

Barack Obama's Twice-in-a-Lifetime Speech and Tony Abbott's Unwelcome Welcome

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The visit of a United States President is among the more exciting events Australian parliamentarians experience. This was obvious on November 17, 2011 as they gathered eagerly waiting for President Barack Obama's entry, and jostled to shake his hand afterwards. A similar sense of anticipation permeated the public galleries where I was one of several PhD students from ANU's School of Politics and International Relations in attendance. Naturally, Obama's visit prompted much media excitement and his address to parliament generated much analysis. This commentary focused on Obama's message of US engagement in the Asia-Pacific region, and in particular what this means for China. However, it was not that Obama's message was new, in fact it largely repeated President Bill Clinton's 1996 address to Australia's Parliament. The attention Obama's message for China received was largely a result of a political context in which those same words seemed more provocative towards China. The media also highlighted Opposition Leader Tony Abbott's defiance of convention in using his welcome speech to make partisan attacks against the government. Again, this was nothing new; Abbott had used his two previous welcomes to foreign leaders in the same way.

The event gave followers of politics a rare opportunity to observe the performances of three distinct leaders in three distinct roles. These leadership roles impart varying levels of authority and encourage leaders to act in different ways. Of these, the role of the opposition leader in welcoming the visiting leader is most interesting because of its ambiguity. While prime ministers have the authority to speak on behalf of the nation, it is less clear who opposition leaders represent. Should they copy prime ministers and attempt to speak on behalf of the nation? Should they speak solely for their party and supporters? How opposition leaders respond to this choice provides an insight into how they understand their role. Abbott, unlike any of his predecessors at similar events, spoke primarily for his party and supporters and used every opportunity to denigrate the government. Clearly, his understanding of his job follows Benjamin Disraeli's maxim, "The duty of an opposition is to oppose".

Obama: fluff and substance but little novelty

Obama's speech was well constructed and well delivered. He spoke eloquently of his personal memories of Australia from when he visited as a child, of the history of military cooperation between Australia and the US, and of the similarity of the settler histories of the two nations. However, the substantive section of the speech was less about Australia than about America's interest in the Asia-Pacific region. The speech was short on detail, as these speeches tend to be, but emphasised three themes for further development in the Asia-Pacific: security, economic cooperation through free trade, and the spread of democracy and universal human rights.¹ These same themes formed the basis of Clinton's speech 15 years earlier.² The similarities did not end there. Both Presidents sought to dispel any fears that the US' focus was elsewhere, reassuring Australians that the US is part of the Pacific.

For Obama: 'Our new focus on this region reflects a fundamental truth: the United States has been and always will be a Pacific nation', and later, 'The United States is a Pacific power and we are here to stay'.

For Clinton: 'not only has America been but she is and will remain a Pacific power'.

Obama's discussion of China, the focus of much Australian media attention, was also very similar to Clinton's.

Obama: 'Meanwhile, the United States will continue our effort to build a cooperative relationship with China. Australia and the United States—all of our nations—have a profound interest in the rise of a peaceful and prosperous China'.

Clinton: 'The emergence of a stable, open and prosperous China, a strong China confident of its place in the world and willing to assume its responsibilities as a great nation, is in our deepest interest. True cooperation is both possible and plainly productive'.

As both presidents noted, this is despite certain differences between the US and China.

Obama: 'we continue to speak candidly to Beijing about the importance of upholding international norms and respecting the universal human rights of the Chinese people'.

¹ All references to Barack Obama's address to parliament: *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates House of Representatives Official Hansard*, No. 17, 2011, Thursday 17 November: 12846-12852.

² All references to Bill Clinton's address to parliament: *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates House of Representatives Official Hansard*, Wednesday 20 November 1996: 7167-7172.

Clinton: 'The United States and China will continue to have important differences, especially in the area of human rights, and we will continue to discuss them candidly'.

Each president stressed the importance of human rights in America's plans for the Asia-Pacific.

