West New Guinea: Perceptions and Policies, Ethnicity and the Nation State

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The West New Guinea dispute, which ran from 1946 to 1962, was characterised by the distinct, passionate and uncompromising views held by the three principal protagonists — Indonesia, the Netherlands and Australia — about the nature of West New Guinea society and its place among the nations of the Asia-Pacific region. The rival views were founded not only in constructions of the ethnography of the Indonesian archipelago and the New Guinea region but also on strong general beliefs about the proper relationship between ethnographic composition and the structures of nation states. The rival views involved different perceptions of the composition, territory and rationale of the Indonesian nation state.

The three governments maintained policy with remarkable consistency throughout the 1950s, and each enjoyed strong public support. As the dispute intensified, the opposing national views seemed only to harden. Despite frequent and protracted negotiation and debates in the United Nations, there appeared little room for compromise until armed conflict threatened and the USA managed a negotiated settlement. This chapter seeks to demonstrate that, in the case of each of the protagonists during the emergence of the dispute, perceptions about West New Guinea were ill-defined, ambiguous, numerous and conflicting. Policy was marked by indecision and vacillation. Such a historical case study, it can be argued, raises issues that continue to be relevant today, since it deals with an episode in which Australians began to come to terms with the emergence of new nations, possessing strong nationalist aspirations, in the Asian region. The process involved not only a reassessment of Indonesia and the wider region of South-East Asia, but also a degree of new thinking about the basis of political unity in any state.

Prior to the Pacific War, the political status of West New Guinea had rarely troubled policy makers, including the Dutch Indies authorities, who administered the territory, the Australian administrators in the eastern half of the island and the Indonesian nationalists, who had been exiled there. The territory’s importance lay not in itself, but rather in what it came to represent in terms of the rival constructions of the Indonesian nation state, Australian perceptions of its ‘neighbourhood’ and national security, as well as Dutch bitterness about a mismanaged process of decolonisation. The experience of the Pacific War helped to transform the perceptions of West New Guinea that each country had, particularly Australia. The sacrifices made by Australian soldiers in New Guinea and the Indies helped to convince Australia’s postwar governments that they had the right to have a say in the political and security arrangements of their ‘neighbourhood’. Given the importance of Australians’ wartime experience in New Guinea, both in policy making and public discourse, it is perhaps ironical that the role of Australian forces in West New Guinea itself was marginal.

The fact that conflicting perceptions of West New Guinea were evident in the policy making processes of the three protagonists, as the dispute emerged in the late 1940s, should not be cause for surprise. Underlying perceptions do not, of themselves, determine policy, rather they inform and set the parameters of the policy debate as well as its form. Thus, Australian policy, perpetuated during the 1950s and early 1960s, remained within the boundaries of the debate generated in the formative years of the dispute. Even when Sir Garfield Barwick persuaded the Australian Cabinet to turn the West New Guinea policy on its head in 1962, much of his argument reflected the values and perceptions of the Indonesia-oriented policy makers of the 1940s.

Policy and perceptions during the West New Guinea dispute are often confusing. They provoke such questions as why the Netherlands would put at risk the development of relatively harmonious post-independence relations with Indonesia, as well as its extensive investments, for a territory previously distinguished by neglect and showing no significant economic potential. A further question is why Indonesian nationalists attribute such importance to the territory within the archipelago that differed most, ethnically and culturally, from the Javanese heartland and for the development of which Indonesia lacked the necessary funds and administrative competence?

Australia’s neighbourhood

The place of West New Guinea in the Australian construction of its ‘neighbourhood’ is ambiguous and has been influenced by notions about differing ethnicities. West New Guinea is in the border region, between and yet part of both the Malay-Indonesian world of insular South-East Asia and the Melanesian-Polynesian world of the South Pacific. In the western part of New Guinea, the Dutch sphere of influence petered out and in the east Australia had its sole colonial enterprise, but there was very little interaction between the two administrations. Australians had a distinct notion of ‘New Guinea’ as meaning the Australian-administered territories,
not the whole of the island. The western half of the island (and much of the eastern archipelago) formed a conceptual void, not part of 'New Guinea', but distant from the strategic, political and economic centres of the Indies, in Java and Sumatra. To the extent that Australians thought about West New Guinea, they tended to assume that the societies of West New Guinea were much the same as those of the eastern half of the island. The consequences of centuries of contact between coastal areas of West New Guinea and the Moluccas, followed by nearly 100 years of Dutch missionary activity and a Dutch administrative presence in parts of West New Guinea were not generally contemplated.

Before the Pacific War, New Guinea had been on the margins of the international political and economic system. During the war it briefly moved to centre stage. New Guinea was the southernmost limit of Japanese expansion through South-East Asia and into the Pacific. From an Australian perspective, it was in New Guinea that the land campaign against Japan was turned around.

The Second World War profoundly influenced how Australians thought about their neighbourhood. Australian security could no longer be thought of solely in terms of the traditional relations with the United Kingdom or the more recent relationship with the USA. Australians began to realise that developments in their own neighbourhood were crucial.

Australians thought about their neighbourhood as comprising two regions: the South Pacific and South-East Asia. Australian perceptions of, and experiences with, the two regions were fundamentally different. Somewhere in or around New Guinea there was a divide between the relatively familiar, sparsely populated, foreign but non-threatening world of the Pacific and the densely populated, complex and potentially threatening world of South-East Asia. The former, dominated by Melanesian peoples, was admirable in its simplicity, and evoked a sense of responsibility and a desire to protect; the latter might be admired for its cultural sophistication, sought after for the economic opportunity it offered but, in some, evoked a need for defence and security. Since the early years of European settlement, white Australians had been involved in the South Pacific as adventurers, traders, 'blackbirders', plantation owners and, in the case of Papua New Guinea, as colonisers. Australia was a dominating influence in this region. In South-East Asia however, Australians had no such experience. Until the Pacific War, most of South-East Asia was safely in the hands of friendly European colonial powers.

In this concept of a dual neighbourhood, the Australian attempt to detach West New Guinea from Indonesia might be seen as an endeavour to extend the safe, familiar South Pacific neighbourhood and keep threatening South-East Asia at arm's length.

In the process of nation building and state formation, which followed the Second World War, West New Guinea's position was problematic. Should the emerging states follow the established colonial boundaries? Should state boundaries reflect cultural and ethnic composition? If the latter, where did people imagine the ethnic and cultural boundaries to be? Should state boundaries accommodate security considerations?

