

SOME CALL IT TREASON

MEMORIES OF A DINNER PARTY

where a Dutch former Diplomat

(Mr Schuurman)

requested

The Australian Minister of Foreign Affairs

(the future Lord Casey)

for the Australian support to The Netherlands to withdraw  
from Western New Guinea.  
(Approx. 1960)

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[1995]

### Some Call It Treason

Although it is all long ago, in the 1950s and 1960s the Netherlands were still a power which had some influence worldwide.

Although Indonesia was no longer part of the realm, West New Guinea was still Dutch territory and we had the responsibility to prepare a populace, which had only just emerged from the Stone Age to take its place in the modern world.

Ever since Indonesia had obtained its independence, it had the intention to annex West New Guinea, regardless of the fact that neither the background of the population nor their culture had anything in common with them. In fact, they wanted to make it an Indonesian colony.

Gradually they became more aggressive and the result was that the Dutch maintained a rather strong Naval presence, reinforced with Marine and Army units. Also two Papuan battalions were formed and I have been told that the latter were well trained and disciplined units, who enthusiastically and devotedly fulfilled their task to defend their future independence, if necessary.

After the war, the Netherlands had seriously started to bring this wild and primitive country to progress, whereby the native population enthusiastically co-operated.

The studiousness of the Papuans was proverbial, now that they were given a chance. It was not an infrequent occurrence that the children had to tell their parents exactly what they had learned in school so that they also could share in the modern civilisation.

They displayed a natural wisdom and a grasp of the ways by which they could best develop their country, which could only be viewed with amazement and awe.

Their natural business instinct and their freedom of thinking engendered hope that they could build up their own middle class and would not have to be dependent on the Chinese or Indians, as was the case in Indonesia.

And there was something else: the Papuans had never had hereditary rulers or tribal kings.

Because of the rough terrain, each village was its own unit, where decisions were made with co-operation from the whole population, where everyone could voice his own opinion. Therefore democracy came naturally to them, everyone was equal, had equal rights and an equal vote.

As a result, it did not take long for enough leaders to come up and, in a rather short time, they were enough advanced to elect their own parliament and form a government, for the time being assisted by Dutch advisors and Government officials.

In this respect we were seven years ahead of the Australian part of New Guinea and this fact has not been forgotten by Papua New Guinea.

When Mienieke and I visited this country in 1985 we were twice told: "You Dutch gave a Parliament to your side, seven years before we got one."

The pressure that Indonesia put on us and, above all, their aggressive behaviour was, at the time, also a great worry to Australia, who had the responsibility for the Eastern part of New Guinea. Generally speaking they supported the Netherlands in her policy in regard to Indonesia and they fully agreed with us that the country and its population were different from the Indonesians and therefore they had the right to an independent existence.

I believe that Australia was even prepared to give us military support for the defence of New Guinea against Indonesia, if that turned out to be necessary. This we deduced partly

from official information from the Australian Army given to our neighbour, Dr Alex Dawkins, a Reserve Brigadier General in the Medical Corps. The information was that: "He should be prepared, that in the event of aggression of Indonesia against Dutch New Guinea, the Australian Armed Forces would intervene on the Dutch side."

But to come back to Dutch New Guinea. It was an upcoming nation that with Dutch guidance and encouragement would come to independence; which already had its own parliamentary representation and which trusted in our knowledge in their affairs and in our promises and our good faith.

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The above is an introduction to the following story, which took place around 1959.

The Arriens family had been living in Melbourne for some time when I had to go there for business. I rang Wim to tell him when I was coming and Gree immediately returned the call to invite me to stay with them.

Some days later Wim rang me again to ask me to specially reserve a certain night because he was giving a dinner party for an old Dutch Ambassador, at which dinner also the Minister for External Affairs of Australia would be present. I naturally accepted with pleasure as it promised to be an interesting evening and I was curious what would be discussed between these prominent men.

The Ambassador, Mr Jan Schuurman, appeared to be an elderly gentleman, rather portly and wearing a rather poorly fitting suit. His English was good and his demeanour was typically that of a diplomat.

The Australian Minister for External Affairs was Mr Casey, later Lord Casey and Governor General of Australia.

Although he was a born and bred Australian, he gave the impression of being an upper class Englishman. Tall and slim, reserved and very well dressed.

During the war he had been a member of the British War Cabinet under Churchill and had been, amongst other things, Governor of Burma. He was not only a Statesman, who was important in Australia, but his voice and opinion carried also much weight in the whole British Commonwealth.

After dinner the ladies retired and the men stayed at the table enjoying a glass of port or brandy. The object of this get-together could be discussed now.

Schuurman opened the conversation by saying that he had requested Arriens to organise this dinner party because he wanted to informally convey some intelligence about New Guinea to Mr Casey. I was a houseguest of the Arriens family and also a retired Naval Officer so Schuurman had no objections to me being present at the discussion.

