

Q&A with Michael Fullilove

Interviewed by Benedict Coleridge

An interesting aspect of Australia's 2010 election experience was that foreign policy barely rated a mention during the campaign. Even in the post-election scramble for government, foreign policy rarely featured in discussions between the major parties and the newly powerful independents.

While Julia Gillard tentatively stated that "engagement with the region" would be the hallmark of a Gillard government's foreign policy, and Tony Abbot resurrected the term "anglosphere", neither articulated a vision of Australia's role in an unfolding foreign policy context. All this at a time when Australia's region is experiencing power shifts that require adept management.

So it is worth asking, what is the role of international affairs and policy in our national life? And why did it not register in an election period? With these questions in mind Benedict Coleridge sat down to talk with Michael Fullilove, the Director of the Global Issues Program at the Lowy Institute for International Policy.



Benedict Coleridge: I'm interested in your perspective on international relations. Do you regard yourself as involved in a discipline with distinct forms of analysis and with a historical trajectory? Can international relations be described as a discipline?

Michael Fullilove: I think it is a reasonable term to use to describe it. I come from a slightly unusual perspective because I am trained as a lawyer and trained as a historian. These are actually very different disciplines themselves and they are also different from the training my colleagues had. Most of my colleagues are really policy experts. They are very focused on contemporary events – and of course I am too – but in particular I bring an historian's training and, I hope, an historian's perspective to it. I did my graduate work at a university that is heavily oriented to the historical approach as opposed to the heavily theoretical approach of most of the American universities.

So you ask me if it is a discipline and I find it difficult to answer. I am trained as an historian and I am currently writing a book about Franklin Roosevelt. I'm writing about history but it is the history of foreign policy. My day job is writing about contemporary international relations. As a lapsed lawyer, working basically in foreign policy analysis, I'm also conscious of the differences between those two traditions because lawyers see things in black and white and foreign policy analysts see it in the infinite shades of grey; the two tribes are very uncomfortable with each other. And you see it in issues like, for example, the Iraq War where

lawyers tended to look at it as a black and white issue – is it legal or is it illegal – and foreign policy analysts tend to see it as wise or unwise.

There are many different approaches to foreign policy analysis, whether it is a historian's approach, or a lawyer's approach, or a foreign policy analyst's approach or a climate scientist's approach, an economist's approach.

B: That carries an interesting point – Karl von Nesselrode, an advisor to Tsar Alexander I in 1812, defined international relationships as purely the relations between states. Conversely, thinkers like Philip Bobbitt discuss the rise of the "market state", more fluid exchanges of information, and people-to-people interaction. Have these trends indeed transformed the field of international relations?

MF: I think states are still prime movers in the system, and forecasts of the decline and death of the state are vastly exaggerated. But it is becoming more and more complicated. And one example of that is the question of diasporas, which I have written on. My argument was that the world in traditional international relations is divided up into states which are contiguous with a certain piece of territory, but the forces that link people are much more complicated than that.

I happen to think that, partly as a reaction against the homogenising effect of global culture, people are looking back into the folds of their history or their memory to find

their identity, and what that often does is link them to a homeland in which they don't live. And that raises all sorts of questions because we would normally think that a state has exclusive control of this piece of territory and no control over anything outside that territory, or at least that anything outside the territory is the subject of competition between these closed impermeable states.

People talk about billiard ball analogy in international relations; that States are like billiard balls on billiard tables, zapping around, bouncing off the cushion in predictable linear sorts of ways. But what I argue is that states actually have webs of people dragging behind them that they are linked to - in particular immigrants, or the children of immigrants and so on - who feel certain loyalties towards the state, feel a certain identification with the state. The state will often try to reach out and claim them and this complicates the movement of states because they have this massive web of people sort of trailing behind them.

So, to give you some very specific examples of that: you have about a dozen countries that have created representative slots in their parliaments for representatives of their diasporas, which means that you can have people who are living in another country, not paying taxes in your country, voting on laws and giving voice on policies that affect your country. So diasporas are one of the new phenomena complicating the definition of international relations and particularly complicating how states see their role. Because the truth is states are almost incapable of dealing with diasporas, they don't know where their people are, or how to interact with them.

B: It seems to me that just as the area of international relations has evolved, your role as a commentator has also - because you are not just talking to a government, you are talking to a broader audience. So with that in mind, how do you understand your role as an analyst, an academic and commentator, and what audiences do you hope to address?

MF: I think that think-tanks are sort of a halfway house between academia and policy makers. We are a little bit like academia in that we aim to have the rigour of the academy, we are empirically based, we undertake research and we have areas of expertise. We interact with government in that we are very focused on policy and we are a bit like the media or the newsroom in that we have become very good at communicating ideas to the public. So we have the culture of all these organisations, and yet we are slightly different. Our role is, I have always said, to thicken Australia's topsoil when it comes to international policy and Australia's role in the world. So our role is to explain the world, or parts of the world, to Australians. It is to challenge policies when we don't think they are rational and from time to time it is to excite people as well. It is very exhilarating to work on a topic that is fresh, and you are playing with ideas which is exciting.