Obama: 'Every nation will chart its own course, yet it is also true that certain rights are universal—among them, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion and the freedom of citizens to choose their own leaders. These are not American rights, Australian rights or Western rights; these are human rights'.

Clinton: 'Neither of us seeks to impose our own vision on others, but we also share the conviction that some basic rights are universal and we have to decide whether we believe that. I believe that everywhere people aspire to be treated with dignity, to give voice to their opinions, to choose their own leaders'.

Despite these similarities, there were notable differences in the contexts of the two speeches. Obama's speech shared little in common with that of his immediate predecessor, George W. Bush, who spoke to the Australian parliament in 2003.³ Bush used his speech primarily to thank Australia for its involvement in the Iraq War and in the War on Terror more generally. He only briefly mentioned US involvement in the Asia-Pacific, stating that it would continue before praising Australia's leadership in maintaining peace and order in the region. So while much of Obama's speech resembled Clinton's, after Bush's focus on Iraq and Afghanistan, Australian observers could perhaps be forgiven for thinking that Obama's vision was new.

The continuing rise of China as a world power since Clinton's comments in 1996 is a further contextual change. Coupled with US economic difficulties and the strain of a decade of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, this has made the US position less secure. It certainly has altered the relative power of the US and China. Obama's commitment of 2,500 additional marines to be stationed at Darwin added greater substance to comments directed at China.

However, Clinton's promise to keep around 100,000 troops in the Asia-Pacific region would have had similar implications. Even with the changing context, the similarity of the messages

³ *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates House of Representatives Senate Joint Meeting Official Hansard*, No. 17, 2003, Thursday 23 October: 21689-21692.

and even the substance behind the messages suggests an over-reaction by the Australian press in reporting a supposedly provocative message for China.⁴ China's negative public reaction to any US defence initiative in the region is to be expected regardless of how important the step is seen to be. As Professor Geoffrey Garrett of the University of Sydney's United States Studies Centre noted, such reactions are likely intended for domestic audiences.⁵

The familiarity of Obama's speech also suggests that Australian observers should be sceptical of the extent to which the US focus will shift to the Pacific and remain there. While Obama has continued to stress the priority of the Asia-Pacific in discussions of future defence spending since returning to Washington,⁶ subsequent presidents may have different priorities. There is reason to think that America's strategic and economic focus will continue to be in this region, especially as China's importance continues to grow, but there was every reason to make the same comment at the end of Clinton's presidency.

Three leaders, three roles, but why does the opposition leader speak?

The familiarity of Obama's speech aside, it was clear to observers of the three speeches to Parliament in November 2011 that each leader spoke with a different level of authority. Obama as President, with no competitors present, could speak without fear of contradiction as leader of the US. When Julia Gillard spoke as Australia's prime minister, her welcome also had the authority that comes from speaking on behalf of a nation.⁷ However, it was delivered in a partisan chamber and with the knowledge that the Opposition Leader would be following her. It was also necessarily deferential to Australia's powerful ally, the US. Naturally, as the leader of a junior alliance partner, Gillard was certain to avoid offending Obama. By contrast, Obama was courteous but never deferential to Australia, focusing on what was important to America.

⁴ For examples of the Australian media on the message for China see Paul Kelly (2011) 'Message echoes beyond our shores', *The Australian*, 18 November; Michelle Grattan and Dylan Welch (2011) 'Pointed message to China', *The Age*, 18 November.

⁵ Geoffrey Garrett interview with Chris Uhlmann (2012) 7:30, ABC, broadcast 6 January

⁶ Barack Obama (2012) reproduced in 'Text: Obama's Remarks on Military Spending', *New York Times*, 6 January

⁷ All references to Julia Gillard's welcome to Barack Obama: *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates House of Representatives Official Hansard*, No. 17, 2011, Thursday 17 November: 12843-12844.

