

DR JONATHON BENNEY, Debate-summary, Yarra Room, Melbourne Town Hall, 30 Oct 2022
(video-recording 1:00:31—1:11:09)

Sarah Muyunga: Our discussion is now over, so I now call on Dr Jonathan Benney, China Specialist at Monash University and the past president of the Victorian Debating Association to summarise the two debating teams' performances.

Dr Jonathan Benney

Thank you very much to everybody for coming. There are a lot of esteemed people in the audience and a lot of speakers today so I definitely acknowledge their presence before I begin.

I'll start by talking about my role. I have three kinds of roles that I am playing here today. One as an academic who focuses on China in Asian Studies at Monash University. The second one is I am the former president, and for a long time was the president of the Debaters Association of Victoria, so I have a lot of experience in facilitating debate, particularly with school students. And then thirdly I am a researcher in Political Communication, so one of the things that interests me about this process of debate and the process of campaigning for West Papua is what the best way of campaigning will be.

So I don't want to treat the topic in a very abstract way, so it's very important that I begin by acknowledging and reflecting on the seriousness of this topic, and the importance of this topic, and the many terrible and regrettable things that have happened in West Papua. I don't want to ignore those things and talk about the debate as if it's very abstract.

But I want to also say that the debate isn't supposed to answer the question one way or another. The point of having the debate is to use the topic as a prompt for reflection on what to do, how to do it, what will happen if particular things are done, and to use criticism from your opposition to change and strengthen your own views.

It is very unsurprising that the negative side of the debate will have more support in this room today. But I also think that the people on the negative side, and the supporters of the negative side, should be thinking about how the criticisms that were made, or the points that were made by the other side, can be used to strengthen, and reflect on, and change views.

Also, debate allows people to test out and assess forms and styles of communication. So the question is, what is the best way to get the message across? What language is the best language to use? What tone is the best tone to use? Should you be angry? Should you be hopeful? Should you be sad and regretful? What has the best effect on the audience? What makes them persuaded to support what you are talking about? All of these strategies are very important things in the debate, and the participants in the debate, and the audience of the debate can reflect on these.

Now to move onto some of the issues in the debate. My first general observation about the debate is that there is a lot of historical background in the debate, and a lot of history in the debate. Obviously you cannot talk about West Papua and Indonesia without talking about the history. But nevertheless, the first speaker reminded us that this debate is in the present tense. It's about what is happening now, and it is about what organisations, what people exist now, that can facilitate change in West Papua.

One thing that I would say to the affirmative side of the debate is that 'is' is not the same as 'should'. So that there were times where the speakers talked about what should happen or what could happen. That's not the same as what is happening now. So when the affirmative side said 'Well we should put this debate in the present tense', that doesn't mean what should happen, it means what is happening.

Nevertheless a trap for both sides of the debate is to focus a lot on history. I don't mean that the history is unimportant. But I think it's a lesson in terms of political campaigning. In a limited time the status quo is very important. What's happening now is very important. The historical background is often difficult and complex. But to hear incidents and stories like the one that Janet brought up at the beginning of the final speech does put the debate in the present tense, and it talks about what we are doing now. So I think that's one thing that fluctuated between both teams in the debate ... focussing on what can currently happen now, focussing on the present and the status quo.

Then the next word in the topic is 'enough'. And of course 'enough' as the affirmative side mentioned is not easy to define. It's really a little bit subjective. It's hard to measure. So it's interesting to see how the different sides responded to the word 'enough'. I think on the affirmative side there was a lot of discussion of 'enough' being limited by the circumstances. Obviously that makes sense to some degree because there cannot not be limits. There are obviously limits. But what are those limits? Well it's difficult to know exactly what the limits are. Perhaps on the affirmative side they over-estimated the limits.

On the negative side, at first, in Pablo's speech, there was a discussion of appeasement: that essentially the problem was that Australia is appeasing Indonesia. And I don't necessarily think that was automatically meant in the sense of the Second World War. But it was used to mean that Australia was thinking too much about Indonesian needs, and not thinking enough of West Papuan needs. And I think that was a strong way of characterising it. Still, I think that the more powerful arguments on the negative side came from Morris and Janet, because they focussed on what could be done that isn't being done. So that you can see ... for example they were brought up in the final speech and you've just heard them so I won't repeat them ... but the legal structure and things that we can stop from an Australian perspective.

Then a couple of other points. One is an interesting point and it doesn't necessarily go one way or another. Discussions about indigenous people in different cultures were brought up at different points in the debate. So on the affirmative side there was a sense that the Voice to Parliament and similar policies represented a trend in changes of attitudes to First Nations peoples. Then there are comparative arguments from both sides about other indigenous peoples in the Oceanic region. I think these comparisons are useful, but it can be dangerous to group all of these different indigenous groups together as if they are all the same and they have the same needs. I think if you are talking about indigenous principles it is useful to talk about the specifics of the West Papuan experience, or the Melanesian experience, in more detail than we heard.

The final thing I want to talk about is Australia's relationship with Indonesia. I think on the affirmative side it was clearly established that a relationship with Indonesia is a necessity. However, where does West Papua fit into this equation? The negative team stated, in Morris' speech, that Australia does not acknowledge the needs of West Papua, despite knowing about them, despite the evidence, Australia doesn't do that. And this is a powerful response, but it still doesn't get to the core of how exactly how Australia should deal with Indonesia .

Then there were questions of diplomacy and economics, and without doubt these are valide points. However the affirmative side seemed to rely on the assumption that if Australia supported West Papua it will lead to broad economic harm with the Australia Indonesia relationship, and that isn't necessarily true. I haven't brought in many of my opinions, but I will bring in an opinion about the Australia China relationship. Your economic relationship can go on quite smoothly when neither side trusts each other. So economic relationship does not rule out diplomatic criticism, and it does not necessarily rule out the ideas that the Senator brought up at the end.

Im going to say one last thing. There was a very interesting point about the credibility of Australia as a critic of Indonesia given its colonial history. And then a comment popped up in the chat

during the final speech that I noticed, and it was about activism rather than diplomacy. And that led me to one final comment about the debate.

Through the debate people focussed on government, but the topic didn't stay government, it said Australia. None of the speakers in the debate talked about individual activism, they rarely discussed community groups. They rarely discussed the way that media can be used to support the people. And I think that observation takes full circle back to where we are here and my own background as a representative of a non-profit community group unaffiliated with government in the Debaters Association of Victoria. And your own experiences in different but unaffiliated groups with West Papua. And so we shouldn't always rely on government to solve our problems. Government is never going to do everything that we want it to do.

This is a good way of concluding my summary of the debate because it puts the onus on us as citizens, and not just on elected representatives of government. So I think that's a good point to end on. Thank. You very much.