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The Arroyo visit to Australia - a day to remember

The elegantly written card arrived by mail from Prime Minister Howard's Office in early May: an invitation to Canberra's Parliament House for a luncheon in honour of Philippine President Gloria Arroyo's first visit to Australia. Mine was simply addressed: Mila Cichello, Community Leader (no titles, thankfully!).

At the May meeting of **Bayanihan Australia Community Network** (BACNI), we tabled the invitations that had arrived. Yes, President Macapagal Arroyo (moniker GMA) was doing a whistle stop tour of Japan, New Zealand and Australia in late May 2007. Yes, BACNI had received an invitation from Asia Society for a Business Dinner with GMA on 31 May 2007 and we had a sponsorship offer to pay for a BACNI table if we wanted to go. Yes, the Philippine Ambassador HE Ernesto de Leon in Canberra was hosting a meet-n-greet upon GMA's arrival on the Wednesday and the Phil Embassy had invited Filipino community leaders from different States. Yes, a number of Filipino and Australian organisations were organising a protest against extra-judicial killings in the Philippines under GMA's regime. Yes, Pampangueno Club of Victoria's own indefatigable Roy Carbungco, as Community Liaison for Philippine Honorary Consulate in Melbourne, was doing the hard work of contacting community groups in Victoria to flag GMA's meet-n-greet at Melbourne's Grand Hyatt in the afternoon of 31 May 2007.

So, who was available to attend which? The Arroyo visit had instigated much discussion within our close network of organisations and friends- about the state of Philippine politics, foreign aid not benefiting Filipino citizens, escalating human rights issues and questions on how the GMA visit affects (if any) the local Filipino- Australian community. We accepted individual's choices: in the end, two declined the PM invitation; a few accepted the PM invitation; some preferred to stay for the Melbourne protest; others chose to attend the Hyatt meet-n-greet, and all declined the Business Dinner invite.

Wednesday 30 May 2007 - And so it was that I found myself flying from Melbourne to chilly Canberra on the same Wednesday as Susan Jaraba, Al Noveloso from PinoyTV, Maina Walkley (former Hon Consul of Melbourne) and her associate, Rose and Josie Wallace from Launceston, Tasmania. Susan, Al and I tumbled into our hire car and made our way to the warm Mendoza household in the suburbs, where Nanay Agus thawed us with hot drinks and meryenda. With Roy M driving us for the day, we dropped off dapper Al at the Phil Embassy at 2:30 pm to prepare his media equipment for the GMA arrival. The Embassy was already abuzz with security vans, media, early guests and food delivery.

Susan and I then took off to snatch some sightseeing time. A drive to the Summit look-out to admire Canberra's panorama was followed by a sobering visit to the War Memorial Museum where we found our flightmates Rose and Josie doing the same tour. What a great chance to share interstate experiences! GMA and her entourage's arrival from New Zealand was delayed but by all accounts, her meeting with Ambassador De Leon and Filipino community leaders went very well. By the time Susan and I arrived back at the Embassy at 6:30 pm, people were finishing their mandatory Kodak moments, as someone quipped "usual suspects, same poses". It was refreshing to chat with the ever helpful Embassy staff nonetheless, and to share a slow dinner of pinakbet, daing and nilagang baka with friends afterwards.

Thursday 31 May 2007 dawned as a perfect Canberra crystal winter morning after an overnight temperature of -3C degrees. I collected a shivering Peter from Canberra Airport and headed home for a quick change of clothes for the Parliament Hall Luncheon at 12:00 pm.

The Great Hall entry always impresses with its stately size and dignified ambience. Staff Attendants in red wool uniforms cordially greeted guests dressed in their thin colourful finery of Filipiniana dress and Barong Tagalog as they deposited their handbags and cameras in the Cloak Room. Inside the Hall, the Great Tapestry adorning one entire wall remains a breathtaking backdrop to the rectangular Main Table in the middle which was set in all- white linen and crockery, and surrounded by similar round tables set for 400 guests.

Guests sipping pre-lunch drinks greeted one another as they were ushered to their seats. Peter and I were with excellent table companions: Kate and Anton Andres from NSW; Dr Colin Rubenstein from Australia/ Israel & Jewish Affairs Council; the Hon Bob Baldwin MP; the Hon Corazon Malayaon, Governor of Davao; Peter Maloney, representing the business sector of Melbourne; and HE Mr Nguyen Thanh Tan from the Vietnamese Embassy. Credit must be given to the event organisers for ensuring that all tables had a mix of community leaders, businessmen, media, a member from GMA's entourage and an Australian Parliamentarian. There were the few usual Filipino personalities milling around but I went for interesting new faces instead. The ensuing lunch conversations must have been intriguing!

Opening music was provided by the brassy Royal Military College Band, Duntroon followed by the hushed tones of a string quartet from ANU's School of Music. The lunch wines were *Green Point Chardonnay 2006* (Yarra Valley VIC) and *Mr Riggs Shiraz Viognier 2005* (McLaren Vale SA). I'm a confessed teetotaler but the men at our table declared these to be an excellent drop! The menu was of course decidedly Australian: entrée mix of scallop, king prawn and ocean trout; main meal of Gippsland beef tenderloin; petit fours of jelly fudge, mud cake praline and pear-macadamia finger slices and coffee/ tea.

The formalities? Well, we sang Advance Australia Fair, followed by Lupang Hinirang. After the entrée, Prime Minister Howard proposed a Toast to "***Her Excellency The President and the People of the Republic of the Philippines***". In return, President Arroyo proposed a Toast to "***Her Majesty the Queen and the people of Australia***". After the main course, the Prime Minister gave a speech extolling the friendly relations between the two countries and the importance of assisting the Philippines in the fight against global terror. The Hon Kevin Rudd MP (Leader of the Opposition) welcomed the President and impressed the audience with his knowledge of Philippine history. At that moment I had a fleeting desire to know the name of his speechwriter. Then he started speaking warmly of his family's many trips to the Philippines, the natural beauty of the country, their stay with friends and his admiration for the Filipino's heroic fighting spirit, and I watched as pride and emotion suffused many faces around me. A moment's pause, then we all gave Mr Rudd a rousing applause! President Arroyo then responded by thanking the Australian people for welcoming her on her first visit here. She announced the signing of the Status of Defence Forces Agreement, praised the government in its work to combat terrorism in the region and thanked Australia for its continuing aid program to the Philippines.

With the formalities over, coffee was served quickly. GMA and her entourage took leave to catch their flight to Melbourne and the MPs agilely rose as one to rush back to Parliament to continue the business of the day. Peter made a beeline to his hero, the former PM Mr Gough Whitlam for a chat while people took photos and said their goodbyes.

Postscript: President Arroyo made it to Melbourne late in the afternoon and very briefly met some community leaders at the Grand Hyatt. A group of people braved the rain to protest against extra-judicial killings and human rights abuses in the Philippines. GMA then addressed the Asia Society Business Dinner that evening before flying back to Manila that same night - a whirlwind Aussie trip to remember indeed!

Photo below from left: Al Noveloso (PinoyTV), Peter Cichello (Bayanihan Australia Community Network Inc), former PM Gough Whitlam and Aide.



Group photo below, from left: a circle of women leader friends shows Lourdes Cummins (ACT), Loretta Jalocha (ACT), unidentified from SA, Rose (Tas), male adviser, two women leaders from interstate, Gough Whitlam and aide, Noonee Doronila (ACT) in front of Mila (Melb) and Evelyn (NSW), Susan Jaraba (Melb) and Esther O'Brien (ACT).



Photo shows President Arroyo being welcomed by Christian Espino of the Grand Hyatt Melbourne.