The ambiguous place of West New Guinea was clearly reflected in the early decision making process about state formation. In mid 1945, when Indonesian nationalists debated the geographic scope of the state they were about to proclaim, the inclusion of West New Guinea was one of the most contentious issues. When establishing the South Seas Commission in the mid-1940s (later renamed the South Pacific Commission), Australia pondered about whether West New Guinea should be included. The Netherlands, upon receiving the invitation to join the Commission, gave the issue particular consideration because in Batavia (now Jakarta) officials had always thought of West New Guinea as an adjunct to the Dutch East Indies not as part of the Pacific.

The South Seas Commission

The first occasion on which West New Guinea became a focus in Australian policy decision making was in the context of planning for postwar regional cooperation in the South-West and South Pacific. This began with the Australia–New Zealand Agreement of 1944. These policy deliberations occurred before the Indonesian proclamation of independence and, therefore, before the status of the territory became an issue in the struggle between the Indonesians and the Netherlands. The deliberations gave some insight into the position of West New Guinea in Australian policy makers' conceptualisation of Australia's immediate neighbourhood, particularly West New Guinea's position in the postwar security arrangements that Australia was attempting to construct in South-East Asia and the Pacific after the trauma of the early years of the War. This wartime experience motivated and legitimised Australian interest in the Dutch East Indies and the future of Indonesia. As Dr Evatt spelt out on many occasions:

Large numbers of Australian troops were lost when the Japanese captured Java and our mainland was bombed and otherwise menaced by the enemy from bases in the Indies. Our forces played a prominent part in the fighting in the Indies and carried out the liberation of Borneo and Celebes, Flores, Timor and other places and played an indispensable part in the operation leading to the recovery of Netherlands New Guinea.7

One of the ideas to emerge from Australian and New Zealand thinking about postwar regional security, and economic and political development in South-East Asia and the Pacific, was the creation of organisations of regional cooperation.
There was a strong desire by Australia to participate in the control of the affairs of South-East Asia and the Pacific area in order to establish a more secure regional environment. Considering the region as a whole, there were thought to be two types of colonies: on the one hand 'Indonesia', and on the other, the small, scattered, insular possessions in Oceania. The racial, cultural, economic, strategic and, indeed, almost all the features and problems of these two areas differ profoundly. It was suggested that it was appropriate to have two organisations of regional cooperation. An 'Indonesian Commission' would cover Indo-China, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies and Portuguese Timor, its membership consisting of the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France and Portugal as 'trustee' states; the USA together with Australia, China, Thailand, Burma and the Philippines as states with major interests in the region. The 'South Seas Commission' would encompass Micronesia, and the Melanesian and Polynesian islands. Its members would be the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, the USA and France as 'trustee' states and, perhaps, the Netherlands and the Philippines as states with major interests in the area.5

The decision to invite the Netherlands to be a member of the South Seas Commission, on behalf of West New Guinea, was seen, by 1949 and 1950, as obvious, self-evident and, most importantly, legitimising a decision to support the separation of West New Guinea from Indonesia. In October 1949, Dr Evatt was said to have considered that 'Dutch New Guinea has never been regarded by us as forming part of Indonesia as demonstrated by inclusion of Dutch New Guinea in the area of the South Pacific Commission'.5 As Deputy Opposition Leader, Dr Evatt recalled, in a parliamentary debate in June 1950, when the question arose of whether it was proper to include West New Guinea in the South Seas Commission, 'all the authorities agreed that it was proper and that western New Guinea had no relation to South-East Asia, but was part and parcel of the South Pacific'.5

However, policy making during the formation of the Commission was rather less emphatic and sure. In the Australia–New Zealand Agreement of 1944, in which the intention to establish a form of regional cooperation for the South-West Pacific was expressed for the first time, the Netherlands was not included among the proposed member states. Indeed Evatt, when questioned in Parliament on this exclusion, defended it by arguing that the proposed commission would be exercising influence in a region geographically distant from all Netherlands possessions.6 During the year following the defeat of the Japanese, when it had become apparent that an organisation for regional cooperation in the South Pacific had much better prospects than in South-East Asia, the idea of inviting the Netherlands was discussed. But first priority was given to securing the participation of the powers specifically mentioned in the Australia–New Zealand Agreement — the USA, the United Kingdom and France. Factors important in the deliberations included a recognition that, while the border between Australian New Guinea and West New Guinea was not meaningful, it was doubtful whether West New Guinea was, logically, part of the 'South Seas area' from the perspective of communications, political interest and economic development. It was argued that West New Guinea was more directly connected with Java and the islands of the 'Indonesian group'. However, in mid-1946, given Australia's difficult relations with the Netherlands, brought about by the trade union boycott of Dutch shipping and the reluctance of the Government to intervene, Chifley felt that the exclusion of the Netherlands 'might appear rather pointed and produce an unfortunate impression at this stage'. New Zealand and the United Kingdom supported an invitation to the Netherlands.7 As will be discussed later, in September 1946 the Netherlands received an invitation to attend the founding conference of the Commission. Despite considerable reservations expressed by its Minister in Canberra and Dr H. J. van Mook, the Lieutenant Governor General in Batavia, the invitation was accepted in December.

Indonesian Proclamation of Independence

When the establishment of organisations of regional cooperation in the South-West Pacific was first discussed in 1944, the prospect of an independent Indonesia was not on the horizon. Australian forces were involved in the recapture of parts of Borneo, the northern Moluccas and West New Guinea. Under the Allied post-surrender arrangements, Australia was given the task of re-occupying the eastern islands in the Dutch East Indies, which included assisting the Dutch East Indies authorities to re-establish their administration. The Australian Government policy of recognition of Dutch sovereignty, and Australian neutrality in the Dutch dispute with the Indonesian nationalists was put under pressure by Australian trade union support for Indonesian independence through a ban on Dutch shipping. The trade union shipping ban, and the government's reluctance to intervene, led to a deterioration in relations with the Netherlands and an implicit impression that Australian neutrality favoured the Indonesians. At the most senior levels of the Department of External Affairs, there was doubt about Indonesian readiness for self-government. It was difficult to assess, on the basis of the very limited information available, the strength and capacity of the nationalist movement. The Netherlands was thought to have had a good record in administration and material development. In keeping with the general thrust of postwar policy on 'colonial' matters, the possibility of trusteeship for the Dutch East Indies was mooted as a desirable solution.8

In November 1945, the armed clash between Indonesian nationalists and British forces in Surabaya prompted Evatt to propose to the War Cabinet that
Australia intervene in Java. This intervention was to advance Australia’s interest in regional security rather than to seek any advantage in the internal affairs of the Dutch East Indies. Australian intervention would be ‘in a spirit of goodwill towards both the recognised holder of sovereignty and the legitimate aspirations of the peoples’. Chifley did not support Evatt’s proposal as he doubted whether toward both the recognised holder of sovereignty and the legitimate aspirations of the emergence of an independent Indonesia. At a Commonwealth Cabinet would support the maintaining of troops in Borneo, let alone commit troops to Java. Australian policy, until mid-1947, was often inconsistent and ambiguous. In March 1946, for example, Chifley expressed to parliament his sympathy for Indonesian aspirations and recognised that the old colonial order could not continue. A week later, Dr Evatt reasserted Australia’s vital interest in continuing the wartime friendship with the Netherlands.

