The forgotten on death row

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AUSTRALIANS are witnessing the last moments of a tragic play that ends today with the execution in Singapore of Australian Nguyen Tuong Van, 25, for possession of 396 grams of heroin.

In the past 12 months, dozens of Australians across South-East Asia have faced drugs charges carrying the death penalty. They include the Bali Nine and Schapelle Corby in Indonesia and Nguyen Van Chinh in Vietnam.

Death for drugs in Asia is not new. Remember the executions of Barlow and Chambers in Malaysia two decades ago? However, the recent cases have shocked the Australian public and caused an angry backlash against our Asian neighbours and their death penalty policies. Why?

One reason is that we seem to have forgotten that the death penalty is standard practice across Asia. More than 75 nations execute criminals, including all the ASEAN ones and some of our key trading partners and allies, such as the US and China, which executes far more than any other country. We are the exception in our region.

Our short memory is another example of our national ignorance about Asia and is the product of years of decline of Asian studies at secondary and tertiary institutions.

OUR governments have steadily cut funding in this area with 70 tertiary academic positions being lost over the past decade.

How can we understand, question or challenge our regional neighbours on this issue, or any other, when Australian expertise is vanishing? We are losing our Asia-literacy.

Even more disturbing is our selective approach to the death penalty. We seem only upset when it is an Australian facing execution.

Did we challenge the Vietnamese authorities who, according to Amnesty International, executed 64 people in 2004? And did we raise an eyebrow when the US, our close ally, executed 59 people in the same year?

Closer to home, Australian politicians and the talkback public were elated to see Amrozi and fellow Bali bombers receive the death penalty, but we are shocked when Australian drug traffickers face the same fate.

How can we celebrate one outcome and not the other? If we stand against the death penalty, it should be universally condemned, regardless of whether Australians, Vietnamese or Indonesians are to be executed and regardless of their crimes.

The death penalty is either morally wrong or it is not.

Of course Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia and the US are sovereign nations and we can't expect them to stop executing people just because we say they should.

Indeed, Singapore executes more per head of population that any other country, with broad popular support among Singaporeans.

But why haven't we done more to persuade our neighbours? It is an indictment of our policy that the Europeans, on the other side of the globe, are far more active in our own region in pushing for an end to executions.
There are plenty of opportunities for our government to be vocal through ASEAN, APEC, the East Asia Summit and other multilateral forums.

Instead there is silence on the broad issue from Australia, broken by politicians queuing to endorse Amrozi's death sentence.

We need to decide on what side of the fence we sit. Do we, in fact, support the death penalty or oppose it? If we care about human rights we need to care about the rights of all, not just Australians.

There is surely no room for exceptions based on politics, citizenship, race or ethnicity when it comes to state-sanctioned killing.

And we need to engage better with our neighbours. This is not just about inter-governmental ministerial meetings, but about Australians understanding Asian societies and languages better and presenting our views more effectively.

WE have to get our street cred back in Asia by being engaged all the time, not just when it suits us.

Otherwise, we will remain the indignant and alien white man of Asia. It is a position that does nothing to advance Australia's interests or those of our citizens in trouble offshore.

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