

New world leaders and the politics of power

September 11 may have 'changed everything,' writes **Tom Switzer**. But everything has just changed again.

In early 2008, David Cameron said he greatly admired Barack Obama and pledged to bring some of the same uplifting spirit of change and renewal that the American Democrat generated in the US to the British political scene.

'I think his optimism and sense of hope for the future is inspiring a lot of people. It's great to see,' Cameron enthused. 'Too often [politics] gets down to hope and fear and I think it's wonderful when hope wins. I'm enjoying watching him, I must say. I think he's compelling. I think we need that same sense of possibility here.'

With the political and ideological cycle running against British Labour, it is Cameron who is arguably the 'British Obama'. True, President-elect Obama and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown are from sister parties and are both politicians of the centre-left. But just as the 47-year-old Democrat Senator was the young candidate of change in the 2008 US Presidential election, so too is the 42-year-old Tory leader in the lead-up to the next British election due as early as 2009. Just as Obama's slogan was 'bringing about real change in Washington', Cameron calls for 'change in Westminster.' No doubt Kevin Rudd and his supporters have expressed similar sentiments about Australia in recent times, though ironically the Labor PM went to great lengths to minimise any differences between himself and John Howard during the 2007 federal election.

Perhaps another way of interpreting all of this is through the lens of Wordsworth after he first heard the news of the fall of the Bastille: 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, But to be young was very heaven!' To what extent, though, do the youthful Obama, Rudd and Cameron, or Brown (if he manages to stay in Number 10), really represent change? And how will the international landscape change dramatically in the post-Bush-Blair-Howard era?

Let's start with the differences between the old and new crowds. Although the Australian Labor Prime Minister has distinguished himself by embracing much of his predecessor's domestic agenda—from tax

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cuts and welfare reform to education accountability to the Aboriginal intervention—he is adopting a more multilateral approach on international relations. As an opposition backbencher in 2001, Rudd predicted in Jakarta that future Labor foreign policy would be ‘Keatingism and Evansism all wrapped into one.’ Judging by his habit of announcing foreign policy initiatives of soaring ambition and vacuous content on the run, with very little detail and no prospect of success (such as his proposals for an Asian Union and to secure nuclear disarmament), he’s nearly fulfilled that ambition.

Rudd’s decision to withdraw combat troops from Iraq in June, furthermore, marked a clean break with what the Australian people regarded as the biggest mistake of the Howard era. As for Britain, both the Labor PM and Opposition Leader supported the 2003 invasion, but Iraq has never been Brown’s or Cameron’s war in the same way that it was Blair’s. Obama, meanwhile, opposed the war from the out-

set, not because of the UN’s failure to enforce any number of Security Council resolutions, as Rudd suggested at the time, but because he believed the Iraqi threat could have been deterred in the way it had been since the 1991 Gulf War: sanctions, a no-fly zone and a naval blockade.

What unites Obama-Rudd-Brown-Cameron and what distinguishes them most clearly from the Bush-Howard-Blair years, moreover, is their enthusiasm for UN-style multilateral summitry, especially when it comes to addressing international and regional conflicts and climate change. More emphasis on grand visions and international gabfests. Less stress on strong bilateral ties and national interests. Rivalry and competition, the argument goes, will soon be replaced by harmony and complementarity.

As nations become more intermeshed, the old zero sum of power politics that has characterised international relations for centuries—in which one nation’s gain is another na-

tion’s loss—will no longer apply.

But far from marking a new dawn of international legalism and multilateral architecture writ large, we’re likely to witness the re-emergence of old-fashioned power politics where the priorities of the three allies could very well differ as often as they coincide. All the more so when one considers how power has become more multipolar, with the rise of China and India. With more states having effective veto power over collective action, this multipolarity has given rise to what the distinguished *New York Times* columnist David Brooks calls ‘globosclerosis,’ or an inability to solve problem after problem. In a decent world, he argues, all it takes is a few well-placed parochial interests in certain states to bring down a vast global agenda.