Some consideration was given to the defence implications of the prospective emergence of an independent Indonesia. At a Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Meeting in London, in April 1946, Chifley underlined the importance of securing facilities for Commonwealth military bases in the Dutch East Indies in Batavia (Jakarta), Surabaya and Kupang. These would form the ‘outer ring of any defence scheme for the South West Pacific and was almost as important for that purpose as New Guinea’. From mid-1947, the time of the first Dutch military action against the Indonesian Republic, Australian support for the Republic became more consistent, as was evident at the United Nations and in Australia’s membership of the Good Offices Commission (later the United Nations Commission for Indonesia) as Indonesia’s ‘representative’.

A Greater or Lesser Indonesia?

After the Indonesian Proclamation of Independence the territorial claim that Indonesia constituted the former Dutch East Indies was consistently advanced. During the Revolution that followed the Proclamation of Independence, the status of West New Guinea — explicitly and implicitly — was a matter of discussion between the parties. These discussions were, in part, based on different conceptions of the Indonesian State. In neither the Indonesian nor the Dutch conceptions of the archipelago was West New Guinea considered crucial. Its importance lay in its peripheral position — geographically, ethnically and culturally. The relationship of West New Guinea to an Indonesian state was problematic for both sides. The status of West New Guinea bore directly on the rationale of the Indonesian nation state and the criteria used for defining the state’s territory.

Indonesian nationalist leaders debated the geographic boundaries of the Indonesian state in the Japanese-sponsored Badan Penyelidik Kemerdekaan Indonesia (Indonesian Independence Investigatory Body or BPKI) in May–July 1945. During the deliberations, Sukarno, Hatta and Muhammad Yamin, all leading figures in the nationalist movement, and all important in the later developments in the West New Guinea dispute, made contributions. Although the BPKI deliberations did not determine the geographic boundaries of Indonesia (indeed the BPKI’s wishes were disregarded), the debates provide a most valuable insight into the conceptual thinking of some of Indonesia’s future leaders. The differences of emphasis on, and interest in, West New Guinea revealed in these deliberations remained evident during the dispute.

Sukarno argued that God had divided the world up into national units and that even a child could see that the Indonesian archipelago was one such unit.

So where is this entity we call our fatherland? Geo-politically, Indonesia our fatherland, the complete Indonesia, not just Java, not just Sumatra, or only Borneo or Celebes or merely Ambon or Maluku, but all the islands which have been designated by God to become the unit, between two continents and two oceans, that is our fatherland.

Although Yamin was more ambitious, territorially, than Sukarno, he did acknowledge that Indonesia was more difficult to define geographically than it was to define ethnically, linguistically or historically. He also noted that there were no representatives from Papua (or from Timor, Borneo and peninsular Malaya) in the BPKI. Yamin advocated that the state should coincide with the ‘Indonesian fatherland’ (Tampah-darah Indonesia), the scope of which had been determined by the fourteenth century state of Majapahit, stretching from peninsular Malaya to ‘Papua’. The Indonesian fatherland had, over the past 350 years, been the victim of partition. Parts of the fatherland had been occupied by Portugal, Spain, France, England, Germany, the Netherlands and the Commonwealth of Australia. The fatherland had been reunified by the Japanese army. Yamin argued that an independent Indonesia should seek to maintain this unit, permit no enclaves in its territory, but not covet any other peoples’ territory.

According to Yamin ‘Papua’ was a special case. Since ancient times, Yamin told the BPKI members, ‘Papua’ and the surrounding islands had been occupied by the Papuan people and had been a place of migration for Indonesians. Part of it had also been within the Sultanate of Tidore. He asserted that ‘Papua is Austronesian territory and is the centre of our fatherland. During a thousand years of history Papua has been united with the Moluccas and become unified with Indonesia’.

Whether Yamin meant by ‘Papua’, only the former Dutch administered territory or the whole of the island was not clear. On the one hand, he noted that, before the War, Papua had been divided between the Netherlands and the Commonwealth of Australia. What he meant by ‘Papua’ was the Dutch territory, confirming this later when he stated that ‘Papua Barat [West Papua] was
Indonesian territory. On the other hand, Japan had occupied both territories and, although the outcome of the fighting in the two territories was uncertain, Indonesia had to remember its unity. Indonesian sovereignty had to be extended to all territories and the occupation of the gateway to the Pacific was very important.14

In a later speech to the BPKI, Yamin returned to the issue of 'Papua'. He acknowledged that there were some scholars who said that the island of Papua was not part of Indonesia, but there were others who understood the term 'Indonesia' to encompass the Malay region and Polynesia. Geopolitically, Indonesia was not able to give Papua — the last stepping stone from the Indonesian islands towards the Pacific — to another power. To this strategic argument he added two others. Firstly, the suffering of those nationalists who had been exiled to Boven Digo — the camp for political prisoners north of Merauke — could not be diminished or forgotten. Secondly, the Ambonese and other Moluccans, who had worked for decades in Papua, did not want it to be separated from Maluku.15

Hatta was the only one of the major contributors to this debate who had been exiled to Boven Digo,16 yet his approach was more cautious than that of Sukarno or Yamin. He argued pragmatically that he did not want to ask for territory greater than the Dutch East Indies and if this was given back to them by the Japanese the Government would be pleased. He was concerned that the discussion on 'Papua' might suggest that Indonesian demands were rather 'imperialistic'. Referring to Yamin's strategic argument, would they be satisfied with just Papua? Why not the Solomons and beyond? But did they have the resources to defend such a wide area? Hatta considered Yamin's argument as akin to the Nazi concept of German nationalism, which would be as dangerous for Indonesia as it had been for Germany. He doubted Yamin's ethnographic argument. Until convinced otherwise, he only wanted to acknowledge that the Papuans were Melanesians.17

