



Asia Pacific Bulletin

Number 76 | October 21, 2010

Will Post-Elections Australia Pursue a Course Independent of the United States?

BY MICHAEL SUTTON

Australians went to the polls on August 21, 2010, and voted for the first hung parliament since the end of World War II. This development presents unique challenges to national governance and foreign policy. The Australian Labor Party, Labor for short, governs with the support of the only member of the Australian Greens in the House of Representatives and three independents. As both Labor and the conservative Liberal National Party Coalition failed to secure the minimum of 76 seats required to form government—each attained 72 out of 150 seats—a caretaker government served until the last independents declared their position on September 7. Two independent Members of Parliament (MP) opted for the conservatives.

However, the balance in parliament remains fragile, and policies can be made or broken in the House of Representatives by the slimmest of margins. The government lost a vote when it followed convention and appointed the Speaker of the House, a politically impartial position, from its own ranks. On the first day of parliament, the government lost a motion when two of its coalition independents crossed the floor to side with the opposition over a procedural matter. Given this precedent, more substantive policy issues will be vulnerable to similar tactics and consequences. With this set of circumstances and the unpredictability of the independent MPs, the likelihood that the current Labor government can survive a three-year term is slim. The current arrangements may result in some procedural reforms, but it is more likely to return one of the two parties to majority government at the next election.

What priorities will be pursued in Australian foreign policy? Provided the government remains in office during the next three years, will Australia seek to adjust relations with the United States or will the alliance remain fundamentally the same? Two points are worth mentioning.

Firstly, any shift in foreign policy towards the United States will require bipartisan support for it to endure, and that is highly unlikely. Despite the change in government, the alliance and the common interests between the two countries remain firm. Secondly, while Labor is formally committed to the alliance, the Australian Greens are not. They support a variety of radical policies that challenge the alliance, such as withdrawal from Afghanistan, a review of anti-terror legislation, and a long opposition to nuclear weapons and energy. However, the Greens do like President Barack Obama, especially his views on a nuclear-free world, and support American criticism of China on human rights. There is a degree of unpredictability about the Australian Greens, but their impact on foreign policy—given the bipartisan support in both major parties on many key issues—will remain irrelevant.

The Australian political landscape is best characterized by occasional unexpected events that coexist alongside an underlying conventional wisdom of resilient continuity. For example, on June 24, former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was

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politically assassinated by the “faceless” factional bosses within his own Labor Party. Rudd’s popularity declined publicly during the early months of 2010 and in the Labor party due to his abrasive leadership style. Nevertheless, Rudd was reelected to parliament in 2010 and appointed Foreign Minister on September 14. Widely respected abroad, Rudd is unlikely to depart the political scene any time soon and is viewed by many conservatives as the “prime minister in exile.”

Rudd’s successor, Julia Gillard, is Australia’s first female prime minister. She entered federal parliament in 1998, as did Rudd, and held a number of key portfolios before being appointed deputy prime minister in the Rudd cabinet in 2007. Gillard was also part of what critics called “the gang of four”—a reference to the four senior members of the 2007-2010 Labor government. This meant that she held significant ownership over the policies delivered during the Rudd cabinet. It should be remembered that in December 2006, Rudd replaced his former leader Kim Beazley, now the Australian ambassador to Washington—an irony that would not have been lost on either men when Rudd visited the US capital as foreign minister, not prime minister, last month.

During the Rudd government, there were stirrings of another unexpected kind—a shift in Australian foreign policy towards the United States and reaction to the role of China in the Asia Pacific. Policymakers and commentators are downplaying the significance of the shift, but the reality is that Australia is increasingly concerned over the apparent decline of the United States in the region and the rise of China. This anxiety was expressed in the 2009 White Paper on Defense that contemplates the gradual erosion of US “strategic primacy” in the region and is elaborated more explicitly in Professor Hugh White’s recent essay entitled “Power Shift: Australia’s Future between Washington and Beijing.”

How is this discussion to be understood? In reality, there is no paradigm shift underway in US-Australian relations. During the 2010 election campaign, the Labor Party described the alliance with the United States as the “bedrock of Australia’s defense security and strategic arrangements” and views the United States as “the single most powerful and important strategic actor in our region for the foreseeable future.” Solidarity with the United States in Afghanistan also enjoys bipartisan support.

The root cause of Australian anxiety is paradoxical. Despite strong resource exports and bilateral trade relationships, Australia has become more anxious about its role, reputation, and position in the Asia Pacific, dominated by much larger and potentially more significant economies in the region, such as China, Indonesia, and India. This is a deep concern for Australia, and it is driving domestic debates on population size, fertility, immigration and the forecasted long-term trajectories for the nation. Gillard, like her predecessors, has however also inherited—and is unlikely to change—the vital continuities underpinning Australian stability and regional relations. Australia is a major exporter of natural resources with a stable financial sector and vibrant economy. Australia is a nation of immigrants with one of the most liberal immigration regimes in the world and, unlike China, Japan, and Korea, enjoys a relatively high fertility level, ensuring a less problematic engagement with an aging society.

While the government itself may not survive, the resilient continuities that characterize Australian foreign policy are likely to endure. It is also true, however, that as the region continues to change and the larger economies supplant Australia’s middle power ambitions, anxiety will also continue to be the adrenalin of state regardless of who is in office.