

Australian Conservatives Are Back On Track

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Results of the elections

On the 7th of September, the Australian people elected their 28th Prime Minister. The federal elections had been brought forward by the former Head of Government and leader of the Australian Labor Party (ALP), Kevin Rudd. Interestingly, but not so surprisingly, the country decided that, after six years of Labor rule, it was time for change.

The polls foreshadowed it: the victory belongs to the Liberal-National coalition.

Australia's strengths and weaknesses

Australia is almost as much a continent as a country. It is the sixth largest nation in the world, closely following Brazil, and, as an island, enjoys many strategic advantages due to its unique geography. Among these, a straight access to the Indian and the Pacific oceans and no land borders with any neighboring country constitute some attractive features. The abundance of natural resources provides the country with a considerable advantage, next to a region (Asia) experiencing high growth rates.

However, the country faces some great structural weaknesses. First, it has to deal with a very low population for such a large territory. Furthermore, in terms of defense capacity, the Australian Defence remains quite weak compared to some of its Asian neighbors.

Although Australia's needs and budgets in terms of defence have been quite low (less than 2% of GDP) up to now, driven down by the unchallenged military supremacy of the American ally, the

modernization processes underway in most Asian economies and armies could make Australia's direct environment slightly more hostile.

Still, all things considered, Australia holds a potential power appropriate for a confirmed traditional middle power.

Why did the ALP fail to maintain itself in office?

Early September, ALP faced its lowest results in more than a hundred years¹. It seems that the lack of cohesion and internal dissents presented a pretty inconsistent face to the public, and eventually drained the voters away.

Under Kevin Rudd's leadership, the ALP won a landslide victory at the 2007 elections, after 11 years of conservative rule with John Howard as Prime Minister. And yet, his then-deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard successfully challenged his leadership in June 2010, and took the head of the ALP two months before the federal elections. Rudd's heavy-handed management methods then seemed to have upset many among its own party. Gillard became the first female Prime Minister of Australia, and managed to stay in power after the elections (that pitted her against Tony Abbott already) with a hung parliament. However, as the 2013 elections drew near, polls showed that the Gillard government stand no chance against Tony Abbott, while Rudd enjoyed greater support among ALP constituencies. A new vote bought Rudd back to the seat of Prime minister, in the run

1 With 54 seats against 90 seats for the coalition, <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/federal-election-2013>, visited on 20th September 2013.

up to the elections.

Therefore, the Liberal victory appears to be both the response from the public to ALP's instability, and the consequence of Tony Abbott's successful campaigning over key social issues such as immigration.

Who's Tony Abbott?

The assertiveness of the opposition leader combined with ALP weaknesses made many voters feel like a change in power was essential. To those, Tony Abbott quickly appeared as the only viable option in these elections.

Abbott arrived in Australia at the age of three. He entered into politics in 1994 and became the leader of the Liberal party in 2009. A conservative man, he has been accused on several occasions of being racist and sexist because of some of his public reactions on related topics. He has long presented a pretty tough image of himself, but seems to have tried and soften it these last months, gaining in the process the support of many constituencies. He hence turned from an "eternal underdog" to an eligible someone, to eventually the providential man the country so much needed in the face of ALP internal struggles.

Abbott organized his campaign around three principal issues on which he was adamant:

- The immigration problem. Abbotts wants to stop the numerous asylum seekers who try to enter the country by boat from Indonesia.
- Repealing the famous Carbon tax introduced by the Labor party. The argument is that the Tax has been harmful to the people's costs of living as well as to the economy.
- Budget cuts. To get the economy moving, and avoid a fall into recession, Abbott argued consistently in favor of budget cuts, criticizing his predecessors' overspending policies.

What foreign policy priorities for Canberra?

Australia put to good use its strategic position as a western democracy in the Asia-Pacific to establish its middle power foreign policy. Canberra seems to have the ambition to present itself as a regional leader in its immediate neighborhood as well as a reliable partner on the international stage. For that, the country enjoys privileged relations with the two great powers of this century: the United States and China.

On one hand, unlike most of the western economies, Australia has emerged from the global recession almost unharmed. Thanks to its enormous amount of natural resources, Canberra has been the main provider of raw materials to the most flourishing economy of these last decades: China. Beijing and Canberra have built a productive partnership finding in each other's supply a complementary trade relation: a rich Australian ground filled with raw materials and agricultural products and a growing market economy.

On the other hand, Washington's pivot strategy – implemented so as to maintain the US leadership in the region – brought in its wake a series of new agreements and consequently strengthened the US-Australian alliance. The United States is aware of the importance of being present in the region in the so-called « Asian century », and Australia is a key partner in this strategy.

