



AUSTRALIAN VOLUNTEERS INTERNATIONAL

FOREWORD

The Hon Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG

Justice of the High Court of Australia

How did it happen? Why has it been such a success? How can its outreach to the world be enlarged so that its future is even more significant than the past? These are the questions that confront us when we think about the story of Australian Volunteers International (AVI) (formerly the Overseas Service Bureau [OSB]).

The chronicle of the formation, growth and success of AVI is one that mirrors the gradual emergence of Australia from a perception of itself as a kind of imperial backwater in the wrong geographical part of the world into a vibrant, multicultural society that rejoices in its engagement with the world, and particularly with the Asian and Pacific regions on its doorstep.

The bright, talented, idealistic and mostly young people who have taken part in the activities of OSB and AVI during its first fifty years, recounted in these pages, were fore-runners for a great transformation in the spirit of our continental country so that it might become a worthy microcosm of the entire

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globe itself. Imperial self-satisfaction and feelings of racial and cultural superiority have gradually given way to feelings of excitement, affection and even love for the people of the wider world with whom the volunteers have been engaged. The belief that Asia and the world were places to be flown over in the youthful pilgrimage "Home" to England has been replaced by a growing realisation of the privilege that it is to spend time working with fellow human beings outside Australia, to come to understand their lives, to share in their problems, to live as they do and to help where help is welcome.

As I myself lived through the same era, and witnessed the changes in Australia that accompanied and explained the growth of AVI, I can empathise with the stories that are recounted in this book. Yet it would not have been easy in the early days. The mission of AVI challenged the inward-looking, often prejudiced, view that many Australians then had of themselves. In a sense, this book is not only the story of the emergence of AVI and its participants. It is the story of the evolution of a new spirit in a nation seeking to discover what is unique and special about its society and people, expressed in all of their variety.

This book recounts the initiatives of the founders. It is no accident that their notions originally grew out of spiritual feelings, and specifically the idealism of the Australian Student Christian Movement in the 1950s. All of the world's great religions, including Christianity, teach of the brotherhood and sisterhood of humanity and the need to live and work in respectful harmony with each other, and to help each other when we are in difficulties. The initial motivation of OSB and AVI has been a kind of spiritual yearning - even on the

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part of those Australian volunteers who would not identify themselves as specifically religious. It is this yearning that is essential to the survival of the human species in the age of nuclear fission and global anger. From the beginning, AVI and its participants have been an example of the good that lies in human beings, particularly in those who grow up and live in Australia, a country so richly blessed by nature and fortune.

The core of this book is made up of the stories of individual volunteers, back to the earliest days in the 1950s. They have worked in all continents, in all disciplines and all conditions. Doubtless there have been failures as well as successes, for that is part of the human condition. But the ultimate success of the AVI movement can be discovered in the bonds of friendship that have been established; the experiences that the volunteers have brought back to help focus their own lives; and the changes to which they have contributed in the outlook of Australia as a whole, as it engages with the world about it.

The book concludes with details on AVI today, on its Volunteer Program and Youth Program and on how we can all be involved and contribute to the success of this noble venture. The focus of AVI's work has changed over the years. As these pages recount, many of the recent volunteers have been engaged in helping the response to a calamity which was unknown and unpredicted in the 1950s: the HIV/AIDS pandemic that now confronts communities and individuals in all parts of the world. And to the Asian/African Tsunami. And to the need to teach English to those of other tongues for full engagement with the internet in the digital age. In every decade new challenges are presented, such as those in Timor Leste to which Australian

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volunteers now go with the same practical idealism and energy as their parents and grandparents exhibited elsewhere in the early years.

It is uplifting to read of the way the AVI experience, at home and abroad, has added a new dimension to the lives of those who take part in it and has enlarged their view of the world and of their own place in it. In times of danger, nights of boredom and loneliness, periods of self-doubt and moments of exhilarating engagement, these Australians have done our country proud. They have more than faithfully fulfilled the vision of the founders. They have raised Australia's reputation. They have immeasurably enriched their own lives.

As a Patron of AVI, I am proud to acknowledge more than fifty years of achievement. This book tells a story at once practical and heart-warming. And the best years of AVI lie ahead.

1 August 2007
High Court of Australia, Canberra

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Wendy White', is positioned in the lower right quadrant of the page. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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