Our audiences certainly include government, which is partly politicians and partly officials. I would say also the



interested public... I think you have got to be realistic about that - most people are not interested in foreign policy. But there is a substantial minority that is interested and they affect governments. I would say media is both an audience in itself and a medium to get to those other audiences. We also have ambitions to play the international game. There is an international debate out there and one of the wonderful things about the internet and the new technologies is that the barriers to participating in the international conversation are very low. There is no reason why you cannot have an international presence.

B: In an election period does your task of informing people about key issues concerning Australia take on a particular urgency? I'm thinking of course of the conflict in Afghanistan or ideas such as regional processing of asylum seekers in East Timor. Would you see yourself as having a role in an election period in contributing to public discussion of such matters?

MF: Yes, in adding a degree of complexity and context. Yes we do, and you see an uptick in media requests and so on. But it is not as great an uptick as you would think, because the truth is that Australian elections are not decided on foreign policy issues. There are very few countries in the world where elections are decided on foreign policy issues - I don't actually know if there are any. I think during the 2008 election in the United States, foreign policy had a significant role but it was still not as substantial as a number of other issues. In Australia, because our ability to change the world is less than the America's, it is correspondingly less important in the election period.

You mention the example of Afghanistan - even though Afghanistan is a very important issue because it goes to a commitment that the international community has made

over ten years to deal with this problem, even though many billions of dollars have been spent, even though we have 1,500 or so troops deployed in the theatre, it is not actually being debated, is it? There is no discussion about Afghanistan.

B: I noticed on your biography one of your stated interests is human rights. I wanted to explore another area – the role of values in international relations, values like a commitment to social justice. If you take Nesselrode's definition of international relations, ideas like justice seem to be eclipsed by interests. So is there a room for values in the area of international relations?

MF: Yes, I think there is. The big debate is whether states are or should be motivated by interests or values and the truth is they are motivated by both. Unfortunately George W. Bush squeezed a lot of the values out of foreign policy because he spoke of foreign policy in such a values-laden way that people really shrunk away from this approach. So you've seen, in the aftermath of Iraq, the return of realism and a much greater focus on prudence and caution and the pursuit of interests in a more narrow way. But I don't think that in a democracy foreign policy can be values-free, because it is conducted by our government and therefore I think that it is appropriate that values do play a role.

But this issue of consistency and human rights is a difficult one and it is the big issue that human rights people often have trouble with when it comes to international relations. It is the demand for consistency on the one hand which goes a bit back to the two tribes of lawyers and foreign policy analysts that I mentioned. The human rights people will want consistent behaviour and yet the world is not consistent. And countries have to take a lot of factors into consideration when they deal with another country and it is not realistic to say that they will deal with Iran in exactly the same way that they will deal with France, or whatever.

You are never going to get absolute consistency of action. But what you can get is a thread where you take certain principled approaches and you have a broadly consistent approach to something, to a particular issue, like the abolition of the death penalty, but you are savvy and nimble and clever about the way that you prosecute your case – you don't want to shoot yourself in the foot and damage your own country's interests while you do it. But nevertheless through sustained effort and engagement you can make a difference.

B: As an analyst, when you are looking at broader issues, is it now necessary that you go beyond the state-to-state paradigm and consider community dynamics?

MF: Oh, absolutely. It is one of the great flaws of some of the realists that they make an assumption that all states act at all times to maximise their self interest. So in a sense you don't have to peer inside the state to work out what is driving it, what is affecting it. This is the billiard ball theory of international relations: it is impermeable, all

the states look the same, they are all round, they react in predictable ways. You can say, for example, that Britain will always try to balance whatever the greatest power is on the European continent, the United States will always try to preserve a certain freedom of movement in relation to the western hemisphere, that there are set rules by which states play and their motivations are consistent. But think of the United States in the last ten years! It would be very hard to explain the Iraq War as the inevitable product of America's position in the international system and that it was taken to maximise its self-interest.

Historians will be looking back in fifty years and puzzling about its decision to go to war in Iraq and say, "why on earth did they do that?" It was a combination of their position in the international system, a certain kind of president, a certain kind of ring of advisors around him, combinations of the power of certain ideas that came up at that particular moment and external circumstances, and 9/11, naturally, that all pushed the US towards that act. But if you tried to analyse US foreign policy simply by looking at its external features then you would miss all those explanatory factors, as well as the factors which then caused it to retreat from Iraq and contributed to the rise of Obama, the discrediting of the neo-cons, and so on. So I think that any real expert necessarily has a really subtle and nuanced understanding of the internal elements of the country as well.

B: You have written fairly recently about Australia's UN Security Council's bid. Are you in part motivated by a sense of a role that Australia might play?

MF: I can't believe we are even having a debate about whether we should run or the Security Council. I can't think of other countries in the world that would have a long anguished national debate about whether we should run for the Security Council. Even conservative leaders in other countries would consider it completely obvious – of course their countries would want to serve on the Security Council because it is a source of leverage, of prestige, it is a way of projecting your influence and furthering your interests and projecting your values. So why wouldn't you want to be on the Security Council?

I worry about the smallness of the world view that says we can't afford to spend 5.7 million dollars on a diplomatic campaign to run for the preeminent international security forum. I would try to take a larger view of Australia's possibilities in the world. We can make a contribution but we need to believe in ourselves and we need to make the case to others that we are contributors to the system.

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