dutch, for their part, might be convinced the concession was a theoretical exercise for the benefit of Australian-Indonesian relations. A pleasing irony of this acrobatic performance was that the statement could also continue to contain a precedent for reversal of Australian policy if necessary.

At a Cabinet meeting in Melbourne on 13 February, the Australians thus focussed on technical and political issues. Menzies began by announcing that discussions had been “very helpful”, but that “it was desirable to develop them a little further to ensure that no misunderstanding or confusion could arise between the parties as to the outcome.”¹⁸ After stressing the importance of NG in the mind of the Australian public, and the revulsion of the latter to the seizure in Indonesia of Dutch property, the Prime Minister moved on to the WNG problem. Australia, he re-asserted, was a bystander, yet it could not be an “indifferent by-stander”; it was a “very interested by-stander”, and its “great ambition” was to have WNG – along with ENG – developed to the point of self-determination, and it was for this reason that an administrative

question the matter should be dealt with by means of peaceful discussion and with the firm desire to uphold peace and stability in the South East Asian area.” See Press Release, 2 November 1955, in A1209/23, 57/5298, pt 2, NAA.

agreement had been formed with the Netherlands. On the topic of sovereignty, Menzies said again that Australia believed the Dutch possessed it, and that it would only recognize a change that was brought about by the International Court, or free and fair negotiations between the parties principal. He also warned Subandrio that Australia could not urge the Dutch to sit down with the Indonesians.

It is impossible to know with certainty what, at this point, Subandrio thought the Australian position was. Nevertheless, it seems he believed Menzies and his Ministers were now more ready to come to terms with an Indonesian WNG than before, though they were worried about political fallout associated with rapid or violent transfer. His aim was therefore to get as much out of the Australians as would be useful for isolating the Dutch, without scaring the Liberal Government back into an ultra hard-line position. His method was to soothe and irritate Australian fears in a subtle manner. He began by saying that the Prime Minister's elucidation of the Australian stance was "realistic and fair and satisfactory", and that he realized the Government could not alter its position. He added that Indonesia was in no hurry for negotiations, and would not appeal to the UN in 1959. On the other hand, he spoke of "the emotional public feeling which exists in Indonesia, and particularly as it exists against Australia", and emphasized that whilst this might be unjustified, it had to be dealt with. He again talked of the importance of friendship with Australia as a symbol of Indonesia's relationship with the West, and the fluid and dangerous situation in Asia (by which he was doubtless referring to contingencies involving communist aggression). Indonesia wanted strong links with the West because of this, and "friendship with Australia [was] most important within this context." Unfortunately, relations with Australia stood "in need of improvement and they [would] only be improved by collective effort."

This, Subandrio must have thought, was the right atmosphere for discussion on the joint statement that began a short time later. Ambassador Helmi began with Subandrio's most ambitious objective; he requested that Australia might indicate that it was neutral towards the question of sovereignty. Menzies responded that Australia was not neutral on the question, and he repeated the outline of his Government's position. Seeing that Helmi's claim had failed, Subandrio said he wondered if it would be possible if an Australian profession of support for the Dutch could be omitted. The Australians, following the only route available, would not move. Menzies replied that he did not want a quarrel with the Dutch, and he had gone as far as any Australian Government could go. Still, he implied, this did not mean Australia was unreasonable;

¹⁸ Minutes of Cabinet meeting, 13 February 1959, in A4943, Vol. 1, NAA.

he assured Subandrio that Australia would never interfere with a transfer to Indonesia properly negotiated and, pushed again by Helmi to “convey the feeling that Australia is not hostile to Indonesian claims”, he said nebulously that a suitable form of words might be found.

Both groups would have been disappointed with this discussion. The Indonesians had not been able to extract more out of the Australians, and the latter had not been able to fool Subandrio. He had kept his head; he continued to appear to know that Australian policy was less solid, and he might seek to test the limits of Australian resolve at a later date.¹⁹ On the other hand, there were positives for both sides as well. For Cabinet, Subandrio had seen there were considerable obstacles in Australia to a vigorous campaign against the Dutch, and he had not pulled away from a statement (vital in connection with the Dutch, and for minimizing chances of Indonesia misusing the concession) in spite of Menzies’ firmness during the talk. For Subandrio, a slightly more fearful Australian Government attitude than perhaps expected was seen over political repercussions to immediate change, but Australian vulnerability over WNG could still be discerned, and a concession – if technical – could be used against the Dutch and Australians in the international arena.

