

The New World and 'Another World'

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Reflecting on his recent Australian visit, Cornell's Professor of Government notes some striking differences in political attitudes

EVEN in the summer of 1940, when the fate of free nations seemed to hang in the balance, Britain and France could not see things the same way. When Charles de Gaulle met with Winston Churchill, they differed on many issues of wartime strategy. The two leaders only 'modestly agreed', as de Gaulle later recalled: 'that when all is said and done, Great Britain is an island; France, the cape of a continent; America, another world'.

This summary still seems to capture the shape of disputes over the future of Europe. Britain remains 'an island' of resistance to the construction of a federal super-state, headquartered in Brussels. France, as the 'cape of a continent,' continues to pull other states in the direction of tighter 'integration'. And across the Atlantic, Americans look at the whole process with bafflement, as if they lived in 'another world'.

On my visit to Australia in August and September of this year, I had the distinct sense that Australians live in yet another world. You certainly don't share French enthusiasm or complacency about yielding up national sovereignty to supranational institutions. But you're not an island of resistance, either. You may be in 'another world'—but it's not the New World that Americans inhabit.

The IPA arranged for me to deliver a series of lectures in different Australian cities and by sheer good luck, my topic—the debate about

sovereignty and global governance—proved highly topical. I delivered the Harold Clough Lecture in Perth in late August and just as I arrived in Melbourne the Howard Government had announced that it would no longer co-operate with UN investigations of Australia's human rights record. There were already rumblings, too, about the planned protest against the World Economic Forum in Melbourne, later in the month. By the time I got to Canberra my topic was a central issue for the Australian media. My final talk, to a business group in Brisbane, also provoked more interest than I could normally have expected. Good scheduling work, IPA!

Quite a few things struck me as curious in Australia's reactions. First, you folks are paying much more attention to these issues than we are in America. I noticed, for example, a surprising amount of hand-wringing in the Australian press about the meaning of the planned S11 protest—weeks before it occurred. In the United States, our media briefly looked up and took notice of the broken glass in Seattle, after the anti-WTO protests there in December 1999. By the time of the next street protest, during a Washington conference in May 2000, our media shrugged off the whole thing as noisy nonsense.

It's not that there is such a firm consensus for free trade in the United States. But a series of agreements for reciprocal lowering of tariffs and trade barriers are one thing. Hardly

any prominent figures in America give serious attention to calls for a global regulatory authority to complement the WTO. That dream of the anti-WTO protesters just seems too fantastical for mainstream politicians here. So it is not an 'issue' we pay much attention to.

But Australians seem to think they must listen to anti-trade protesters because they may speak for important forces in the wider world—and the wider world must be heeded. So, there was an amazing amount of hand-wringing in the Australian media about how the world would respond to the Howard Government's rebuff to UN human rights monitors in Geneva. In America, this dispute got almost no media coverage at all. But then, the American media pay no attention even when the UN finds human rights violations in the United States, itself. It is not newsworthy because nothing can follow from such criticism.

Similarly, businessmen in Brisbane asked anxiously whether Australia would not get itself in trouble if it refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol on Global Warming. In the US it is generally agreed that the treaty has no chance whatever of being ratified in the Senate. We have just gone through a presidential campaign in which Al Gore, a principal architect of the Kyoto Protocol, scarcely mentioned this treaty at all in months of campaigning.

International authority has an aura of solid reality to many people in Australia, which it just does not

have in America. When I spoke somewhat mockingly about human rights conventions in Canberra, parliamentarians in my audience seemed grateful to hear such public acknowledgement of the emperor's nakedness. If you go to Capitol Hill in Washington and say that human rights conventions are mostly hot air, you will be criticized for taking a cheap shot—because the point is already so widely acknowledged.

The difference was really brought home to me when I participated in an ABC radio call-in show with an Australian human rights advocate. One of the callers remarked that Australia must show respect for UN human rights monitoring, because 'if we were ever conquered and occupied by a foreign power, we would want to be able to appeal to the UN to safeguard our human rights under the new government.' Neither the host nor the other guest laughed at this. Not even the kooky left in America would talk this way. The idea that if the Pentagon failed us, we could turn at last to the UN to protect our rights—it is just too preposterous to say out loud.

Of course, our geopolitical situations are rather different. Your nearest neighbour, Indonesia, is ten times your size and teetering between a new military takeover and a descent into total chaos. Beyond, there is a newly assertive China, with some 60 times the population of Australia. If Haiti were a hundred times larger than the US, we might worry much more about global trends. As it is, our strongest neighbour is Canada—one-tenth our size and one of the most orderly and civil countries in the world. Besides, the US is a military superpower. Australia is not even a predominant power in its region.

But I am also struck at how much the differences in international outlook mirror the differences in domestic political patterns. Most Americans are somewhat distrustful of what we call 'big government,' so they are naturally distrustful of the super-big

government represented by international institutions. Most Americans assume that government programs will be dominated by self-interested constituencies and distrust them, accordingly. Americans take it for granted that most constituencies, most of the time, will be highly self-interested, because that's human nature. So they assume that when you

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get a lot of countries together in an international venture, most of them will probably be acting in their self-interest and this will mean that they are trying to take advantage of the United States.

A lot of Australians seems to think people can be nicer than that, so countries can be nicer, so the world at large can be pretty nice. It all sounds quite nice and perhaps your fellow citizens are nice enough to make the domestic version of collectivism seem plausible. But I can't imagine which countries in your neighbourhood have given you the idea that the world at large is so nice.

Perhaps there is a still deeper root to the difference, though. Americans have a very deep and instinctive regard for their national sovereignty. We fought a revolution to secure our independence. We wouldn't for a moment think of submitting ourselves to the dictates of some other country or some gathering of other countries in some international body.

There's a long list of international treaties and conventions that have never been brought to a vote in the US Senate because they would never be ratified. Quite a lot of them never get signed in the first place.

Europeans, by contrast, are usually the principal promoters of these ventures—from the International Criminal Court to the Kyoto Protocol to plans for a Global Environment Organization or proposals to somehow merge conventions of the International Labour Organization with the trade rules of the WTO. I understand why the EU, now the world's largest trading state, thinks it can dominate international institutions. I understand why Europeans, having already delegated so much authority to Brussels, find it easy to delegate other powers from Brussels to Geneva or Kyoto or some other centre of global governance.

In the end, I still find it hard to understand Australian leanings. You cannot be a dominant power in world councils but you are justly proud of your own constitutional traditions. Why are you so ready to cede authority to international brokers with no constitutional restraints? Your elites are so jealous of a British ceremonial presence that they want to make Australia a republic. Yet they are keen to treat international bodies as some kindly protector from on high.

Whatever the reasons, Australia really is in another world from the United States—though you will never be part of the EU. Australia is a beautiful and charming country with quite a lot to admire. But viewed from the rest of the world, it does seem a bit upside down.

If you permit a foreign friend to offer one word of advice, I would say this: You should learn to stand up for yourselves in this world. No-one else will.

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