

## Beyond brittle Burma boycotts

[David Scott Mathieson](#), the Human Rights Watch "Burma-watcher", has written [an essay](#) on Australian approaches to Burma. From certain perspectives I expect this would be considered a parochial matter. But my sense is that the current debate here in Australia around, crudely, "sanctions" and "engagement" is one that speaks to the wider yearning for a more effective set of policies towards Southeast Asia's most famous military dictatorship.

Mathieson makes a number of very fair points about Australia's "well-rounded" policy on Burma and offers some useful suggestions on "diplomacy, humanitarian assistance and sanctions". He also takes aim at the recent pro-sanctions lobbying of the Australian Council of Trade Unions and the Burma Campaign Australia. Regular *New Mandala* readers will recall that I have also questioned their intervention in the Burma sanctions debate ([here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). Mathieson introduces a handy turn of phrase when he reflects that the current campaign for tougher sanctions "hark[s] back to the consumer boycotts of the 1990s".

As far as I know, the few serious reflections on that era of sanctions suggest that, by almost any measure, they were profoundly ineffective. If the pro-boycott/pro-sanctions advocates are hoping to win this debate I think they will need to do a better job of persuading us that there is more than "[limited, Western, symbolic](#)" value in their arguments.

[Standing up](#) for [human rights](#) in Burma is, without any doubt, a big and important job. But the experience of decades suggests that finding good levers for improving the lives of ordinary people in Burma is the really hard part. Earlier efforts to beef up sanctions have only left us puzzling at their limited impact, and the ongoing stalemate they have left behind.