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Australia's International Affairs: The Australian Greens' Approach

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Election campaigns are mostly argued on the basis of local issues that have direct impacts on our community; so much so that the phrase “all politics is local” is considered self-evident. However, some things are missed in our three-year electoral cycle. The biggest gap in our national conversation is the place of Australia in the world. Foreign policy takes a back seat during an election, and if it presents at all, it is as caricature: foreign wars, the nameless families who flee them, or massive defence procurements to meet undefined threats. The rest of the planet is meant to form a one-dimensional backdrop to our domestic drama. Whether we like it or not, this is all going to change. Australia remains an island in geographical name only. In terms of culture, economics, security, and even the weather patterns that threaten our homes or ruin our crops, our lives are bound up with people all over the world who are also trying to build safe and prosperous lives for themselves and their families.

The Greens understand that UN Security Council Reform, or torture in West Papua, or the bitter, endless siege of Gaza, are subjects unlikely to make it onto talkback radio or into the election coverage over the next few fevered weeks. Tragedies like the Syrian civil war seem incomprehensible from this distance. They probably seemed incomprehensible to people watching from Calais or Lesbos as well, until suddenly there were tent cities, and families piled up against barbed wire fences, and children washed up on beaches. Here in Australia, the razor wire contains those fleeing the disintegration of Afghanistan or the unspeakable aftermath of the Sri Lankan civil war, but their stories have much in common. How we respond to those seeking safe harbour from collapse will ultimately bear directly on our own survival.

As hard as it seems, we must leave behind the comfortable illusion that we are somehow separate or that we can remain insulated from the tides of nationalism and extremism rising around the world, or from the shock waves from wars our own Government helped start, or from the collaborations of quiet convenience with authoritarian regimes who serve some temporary commercial end dressed up as the national interest.

Right now, the world is engaged in multiple arms races, from the military build-up in the South China Sea to the modernisation of nuclear weapons arsenals still deployed by the handful of countries defying the will of the overwhelming majority of the world's peoples. On a troubled, overcrowded and rapidly overheating planet, these are arms races our human family can no longer afford, with money and expertise squandered on another generation of weapons whose use cannot even be contemplated. The real reason we have to bring foreign policy into the heart of our political conversation is because our present generation of leaders are carrying us, seemingly helplessly, into a world in which there will no longer be anywhere for refugees to run.

In 2011, researcher Christian Parenti published a work entitled *Tropic of Chaos*, in which he visited failed and failing post-colonial states and war zones around the world's equatorial regions, from Mexico to East Africa to the Golden Crescent. Underlying these widely dispersed conflicts and regional traumas and fragilities, he discovers the unmistakable signature of climate change. It expresses not as a primary cause, but as a forcing agent; a blowtorch of drought or flood or crop failure held to fragile regimes and bureaucracies edging them towards collapse. In a dynamic that will be familiar to anyone who has come across the "Shock Doctrine" as described by Canadian author Naomi Klein, he also found the militaries of the world's most powerful nations exploiting this instability for wider political and economic ends. It is no coincidence that the United States, which accounts for one third of the whole world's military spending and has an unmatched overseas base footprint, also has the most advanced and carefully considered scenario planning for when the Tropic of Chaos spills across the border.

Parenti terms this near-future scenario the "armed lifeboat". In the armed lifeboat world, the pinchpoints and edge places of global inequality are places of intense misery and perpetual conflict; whether in occupied Palestine, occupied Tibet, on the Mexican border with the United States or our own benighted prison islands. Nobody is really spared in this scenario. As the front-line diffuses and washes back into those places of privilege from where these armed lifeboats are piloted, mass surveillance of domestic populations morphs into soft authoritarianism, erosion of the rule of law, and the kind of cultivated paranoia and division that accompanies the militarisation of civil society.

That is the world into which we are being led, by those same leaders who violated the founding principles of the United Nations in their rush to unleash the invasion of Iraq and light the fuse on the barbarity of Islamic State. Those same leaders who brought regime change to Libya but didn't stick around to prevent its collapse into a failed state. The same leaders who assure us that all we need for our own national security is a massive investment in new military hardware and a tightening web of driftnet surveillance to distinguish ordinary Australians from enemy combatants who arise in our midst.

We cannot seriously believe that the struggling, fragile states around the Tropic of Chaos and elsewhere in the Global South will collapse politely, without consequence for the rest of us. Jared Diamond describes it in the closing chapters of his book *Collapse*: the rich world simply buys itself the privilege of being the last to starve. We are all in this together and, in our interconnected age, we stand or fall together, as a global community.

The tropical cyclone that hammered Fiji this February was the most powerful to ever make landfall on that island. Australia, as a regional first responder, sent an Australian Medical Assistance Team (AUSMAT) including 21 doctors, nurses and medics who provided emergency medical care for more than 1,700 people. The HMAS Canberra landed 60 tonnes of emergency relief and humanitarian supplies, helicopters and approximately 760 personnel, including engineers, carpenters, electricians and plumbers. These are our neighbours. When we were needed, we were there.