Before the talk ended, it had been agreed that the parties study a draft statement submitted by Casey, and that a meeting be held later between officials in an effort to agree on a draft that could be scrutinized by the Ministers. This meeting was held the next morning in Casey’s residence at Berwick.²⁰ The joint statement covered a number of issues apart from WNG, none of which proved points of disagreement. Regarding Irian, there was some bargaining,²¹ but the limitations revealed the day before provided the framework; the relevant segment of the final statement would have been as expected:

The Ministers reviewed in detail Indonesian-Australian relations. There was a full explanation of the considerations which have led each country to a different view over West New Guinea (West Irian), with Australia recognizing Netherlands sovereignty and recognizing the principle of self-determination. This difference remains, but the position was clarified by an explanation from the Australian Ministers that it followed from their position of respect for agreements on the rights of sovereignty that if any agreement were reached between the parties principal,

¹⁹ Conveying this sense of anxiety, a member of the British Embassy commented to London: “Casey emphasised to me that there had been no shift in Australia’s position. But I cannot help feeling that [the Australian Ministers] may be wondering whether they may not have gone too far in their statement that they would accept any agreement freely arrived at”. Telegram 96 from Canberra to CRO, 17 February 1959, in FO 371/144082, PRO.

²⁰ See record of 14 February meeting, completed by Plimsoll on 20 February 1959, in A1838/276, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1, NAA.

²¹ After this, Casey rang Menzies in Canberra and attained approval for the final draft. See *loc.cit.*

arrived at by peaceful processes and in accordance with internationally accepted principles, Australia would not oppose such an agreement.²²

III

Unfortunately for Cabinet, neither large segments of the Australian public, nor the Dutch, accepted the Casey-Subandrio statement as a meaningless concession in aid of better bilateral relations. It was evident to them, as it had been to Subandrio, that the Government would not in the past have announced it would not oppose a settlement reached by the Dutch and the Indonesians. A change in policy, they thought, must have occurred. On February 16, Sydney's *Daily Mirror* ran the front-page headline "N. G. "Sellout" Storm", and described the Government's decision not to oppose an agreement legally reached over WNG as "a complete turnaround in Australian foreign policy."²³ Similarly, an editorial in *The Sydney Morning Herald* said that Subandrio "left Australia yesterday with a remarkable diplomatic victory to his credit", and that the notion that Australia could not effectively oppose a freely negotiated agreement made "nonsense of the attitude Australia has hitherto adopted on West New Guinea."²⁴ Casey also received a number of letters, including one from F. Bland of Murwillumbah, who wrote:

The public is surprised at your weakness to the slit eyed Dr. Subandrio...you have sold Australian pride. Sold to people who worked hand in hand with the Japs....You also sold our best friends the Dutch....You have also given the Australian Soldier...away to our would be enemies. Have a bit of guts and don't carry your weakness any further – you are too weak...I'll bet the slit eye's having a laugh at you now. Change and be wise.²⁵

It would be incorrect to assert that all the letters sent to the Minister of External Affairs were of this nature, though the above represented the views of most Australians interested in the issue.

The Dutch reaction, when it came, was also vehement. Four days after the announcement, Lovink, on behalf of his Government, wrote an urgent letter to Casey. He began by saying that "certain Netherlands circles", who had always held that the US and Australia would oppose the transfer of WNG to Indonesia or any change in WNG's status, now felt that such ideas appeared to be "without foundation" – a situation that would have repercussions on Netherlands policy.²⁶ Furthermore, these circles felt that

²² See DEA press release, 15 February 1959, in A1838/276, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1, NAA. Phelps' version of events surrounding the joint statement focuses too much on the meeting at which the final wording was negotiated, and misses the complex background. See Phelps, *op.cit.*, pp. 306-10.

²³ *Sydney Daily Mirror*, 16 February 1959. A selection of articles on the statement, including the latter, may be found in A1838/283, 3036/6/1, Pt 35, NAA.

²⁴ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 February 1959.

²⁵ F. Bland to Casey, 18 February 1959, in A1838/283, 3036/6/1, Pt 36, NAA.

