

A victory for the culture of paranoia

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These are nervous times for our boys and girls in pinstripes. As newspapers around the world publish salacious extracts from American diplomatic cables posted on the WikiLeaks website, our diplomats are scouring their brains, trying to remember whether their gossip or candid observations to American counterparts about Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard or Stephen Smith may have been deemed amusing or useful enough to have been cabled back to the State Department. As North Korea and South Korea square off and Europe teeters on the brink of financial chaos, one wonders how many of our officials are spending time scrolling through WikiLeaks with hearts in mouths.

But for all the tension, what we have seen so far is hardly going to be the end of international relations as we know it, as Hillary Clinton warned at the start of the week. No one can honestly be surprised that Washington is worried about Pakistan's and Iran's nuclear programs, or that the Americans spy at the United Nations, or that Beijing is frustrated with North Korea, or that North Korea sold missiles to Iran. Is anyone really shocked that politicians and diplomats get drunk, act stupidly and judge each other harshly? I'm waiting for the cable that shows us - hold the front page - that politicians and officials are venal, self-serving and duplicitous.

If WikiLeaks is publishing its best stuff first, none of the cables that have come to light so far will make the slightest difference to the substance of international relations. Its effects will be at a deeper level, and will take some time to manifest themselves. While the leaks are not likely to provoke any sudden diplomatic rifts, they will almost certainly change the way our government operates, making it quite a bit less effective in promoting and protecting Australia's interests in the world.

Foreign ministries have always leaked. Leakers act from a variety of motives; some harbour a deep suspicion of governments' motives, others burnish a strong, but never proven belief that the fewer secrets there are the better policy will be. Most are motivated by the thrill of exercising power against the powerful. But WikiLeaks changes the game. In the past, leakers may have had perhaps a week of satisfaction as the media frenzied and the politicians squirmed. Now their handiwork can have global impact and last for years. Julian Assange has done more than ensure his own fame and fortune; he has made certain that Wikileaks will be deluged with more material than it can ever use for years and years. And if the authorities track him down and close down the site, others will spring up to take its place within hours.

A creeping public cynicism about the motives and methods of governments has led most to institute some form of freedom-of-information legislation and parliamentary oversight. But this has only made them even more secretive, generating greater amounts of classified material with each passing year.

The original definition of an official secret - a piece of information which, if released, would damage national interests - now applies to just a small proportion of what is classified. Anything which could be embarrassing, or complicate things if it got out, is slapped with a classification. Governments are becoming paranoid about information, holding anything even slightly sensitive to their chests, becoming obsessed with controlling who gets to see what and when.

Even as they've become more secretive, though, governments have become progressively less candid in their internal communications. Every official in Canberra and other Western capitals operates under the unspoken dictum "write everything as if it's going to become public". Diplomatic cables have been dumbed down and blanded out. Most of the 250,000 cables Wikileaks has will not get more than a passing glance because they will be too banal -

dry reportage of events and formulaic meeting summaries. Meanwhile, the really useful stuff, the blunt character appraisals, the subtly gleaned intelligence, the clever manoeuvres and gambits - the core currency of diplomacy - is communicated outside official channels. Cables can be FOI-ed; emails can be deleted. Correspondence can be leaked; conversations can be had and denied.

These tendencies have been around for well over a decade, but WikiLeaks will drive them forward further and faster than ever before. There is a massive scale to WikiLeaks, a casual randomness, that makes the possibility of the sudden exposure of official confidences so much greater. In the past, leaks have been targeted. Those who were damaged by them were intentionally damaged. WikiLeaks carries collateral damage to officials and informers, soldiers and diplomats as part of its operating logic. It will take the obsessive secrecy, the blinding down of cables and correspondence, the paranoia about engaging with the outside world to new levels within government at a time when we need confident, open, clever foreign ministries.

As governments classify more and more, and clamp down on the flow of communication, our foreign and security agencies will become more and more stovepiped. However hard they try to improve co-ordination mechanisms, without the free flow of information through their arteries, governments become more unco-ordinated and less effective. Different parts will start to drive forward diametrically opposed agendas. This will happen at a time when our society is internationalising at a great rate, vastly expanding and complicating the remit of international policy. At a time when the international challenges we face have no easy or obvious solutions, and demand a diverse range of expertise even to comprehend them. At a time when the virtuous and vicious interlinkages between international issues can frustrate responses that are not thought through and co-ordinated carefully.

With the blinding out of internal communications, as emails are deleted and diary notes shredded, foreign ministries are destroying their corporate memories. The relentless churn of diplomats through jobs means that every time someone arrives anew at a post or position, he or she has less and less correspondence to read himself or herself into the job. Each generation starts their new jobs from a lower base and our foreign ministries become ever more lumbering and hesitant just as we need them to be dynamic, creative and sure-footed.

A growing culture of secrecy can only increase public cynicism about government motives and methods, leading in turn to even more government defensiveness and paranoia. At a time when Australia's international policy affects, and is influenced by, a growing segment of society, from business to NGOs to churches and the media, we cannot afford a culture of mutual wariness between our officials and the public. But over the past 20 years, despite a remarkable period of internationalisation of our society, there has been no sign of the opening up of government to interaction with the public. Such interaction as exists is arms-length and formulaic.

This may seem overly dramatic. Few Australians spend much mental energy worrying about our diplomatic capacity - which is why governments of both sides have been able to starve the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of resources for a decade and a half. But we should care. Australia's region is becoming more complex and unpredictable with each passing month. The stability and order on which our security and prosperity are based are becoming less certain as continent-sized countries rack up unprecedented growth rates and those around them adjust. We need to take our international relations more seriously, and think through our foreign policies more carefully than we have needed to for decades.

There is another danger lurking behind WikiLeaks. The leaks will almost certainly all come from democratic governments, and the ensuing culture of defensiveness and secrecy will affect only democracies. Authoritarian states, which have defensiveness and secrecy built into their DNA, have learned over decades how to be effective despite it. Leakers in democracies may or may not be found. If they are, they face criminal proceedings.

Leakers in authoritarian states will be relentlessly hunted and found, and almost certainly executed, with the knowledge that the state's retribution will extend to their families. It is not

likely that we will see Chinese, North Korean or Vietnamese diplomatic correspondence popping up on WikiLeaks. The confidence of the US has been badly damaged by Iraq and Afghanistan and the global financial crisis. WikiLeaks can only damage its self-belief further.

Ultimately, WikiLeaks plays into a culture of caution and paranoia that starts from the top. Our political leaders and the media have become embroiled in a destructive cycle. Politicians grow blander and more defensive as they are pursued by a "gotcha" media mentality. As they take fewer risks and are less candid, the press becomes more cynical and frustrated and pursues even harder. The answer to WikiLeaks is not to draw into a defensive crouch. The answer is to accept that leaking has gone viral, to rethink the distinction between what could genuinely damage the national interest and what is merely potentially embarrassing, and get on with the proper business of diplomacy. If the policy works, the gossip and character appraisals will not matter.

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