In the aftermath of the Great Tohoku earthquake and subsequent nuclear meltdowns, emergency services personnel from across Australia were among the first on the ground to join their Japanese counterparts in combing the wreckage for survivors. When we were needed, we were there. Our overseas development aid budget, the softest target for lazy treasurers, is responsible for reducing infant mortality in our near region, helping conduct an election in Myanmar, and proving primary health care in Tibet. This is what global citizenship looks like.

Close to home, we all have local examples of solidarity and heroism in the face of disaster, whether in the midst of the Brisbane floods or the Victorian fires, when communities showed their true strength in defence of the collective. Prime Minister Bob Hawke's response to the Tiananmen Square massacre enabled 42,000 Chinese students to remain in Australia, and his condemnation of the "systematic repression of legitimate democratic aspirations" in China would be unthinkable today. His predecessor, Malcolm Fraser, wrote the template for bipartisan consensus on raising the humanitarian intake to give safe harbour to those fleeing the war in Indochina. These isolated examples, rare but powerful, speak to the possibility of a new kind of international accord in which we agree, collectively, not to arm the lifeboats.

Anthony Banbury was a United Nations Assistant Secretary General, a fierce defender of the organisation but one who also spares it no honest criticism. In a piece he wrote for the *New York Times*, "I Love the U.N., but It Is Failing", he describes the organisation as "a Remington typewriter in a smartphone world". He runs through a forbidding list of failures and breakdowns that hint at an institution that is no longer fit for purpose, before noting that:

"these criticisms come from people who think the United Nations is doomed to fail. I come at it from a different angle: I believe that for the world's sake we must make the United Nations succeed."

And so, in the teeth of an election campaign in which these issues are certain to be subsumed beneath more immediate concerns, we will be trying to provoke a discussion on Security Council Reform. It is time we loosened the 1945-era stranglehold of the nuclear-armed powers whose lock on that institution now threatens their own collective survival.

Repeated Russian and Chinese vetos have paralysed the Security Council taking any action against the Assad regime in Syria; repeated US vetos have rendered the UNSC powerless to act against Israeli bombardments of Gaza or the expansion of illegal settlements in the West Bank. Now, momentum is building behind a French proposal for the five veto-wielding “permanent” UN Security Council members to collectively limit their use of the veto where mass-atrocity crimes are being committed. “Unfortunately, the tragedy of Syria has made the issue of the veto a real issue at the UN in a way that it hasn’t been since 1945,” observes Simon Adams, the director of the Global Centre of the Responsibility to Protect. This tentative initiative hints at broader prospects for democratising the stale architectures of the United Nations: expanding the Security Council to include broader representation from Africa, South Asia and South America, and doing away with the veto entirely. The notion that the existing veto-wielding powers would countenance such an action is almost inconceivable, but then so is the idea that the status quo is in any way sustainable. As an activist middle power, Australia could be leading these debates; instead, we’re nowhere.

The very first resolution of the fledgling United Nations in 1946 was the establishment of a “Commission to deal with the problem raised by the discovery of atomic energy.” Seventy years on, new civil society determination led by the Australian-initiated International Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) has breathed life into the global campaign to eliminate nuclear weapons, with 127 countries committing to a new road to nuclear abolition in December 2015. The Australian Government has played a spoiling role; not only refusing to sign on and lend support to this new momentum, but insisting on the inclusion of the US nuclear “umbrella” in the 2016 Defence White Paper and turning a blind eye to the possibility of nuclear weapons transiting through Australian ports or through new US airbases in northern Australia.

With unswerving subservience to US defence policy has come the atrophy of independent foreign policy more broadly, and so we drift from one misguided invasion to the next, enmeshed in the expanding reach of the Five Eyes surveillance network and complicit in a global drone assassination programme. Former Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser’s treatise *Dangerous Allies* traces the extent to which Australian foreign policy needs to escape from the shadow of the United States.

We will be making the case that human rights should stand front and centre in our foreign policy instead of being trampled under the imperative to remove the remaining democratic constraints on global commerce. Most Australians would be horrified to know that Australian Government support for police, security and paramilitary forces in

West Papua, PNG, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere is directly implicated in human rights abuses including torture, disappearances and extra-judicial killing. At the very minimum, there should be legislative prohibitions in place to prevent public funds being used to train, arm or support foreign police, military and security forces credibly believed to have committed human rights violations. We will be making the case that mass surveillance and global militarism are two sides of the same coin, and that no one survives if the lifeboats are armed.

In April 2016 we mourned the suicide of a young man who sought safe harbour from the tragedies that are overwhelming in less fortunate parts of the world. A short time later, a young woman who sought safe harbour and met only despair also attempted to take her life. As a nation we failed these people, and the continued forced incarceration of many hundreds like them is as unforgivable as it is avoidable. Imagine if, instead, we recognised these young people as family, not in metaphor, but in truth – they are part of the global family in an age in which there is no place any more for foreign policy, because we can't afford the delusion that anyone is foreign to us. We are all in this together, and its time we grew up as a species and started behaving like it.

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