Does Philosophy matter?

Before the 2007 election former Labor Leader, Mark Latham stated that “we have reached the zenith of policy convergence in Australian public life…Australia is having a Seinfeld election, a show about nothing.”

In a similar vein, since the fall of the Berlin wall, and Labor’s denouncement of socialism, you often hear people claim that there is no longer any difference between the major political parties; that philosophy no longer matters.

I strongly disagree. My observations of politics first hand over the last 28 years convinces me that the fundamental philosophical beliefs that drove Labor towards socialism over a century ago lives on as strongly within modern day Labor.

And it continues to provide a stark philosophical contrast to the conservative side of politics.

I refer to Labor’s fundamental belief that the State knows best.

I refer to Labor’s instinct that the collective good of the community is best understood and dictated by centralised authority, by an overarching set of rules which they see determining how people lead their lives, how they should think, how they should interact with one another, what responsibilities they should shoulder, how their lives and business will be ordered.

It is a “nanny state” view of the world

By contrast the liberal conservative view of life looks to promote the great freedoms – the freedom to choose, the freedom to be ambitious, the freedom to accept responsibility for your decisions, the freedom to lead your life as you see fit, as long as you don’t harm others.

It is a philosophy which celebrates the personal dignity of every individual; a philosophy which seeks the opportunity for every person to realise their individual aspirations.
This is not possible without individual freedom, without the exercise of individual choice.

Over extended periods in office these philosophical distinctions inevitably emerge as they progressively shape the decisions of Government.

It was evidenced domestically over the last 12 years by the growth of choice in education, the growth of choice in health, in superannuation, in the workplace … and much more.

**Philosophy and Foreign Affairs**

Some might ask, how does this relate to foreign affairs given the conventional belief that foreign affairs is bi-partisan?

This liberal conservative philosophy is based on the reality of human nature – namely that we all respond from a position of self interest – that we all want to be valued and respected.

This is as true for individual nation states, as it is for individuals.

As such, we saw this philosophy progressively guide the former Federal Government’s approach to foreign affairs.

We saw respect for the sovereignty and choices of individual nation states dictate the approach and priority we placed on strengthening bi-lateral relationships with our strategic and economic partners in the Asia – Pacific.

It has much to do with the fostering of respect, understanding and trust that comes from working hard on bi-lateral relationships.

We do not share Labor’s dogged belief in the virtue of global or regional governance and laws to deliver timely and meaningful outcomes.

Labor is putting the cart before the horse.

In our view strong bilateral relationships are the foundation and pathway to cohesive and effective regional and global relationships; not the other way around.

Australia’s involvement and increasingly effective participation in various forums and regional architecture was achieved on the back of strengthening bi-lateral relationships.

So much so that the individual relationships Australia enjoys with the United States, Japan, China, Indonesia and India grew to their strongest point ever over the last decade, yet grew simultaneously without damaging other relationships.

**Labor’s approach**

Labor’s primary instinct is to support an over-arching set of international and regional rules, to see the establishment of a universal set of moral imperatives and laws that all nations should follow.
This instinct was on full display in June this year with Mr Rudd’s embarrassing proposal to create, within the next twelve years, a single European-style Union across the Asia-Pacific region.

The announcement, made with no prior consultation with any of our bilateral partners, presumed that the intrinsic merit of an over-arching rules based approach to regional security, trade, climate change and disaster response, would be obvious to all. It was not.

This presumptuous proposal marked a hasty return to Labor’s long standing view that Australia’s interests are best pursued through rule-based international systems.

Fifteen years ago, Labor’s former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Gareth Evans said in the Inaugural Sir Zelman Cowan Address, and I quote: “It is a logical corollary of Australia’s status as a middle power that we should always have been strongly committed to effective multilateral institutions – especially the United Nations, the only fully empowered body with global membership that we have. Middle powers, and smaller ones as well, by definition may need to find comfort in collective responses and rule-based international systems – in a way that may not be so necessary for countries with the clout of major powers, great powers, or super powers.”

Already in the first eight months of a Rudd Labor Government we have seen a rush to sanctify multilateral institutions.

The early announcement of Australia’s formal bid for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council in 2013/14 signalled Labor’s eagerness to return to a tradition of favouring the pursuit of Australia’s foreign policy through multilateral institutions.

