They think we’re soft

Tim Lindsey and Jeremy Kingsley

LOOKING south from Indonesia, Malaysia or Singapore, our neighbours see a country that has drug problems.

We tolerate widespread marijuana use, a drug that most ASEAN countries regard as “category 1” — equivalent to heroin.

They think that shows we don’t take drugs seriously.

Their views seem confirmed by the dozens of Australians arrested across Asia for serious drug offences.

Right now, there are more than 45 Australians sitting in Asian jails. After Schapelle Corby was arrested, Michelle Leslie, Graham Payne and the Bali Nine followed in rapid succession, bringing the score of Australians arrested for drugs in Indonesia alone to 12 in 15 months.

The bleak future facing most of them was brought home grimly in December last year when Singapore executed Australian Nguyen Tuong Van for heroin smuggling.

What doesn’t make sense to our neighbours in the north is why we get upset about the tough punishments these Australians face.

By any measure, the Bali Nine were obviously involved in a major criminal operation. Some 8.26kg of heroin is a big haul in any country and would certainly result in heavy jail time in Australia.

We see marijuana as less serious, but most of our region doesn’t. For many South-East Asians, Corby’s 4.1kg of hydroponic marijuana is very nasty stuff and deserves a heavy penalty.

The Indonesian President has even said he would never use his powers of clemency to help a drugs offender and that includes heroin and marijuana.

It is far enough that we differ on the evils of marijuana; after all, there is a debate on this in Australia too. But what really drives a wedge between Australians and our near north is the death penalty.

All ASEAN countries apply the death penalty for drugs offences, except the Philippines. For instance, in Singapore, possession of as little as 500 grams brings a mandatory death sentence. So why did the Bali Nine risk it?

Australians know what drug offences mean in Asia, or at least they should. It has been public knowledge, at least since Malaysia hanged Barlow and Chambers in 1988 and has been the subject of a stream of TV and big-screen films, such as Midnight Express (1978) and Bangkok Hilton (1989).

But reinforcing this, when we leave Australia we are handed pamphlets that unsubtly remind us of tough drug laws overseas, while airports across Asia are festooned with signs warning that drug offenders will be executed.

Despite this, and the Corby trial being plastered across their TVs, the Bali Nine went ahead anyway. They seem to have had a “couldn’t happen to us” attitude.

Maybe our Government does too. Perhaps this is why it has done so little to oppose the death penalty in Asia?

Australia’s official policy is that execution is a barbaric penalty and a fundamental breach of human rights, which is why our last hanging was in 1967. But every year, millions of Australians travel overseas.

Inevitably, some will be involved in drugs, some will get caught and a few will face death. So, you would think our Government would be an active international opponent of the death penalty.

But no, our Government has been largely mute.

It doesn’t make much noise about executions, at least not until an Australian gets to death row. Why?

Is our Government afraid to offend China or the United States, another leading death-penalty country, which executed 60 people last year?

Or does Canberra deep down, not really care all that much? After all, Prime Minister John Howard is on record saying that execution is “appropriate” for terrorists.

Whatever the reason, because we say little or nothing internationally, we don’t have much credibility when we object to the execution of an Aussie. To Asians this sounds a lot like “you can execute as many of your own lot as you want, but hands off ours”.

Our selective compassion means that when we demand our latest drug offender be let off, it reads as arrogant neo-colonialism. To many Asians, we are geographically confused Europeans unable to accept that we are part of Asia, not the European Union.

Many of us naïvely think being Australian is a “get out of jail free” ticket in hot, poor countries. Australians seem unable to understand that Asian countries are not colonies any more, but sovereign states with autonomous, if often clunky, legal systems.

The mixture of a sense of invincibility among young Australians abroad, a relaxed attitude to drugs and our Government’s lukewarm opposition to the death penalty overseas gives us little leverage in South-East Asia.

No wonder our Government could do nothing to stop Singapore executing Nguyen.

Unfortunately, it also means the Bali Nine can hope for little comfort from Canberra. To protect Australians in trouble it is time to drop our superiority complex and take more consistent policy positions internationally against execution, of anyone, anywhere.

Is that too big an ask, Mr Howard?

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