After that he explained that he was not speaking on behalf of the Dutch Government, but on behalf of a group of Dutch businessmen, politicians and higher bureaucrats.

What followed was hardly credible. The group he was representing did not agree with the New Guinea policies of the Dutch Foreign Secretary, Mr Luns. The latter had however such a strong position in the Dutch Cabinet and Parliament that the group he represented did not have the power to change his policies or to get him removed.

The group felt that friendship with Soekarno and Indonesia, especially in the area of trade, would be more important than New Guinea and that that land and her population were not worth taking the risk of getting into an armed conflict.

According to Schuurman the opinion was held that New Guinea should be transferred to Indonesia as quickly as possible.

Casey brought up the strategical position of New Guinea in regard to Australia. To this Schuurman answered that he could give the assurance on behalf of Soekarno, with whom

*Note: Mr. Arriens had been Consul in Perth in the mid 50's. Later on he was Consul in Melbourne.*

the group had been in contact, that Indonesia would not increase its military strength in New Guinea so it would not be a threat to Australia.

In the meantime Wim had become very quiet and was obviously embarrassed.

After the conversation had continued for a while Casey asked: "Mr Ambassador, what is it that you really want from us?"

The answer was: "I want you to withdraw your support for the policies of the Dutch Government. We have arranged with some prominent people in America that the U.S.A. will back you if required."

I could not listen to this any longer and as Wim did not say anything, I spoke up myself: "Are you actually asking the Australian Government to go against the policies of your own country? What about the Papuans and all the promises we gave them?"

Casey's reaction was significant: "Is that really what you are asking of us? We, of course, are concerned about the welfare of the native population as it may have repercussions on our side."

Schuurman replied: "We feel that peace with Indonesia is more in our commercial interest and is more important than promises given to some half-savage Papuans. I am sure that some formula can be worked out to satisfy you." ... ..

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It strikes me when I visit the Netherlands that many people are of the opinion that we have to be ashamed of what we did in Indonesia in the past. These people brim over with ideas like "human rights" and "democracy."

I have never been ashamed of what we have achieved in Indonesia. In the light of the times and the fact that it happened in the colonial era, the Dutch East Indies was the best, the most modern and the most humanely ruled colony, whilst from 1925 onwards it was self-governing.

We brought peace and general prosperity, which raised the jealousy of the other colonial powers and that has never been attained since our departure. We protected the small man against exploitation and corruption by their own chiefs. In our time the human rights were better secured than now.

Of course, during the Atjeh wars and other military actions, things have happened which now abhor us. But, in those days, those methods were generally accepted amongst the colonial powers and, alas, are still considered acceptable in many countries in Asia and Africa, including Indonesia itself.

But why do so many Dutchmen appear to think it necessary to put themselves into an extra bad light in the eyes of the world?

We never deemed it necessary to tie captured rebels 10 or 12 together in front of a canon to shoot them into the hereafter as was done by the British in India. We have not exterminated whole tribes as was done in Canada and Australia. We never have put tens of thousands of women and children in concentration camps as the British did in South Africa, of which 26,000 perished in two years.

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Indonesia, as it is now, would never have existed if the Dutch colonial administration and policies had not prepared them for it.

The colonial era is past. It was a phenomenon that probably has been necessary for the development of mankind because it raised most people on the globe to more or less the same

level of technological and political development. Western civilisation has nothing to apologise for.

That we, the Dutch, as a small country, have played a significant role in this development; that our laws are still used in Indonesia and Sri Lanka; that our constitutional Republican ideas have been substantially adopted by the U.S.A. and by practically all Federal States in the world; that Indonesia had no racial problems when we left, as was the case in many of the old British colonies; that for 200 years we were the only Western nation that was trusted by Japan and could trade with her; that the Japanese and the Dutch together started their first modern industry in Japan which prospered to become the Mitsubishi shipyards today—these facts can make us truly proud.

And when it comes to our relationship with Indonesia, I like to quote an article of the well known American, Dr Wassall, who in 1941 visited the then Netherlands Indies for a study tour and who wrote a book and other publications about it:

"It is so peaceful and there is such harmony between the people of the Indies and the Dutch, that it is the nearest thing to Paradise on Earth."

And when it comes to today's attitude of the Indonesians towards the Dutch, I advise everybody to go and have a look for himself. They will be astounded how much goodwill and cordiality is extended, especially to Dutch people.

Regardless of all the mistakes we made in Indonesia, we can say with Jan Pieterszoon Coen:

"We have achieved something great."

But the one thing we should be ashamed and sad about is the fact that when we had the power to give freedom and independence to a million and a half Papuans, who already had their own Parliament, we, under international pressure, had to deliver these people, their freedom and their land, to oppression.

That is what **I** am ashamed of.

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