For opposition leaders the task of the speech is less clear. They can only truly claim to represent their parties, and perhaps the segment of society that voted for their parties at the previous election. In an adversarial parliamentary democracy like Australia, opposition leaders are alternative prime ministers and generally take every opportunity to attempt to show their superiority over the prime minister. So then, what is their role at a formal, apolitical occasion such as the welcome of a US president? The occasion demands a measured, deferential and apolitical speech like the one Prime Minister Gillard delivered, but opposition leaders gain little from that. Abbott was unwilling to be apolitical and as such, he even risked remarks that could be interpreted as patronising to the President.⁸

Abbott attracted derision in the media for his attack on the Labor government's shifting positions on the sale of Australian uranium to India.⁹ The media paid less attention to the fact that his attack also seemed condescending towards Obama, 'On selling uranium to India, President Obama had the good sense never to change President Bush's policy. In this country, on this policy, the transition from the former government to the current one has been – how shall I say? – less seamless'. Some journalists noted that Abbott's choice of quotes was hardly designed to flatter America.¹⁰ Abbott likened the US to the main American character in Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American*, including the narrator's description, 'he had never met a man with such good intentions for all the trouble he caused'.

Abbott attacked the Australian Government later in the speech, and again sounded patronising towards the visiting President. On this occasion he criticised the Mineral Resource Rent Tax and Carbon Tax, though without mentioning either by name, 'Australia's danger is complacency: the feeling that the world has no choice but to buy our minerals, so new taxes can painlessly fix our fiscal problems. America's could be political gridlock, with congress a permanent hung parliament where everyone accepts the need for lower spending except on their favourite project'. Here Abbott justified his criticism by wrapping it in advice to the President. Why Obama would need to be told by an Australian opposition

⁸ All references to Tony Abbott's welcome to Barack Obama: *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates House of Representatives Official Hansard*, No. 17, 2011, Thursday 17 November: 12844-12846.

⁹ For example Steven Scott (2011) 'Abbott address ignores traditions', *Courier Mail*, 18 November; Katharine Murphy (2011) 'Abbott's praise bears a partisan shot', *The Age*, 18 November.

¹⁰ Laurie Oakes (2011) 'Abbott's sniping tactics are on the nose', *Herald Sun*, 19 November.

leader that Congress can be intransigent and self-interested is unclear. It could also be seen as hypocritical for Abbott to point out the capacity for 'political gridlock' in the US, when he has done little to smooth the operation of Australia's parliament. People in glass lower houses should not throw stones.

Abbott's behaviour was nothing new. He had welcomed two other leaders to Australia's parliament, each time attacking the Labor government. In March 2010, when welcoming Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Abbott attacked Australia's immigration policy, 'We [Australia and Indonesia] have worked to end people smuggling before. It worked when we worked together before. People smuggling has started again and we can stop it again, provided it is done cooperatively and with a clear understanding of our mutual interests and with the right policies in place here in Australia'.¹¹ Similarly, his welcome to New Zealand Prime Minister John Key in June 2011 included this attack on Government environmental policy, 'I also congratulate you, Prime Minister [Key], for dramatically watering down the emissions trading scheme that you inherited. In this country, your sister party will go further and do better. Should we inherit any carbon tax, we will not just reduce it; we will rescind it'.¹²

Abbott's repeated use of these occasions to criticise the government suggests that it is an entrenched part of his understanding of his role. He speaks at these occasions on behalf of his party, and he understands that to mean that he speaks at the expense of the governing party. Previous opposition leaders have spoken on behalf of their parties and noted differences between their policies and those of visiting leaders. In 2003, Simon Crean's welcome to US President George W. Bush mentioned that his Labor party did not agree with the Iraq War,¹³ and in 2006 Kim Beazley made the same point when welcoming UK Prime Minister Tony Blair.¹⁴ Both added that this point of difference did not diminish the alliance between Australia and the country whose leader they were welcoming, and both refrained from using the occasion to question Australian government policies.

¹¹ *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates House of Representatives Official Hansard*, No. 4, 2010, Wednesday 10 March 2010: 2136.