Take security. Rudd appears to embrace a quasi-Wilsonian idea of collective security. Obama, Brown and Cameron have said similar, albeit understated, things on the subject. Indeed, there is a very real risk that all

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these leaders could attach opportunistic importance to the role of the United Nations as the authoriser of policy and play down the importance of democracies such as Australia, the US, Britain, Japan and India that work together in partnerships. But the abysmal record of collective security should not be forgotten. Woodrow Wilson envisioned the League of Nations as the body that would make the First World War the 'war to end all wars.' Yet within two decades the bloodiest war in history engulfed the world.

By pandering to illusions about the UN, instead of exposing them, the three governments might think that UN approval is a necessary condition for the legitimate use of force. But the UN cannot operate successfully unless the major and veto-owning powers reach a consensus, and given the score of resolutions condemning aggression since the war have failed to translate into any meaningful action, that prospect is highly unlikely. As that conservative realist Robert Menzies once said of faith in the United Nations: 'Believing that it can transform international politics is like believing it is possible to erect a house which will then proceed to dig its own foundations.'

Take trade. In July, the Doha Round of multilateral free trade collapsed. The culprits: India's Congress, which sought to placate small farmers in the run-up to the next elections; and Chinese leaders who doggedly defended cotton and rice producers. Add to this the powerful protectionist forces in the Democrat-controlled Congress (which has recently rejected major free trade deals with Colombia and South Korea) and in the White House (Obama has been described by the Wall Street Journal as the 'most protectionist US presidential candidate for decades') at a time of financial market mayhem, and it's no wonder

the outlook for the international economic order is gloomy.

During the recent election, Obama commanded overwhelming support among Australians, Brits and indeed people all around the world. Yet, on trade, the Democrat poses a serious threat to the global economy. Whereas Rudd, Brown and Cameron champion the advantages that come from globalisation, Obama tends to talk about free trade and free markets almost exclusively as a problem. Whereas Rudd, Brown and Cameron push for a successful outcome to Doha, Obama complains about US job losses created by trade deals such as NAFTA. So much for Obama's claim to be a 'citizen of the world.'

Take climate change. Rudd likes to proclaim that 'climate change is the great economic, environmental and moral challenge of our time.' Australian Greens leader Bob Brown predicted that the Obama administration will be manna for a greener globe. And Brown and Cameron talk similar language. But if the world can't reach a consensus on something as relatively simple as free trade, how on earth will it be able to reach a consensus on something as complicated as global warming? The Indian government is not only rejecting Kyoto-style emissions cuts; it is unashamedly saying poverty poses a greater threat to its people than climate change. The Chinese Government is not only refusing to cut its emissions; it is building a new coal-fired power plant nearly every week. In the US, although Obama supports a cap-and-trade model, only last June the Democratic-controlled Congress rejected a watered-down version of his emissions trading plans. Most of Europe, despite already having implemented an emissions trading scheme, has failed to meet its mandatory carbon targets under the Kyoto protocol.

So if the world's major emitters such as China, India and the US—which together will account for more than 50 per

cent of global emissions by 2030—won't participate in any serious carbon reduction plans, why should a nation such as Australia—which will account for only 1 per cent of global emissions—slash emissions to 60 per cent of 2000 levels in the next 40 years? The idea that Australia, with its natural abundance of fossil fuels, should go out on a limb ahead of the world on cutting greenhouse gases is frankly risible. For unless the nations responsible for the biggest emissions commit to effective plans to reduce them, Australian unilateral action would lead to the export of its energy-intensive jobs to those nations that do not take action to reduce carbon pollution, thus worsening the emissions problem.

Another way of saying all this is that the day of the fox has replaced the day of the hedgehog. 'The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing,' wrote Isaiah Berlin in his famous essay on Tolstoy. He was concerned to use the distinction between the centripetal and monist hedgehog and the centrifugal and pluralist fox to illustrate two different political styles.

Bush, Blair and Howard were single-mindedly committed to fight the good fight in the war of Islamist terror. They had no doubt as to the reality of global jihad and were prepared to subordinate a lot of foreign policy decision making to it.

For Obama, Rudd, Brown and Cameron, however, there is no such central, global issue, nor any overriding and threatened interest that might bind together their causes in a convincing way. Far from embracing an over-arching policy, they are more likely to support different policies that are shaped by diverse forces and competing interests. Whether this is bliss in that dawn to be alive remains to be seen, but the signs are not promising.

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