²⁶ Lovink to Casey, 19 February 1959, in A1838/276, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1, NAA.

even if Australia indicated a preference for Netherlands sovereignty, the Dutch Government need not take this into account, for the Australians had declared themselves happy with any agreement reached between the Netherlands and Indonesia. Although Lovink said that this line of thought was “of course...very unwelcome to my government”, it was clear that the “circles” mentioned included the Dutch Cabinet. Their observations therefore contained something of a threat. Casey was asked to urgently consider making a public statement clarifying the reasons why Australia would not encourage negotiations or the institution of any process that would lead to transfer to Indonesia. Lovink continued:

My Government considers it of the utmost importance that the Australian Government makes it perfectly clear that the theoretical acceptance of a hypothetical agreement between the Netherlands and Indonesia on the question of Netherlands New Guinea has merely and purely merit in the juridical sense and from a standpoint of international law, but that from a point of view of practical politics Australia attaches the greatest importance to a peaceful and undisturbed continuation of the present development of the whole island of New Guinea, as envisaged in the Australian-Netherlands declaration of November, 1957.

Lovink concluded by noting that by Casey’s statement to the House of February 18 regarding Subandrio’s visit strengthened the interpretation of the various “circles” in the Netherlands, an interpretation “which, it is found, is very hard to disprove.”²⁷

Faced with an irate public, and a vulnerable and potentially fatally discouraged Netherlands Government on the eve of a Dutch election,²⁸ the Australians were forced to take urgent, if not entirely unexpected, palliative action. An advantage that Cabinet did have was that the public and the Dutch were not privy, as Subandrio had been, to the first Cabinet meeting from which the trouble arose. Only the final result could be seen, which, while including the concession, had been made more defensible. Another convenience was that any comment now made on the concession was not subject to Subandrio’s veto, as the statement had been; the truth could be bent a little further. Menzies made full use of these benefits in a juridically centred, and partially deceptive, statement to parliament on 24 February.²⁹ Opening with a declaration of Australian

²⁷ In his report, Casey said that Australia’s non-opposition to an agreement between the Dutch and Indonesians “represents no new departure in our policy, but I believe it does clarify to Indonesia a position upon which they have held doubts...I would judge from some public comments on the terms of this particular part of the joint announcement that some unwarranted assumptions are being made. One of them is that, if there were an agreement between the Netherlands and Indonesia, only one result in terms of the future of the western half of the New Guinea is possible. I suggest that, on the contrary, there is a variety of possibilities, depending largely upon the decision of the Netherlands and Indonesia to accept any one of them.” See *Parliamentary Debates*, 18 February 1959, Vol. 22, pp. 36-39.

²⁸ In a further letter from Lovink on February 21, the Dutch used the pretext of an upcoming election speech by Luns - “who would find it impossible not to touch on the subject of the Australian views on the result of the visit of...Dr. Subandrio” – as a means of applying further pressure on the Liberal Government to present an official statement based on the outlines of past references to the WNG issue. See letter from Lovink to Tange, 21 February 1959, in A1838/276, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1, NAA.

²⁹ *Parliamentary Debates*, 24 February 1959, Vol. 22, pp. 194-198.

policy, the Prime Minister made five points. The first was that the Government had supported, and continued to support, Dutch sovereignty. Secondly, if Dutch control was to change, it would have to be done in accordance with international law and, thirdly, the Australians would accept the jurisdiction of the International Court, but not that of the General Assembly. Here, Menzies said his Government advocated reference to the Court – something that the Dutch had been prepared to do, while the Indonesians had not. Finally, it was claimed that Australia had “always maintained that the paramount interest ultimately is that of the indigenous population” – a view that recognized sovereignty, and yet saw the future in the light of self-determination. This was deliberately misleading, for even after realizing that the blunder of the first Cabinet meeting had to be redressed, Papuan welfare had been only one of a series of political factors used by Menzies and Casey to brace a legal argument.³⁰

