

CHRIS LYNCH, Debate-summary, Yarra Room, Melbourne Town Hall, 30 Oct 2022

(video-recording (00:44:00—51:00))

Sarah Muyunga: Our next speaker is Chris Lynch. Chris is a white New Guinean-Australian of Gaelic heritage. He is a teacher who resides in Wurundjeri Country near Merri Creek, and is writing a novel. Let's welcome Chris to present his argument that Australia IS supporting West Papua properly.

Chris Lynch

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

Before concluding the Affirmative team's arguments, I'd like to briefly discuss Australia's engagement with Indonesia, including trade and people-to-people connections. These are important, because without them, we can't expect to have much influence on what Indonesia does or doesn't do.

In terms of trade, there are billions of dollars in two-way trade made between our countries. Indonesia is Australia's 13th largest trading partner, with cattle, beef, iron, wheat, honey, petroleum and coal making up the bulk of Australian sales. Some estimate that Indonesia will be the fifth-largest economy in the world by 2030.

In 2018 the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was signed between our countries, which is focused on, among other things, connecting people and enhancing economic trade and development. In 2020, the Indonesia–Australia Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement entered into force, aimed at liberalising trade. Around 2500 Australian businesses currently export to Indonesia, and that number will only grow.

There are challenges in our relationship, not least mutual distrust between citizens. According to the Lowy Institute, "Indonesians' trust in Australia has slipped 20 points in 10 years—from 75% in 2011 to 55%" in 2021. Agreements like the nuclear submarine deal haven't helped, and many Indonesians see Australia as a coloniser who thinks sending aid gives us licence to interfere.

However, there are increasing people-to-people connections between our countries. We know that Australia loves Bali—1.1 million Australians travel there every year. But Indonesians are also visiting Australia in increasing numbers—over 100k, for travel, business, and study. Before COVID hit, 23k Indonesian students were studying in Australia. Now there are almost 15k, including West Papuan students. Many of my own students here in Melbourne are Indonesian, and they're very curious about Australia and open to learning new things, including about their own country.

All of this is relevant to West Papua because West Papuans are currently Indonesian citizens, and because a strong and stable relationship is the only way to overcome mutual distrust and allow Australia to help West Papuans more specifically, for example through resettling refugees and exercising diplomatic pressure without destabilizing our relationship.

So, to sum up the Affirmative team's argument. As our first speaker Gordon argued, we need to understand the complex context of West Papuan history, and its increasing integration with the rest of Indonesia. We cannot undo the past. Australia's new Labor government is prioritizing a strong relationship with Indonesia, which may in time bear fruit for West Papua.

However, the Indonesian relationship has been fraught in recent decades, with issues such as asylum seeker boats, live cattle export, terrorist attacks, spying, drug smuggling and not least East Timor, in which Australian soldiers were deployed. Tensions have often been high with Indonesia, and we need to focus on respectful dialogue.

Our second speaker Ross explained the current geopolitical realities of our region, as well as the history of West Papua's annexation. The US, the UN, and Australia were all implicitly or explicitly supportive of it. Since then, Indonesia has become an important regional partner, and, despite tensions, cooperated on a range of security issues.

This has led to the Lombok Treaty explicitly recognising Indonesia and Australia's territorial integrity and non-interference in internal affairs. Finally, the rise of China has led to significant shifts in power in our region, which require us to be on good terms with a large and powerful neighbouring country.

And, as I've outlined, despite challenges, there are also increasing economic ties between Indonesia and Australia which provide enormous benefits to both Australians and Indonesians, including West Papuans. In time it will help build trust between our countries and allow us to give more specific help to West Papuans.

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, we in the Affirmative team believe that Australia *is* doing enough to support West Papua at the present time.

All three of us personally support the West Papuan struggle for human rights and self-determination. We do not in any way deny the human rights issues outlined by the Negative team, or the Melanesian ethnicity and culture of half of the people in West Papua. We also don't deny that there is more Australia *could* be doing.

However, we have to face the fact that there are real limits to what Australia *can* do to help West Papua given that it remains part of the nation of Indonesia, and the West Papuan struggle lacks significant support by the people of Australia.

Australia is a colonising power with serious human rights issues of its own, and has a complete lack of credibility when criticising other nations. Doing more than Australia currently is may actually harm West Papuans in the long run. Rocking the boat could have serious consequences.

Most importantly, Australia needs to put the interests of Australia and Australians first, while continuing to honour our bilateral and international obligations. Australians, including government MPs and Senators, have spoken out about West Papua, and will continue to do so.

In time, perhaps a shift in the regional Asia-Pacific consensus on the status quo in West Papua will allow us to do more. Perhaps the United Nations will add West Papua to its decolonisation list. Perhaps a groundswell of support by Australians for West Papuans will push our government to do more. Perhaps the Lombok Treaty with Indonesia will be overturned, or a closer relationship between our peoples will allow for more criticism and pressure.

Until such a time, the Australian government's room to move is limited, and that is why Australia is currently doing enough to help West Papua. Thank you.