We must not forget that to the east our people are greatly intermixed with Melanesians, just as Indonesians in the centre and west are intermixed with the Arabs, Chinese and Hindus. This is the fate of peoples who live in the middle of international thoroughfares to associate with other peoples. So don't let us place Papua in the same situation we find in the eastern archipelago, where Indonesians have intermixed with Melanesians... I only want to say that we should not be worried about Papua; it can be given to the Papuans themselves. I acknowledge that the Papuans also have the right to become an independent people, but Indonesians for the time being, for a few decades, will not have the capacity or sufficient resources to teach the Papuans until they become an independent people.18

Although Sukarno and Yamin's 'Greater Indonesia' concept was supported by the majority of the members of the BPKI, it was rejected by the Japanese. Sukarno later told the Panitia Persiapan Kemerdekaan Indonesia (Indonesian Independence Preparatory Committee), which succeeded the BPKI, that he would be content with the territory of the former Dutch East Indies.19

The debate within BPKI is the most extensive and frank discussion on the public record of the geographic scope of Indonesia, and its underlying assumptions. In the light of the peripheral importance of West New Guinea in the pre-war Dutch East Indies and the Indonesian nationalists' limited experience of West New Guinea, it is remarkable that there was so much discussion. A number of points raised in the debate are noteworthy. The successor state argument — West New Guinea was part of Indonesia because it had been part of the Dutch East Indies — that, after the proclamation became the basis of the Indonesian claim, was only advocated by Hatta and attracted minority support. For others, the Japanese destruction of the European colonial boundaries in South-East Asia seemed to have broadened and liberated the nationalist vision. The ethnic and cultural composition of the archipelago, which so informed Dutch and Australian thinking about West New Guinea, was subsumed within a broader construction. It was as if, in order to minimise the archipelago's ethnic and cultural diversity, the concept of Indonesia was expanded to encompass Melanesia and Polynesia as well as the Malay world. This 'Greater Indonesia' was not based on the schoolroom maps of the Dutch East Indies, but rather on a straightforward geopolitical vision, supported by strategic and 'historical' arguments. Foreshadowing his role at the Round Table Conference in late 1949, the former internee at Boven Digo, Hatta, was singular among the main leaders in contemplating other options for West New Guinea. Yamin and Sukarno were only the first of many leaders, from all sides in the dispute, to argue that because the Papuans were not yet able to understand politics, in their own best interests, their future had to be determined for them.20

From the proclamation of Indonesian independence on 17 August 1945, the formal Indonesian position was that the Republic of Indonesia consisted of the territory of the former Dutch East Indies. The BPKI debates suggest that the importance of West New Guinea was as a defining factor in determining the geographic scope and rationale of the Indonesian state. It was precisely because West New Guinea was geographically and ethnically peripheral that the region assumed its symbolic and political importance, particularly once the successor state principal had been proclaimed as the basis of the new Indonesian state. Given the geographically disparate and multi-ethnic character of the archipelago any compromise was difficult — if Irian (New Guinea) could be conceded, why not Maluku, Timor, Aceh or Kalimantan? Once a concession was made, the underlying rationale of the state changed and became more difficult to defend. For Indonesian nationalists, once concessions were made in their claim to the former Dutch
East Indies there was no alternative rationale for a smaller geographic unit. In the face of Dutch and Australian arguments about ethnic difference, for Indonesians the inclusion of Irian became the proof that the basis of the state was political and historical — a national unity forged by the common suffering of the Indonesian people under Dutch colonialism and not based on a common ethnic, cultural or religious background.

The differences in emphasis and interest among the Indonesian leaders revealed in the BPKI debates remained. The Dutch Foreign Minister D. U. Stikker reported Indonesian Vice-President Hatta as saying, in November 1948, that he was not particularly interested in New Guinea. In contrast, President Sukarno, upon being told of Hatta’s opinion, reacted immediately: ‘Hatta could indeed have said that, that is his concern. I am a New Guinea fanatic’. At the time of the Round Table Conference in late 1949, Australian representatives were also aware of differences among Indonesian leaders in their emphasis on West New Guinea.

Dutch Ethnic Indonesia

The Netherlands also recognised its own role in forging an Indonesian nationalism. One of the most fulsome expressions of this recognition came from Dr J. H. van Roijan in a statement to the United Nations Security Council in late 1948, in which he said:

The population of Indonesia consists of about seventeen main ethnic and linguistic groups which, in turn, contain a still greater number of subgroups. The unity of Indonesia, which has gradually grown, is a product of common Netherlands sovereignty ... Common existence under the Netherlands Crown has created a sense of Indonesian nationality and the will toward an Indonesian state. 11

Other Dutch officials gave much more emphasis to the archipelago’s ethnic and cultural diversity, and were more sceptical about the degree to which a political unity and a common identity had been forged. This view found political expression in the Dutch strategy to establish federal states in addition to the Republic of Indonesia and, in the various agreements with the Republic, to insist that federal states and regions within them had a right to self-determination. Aside from the obvious political objectives of the federal strategy, these policies were based on a perception of Indonesia that was fundamentally different from the formal Republican position. According to this perception, it could not be assumed that all the ethnic groups and regions, which happened, through the accidents of colonial expansion, to become part of the Dutch East Indies, automatically wanted to become part of an Indonesian nation state. These groups and regions should have the right to determine their own future.

In this perception of the composition of Indonesia, West New Guinea came to assume a special place in the imagination in some Dutch political and official circles. West New Guinea came to be seen as that part of the Dutch East Indies that was most different — ethnically and culturally as well as in terms of political and economic development — from the Indonesian heartland of Java and Sumatra. In the 1940s, West New Guinea was transformed from the most neglected and isolated region of the Dutch East Indies to the focus for a final act of colonial idealism. This transformation is, in large part, the work of J. P. K. van Eechoud, the Resident of New Guinea, 1945–50. Van Eechoud sought to establish West New Guinea as an administrative entity separate from the rest of the Dutch East Indies. Papuans were recruited into the lower levels of the administration; a Papuan military unit, the Papua-bataljon, and administration and police schools were established. Van Eechoud’s objective was to replace the Indonesians in the lower and middle levels of bureaucracy and education with Papuans, and to develop a pan-Papuan identity among the educated. He was perhaps the first Dutch official to envisage the advancement of the Papuans to self-determination, which would take place as far as possible in isolation from the archipelago. He also sought to reorient West New Guinea towards the Pacific. Within the Dutch East Indies administration, he became a determined advocate of the Netherlands retaining control of West New Guinea. He had good access to the highest official levels in Batavia and to leading Catholic politicians in the Hague. At the risk of oversimplifying the process, van Eechoud provided the vision for a grand ethical enterprise in New Guinea, which principally Catholic Ministers and party leaders were able to use for essentially domestic political objectives in 1949–1950.