¹² *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates House of Representatives Official Hansard*, No. 9, 2011, Monday 20 June: 6450.

¹³ *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates House of Representatives Senate Joint Meeting Official Hansard*, No. 17, 2003, Thursday 23 October: 21688-21689.

¹⁴ *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates House of Representatives Official Hansard*, No. 4, 2006, Monday 27 March: 2-3

In terms of the formalities of the occasion, it is difficult to understand why the opposition leader gives a speech welcoming visiting leaders to Parliament. The prime minister is the leader of the government and the de facto national leader. Furthermore the opposition leader lacks the claim to speak for parliament as it is the prime minister who commands majority support in the lower house of parliament. After the prime minister has welcomed the visiting leader, there is little that an opposition leader can add to the occasion. The tradition emerged in 1996 when Clinton addressed parliament. In 1992, neither the prime minister nor the opposition leader spoke to welcome President George H. W. Bush. Amendments allowing both to speak in 1996 were approved by both houses of parliament without debate. Introducing the motion in the House of Representatives, Peter Reith noted that there had been discussion between Government and Opposition on the matter.¹⁵ It is likely that the reason for allowing both prime minister and opposition leader to speak was a fear that if prime ministers had a monopoly on the occasion, they might be tempted to politicise it. If so, then the outcome has not been as expected. Now if a prime minister or an opposition leader wishes to politicise the event, there will be little preventing them from doing so. Both leaders have continued to make welcome speeches at such occasions since 1996, though the opposition leaders' speeches have rarely enhanced the occasion.

The performance of political leadership

The excitement for Australia's parliamentarians and the few lucky spectators allowed into the galleries may have been excessive for what turned out to be a twice-in-a-lifetime speech. The same can be said of the media excitement; the Chinese government heard nothing during Obama's visit that it had not already heard directly from the US and Australian governments. In the absence of much detail of the planned US focus on the Asia-Pacific, the pertinent question seems to be, will anything significant change this time? The rise of China gives the US reason to focus more attention on this region, but what exactly that will mean is as yet unclear.

Tony Abbott did little but live up to expectations that he long ago created for himself. This speech was only the latest piece of evidence that he sees his role as primarily one of

¹⁵ *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates House of Representatives Official Hansard*, Wednesday 6 November 1996: 6674-6675.

building up his party and tearing down the government. His posture throughout his opposition leadership has been aggressive. Abbott is the first opposition leader to use these welcome speeches in this way, if others follow his example, it may lead to a questioning of the format of future such events. Any major revision to the format would be unlikely though, and while the opposition leader's speech adds little to the occasion, its existence is useful to scholars.

The occasion gives a rare insight into the nature of the relationships between Australia and visiting leaders' nations. John Howard's prime ministerial welcomes to George W. Bush and to Chinese President Hu Jintao on consecutive days were highly dissimilar. The former was a warm, friendly and deferential speech, similar to Gillard's more recent welcome of Obama.¹⁶ The latter was more rigid and business-like, noting the mutual benefit of the Australia-China relationship rather than a history of great friendship.¹⁷ Furthermore, visiting US Presidents in particular have left observers with little doubt that America is less interested in Australia than in the region to its north.

It is also intriguing to observe opposition leaders' reactions to such occasions. Opposition leaders are among the most purely political actors in Australian politics, they have no government function and no meaningful state function. Usually they exist purely to attempt to win government and replace the prime minister. Therefore the way opposition leaders respond to apparently apolitical situations, in which their usual behaviour is seen as inappropriate, provides fascinating insights into their character and the way they understand the position. The visit of an American president may be overvalued in the media, but it provides a rich opportunity to better understand the nature of Australia's political alliances and to observe the performance of political leadership in various roles.

¹⁶ *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates House of Representatives Senate Joint Meeting Official Hansard*, No. 17, 2003, Thursday 23 October: 21687-21688.

¹⁷ *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates House of Representatives Senate Joint Meeting Official Hansard*, No. 17, 2003, Friday 24 October: 21695-21696.