At the end of the day, it seems that Canberra keenly found that its best interest was to balance its vital concerns between its two main partners.

It is maybe too soon to tell what the Australian foreign policy is going to look like for the next three years, but what can already be noticed are some relevant comparisons between the former and the new Prime minister.

First, it is often said that Abbott shows a lesser interest in establishing a coherent foreign policy, in contrast with his predecessor who, as a former diplomat, was used to stand on the world stage. On that point Abbott does not seem to be an exception since most Australian Prime ministers do not express a lot of interest in foreign policy until they really have to. Therefore if Abbott's expertise in this field is not obvious at first, we can still expect him to be doing well in terms of foreign policy, even more with the contribution of the woman he named Foreign minister, Julie Bishop, whose appointment was warmly welcomed in Australia and its neighborhood.

Regarding their differing perspectives, remembering Rudd's idea to have a « creative middle power diplomacy », the two first pillars concerned the essential commitment to the American ally and to the United Nations, while regional forums were in third position. So, if an emphasis on multilateral institutions was one key aspect of Rudd's more idealist foreign policy, according to some scholars², Tony Abbott

² Hugh White, professor of strategic studies at the ANU.

« (...) will be essentially reactive to events, and his reactions will be shaped by his conservatism and his pragmatism »³. As a matter of fact, the conservative way of dealing with international affairs is one that relies much more on bilateral relations than on multilateral institutions. As the new foreign minister, Julie Bishop claimed, it is going to be « more about Jakarta and less about Geneva »⁴. According to her, Labor leaders have « spent too much time thinking about multilateral institutions and too little time thinking about the practical foreign policy issues in Australia's region »⁵.

Furthermore, she stressed the importance of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade as the institution in charge of making Australia's foreign policy; « We believe DFAT should be reinstated as the typical driver of foreign policy »⁶. With this statement, Julie Bishop differs from its predecessors who had focused the decision-making mainly in their hands.

Moreover, while the new Prime minister will surely maintain the privileged alliance with the United States, he appears to be less interested in developing the alliance with all western allies than Rudd, and more focused on deepening the country's relations in the Asia-Pacific region. Therefore we could expect a greater integration at the regional level. Unless this emphasis on relations with regional neighbors and especially with Indonesia, may also be used to soften Abbott's numerous appeals to the notion « Anglosphere ». This belief that United States, the UK and the other Anglophone democracies should have a particular role in world affairs is not the best way to charm its Asian neighborhood.

Then, in the very critical context of a possible military intervention in Syria, the result of the Australian federal elections has a significant impact. While the Rudd's government has been very supportive to the American decision to punish the Syrian government, Abbott's opinion on a military action is not as straightforward

3 ACLLICK Rowan, « A fresh foreign affairs Realism », 10th of september 2013, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/features/a-fresh-foreign-affairs-realism/story-e6frg6z6-1226715486146>, visited on 20th of September 2013.

4 TAYLOR Lenore, « Ten things to know about foreign policy under Julie Bishop and Tony Abbott », 3rd of June 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/02/foreign-policy-julie-bishop-coalition>, visited on 23rd of September 2013.

5 WESLEY Michael, « In Australia it's now less about Geneva, more about Jakarta », 10th of September 2013, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/09/10/in-australia-its-now-less-about-geneva-more-about-jakarta/>, visited on 20th of September 2013.

6 TAYLOR Lenore, op.cit.

as that of Obama and Rudd. An interesting difference of personalities and therefore way of acting can be noticed. Not only wants Rudd to confirm his support to his long-time ally, but he is, above all, driven by his democratic idealism to make the world a better place, which makes him more of a "risk-taker" than his successor. If Abbott considers the Defence capability of his country currently too weak to intervene, which he seems determined to strengthen by increasing the budget and rebuilding military forces, he does not see Australian vital interests at stake over there.

One can easily imagine that the way the new government is going to shape its foreign policy will show a great deal of change from what Australia has known for the last years. Because a good way of starting a new mandate is to make clear that where the former government failed, they will not, the Liberals are very likely to prove to Australians they have other priorities. As some experts already compare Abbott to G.W Bush, we can imagine that his lack of expertise in foreign policy and his pragmatism will drive him to rely more on his instinct than on the experience of multilateral institutions. Therefore, we can expect a much more realistic vision, a legacy of the Howard's time⁷, with a greater emphasis on pragmatic bilateral relations.

7 John Howard was the Liberal Prime Minister of Australia from 1996 to 2003.

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