Dutch policy on the status of New Guinea during the struggle against the Republic of Indonesia was inconsistent and, at times, contradictory. This reflected conflicting opinions about the ‘place’ of West New Guinea within the Dutch East Indies administration and the government in the Netherlands. Indicative of the undecided state of Dutch policy on the status of New Guinea was the response to the Australian and New Zealand invitation to the initial meeting of the South Pacific Commission in January 1947. Van Mook considered that, while such a regional organisation was not a bad idea, Dutch New Guinea was really a part of an entirely different region and, so long as this was the case, it would rely on the rest of Indonesia for its economic, medical, social and cultural development. There were a few matters in common with Australian New Guinea but, in general, contact was extremely limited, if not completely absent. If Dutch New Guinea was separated from Dutch territories in India or Indonesia, a new situation would emerge, in which case the South Pacific Commission would become of interest. It might happen that such a separation became necessary or desirable, but, at this time the Dutch government should not signal that they were working towards the
separation of New Guinea from Indonesia. Van Mook advised that the Nether­
lands should be an observer at the meeting. The Minister for Overseas Territories
agreed and noted that he wanted to keep open the possibility of a separate devel­
opment for New Guinea. Despite van Mook’s advice, the Netherlands did, how­
ever, accept the invitation.

The Linggajati Agreement of November 1946 recognised that the future
United States of Indonesia would constitute the territory of the former Dutch
East Indies. A month later the Dutch Government unilaterally qualified Linggajat­
i by declaring:

New Guinea must be able to obtain its own status with respect to the
Kingdom (new style) and the United States of Indonesia, although it would
perhaps still be difficult for the indigenous people to be able to express
themselves. The possibility would be kept open for significant migration of
Netherlanders, particularly Eurasians, who want to live under their own
administration.26

Later in the same month, at the conference establishing the State of East Indo­
nesia, van Mook was forced to concede that ‘it was absolutely not the
Government’s intention to separate New Guinea from Indonesia but rather to
examine carefully in what fashion it should be included within the extent of
Indonesia’.27 Nevertheless, West New Guinea was not included in the State of East
Indonesia.

It was probably only after the failure, in diplomatic terms, of the second Dutch
military action, in early 1949, and the realisation that Indonesian independence
was imminent, that there was sufficient determination and support within
the Dutch Cabinet to try to separate West New Guinea from the transfer of
sovereignty. The first sign of this determination was the Dutch insistence that the
status of West New Guinea be on the agenda of the Round Table Conference.

**Australian Perceptions of Neighbourhood in Policy Making**

It is suggested that Australian perceptions of a neighbourhood divided between
the South Pacific and South-East Asia was evident in policy formation with respect
to Indonesia and West New Guinea. To be more specific, it seems possible to
group External Affairs officers who were involved in developing policy on Indo­
nesia and West New Guinea according to which part of the neighbourhood they
identified with and/or had experience of. Which stance they adopted appeared to
stem from professional experience and ‘socialisation’.

Among those who identified with the South-East Asian or Indonesian neigh­
bourhood, Australia’s representatives on the United Nations Commission for
Indonesia were the most notable. They were young men who identified with the
western-educated, internationalist-oriented Indonesian leaders such as Hatta and
Rum whom they considered the key players. T. K. Critchley was the only one who
had much previous experience in Asia. He had served in India as a member of an
anti-Japanese propaganda unit. Many of his colleagues were Indians and South­
East Asians. He became aware of, and sympathised with, their national aspirations.
In Indonesia, the Australian representatives shared the nationalists’ social democ­
ratic vision for an independent Indonesia. The need for strong central control was
recognised but the threat of Javanese domination was not a principal concern. In­
deed, many of the Australians’ closest associates in the Indonesian leadership were
not Javanese. The United Nations Commission for Indonesia representatives be­
came the personification of Australia’s support of the Indonesian struggle, in both
Australian and Indonesian eyes. Critchley saw a strong, united Indonesia as being
in Australia’s strategic interest. His distaste for the Dutch-created federal states
was partly based on the view that such a governmental structure would be incom­
patible with development of an Indonesian national identity.28 The mid-1949
decision to support the separation of West New Guinea from the transfer of sover­
eignty was greeted with surprise and dismay by Australia’s representatives in
Jakarta. It had always been assumed that Canberra understood, since Linggajati,
that Indonesia consisted of the territory of the former Dutch East Indies.

Critchley’s view that a strong, united Indonesia was in Australia’s strategic in­
terest found support elsewhere in the Department of External Affairs. In
November 1949, after Critchley had been instrumental in formulating a compro­
mise on West New Guinea, discussions were held in Canberra about the changing
strategic situation in South-East Asia following the victory of the communists in
China and communist revolts in a number of South-East Asian countries in 1948.
Out of these discussions, a draft Cabinet paper was prepared. The submission was
framed in the context that the Pacific War had brought about a realisation of the
importance of South-east Asia to the future security of Australia. Geographic iso­
lation from our traditional points of cultural and economic contact in Europe and
USA dictated that ‘there must be a permanent re-orientation of Australian out­
look and policy towards this neighbour region and the countries within it’. The
submission argued that Australia should welcome the movements towards inde­
pendence and self-government in South-East Asia as inevitable and natural, and
should support the emergence of stable, moderate and friendly governments. This
required a sustained and coordinated program of political and economic support
to encourage and strengthen established governments, to cultivate and maintain
the goodwill of the peoples, and to help them to raise their standards of living,
thereby increasing their resistance to communism. Given the good will Australia
had earned on Indonesia, and given the limited resources, there was a strong
argument for concentrating our assistance in Indonesia. The submission went on
to recommend a comprehensive program of educational assistance, technical
training, expanded diplomatic representation and promotion of trade, which
foreshadowed the Colombo Plan implemented under the Menzies Government.²⁰

Along similar lines, Francis Stuart, the First Secretary at the Australian Com­
mission in Singapore, and another officer 'socialised' in South-East Asia, advised
P. C. Spender, the new Menzies government Minister for External Affairs, on the
eve of his first visit to Indonesia that Australia 'should do everything in its power to
see that the authority of Dr Sukarno and his administration is able to make itself
felt throughout the Archipelago, and that by every means in our power, through
the provision of advisers, through financial assistance, and if need be by military
means, the Indonesian experiment be made to work'.²¹ It was not until Barwick
reassessed policy on West New Guinea in 1962 that similar values and perceptions
were reflected in Australian government policy.