Moving on to the question of whether there had been any change in Australian policy during Subandrio’s visit, Menzies continued to construct a smokescreen. He endeavoured to offset acceptance of a negotiated settlement by suggesting that although the Liberal position was presented to Subandrio in a juridical sense, it had been made clear that Australian policy was unchanged for practical purposes. For example, he said the Foreign Minister had been told Australia would recognize a Dutch-Indonesian agreement, but it did not follow that Australia was not deeply concerned about the future of WNG’s inhabitants; we “expect”, he continued, a program aimed at self-determination, similar to that in operation in ENG. In reality, Menzies had said that it was Australia’s “great ambition” to have WNG developed in the same way as the other side of the island, and that his Government “respects sovereignty as it now exists and would respect immediately and without ill-will *any* altered sovereignty if the alteration were reached by the proper process of the law”.³¹ In other words, he had told Subandrio that self-determination was Australia’s current objective, yet it would neither oppose nor even harbour bitterness *vis-à-vis* any future arrangement legally reached.

As a corollary to the idea that Australia expected self-determination to be a continuing priority in WNG regardless of the nature of the administration, and that the Government had not forgotten its “special relations” with the Netherlands or the joint declaration of 1957, Menzies stressed towards the end of his speech that

³⁰ In fact, Plimsoll of the DEA had been uneasy about use of the word “paramount”, and felt that the Prime Minister’s fifth point was “too categorical in relation to what we said to Subandrio”. See covering note to Menzies’ draft, 23 February 1959, in A1838/276, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1, NAA.

³¹ Emphasis mine. See minutes of Cabinet meeting, 13 February 1959, in A4943, Vol. 1, NAA.

We...have a lively and continuing interest in the result of any negotiations should the Netherlands, freely of its own free will, decide to engage in them. We would therefore naturally expect our voice to be heard on matters which affect the future of New Guinea.

This did not, of course, mirror the general tenor of talks with Subandrio,³² but the attempt to cover-up accidentally revealed changes in Australian policy was successful regarding the Dutch Government and the Australian public. Representing the former, Luns demonstrated that he was unaware of the new bias in Australian policy towards Indonesia by declaring the statements as “good”, despite saying that the initial reference to hypothetical negotiations was regrettable.³³ In Australia, the press fracas soon died down, and the Opposition was able to make little capital out of a Government policy that was now more carefully guarded.

The outcome was not completely positive, however. There was disconcerting confirmation that the Netherlands might change policy; Opposition parties and public opinion were shown to be fragile. Baron van Tuyll was perhaps more correct in saying that the position of the Dutch Government, in terms of public opinion, had been weakened by the Subandrio visit, and that

whilst a lot had been done...to soften the original impact of the Communique on the minds of those interested in the question...when the subject came up in political circles, those advocating a firm adherence to the present policy would have the Australian declaration in the Communique used against them.³⁴

In Australia, the controversy had made clear that it would not be easy for the Government to introduce changes on WNG smoothly if these proved necessary. A memorandum for Tange by three members of the DEA's South and South East Asia Branch explained that cleavages in public opinion had immediately become obvious after the 15th.³⁵ Apart from those who favoured the *communique*, there was a group that found fault with the announcement, believing that “it reflected a weakening of our opposition to Indonesian occupation of Netherlands New Guinea.” “Their criticism”, the memorandum continued, “appeared motivated in varying degrees by concern for Australian security and by moral considerations.” After canvassing these two motives

³² An officer in the DEA questioned the use of the word “result” and asked: “Does this reflect [the] atmosphere of [the] Melbourne talks with Subandrio?” See attachment by J. P. Quinn (Assistant Secretary, DEA) on Menzies' draft, 23 February 1959, in A1838/276, TS3036/6/1, Pt 1, NAA.

³³ Cablegram 39 from McCarthy, 25 February 1959, in A1838/283, 3036/6/1, Pt 36, NAA.

³⁴ E. McCarthy (Australian Ambassador to the Netherlands) to Tange, 9 April 1959, in A1838/283, 3036/6/1, Pt 37, NAA. Van Tuyll reinforced this sentiment on the same day: “In the discussion in the past within political circles, the point had constantly been made that Australia wanted the Dutch to stay....The fact that a weakening by the Dutch in the face of Indonesian claims would be questioned by Australia was a point that weighed quite a lot with those who were required to review it within the political parties”. See *loc.cit.*

³⁵ Memorandum by R. N. Hamilton (Officer, SEA Section, DEA), Quinn, and an unidentified officer, to Tange, 27 February 1959, in A1838/283, 3036/6/1, Pt 36, NAA.

