

Inaugural Conference of the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies

University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

31 March – 3 April 2005

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OFFICIAL OPENING OF CENTRE

The inaugural conference of the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia, began on Thursday, 31 March 2005, with the official opening of the Centre. The Centre is found on several floors of a building on the St Lucia Campus of the University, and has been operating out of the offices in that building for some time, but the opportunity was taken to have an official opening of the Centre at the time of the inaugural conference organised by the Centre.

The official opening took place in the University of Queensland Centre not far from the offices of the Peace and Conflict Studies Centre, and was performed by the Governor of Queensland, Ms Quentin Bryce AC. The secretary-general of the Pacific Islands forum, Mr Greg Urwin provided the keynote address for the occasion, and Professor Kevin Clements the foundation director of the Centre gave a speech of welcome and reminded listeners of the moving passage in Psalm 85 written more than 2000 years ago but as inspiring today as it was then: ‘Love and faithfulness met together and justice and peace kissed each other’.

CONFERENCE

The conference itself was held away from the grounds of the University of Queensland at the Bardon Conference Centre, which is set in the midst of Australian bush, about 20 minutes drive from Brisbane. This provided a very attractive setting for the conference, especially for participants from overseas, for whom the early morning call of Australian wildlife provided a very appealing and invigorating start to the day.

Day 1

The first day, Friday 1 April 2005 began with three opening papers in a plenary session. The opening speech was provided by the director of the Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, Mr Michael Williams, and this was followed by two papers which spoke of more international and regional aspects of peace and conflict.

Following this there was a framing session. Four speakers - Honourable Justice Sir Albert R Parmler, Professor Luc Reychler, Ms Veva Wendt and Dr. Sinclair Dinnen – introduced the key themes of the conference. The topics covered in this session were Customary Law versus Introduced Law; Peace and Conflict Assessment Methodology; Strengthening Regional Institutions – the Role and Significance of the

Pacific Islands Forum; and Re-Configuring the Governance of Security in Modern Melanesia.

The conference then split into five break out groups. In seminar room 1 the focus was on Development and Security in Pacific Island Countries – ACPACS and the International Peace Academy New York. In seminar room 4 the focus was on the State, the Market, Governance and Conflict. In Banksia room the focus was on Prospects for Peace and Reconciliation. In Meeting room 2 discussion was centred on Roundtable: A draft Pacific Charter on Human Rights. In seminar room 2, the group look at Courts, Constitutions and the Rule of Law. I joined the group that focused on the courts, constitutions and the rule of law. In that group it was highlighted that in Solomon Islands the subsistence economy is not enough to generate funds to support the courts. Judges salaries need to be paid and courts should be friendly. These are some of the issues that need to be addressed if the rule of law is to be implemented.

Leading on from this was a discussion on constitutional fundamentalism. Professor Suri Ratnapala provided a talk on this. He pointed out that constitutional fundamentalism could be divided up into three parts: - paper constitution, actual constitution and philosophical constitution. According to Professor Suri a constitutional government occurs when the philosophical constitution is reflected in the paper constitution and realised in the experience of people.

The Venerable Master Chin Kung, President, Pure Land Learning College, Honorary Professor, the University of Queensland and Griffith University was given a special session to speak. His paper was entitled 'True Sincere Love is the Key to Solving Conflicts'. In that paper he explored the causes of conflict and then went on to explain how sincere love could resolve conflicts. He also mentioned that morality and virtue are important elements that should be part of sincere love as well. The Venerable Master was instrumental in providing financial support for the conference. It was certainly a gesture of love and kindness.

Later on in the afternoon there were other break out group sessions which discussed issues such as Post Conflict Reconciliation in the Asia Pacific Region; Law Reform, Justice, ADR and Mediation in the Asia Pacific Region and the Asia Pacific Regional Prospects. In the Law Reform, Justice, ADR and Mediation in the Asia Pacific Region session two members of the USP Law School delivered papers: Professor Don Paterson who described customary land tribunals in Vanuatu; and Mr. Yoli Tomtavala who spoke about customary dispute settlement processes in the South Pacific region more generally.

The final programme for the first day of the conference was a plenary session entitled Pacific Speaking to Australia. Individual representatives from various Pacific Island countries were called to the front of the Amphitheatre to express their views. They were also to respond to questions raised from the floor. This was an interesting session because of the types of questions asked and the type of responses made by the Pacific Islanders.

Day 2

The second day of the conference began with a plenary session entitled 'We talk you listen – Aboriginal and Indigenous Voices from Australia/ Aotearoa New Zealand'. In this session, Mr. Michael Williams, Director for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, The University of Queensland and Mr. Lydon Murphy, Griffith University spoke. It was a moving session, especially when Professor Kevin Clements stood up and made an apology to the people of the land.

This was followed by a split into break out groups as in day one. The session on development and security in the Pacific Island countries – ASPACS and the International Peace Academy New York continued on in day 2. It was chaired by Professor Bob Hughes, the Head of the USP Law School. Other sessions from mid morning to 4 pm were – Conflict Management/ Transformation in the Asia Pacific Region; Small Arms and Light Weapons; Women, Peace Building and Community Engagement; Pacific Maritime

Boundaries and Fisheries; Workshop: Working Collaboratively on issues affecting Indigenous Communities – A Practical Perspective; Australia Federal Perspective on the Asia Pacific; Post Conflict Reconstruction in Timor Leste; Law Reform, Justice, ADR and Mediation in the Asia Pacific Region; the Role of Police in Conflict Transformation; the Prospects for Peace in Nepal, Fiji and New Caledonia; and Workshop on the South Pacific Anti Nuclear Movement.

In the late afternoon there were four other sessions – Post Conflict Reconstruction in the Solomon Islands – RAMSI Results and Experiences; Post Conflict Reconstruction in Cambodia; Indigenous Knowledge, Governance and Peace; The Prospects for Peace in Philippines; Peace Education in the Asia Pacific Region; and The Use of Technology in Dispute Resolution. In the Post Conflict Reconstruction in the Solomon Islands – RAMSI Results and Experiences session a member of the USP Law School delivered a paper: - Mr. Joseph D. Foukona made comments on the *Facilitation of International Assistance Act 2003* (No. 1 of 2003) of Solomon Islands.

Day 3

Day three was the final day of the conference. It began with a plenary session on the State and Violence in the Asia Pacific Region. Many speakers from various institutions took part in this session. It was a very enriching session because of the way each speaker talked about the inter-relationship between state and violence. The views were diverse and this made the plenary session quite unique.

There were only four sessions in day three – The Prospects for Peace in Solomon Islands; International Responses to Peace and Security; Peace Education in the Asia Pacific Region; Constitutions, Rights and the Rule of Law in the Region; and Workshop: Contemporary Movements in Mediation and Peace. This was followed by a final plenary session in the Amphitheatre. One of the participants from East Timor started the session with a song from his native dialect. It was melodious. Afterwards, people from the organising committee went around the room giving microphones to participants to share their experiences about the conference.

CONCLUSION

In short, the conference covered so many issues and topics on peace, justice and reconciliation in three days. The wealth of knowledge shared among participants during the sessions in the three days was tremendous. The inclusion of indigenous people to be part of the conference to share their views on peace and conflict was quite unique. Interaction between participants from different backgrounds, cultures and institutions to share experiences of peace, justice and reconciliation was remarkable. The conference organisers are worth commending.

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