The 'Pacific' group of External Affairs officers approached the West New
Guinea issue from a different strategic perspective and different personal experi­
ence. Their principal identification was with the Pacific, particularly New Guinea,
rather than with South-East Asia. On the basis of ethnography and level of civilisa­
tion, they perceived West New Guinea to be part of the Pacific and viewed its
inhabitants as 'dependent peoples'. In the late 1940s, Kevin Kelly was the driving
force in this group. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, R. N. Hamilton maintained
a similar orientation. Kelly had served in both West and East New Guinea as an
intelligence officer during the war. He had formed the view that Papuan society was
similar on both sides of the border. In West New Guinea, he found little evidence
of a 'Javanese' presence or influence. Kelly was impressed with the use the Ameri­
cans had made of the Papuan towns of Hollandia and Biak, and saw an ongoing
strategic importance for West New Guinea. Some officers in the Pacific Division
were imbued with the idealism of trusteeship, which would provide the appropri­
ate political and policy framework for West New Guinea, advance 'native welfare'
and protect Melanesian society against external influence. These officers were
greatly influenced by the impact of Asian (and European) migration on the
Melanesian societies of Fiji and New Caledonia. Trusteeship would protect West
New Guinea's Melanesian society from both 'Asian' immigration and 'Asian'
governance.²²

Kelly and others in the Pacific Division made a number of attempts to draw the
Department's attention to the status of West New Guinea. Within months of
the proclamation of Indonesian independence, Kelly argued that it was not in Aus­
tralia's long-term interests for the 'Javanese insurgents' to believe that they could
control the oil fields of Borneo, Sumatra and West New Guinea, nor the Dutch
East Indies territories east of Bali and Sulawesi.²³ In further memoranda in June
1947, July 1949 and January 1950, the strategic importance of West New
Guinea for Australia was emphasised along with the dangers that Indonesian con­
trol of West New Guinea would pose for the Australian territories. Indonesian
sovereignty in West New Guinea 'would bring Asia right onto Australia's doorstep
... Any hope for a Melanesian nation at some future date would be considerably
diminished. It would seem that the incorporation of Netherlands New Guinea
into Indonesia would widen what is really a purely artificial distinction between
the two parts of New Guinea'.²⁴

Officers in the Pacific Division were concerned that West New Guinea could
attract interest from the Australian press. They considered that the matter should
receive urgent Ministerial and Cabinet attention, and that Critchley should be
given specific instructions on the issue for the forthcoming Round Table Confer­
ence. They advocated that the future of West New Guinea be settled independently
of the substantive issues involved in the dispute between the Indo­
nesians and the Dutch. The status of West New Guinea should be treated as
presenting problems not essentially connected with the transfer of sovereignty
from the Dutch Republic to Indonesia. Two solutions were canvassed. First, the Indonesians
might be persuaded that the Netherlands should retain sovereignty over West New
Guinea until 1960, after which it could be reconsidered. Second, the Netherlands
might be prepared to administer the territory under a trusteeship, which would
have the advantage that the territory 'would have some assurance of economic
development and social and political advancement to the stage when the inhabi­
tants would become capable of self-government and independence if they so
chose'.²⁵ In August 1949 Critchley did receive some 'instructions' along the lines
of these two solutions, which in turn became the basis for the United Nations
Commission for Indonesia compromise proposals.

It would appear that, at least from mid 1947 until July or August 1949, the
'South-East Asian' orientation in External Affairs was the dominant influence in
official policy determination. Australia's support of the Indonesian Republican
cause in the United Nations Security Council, through its representatives in the
United Nations Commission for Indonesia and at the New Delhi Conference, is
well known. External Affairs records indicate that the attempt, in mid 1947, by
Kelly and his colleagues in the Pacific Division to have the West New Guinea issue
addressed was not successful. Kelly's views on this and other issues were not always
viewed sympathetically by Dr Burton, the Department's Secretary. Yet, Dutch
records suggest that Burton's views may have been more complex. The Nether­
lands Chargé d'Affaires records a conversation with Dr Burton, in March 1947, in
which Dr Burton declared that the Netherlands must not hand West New Guinea
to the Australians, and that Australia and the Netherlands must coordinate policy
for all of New Guinea, quite separately from Indonesia.²⁶ Two years later, when the
Netherlands was seeking Australian support, Dr Burton was reported as saying that he was astonished the Netherlands had not already made it clear that West New Guinea was not part of Indonesia. It had been assumed that, with Dutch participation in the South Pacific Commission, West New Guinea would be excluded from the transfer of sovereignty to Indonesia. There is no doubting Dr Burton’s sympathy with, and support of, Indonesian national aspirations, but it would seem that he shared with Kevin Kelly an ethnographic view of the archipelago, which envisaged the Indonesian Republic being based on Java and Sumatra while the political status of the eastern archipelago, including West New Guinea, should be determined separately from the Republic and by the indigenous inhabitants themselves. To view political unity in terms of ethnic homogeneity was, of course, hardly surprising in the light of the way Australians still tended to conduct their own White Australian society.

Making West New Guinea Melanesian

In February 1950, the Australian Cabinet accepted the view that West New Guinea should not be part of Indonesia for a combination of strategic and ethnic reasons, which closely resembled the arguments that had been advanced by officers from the Pacific Division since 1947. It is not suggested here that there was necessarily direct influence by Kelly and his colleagues on the formulation of the new Menzies Government’s West New Guinea policy, rather that this group was the first to articulate the perceptions and values that were to inform and underpin government policy until 1962 as well as finding broad support within the Australian community. Once adopted, the policy was pursued with great vigour and determination by Spender, reflecting few of the complexities, uncertainties and ambiguities of what had gone before it.

The imagery that Australian politicians used in 1950 to justify the separation of West New Guinea from Indonesia relied heavily on notions of ethnic difference, and even differences in flora and fauna. In the colourful language of W. S. Kent Hughes:

May I say in all friendliness to President Soekarno that his claim [to West New Guinea] is not just, either historically, ethnically or geographically. Even the fauna and flora of New Guinea are not the same as those of Indonesia, but they are the same as those of Australia. If I remember rightly there are nine species of echidna and 84 species of marsupials in New Guinea. The whole of that island is geographically and in every other way tied with Australia. Racially, the people are not straight-haired Indonesians but frizzy-haired Melanesians.