in detail, the paper concluded with a significant section entitled “Limits to future action”:

Should any change in the status quo be envisaged, it will be necessary in formulating policy to take into account the strong body of opinion which...distrusts Indonesia and opposes direct Indonesian influence into New Guinea...[and which] demands that self-determination should be safeguarded for all Papuans....It would therefore seem necessary for Australia to work towards a situation in which, should the Dutch decide to modify their present policy, Australia would be immediately consulted and would be in a position to influence the direction of the settlement to take account of both security requirements and self-determination. Outright Indonesian occupation would run counter to widely expressed public opinion on both these aspects.

A third negative for Cabinet in the aftermath were indications of Indonesian perceptions of the visit which, if differing, were uniformly worrying. Sukarno had not been impressed enough by Subandrio’s feats to give a personal guarantee that force would not be used against Irian. He was therefore perhaps continuing to consider more violent options. Subandrio, meanwhile, showed that he still believed Australian policy had changed, commenting to McIntyre that “the Indonesian Government would in practice expect to consult us but to admit this publicly would resurrect the fear here that Australia would block any move towards settlement.”³⁶

Subandrio’s visit, along with rumblings in the Netherlands, Australia, and Jakarta, were clear demonstrations for Cabinet that the policy instituted in January would provide no instant elixir for the WNG-Indonesia problem. Not only had it proved exceptionally difficult to enmesh greater recognition of Indonesia’s importance within the fabric of a relatively traditional WNG policy, but the process of trying had reemphasized that the alternative of an ‘emergency’ transfer to Indonesia would be both difficult to avoid and highly unpalatable. However, as ‘difficult’ was not yet thought ‘impossible’, Cabinet’s answer to this was to push, if unhappily, the policy of 5 January even harder.

IV

The intentions behind the torturous manoeuvres of the Menzies Cabinet during Subandrio’s visit were consistent with the earlier decisions that had themselves revealed a Ministerial view of Australia as a heavily reduced power. Certainly, Cabinet had shown that in trying for a policy previously appropriate to a particular status, it could no longer behave as if it was in complete possession of that status. The concession, for instance, exhibited recognition that the balance of power was changing in Indonesia’s favour, even as it doubled as a means of minimizing damage caused by

³⁶ Cablegram 114 from McIntyre, 27 February 1959, in A1838/283, 3036/6/1, Pt 36, NAA.

denial of WNG to Indonesia. Though the Government hoped to have the Dutch hold on in WNG, as attempts to temper the concession suggested, it could no longer treat Indonesia with contempt.

These sentiments were not entirely shared by the electorate. Reaction to the Casey-Subandrio statement disclosed that in 1959 Cabinet's perceptions of the country's decline as a middle power were not representative of 'Australia's' position in the same way that views of Australia's dominance had been through most of the 1950's. Public and Government opinion was split. A large proportion of the former did not believe the aims of the Indonesian Government, or events in the Republic, warranted a change in policy on Australia's sphere of influence.³⁷ Australia, it was thought, had the necessary power to maintain an independent policy, and because it did so, any sign of weakness – especially as the Cold War escalated in SEA – was inexcusably foolish.³⁸

With this division in mind, along with the public realisation in January 1962 of Australian limitations, it is possible to see early 1959 as part of a period of transition for Australia. Important components of what constituted the nation had surrendered the notion that Australia could deal with the area south of Singapore in a different manner to mainland SEA – yet other important groups in Australia had lagged behind in the redefinition of post-War reality, and were only to catch up later.

³⁷ Gallup Polls of 1956 and 1958 showed an increase of approximately 10% of those favouring a United Nations trusteeship over WNG (see Aitkin and Wolfers, *op.cit.*, p. 204). This appears to indicate greater recognition that the Australian Government was not in a position to implement its preferences. However, support for Indonesia in the polls was little changed, and the vast bulk of those with an opinion continued to want direct Australian or Dutch control.

³⁸ Memories of Darwin, the Kokoda Trail, and the Owen Stanley Range might have meant less to the teenage or 20 to 30 year old generation, but they were vivid for those who had lived and worked in the war years, and who believed that invasion had been narrowly avoided. This group perhaps composed the bulk of those bitterly opposed to the joint statement.