

My focus in this short submission is on just two aspects of Australian foreign and trade policies—one related to policy content, the other to the process of policy making and public communication with this country's foreign affairs constituency and with overseas audiences.

For the past forty years Australian governments, on both sides of the party divide, have formulated foreign policy within a framework of political realism, not identifying specifically with any school of international thought but with a recognisable allegiance to the English classical school, whose most distinguished Australian voice was that of the late Hedley Bull. Within this intellectual tradition the quest for power is the major driving force behind policy, and heavy emphasis is laid on the concept of "national interest". Unfortunately references to the national interest by ministers or other Australian government spokespersons are sometimes slick and uninformative, devoid of any attempt to explain how a government stance actually serves or even relates to the national interest. Repeated aloofness by ministers in response to legitimate questions can engender ignorance, scepticism, distrust, and even cynicism.

The 2003 White Paper contained a section entitled "Projecting Australia and its Values". The 2017 Paper warrants a stronger discussion of this theme, preferably containing clear acknowledgment of the importance of national reputation and the factors that contribute to it. Given that several components of current policy attract severe public criticism, off-shore detention and reduced overseas aid budgets among them, government could be more imaginative in identifying opportunities to project "soft power".

Neither of the two previous white papers laid much stress on the exploitation of soft power in bolstering Australia's national interests. It is hoped that this deficiency will be remedied in the current drafting exercise. As has been asserted frequently since the eminent Harvard political scientist coined the concept more than two decades ago, a smart nation combines hard and soft power resources in its diplomacy. Political realism and soft power are quite compatible. Indeed a

cultivation of soft power can help compensate for the necessary harshness of the government's apparently uncompromising stand on off-shore detention.

Some attempts have been made to rank states according to their soft power resources and their promotion, though the relative importance of factors which contribute to it may be open to debate. The Monocle Soft Power Index compiled annually in London has ranked Australia 6th or 7th in recent years, behind the United Kingdom, Germany, USA, France and Canada. Although Australia scores well on the indices of political culture, physical environment and sporting achievements, it lags behind on the level of government-funded or sponsored cultural agencies with international outreach. By contrast, the 83-year old British Council spends more than GBP 1 billion annually and is represented in more than 100 countries, while the Canada Council's most recent budget allocation was C\$ 182 million, with a promise from the Trudeau government to double this amount over the next five years. The 1997 White Paper included a page on cultural relations and public diplomacy but no in-depth discussion. Since then there has been a reduction of radio and television news and current affairs transmission to the Indo-Pacific spheres of prospective Australian influence.

Avenues for projection of soft power.

A few of the channels for projection of soft power which probably warrant more detailed mention in the White Paper are noted below.

Overseas development aid:

Australia's commitment to a generous level of overseas development aid is a key contributor to its international reputation, but heavily reduced levels of funding since 2012-13 to 0.21 of national income have disappointed a sizeable (but articulate) minority of the electorate. Unfortunately a few high profile parliamentarians on the cross-bench are so narrowly nationalistic that they urge a cessation of all foreign aid. In fact they seem to recognize few if any "duties beyond borders" for the national government. The serious reduction of Australian overseas aid allocations is no cause for celebration, especially so since

several European governments have increased their commitments in the past two years, with the United Kingdom safeguarding a generous annual commitment in legislation, endorsed by all political parties. Is that a bridge too far for Australia?

Integrity of government and commercial culture:

National reputation is enhanced by international confidence in the integrity of its institutions of governance. A key indicator of Australia's reputation in this sphere is its ranking in the international transparency index. This country has slipped from 8th on the global corruption ladder to 13th in 2016. The key reported failures have been the absence of a national anti-corruption body, inadequate protection of whistle -blowers, weakness of anti-bribery laws and sustained government assaults on the Human Rights Commission.

Refugee policy:

A sizeable gulf has developed between government and critics of current policy, principally off-shore detention, reinforced by the largely bipartisan support of the government's border protection strategy. But the loud clamour from the refugee lobby and the churches could surely be reduced by compensatory increases in Australia's humanitarian refugee intake and speedier processing. Canada's example has not been followed, presumably because Australia's screening process is thought to be more thorough than Canada's.

Building public understanding in the domestic constituency and abroad:

The 2003 White Paper contained a small section on the building of public understanding, but several areas of potential influence were overlooked. The domestic constituency for foreign affairs is still quite small, but it can assume considerable influence when policy is challenged by articulate, well-funded interest groups. Parliamentary debate is possibly not as critical to public understanding as it once was, but full-scale informed debate on foreign policy is now regrettably rare. I can find no reference in Hansard, for example, to any debate on the vexed Israel-Palestine dispute over recent decades, yet it is an issue on which a few parliamentarians and both major party leaders hold

defiantly fixed positions, and on which harsh denunciations of any critics of current policy are commonplace, especially in the Murdoch-owned media.

Building public understanding

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The domestic constituency for foreign affairs is still quite small, but it assumes significance when policy is challenged by articulate interest groups or NGOs (think tanks). Parliamentary debate is possibly not as critical to public understanding as it once was, but full-scale informed debate on foreign policy is now rare. I can find no reference, for example, to any debate on the vexed Israel-Palestine dispute over recent decades, yet it is an issue on which several parliamentarians, on both sides of the party divide, hold defiantly fixed positions. Ministerial replies need to move beyond the cryptic, dismissive “it is not in the national interest” to offer at least a brief explanation as to why it is not.

Another lament for this reviewer is that the quality of foreign affairs journalism has declined markedly in recent years, partly because so many aspects of foreign policy impinge on domestic issues, covered by regular reporters, and partly because sections of the shrinking print media can no longer afford to employ senior foreign correspondents. Some encouragement to journalism schools to require a s mattering of international history in their curriculum would be useful.

Closing comment:

The 1997 and 2003 White Papers were too sanguine and self congratulatory---as if all our aspirations were already being met. They contained no recognition of the compromises and second-best solutions often necessary in modern

diplomacy (what the formidable political theologian Reinhold Niebuhr termed “the proximate good”). For example, acknowledgment of the complexity of foreign relations in modern diplomacy would be a useful reminder as to why even a liberal western democracy must sometimes do business with authoritarian or corrupt regimes, preferably without losing sight of its own collective moral standards. Because of its geographical location Australia is possibly more exposed to ethical dilemmas on this front than most western liberal democracies. A failure to acknowledge those challenges creates a rather distorted and misleading description of the international environment in which Australia seeks to advance its interests. Finally a call for more cosmopolitan empathy at a time when populism and narrowly self-preoccupied nationalism is gaining ground in Australia would be salutary.

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