



Raising our eyes in the wake of the Federal Election

David Lowe

Come September, Aussie Rules football fever is everywhere in Victoria, and indeed to varying extents, it captures attention throughout Australia. For the clubs lucky enough to be playing finals footy, and for their supporters, the sense of climax is palpable. The cocoon of finals footy envelops workplaces, playgrounds, chance encounters and friends and families. We commune as we imbibe the finals season. For footy commentators, too, there is extra attention – their opinions are more hungrily and nervously devoured. One of the commentator’s favourite recommendations that has grown in popularity over the season has been for players heading towards their forward line to ‘lower their eyes’ in order to hit one of their teammates leading towards them. It’s an interesting phrase that suits some teams’ tactics better than others; but alas, in the case of sport reflecting life, it is a phrase that has suited the national conversation about what matters to Australians in the Federal Election.

We have been encouraged by both of the major parties, in particular, to lower our eyes. Labor and Liberal campaigns were determinedly inward-looking, inviting us to judge how we are travelling as a nation according to a mixture of half-sketched equations of financial house-keeping and an awkwardly balanced commitment to growth and jobs while bettering the house-keeping. What has been missing is the rest of the world, at a time when the rest of the world matters. If, for example, we are to understand the full implications of Australia’s national debt, it might help to know how it stands in relation to debts of other members of the OECD; if we are placing high premium on how the previous government responded to the Global Financial Crisis, then might not the IMF’s views on Australia’s performance matter? Not so long ago, Joe Hockey came back from a trip to Europe reflecting on whether the ‘Age of Entitlement’ was over, a statement that was provocative and suggestive of more policy debate to come – but this, like the Henry Tax Review before, sank silently the closer we came to election campaigning. If, as some argue, a regional approach to refugee arrivals might profit from remembering the Fraser Government’s agreement

reached with Malaysia relating to Vietnamese refugees fleeing conflict in the late 1970s, then might we not need to be better informed about how this actually worked and whether it translates in instructive manner to today's predicament? And while there seems to be considerable variety in how other developed countries have tried to reduce carbon emissions, might it not be a good idea to hold some of them up for detailed scrutiny rather than overlook them or sweep them to one side?

I hope the condition is temporary, but we have become less international and less historically literate as a consequence of the Federal Election. Labor's great leap into 'the Asian Century' was nowhere. Perhaps the most interesting foreign initiative was the Liberals' 'New Colombo Plan'. The aim to sponsor Australian students to study and hopefully also work for set periods in Asian countries, as part of their higher education experience, is a most worthy one – and I hope it will succeed. The name of the project recalls a partly-Australian-led initiative beginning in the 1950s, the Colombo Plan for aid to South and Southeast Asia, and so invites at least, some historical reflection. The Colombo Plan is well-remembered by Australians (especially those over the age of 50) as a means by which Australians came to know Asia, and supported development in Asia, particularly through sponsoring Asian students to study in Australia. It is rightly held up as a positive story of engagement that managed to cut through persistent obstacles to better Asian-Australian relations in the 1950s and 60s of Cold War alliances and the White Australia policy. Like the sketch we have of the 'New Colombo Plan' the old one consisted primarily of a series of bilateral agreements between donor and recipient countries: Australia struck agreements with particular countries to provide developmental aid and scholarships according to need and fit. But a soft form of regionalism grew with the Colombo Plan. At annual meetings, in the active publicity around the projects, there developed a stronger sense of interdependence and even a language of internationalism and regionalism. I hope that the New Colombo Plan can also embrace this multi-directional 'people-to-people' regional quality, too. Under the old Colombo Plan, recipient countries enjoyed becoming donor ones as they grew, and promoted regional training centres for general use. Today, Papua New Guinea is quietly rolling out a modest program of development assistance for its neighbours. The O'Neill government has already pledged financial assistance to help Fiji prepare for elections next year; and it has extended aid to Tuvalu, Tonga and the Marshall Islands. In

addition to long-established regionalism in the form of entities such as ASEAN, there are new forms of regional co-operation stirring in Australia's neighbourhood. To the extent that we have a historical hook offered in the name of the 'New Colombo Plan', there also comes the renewed need for Australians to build with the dynamics of change, rather than standing apart.

Given where I have travelled in these reflections, perhaps the Aussie Rules football means of inviting Australian politicians to raise their eyes seems too flippant. But there is another bitter/sweet connection. For all the AFL's extraordinary efforts, the sport we love (and I'm a hopeful Hawks supporter) doesn't attract more than mild curiosity and ex-pat fanaticism overseas – with Ireland perhaps as partial exception. If we do not raise our eyes in political and policy debate, then there is a danger we will succumb to the same kind of mixture of satisfaction and insularity that characterizes Australian Septembers. Unlike footy, wherein there is always next season, our national conversations are at risk of becoming impoverishing in ways that could be felt both here and overseas, and with consequences that take longer to correct.

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Citation: David Lowe, *Raising our eyes in the wake of the Federal Election*. Australian Policy and History. September 2013.

URL: <http://www.aph.org.au/raising-our-eyes>