

15 February 2017

Submission to Foreign Policy White Paper Taskforce

Most of all, I want Australia to be a nation that treats all people everywhere with equality, dignity and respect. In our international policy, we must embrace our own humanity and recognise the humanity of people everywhere. We pride ourselves on being the land of the "fair go". I want a fair go, not just for Australians but for people everywhere.

I want Australia to be a nation which has the courage to face its fears and the wisdom to define them. I want leaders who lead, not on the basis of fear of repercussions but on a foundation of principles - especially of equity, humanity and compassion. I want leaders who will call out a world where 8 people can have the same wealth as 3,600 million of its poorest. I want a nation where leaders cannot be bullied, coerced or blackmailed by powerful but barely visible entities, so contributing to such appalling inequities.

The rest is detail.

Aid:

We should recognise our own prosperity, by most measures in the top five or so countries in the world, and extend our generosity accordingly. Australian aid is at its lowest level ever (as a percentage of GNI) and low by comparison to many less economically fortunate nations. This makes a travesty of our championing of the 'fair go' - a fair go or a selfish go? Historically, our aid programs have made some marvellous achievements, many under-recognised or lost in the fog. We have this history, we have the skills, we have the nous, we have the prosperity - we need only the will.

Timor Leste:

Our treatment of Timor Leste's maritime boundary claims is clearly a blight on our moral history, set in a mire of intransigence and belligerence. If it were not predicated by commercial self interest, why would we be so bellicose? We must revert without delay to a deal which is recognised as fair by the international community.

Asylum seekers:

Our treatment of asylum seekers is racked by inconsistencies. "We have squandered much of our moral capital on a shameful charade - an exaggerated response to a few wretched refugees" said Phillip Adams in 2003. The only thing that has since changed is how. We don't want boat people to die at sea but our reactions, to wit Nauru and Manus, are plagued by fear and over-reaction. We have locked ourselves into a position devoid of any pretence of being a "fair go" for those involved. Whatever the outcome of this ugly story, we must say 'never again'. We must put in place policies which recognise the humanity of asylum seekers and address their needs consistent with the opening principles of this letter.

Alliance with USA:

We must revisit our strategic alliance with the USA. Our participation in the US invasion of Iraq made us party to one of the most disastrous political misjudgements so far this century. Our involvement in the conflict in Syria is similarly a political and strategic mess. We must find a means to avoid such awful entanglements in future.

Decision making regarding war:

Related and critical to this, is the decision making process for involving Australia in armed international conflict. The lack of a realistic participatory process, involving the entire parliament, makes for error-prone decisions clouded by personal prejudice and party affiliations.

The UN:

Also related is our support for the United Nations. The 2003 invasion of Iraq was one of the most corrosive attacks on its integrity in my lifetime. I want Australia to be a nation which can fearlessly defend the principles on which the UN was conceived.

Science:

I want an Australia that continues to lead the world in the sciences. It has done that for decades, quietly in the main, but so effectively in many spheres. More recently, distrust in government and big business and polarisation of opinion has strengthened the hand of lobbies of a more pragmatic view. The 'debate' about coal and global warming is an example of the more serious potential outcomes. Commitment to an honest scientific assessment of complex matters should be a priority for our government, a priority for our nation.

Thank you.

Pat Boland