

More finesse needed in Abbott's foreign policy

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The leaders' debate featured almost no foreign policy. There was more discussion of Nauru's diplomacy than Australia's diplomacy; more talk of green armies than real armies.

This continues a pattern. There have been a few campaign reviews of Julia Gillard's foreign policy, mainly negative. But even though Tony Abbott may be prime minister in a few weeks, almost no-one has checked out his diplomatic chops.

Unlike some politicians, Abbott is interested in ideas and he has a good pen. However, the foreign policy section of his book *Battlelines* is short – a mere five pages – and pretty thin. Its emphasis on the importance of English-speaking countries – 'the anglosphere', described by Abbott elsewhere as 'the heart of the Western alliance' – sits oddly next to his praise for the Dutch contribution in Afghanistan, or the importance of Australia's relationship with Japan. These days, the anglosphere is simply not enough.

Abbott has real political gifts, but he also has certain weaknesses that can be damaging in diplomacy. The first, illustrated by the anglosphere example, is his tendency to see a difficult and complicated world in stark black and white.

A proper sense of history and values must inform a nation's foreign policy. Courage is essential. But unlike US presidents, Australian prime ministers cannot change the world by pronouncement. They have to deal with the world as they find it – not as it once was, or as they would prefer it to be.

Another weakness is Abbott's taste for the easy line. In *Battlelines*, for instance, he defends John Howard on the charge of being too close to Washington. 'Far from being America's "deputy sheriff"', he writes, 'Australia ran a kind of neighbourhood watch scheme in support of Western values.' Given the Howard government's gentleness in dealing with China's human rights performance, this characterisation is clearly inaccurate. But even if it were true, why would you say it? Given that Howard was dogged for years by the 'deputy sheriff' tag, why would you choose to employ more law-enforcement language?

On the US alliance, Abbott's instincts are broadly right. He has been a responsible opposition leader when it comes to the alliance commitment in Afghanistan,

declining to make opportunistic mischief in the aftermath of Australian casualties. He deserves significant credit for this.

Yet it is not clear what kind of relationship Abbott would be able to establish with President Barack Obama. In part, this is bad timing: unlike Julia Gillard and most recent prime ministers, Abbott would be out of synch ideologically with the incumbent US administration.

However, ill discipline is also to blame. In 2008, Abbott allowed himself to freelance on the American election, saying of Obama: 'He sounds terrific but I don't know what's really there.' It is natural that politicians should have their personal favourites in foreign elections. But when it comes to candidates running for election to the office of head of state of our closest ally, Australian political leaders should maintain a public neutrality befitting the Swiss.

There are doubts about other aspects of Abbott's international program. What should we draw from the fact that Abbott remains bullish about the wrong-headed decision to invade Iraq? In similar circumstances in the future, would he make a similar decision?

The opposition leader has recanted his view that climate change is 'absolute crap', but this feels more like political repositioning than a Damascene conversion. How actively would Abbott participate in international negotiations on a comprehensive response to climate change, on which Australia's long-term interests depend?

The opposition has withdrawn its support for Australia's campaign for a seat on the UN Security Council in 2013-2014 – a move that most conservative world leaders would find strange. Two leading candidates for the Security Council next year, for instance, are Germany (led by the Christian Democrats' Angela Merkel) and Canada (led by the Conservative Party's Stephen Harper).

Neither Merkel nor Harper are members of the Fabian Society. They are conservative pragmatists. They understand that the Security Council is the world's pre-eminent crisis management body; that membership is a source of national prestige, which helps a country to further its interests and values.

Finally, there is the opposition's plan for a two-year public service hiring freeze. In Abbott's Budget Reply, diplomats were conspicuously left off the list of 'uniformed and frontline service positions' that would be exempted from the freeze. The assumption must be, therefore, that over the first two years of an Abbott government, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade – already much depleted over the course of the last decade – would lose several hundred more

officers. How does this square with Abbott's ambition for Australia to be 'an international power in its own right'?

You don't have to be a foreign policy wonk to be an effective foreign policy prime minister. But there is a question whether Abbott is well prepared to meet the international demands of the prime ministership: to advance Australia's interests by working through the full range of relationships and institutions; to make sustained, measured arguments to multiple and diverse audiences; and to balance ends and means.

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