There was bipartisan consensus on the matter. Evatt cited South Pacific Commission experts to the effect that New Guinea is divided from Indonesia by the so-called ‘Wallace line’. He went on to argue that ‘the Melanesian race in New Guinea, and the Indonesian race, are completely different. The overrunnig of the Melanesians by the Indonesians would lead to the complete destruction of tribal life in New Guinea’. Spender concurred with this line of argument, emphasising the ‘separate and distinct nature of western New Guinea’. A few months later, in his discussions with his Dutch counterpart, Spender also used the ‘Wallace line’ to argue that West New Guinea did not belong to Indonesia. The fact that Alfred Wallace drew his lines between the ‘Indo-Malayan and Austro-Malayan Regions’ and the ‘Malayan and Polynesian Races’ much further to the west, rather than conveniently between the Moluccas and West New Guinea, as imagined by some members of the House of Representatives, serves to emphasise rather than diminish the importance of perceived ethnic composition in Australian thinking about nation states.

In his June 1950 statement in Parliament, Spender underlined this Australian approach. ‘Our information is that the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of western New Guinea are of the same race, with the same ethnic origins, the same characteristics and in the same state of development as those who inhabit Australian New Guinea and Papua’. Once established, the assertion of a clear ethnic difference between Indonesia and New Guinea became an article of faith in Australian rhetoric. Rarely was it expressed in more absolute terms than by Spender himself, in 1954, at the United Nations.

I wish to say categorically that the inhabitants of West New Guinea are not ethnologically akin to the Indonesians. I am one who has had the fortunate experience of having travelled over large areas of New Guinea. I have as well on more than one occasion travelled extensively in Indonesia. It does not require anything but eyes to establish what anthropologists know clearly enough — that there is not the slightest resemblance between the people of Indonesia and of New Guinea. They are Papuan race while the Indonesians are Malaysian [sic].

One of the difficulties Australian policy makers had in defending the argument of ethnic difference was the paucity and unreliability of information at its disposal. The government had adopted a clear policy position, passionately held, long before there was any detailed knowledge of West New Guinea society. In the early 1950s, Australian Defence authorities thought the population of West New Guinea to be about half of the contemporary Dutch estimates. The highlanders were described as pygmies, and the people in general were thought to be ‘pagan and primitive’. During the 1950s, there was surprise and concern expressed
when it was discovered that West New Guinea society was not as it had been imagined. The ‘Indonesianness’ of West New Guinea was reflected in the high proportion of Indonesian middle and lower officials in the administration, and among missionaries and teachers, as well as in the labour force for the oil industry in Sorong (who came from eastern Indonesia). In August 1950, the one point of major disagreement in the discussions between Spender and his Dutch colleague was the Indonesian presence in West New Guinea. Spender objected strongly to the use of imported Indonesian labour, which he considered as dangerous as any concession to the Indonesian claim for sovereignty. Later in the 1950s, other Australian attempts to de-Indonesianise West New Guinea were evident in education policy. Australia wanted Malay (Indonesian) replaced as the language of instruction in schools by Dutch or, preferably, English. It was as if Australia wanted West New Guinea remade so it would resemble its initial image.

The international exposure of Australia’s argument on the ethnic differences between West New Guinea and Indonesia, as in Spender’s speeches at the United Nations, elicited some interest from other countries. In mid 1955 the Australian Legation in Rangoon reported official Burmese interest in the ethnic differences between New Guinea and Indonesia. Upon inquiry among senior anthropologists, it appeared that there was limited material and expertise available in Australia, and the question would have to be referred to Dutch anthropologists for an authoritative opinion. On the information available, the Department of External Affairs formed the opinion that Indonesia was a ‘multiracial’ state. The inhabitants of the Moluccas, the region of Indonesia bordering West New Guinea, had many affinities with the peoples of coastal West New Guinea. With respect to the public expression of policy, it was noted that, in the United Nations and elsewhere, Australia had used the ethnic argument but this should not be pushed too far. It would not be politic to discuss the matter in too much detail with the Burmese authorities.

It was not until 1959, with the placement of a Liaison Officer in Hollandia, that the Australian Government received regular, detailed and informed reports about developments within West New Guinea — nine years after Cabinet had determined that West New Guinea was of vital strategic interest to Australia. Hasluck was one of the first Australian Ministers to become aware that the population of West New Guinea was more mixed than in the eastern half of the island. In the coastal areas and the western part of the territory there were some Malay-speaking communities. By reason of pre-war and wartime communications with the outside world, some of the coastal peoples were more advanced educationally and economically. These ‘coastal sophisticates’ had no counterparts in Australian territory in New Guinea. There were also significant numbers of Moluccans and other Indonesians as well as Eurasians. Hasluck’s reservations about cooperation with the Dutch and a common future for both halves of the island were, in part, related to his recognition of these differences between West New Guinea and the Australian territories.

Whatever doubts may have existed among senior officials and ministers about Australia’s rhetoric, it was not publicly questioned. The view that West New Guinea was part of the Pacific, and ethnographically formed a unit with the Australian territories, distinct from Indonesia, found institutional form in cooperation agreements between the Netherlands and Australia in 1953 and 1957. In a Joint Statement of November 1957 it was asserted that ‘the territories of Netherlands New Guinea, the Australian Trust Territory of New Guinea, and Papua, are geographically and ethnographically related and the future development of their respective populations must benefit from cooperation in policy and administration’.

The cooperation agreements reflected the dominance, in both the Netherlands and Australia, of those policy makers who saw West New Guinea as part of the Pacific. Dutch policy makers envisaged that cooperation with Australia was a way of re-orienting their territory away from its old links to the Indonesian archipelago in the west, and towards the Pacific and Australian New Guinea, in the east. It was hoped that this orientation would remove the New Guinea problem from the realm of the troubled relations with Indonesia, to which, in the Hague’s eyes, it was all too often consigned. Economic and social advancement would be fostered outside the Asian sphere and without Asian participation. One motive behind Australian and Dutch thinking was the expectation that a public emphasis on the ethnic unity of New Guinea would help to counter Indonesian claims at the United Nations. Australians also had an eye to the future of New Guinea after formal colonial relations had ceased. Publicly promoting the unity of New Guinea and the ethnic homogeneity of its inhabitants, would create the possibility that the peoples of both parts of the island might exercise their right of self determination to create a single state, separate from Indonesia. Australia should also seek to ensure that the future political leaders of a united New Guinea recognised the value of relations with Australia.

