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AUSTRALIA AND THE PACE OF CHANGE

The pace of change continues to accelerate. Some of the changes have been dramatic, while others are so gradual we hardly seem to notice them happening. It is only when we stand back and take a long view that we can see the extent of the change.

The November 2007 swing to Labor was one of the biggest ever achieved at any election. Meanwhile, the 1996 Howard defeat of the Keating Labor Government was Labor's biggest defeat since 1931. Howard therefore came in and went out on similarly dramatic notes.

The extent of the swing – which even cost the Prime Minister his own seat - was all the more surprising because the economy at the time seemed to be going so well. Australia has been having the longest continuous period of economic growth since records began – but the voters dumped the Prime Minister that claimed credit for the “wonder Down Under”. Voters wanted a change.

Ironically, Rudd did not promise dramatic economic or social reforms. The foundations were laid in the 1980s by the earlier Labor Governments and their policy of deregulation, and so he will simply build on them. He promised to reverse the controversial industrial relations changes made by Howard. He has promised an “education revolution” but mostly on the back of increased expenditure.

Additionally, while showing he is well aware of the environment as an issue, Rudd has again not promised drastic changes. His Government will not, for example, ban all native forest logging or close down the coal industry. January 2008 was marked by a confrontation between Japanese whalers and environmental activists in Australia's Antarctic waters. The Government has promised a tougher stand on opposing Japanese whaling (the Howard Government preferred to avoid offending such an important economic trading partner).

Gradual change will probably be a hallmark of the Rudd Labor Government.



Australia and China

Kevin Rudd is the first Western leader in history fluent in Chinese language and history. His knowledge of China is appropriate for the rise of the “Chinese century”.

China's contribution to Australia's booming economy has contributed to a slow change in attitudes towards racism in Australia. There has long been a deep-seated fear of China: "the yellow peril". The European settlement of Australia also saw Chinese workers arriving to help provide menial labour. There were violent racist actions committed against Chinese workers in the 19th century. Meanwhile the emerging trade union movement also opposed the influx of Chinese labour because of the fear that they would lower wages.

Anti-Chinese fears gathered momentum in 1949 after the Chinese communist revolution. Election posters from the conservative parties in the 1950s and 1960s portrayed yellow or red arrows pointing from Asia as the communists were allegedly continuing their headlong march across south-east Asia into Australia. China was seen as a country with a huge population looking longingly at the vast empty space in Australia.

In 1996, maverick conservative politician Pauline Hanson flashed across the political sky. She tapped into the tribal memories of the yellow peril. She was a Liberal candidate in a solid Labor seat (previously held by the former foreign minister Bill Hayden); she was standing simply to give the Liberals a presence. But her racist comments forced the Liberal Party to disown her. She then ran on her own ticket and scored one of the most amazing election victories of the 1990s. She criticized both the Indigenous population whom (she claimed) lived off welfare and the Asians who worked too hard (and cost Australians their jobs).

Her political career was short-lived. All the major political parties co-operated – for the first time - to drive her out of politics. She left politics and capitalized on her celebrity status in non-political appearances in television entertainment programmes. In 2007 she tried again for Parliament but got nowhere. Times have changed.

The Australian mood on China has changed. Although technically still a communist country with a huge population, Australians now see the Chinese as wanting to make trade and not mischief. They know the importance of China for their economic growth. There is a new found respect for China.

✓ **Australia's Place in the World**

Underlying Australia's changed attitudes towards China is the basic question: what should be the focus the Australia's foreign and defence policy? There are three broad themes. First, the traditional view is that Australia cannot be defended alone and so it needs a powerful friend that will assist Australia. Australia for its part needs to assist that friend. Originally (1788-1941) Britain was that great friend. Australia was very loyal. For example, Perth, Western Australia had on a per capita basis more deaths in World War I than from any other location in the Empire. After the Japanese attack Pearl Harbour on December 7 1941, the focus shifted to the US. Australia is the only country to have fought alongside the US in every war in which the US fought

in the 20th century, and Australia (along with Britain) joined in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Australian forces have served with distinction on almost all the world's continents starting with the Zulu War in the 1880s.

This was Howard's line. The largest Australian Defence Force deployment (as at December 2007) was in Iraq (1,575 personnel, out of a total of about 3,500 deployed worldwide).

A second theme emerged in the 1970s: "defence of Australia". There was an appreciation among some defence commentators that Australia was not nearly as vulnerable to attack as was commonly believed in the community. For example, a 1981 Parliamentary report noted that only two countries had the military capacity to invade Australia (US and Soviet Union) and neither had any need to do so. Australia's geographical isolation, instead of being a weakness, was an asset: Australia was too distant for most countries to invade. The "tyranny of distance" can actually be an advantage.

It was still necessary to remain friends with the US but it meant that Australia's real task was to defend the immediate continent and the sea/air gap to the north (around Indonesia). This required a different defence structure (more assets for the navy and air force and fewer for the army). This theme peaked under the Labor Government 1983-96 and was discarded by the Howard Government, which wanted forces to be deployed alongside American ones.

A third theme is to see the Asia region as the focus. Rudd seems to be heading this way. China is of increasing global importance and he hopes that a China-US arms race can be avoided. He does not want the US to unnecessarily add to China's paranoia, such as by offering to defend Taiwan against China.

He will also give more attention given to the South Pacific. This region only got more attention from the Howard Government after September 11 2001 – "9/11"- and the new US fear about "failed states". As "regional sheriff", Australia has conducted an important operation in the Solomon Islands. Rudd wants a more consistent Australian attention to the South Pacific.

A Rudd Labor Government will therefore see a subtle shift in Australia's foreign policy focus. The US may be an old friend - but China is a new friend for a new century.

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