

Launch of the New Colombo Plan in Malaysia

Speech by Minister for Foreign Affairs Julie Bishop MP 6 August 2015

Friends of Australia, friends of Malaysia, what a pleasure it is to be here in Kuala Lumpur, first for the East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting and the ASEAN Regional Forum which have been so exquisitely hosted by Malaysia. I'm delighted to see Dato' Sri Reezal Merican Naina Merican here this evening. I know he's standing in for my colleague Dato' Sri Anifah Aman.

I left a meeting just a short while ago that was in fact being chaired by the Malaysian Foreign Minister, so I'm delighted that you are here this evening and I'm so pleased we've had the opportunity to meet over the last few days as I have taken part in these meetings that have been hosted here in KL.

But, importantly I am delighted to be here to launch the Australian Government's overseas study initiative, the New Colombo Plan, in Malaysia.

And it's apt that we should do it this evening here in the Australian High Commission in the 60th year of Australia's diplomatic presence in Malaysia.

I am very proud that Australia was one of the first countries to formally recognise what was then Malaya's independence in the 1950s and indeed it came as no coincidence that we did that because the Australian Foreign

Minister in the 1950s, Richard Casey, said that Australia's place in the world was in Southeast Asia. That our foreign policy would largely focus on Southeast Asia. Decades later he has been proven absolutely correct.

And our relationship with Malaysia is one of a strong, strategic and economic partner.

We have a very close defence relationship, we have a joint defence program, we are part of the Five Power Defence Arrangements.

We also have a very strong trading relationship. Indeed, we have a Free Trade Agreement with Malaysia. We are also part of the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement and we are both participants in the negotiations for the Trans Pacific Partnership and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

Should all of these Free Trade Agreements come to pass we will truly find that holy grail of a free trade zone across the Asia Pacific, and Australia and Malaysia will be at the heart of that.

Australia and Malaysia were both original members of the original Colombo Plan. Now this was an idea that came out of the devastation of World War II and it was appreciated that for Southeast Asian countries to develop their economic intention to grow economically and socially and politically, the countries would need skilled workers, they would need education and training. And so at a meeting in Colombo in early 1951 Australia, Malaysia and others committed to this idea of the Colombo Plan that would bring Commonwealth students to Australia to study in our universities, gain Australian qualifications, live among

Australian communities, develop friendships and connections with Australian families and Australian students, and then return home to be part of the economic development, the building of prosperity in their home countries.

And I think it's notable that between the 1950s and the 1980s the original Colombo Plan saw about 40,000 students study in Australia. 4,000 of them were young Malaysian men and women, and thousands of other Malaysians have followed in their wake and studied in Australian universities.

So we have an enormous alumni of Malaysian people who have studied in our universities and it is such an asset to our country to have these connections.

Dato' Sri Mustapa Mohamed, one of the Colombo Plan alumni, the current Minister for International Trade and Industry, we are delighted to see you here this evening.

So when we came to government in September 2013, I was determined to ensure that our engagement in our region was not just in defence and economic and security terms but deep people-to-people links and the manifestation of our foreign policy is indeed in the New Colombo Plan, the original in reverse.

And we have committed to ensuring that thousands of young Australian students will have the opportunity to live and study and gain work experience in nations in the Asia-Pacific region.

We started with a pilot program in 2014 in just four locations. It was so successful that we decided to roll it out in 2015 across 38 countries in our region. Today 5,500 students will be undertaking New Colombo Plan experiences in our region.

By the end of next year, just three years from the commencement of the pilot, around 10,000 Australian undergraduates will have had a New Colombo Plan experience.

I think what sets this overseas study program apart from others is that there is a component of work experience attached to it where students get the opportunity to see how business is conducted in the host country. It is focussed on our region which sets it apart from other programs, and it is very tailored to the students' needs and aspirations.

We are very flexible about the courses, the opportunities, the experiences that we can offer and this comes down to extraordinary cooperation between governments, between universities, the international student sector, alumni groupings, of course our high commissions and our embassies around the region and also businesses, NGOs and the like.

So it really is a partnership at so many levels. As one would expect given we have such a significant alumni of Malaysian students here, the New Colombo Plan has been a great success already in Malaysia.

150 students have studied here, we have four scholarship winners those who are spending at least two semesters in the host country and this evening we have Tyce Barton and Jotham Young, two young Australians.

Tyce studying engineering and Jotham studying economics at the University of Malaya. They represent the very best of young Australian students bright, articulate, dynamic, looking to absorb as much as they can of their time here in Malaysia.

You see, I want it to be a rite of passage for undergraduates in our universities, the young people who are going to be the leaders of the future to have an experience of living, studying and working in our region. Coming back to Australia with new perspectives, new ideas new insights and importantly with friendships and connections and networks that will hopefully last a lifetime. We have a number of people here this evening who are testament to that experience.

So I thank the Malaysian Government for being part of the New Colombo Plan, for so willingly embracing the concept and assisting us roll out this plan in Malaysia.

And so it's my very great pleasure. You have no idea what a joy it is for me to see this program reach this stage. It is a dream turned into a reality. So it is my very great pleasure to officially launch the Australian Government's New Colombo Plan in Malaysia as another example of the strength of this wonderful relationship.