In 1959, the Australian Cabinet seemed to shift away from the objectives espoused in the Joint Statement with the Netherlands. It was a change of emphasis based on strategic considerations rather than on any transformation of ethnographic perceptions of the neighbourhood. The Menzies Cabinet recognised, for the first time, that the strategic importance of Indonesia to the USA and Australia was greater than that of West New Guinea and it should, therefore, be a major objective of Australian policy to keep Indonesia non-communist and friendly. Cabinet’s decision in 1959 was the first step back to the values and perceptions of the South-East Asia oriented policies, influential in some quarters in the late
1940s, while still maintaining the objective of supporting Dutch authority in West New Guinea. This trend in Cabinet’s thinking was consolidated the following year when it rejected an External Affairs submission to expand cooperation with the Netherlands and further promote the creation of a united New Guinea.25

When Barwick turned Australian policy on its head, at the beginning of 1962, his arguments were a development of Cabinet’s 1959 decision. The principal objective of Australian policy should be the cultivation of friendly and cooperative relations with a preferably non-communist Indonesia. Barwick noted the earlier Australian support for a united New Guinea and the exercise of self-determination. He argued, however, that an independent West New Guinea would be economically unviable and militarily indefensible and, far from enhancing Australian security, would be a provocation to Indonesia. Barwick recognised, as none of his predecessors had, that Indonesian aspirations for the attainment of sovereignty in West New Guinea were ‘real, deep-seated and a not illogical national sentiment’. A friendly Indonesia would prove a much more effective bulwark against the ‘southward march of Communism’ than a Papuan State of New Guinea.26

It was not so much that Barwick had a different ethnographic view of the neighbourhood, rather that ethnographic considerations were of little consequence. He expressed, in very different geopolitical circumstances, similar values to the South-East Asia oriented diplomats of the 1940s. Barwick, like Critchley and the authors of the 1949 strategy paper on Australian policy in South-East Asia, accepted that a strong united Indonesia was in Australia’s interest and that Australia sympathised with, and regarded as legitimate, Indonesian national aspirations. The vacillations and turbulence of Australia—Indonesia relations notwithstanding, it is this view that has informed Australian policy since 1962. This said, it is nevertheless the case that, over the last two decades, Australian community support for the East Timorese cause suggests that the ethnographic view of the neighbourhood (including the appropriate rationale of the Indonesian nation state) continues to enjoy much support.

**Conclusion**

Reflecting upon the West New Guinea dispute suggests that there were two quite distinct phases in policy development, and in the perceptions and values on which policy was based — the formative phase and then the phase when policy was perpetuated and sustained. In the first, the policy of the three protagonists was marked by ambiguity, vacillation and indecision. This reflected the competing constructions of the position of West New Guinea in the governance of the region, and the underlying rationale of the Indonesian nation state. Much of the diversity in Australian opinion has been attributed to how Australia’s neighbourhood was constructed. It was argued that policy makers tended to fall into two groups: those who were ‘socialised’ in, and oriented towards the South Pacific part of the neighbourhood and those who looked principally towards South-East Asia. Whether West New Guinea was perceived to be part of the South Pacific or part of South-East Asia was a critical factor in policy formation. In the second phase, from 1950, policy became an article of faith. There was relatively little questioning of policy within government or criticism from without.27 From the early 1950s, the respective governments became dominated by groups supporting the national orthodoxy. In Indonesia, Hatta and other moderate members of early cabinets gave way to Sukarno. In the Netherlands, the Catholic Party, from its pivotal position in successive cabinets, was able to impose its view of the importance of West New Guinea. In Canberra, the new Liberal–Country Party Government embraced the ethnographic argument that West New Guinea was quite separate from Indonesia. In the crucial period, 1949–50, certainty and rigidity replaced ambiguity and indecision, as national policies were established.

Apart from reminding us that the passionately held national orthodoxies were not always so, an analysis of the formative period of the dispute has given insight into two other aspects. The dispute was not so much about West New Guinea itself but rather about what it came to represent in a broader symbolic sense to the respective governments. West New Guinea was, after all, one of the least consequential regions of the Dutch East Indies. At most, it was a territory that could be used as a homeland to solve the socio-political problems of the Indo-European community. There was only very minor West Irianese representation in the Indonesian national elite. The Australian government had negligible information about the territory, and showed little interest in acquiring any, for many years after it had determined that West New Guinea was of vital strategic interest. The symbolic representation that the territory came to assume for each country was consistently underestimated, and at times misunderstood, by the other parties. The very unimportance of the territory meant that policy makers did not anticipate the issue. Few people in 1949 could have imagined that, for the following thirteen years, West New Guinea would provide Indonesia and the Netherlands with the focus to continue their decolonisation struggle.

This chapter highlights the importance of ethnicity in Australian thinking. In the turbulent political situation in Asia, following the Second World War, ethnicity and culture were seen as one of the proper building blocks of nations. The Papuans of West New Guinea were perceived to be ethnically different from Indonesians, therefore, they should be part of a separate nation state. Australians found it difficult to appreciate the Indonesian notion that their state was not based on a supposed cultural and ethnic affinity. It is not without irony that a nation
then implementing policies, which would make its own society multicultural, could not imagine another multi-ethnic state based on political and historical principles.

It is easy for us to reflect upon 50 years of decolonisation and note the prevalence of the successor state principle, but for policy makers of the late 1940s it was much less obvious. The experience they could look back on was the break up of empire and the emergence, after the First World War, of new states based, at least in part, on ethnic, linguistic and cultural bonds. This aspect of Australia’s rhetoric was sustained, despite some awareness among policy makers of the difficulties of drawing clear ethnic boundaries in the highly heterogeneous eastern archipelago and New Guinea. Australia’s rhetoric was thought to provide the most effective counter to Indonesian anti-colonial arguments in the United Nations and elsewhere. Australia and the Netherlands were protecting the rights of self-determination of the ethnically distinct Papuans.

Persistence of the conceptual rationale and rhetoric of Australian policy is the more remarkable because of the changing international relations environment in which the dispute took place, and the sharp difference of perspective between Canberra and Washington. The Cold War was in its infancy when the dispute began, but with the re-emergence of the Indonesian Communist Party in the mid-1950s, and Indonesia’s willingness to seek support from the Soviet Union and China, Cold War considerations became prominent in Washington’s thinking. The place of West New Guinea in the Cold War conflict — the influence that maintaining Dutch sovereignty had on the global struggle — was one issue on which Canberra and Washington held distinct perspectives. The ethnographic construction of West New Guinea and Indonesia, together with highly localised assessments of security, continued to inform Canberra’s view of West New Guinea, while Washington, in its struggle with the Soviet Union, was more concerned about the fate of the entire archipelago. Barwick’s reassessment of Australian policy brought Canberra’s policy much closer to Washington’s, but the conflicting perspectives had been evident for over a decade. The differences between Australia and its principal protector in their perspectives on West New Guinea gave the West New Guinea policy a particular place in the Menzies Government’s foreign policy. It was home-grown, as we have seen, having deep roots in the way Australians imagined their neighbourhood as well as their own White Australian society, and was sustained with little support — and often some opposition — from Washington and London.