This internationalist tradition was further evidenced by:
- the major emphasis on the Doha round of talks and the very dismissive references to bilateral FTA’s, especially in the early months
- the cuts in funding to the teams responsible for negotiating the Free Trade Agreements with China and Japan
- the unilateral abandonment of Australia’s involvement in the quadrilateral dialogue with India, Japan and the United States
- the snubbing of Japan, our largest export market and closest friend on Asia, in the 17-day world trip by Mr Rudd, and in the months leading up to that trip
- the unilateral withdrawal from the initiative to promote clean technologies through the Asia Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate, involving the United States, Japan, China, India, South Korea and ourselves
- the creation of an international commission to end nuclear proliferation and secure nuclear disarmament; and
- the EU for Asia – Pacific proposal.

This trend is misguided.

To put systems which seek to embody a process of international or regional law ahead of more flexible and targeted alliances and actions, is to deny reality.
The fact is we remain a world of nation states where trust, alliances and coalitions are still the things that most effectively stabilise the world in times of threats to world peace, such as in the 1930’s, or in times of economic opportunity, as in the 21st century.

As observed earlier, such relationships in turn foster broader forums, not the other way around.

The fact is the broader forums that facilitate the economic, security and cultural relationships throughout the Asia-Pacific region have emerged and evolved to suit the times.

The relationships have often emerged from bi-lateral relationships, or coalitions of countries, and have progressively been formalised and added to in an interactive fashion as circumstances dictate.

Structures include –

- ASEAN
- APEC
- The East Asian Summit or EAS (or ASEAN + 6)
- ASEAN Regional Forum or ARF
- The US / Japan / Australia trilateral security agreement
- The Six Party talks
- ASEAN PLUS THREE or APT
- The Pacific Islands Forum
- and others

This range of structures has been a strength.

Real progress is achieved sooner rather than later.

Trust and confidence is built.

It has provided flexibilities, and an ability to accommodate the enormous diversity between countries across the region in terms of their stage and rate of development, security concerns, historical considerations and cultural differences of countries covering nearly two-thirds of the world’s population and over half of global economic output.

Evolving regional structures built on a culture of strong bi-lateral activities, and coalitions of countries joining together to tackle particular problems, has great continuing merit.

For example, in the next decade alone China will build four times as many coal fired power plants as exist across the whole OECD.
In this context it is unforgivable that the Rudd Government unilaterally withdrew from the AP6 forum to promote clean technology; the only international forum where China and India were committed to reducing emissions.

The growth in coal-fired power plants will be despite a huge push within China for nuclear and renewable energy sources. Clearly, CO2 capture and storage and other clean coal technology will be of great importance.

As it is much cheaper to put technology into new plants rather than retro fit old coal plants, China could well be a laboratory for this, with the help of a coalition of rich countries.

This is the sort of initiative that could well have emerged from the AP6 forum compared to the gridlock such a proposal would confront within some over-arching Euro-style union for the Asia – Pacific.

**Link between economic success and foreign affairs**

Another important observation about the region, and the wider world for that matter, is that there is an inextricable link between a country’s economic success and its capacity to influence foreign affairs.

In Australia’s case, it is not a coincidence that fifteen years of uninterrupted economic growth coincided with a growth in Australia’s influence, particularly within the Asia - Pacific region.

The strength and robustness of Australia’s economy enabled Australia to profoundly assist and advise a number of regional neighbours during the Asian economic meltdown in 1997 - 98.

Again, our economic circumstances enabled Australia to answer calls for help in Bougainville (1997), East Timor (1999 and 2006), and the Solomon Islands (1999, 2001 and 2003); to lead responses to the Boxing Day tsunami and other natural disasters; to assist counter-terrorism and policing co-operation in Indonesia, the Philippines, India and other countries; to lead the regional response to the devastating impact of HIV – AIDS and to be at the forefront of responding to the threat of a possible bird flu pandemic.

As in business and other walks of life, a decade or more of success has given Australia increasing credibility and standing in bi-lateral, regional and world forums.

It is axiomatic that authority, leadership and influence are derived best from a position of success.

Mr Rudd would do well to remember to focus on protecting the outstanding economic legacy left to him if he is to go even half way to achieving a level of credibility that matches his soaring ambitions.

In a similar vein, the lesson of the last 60 years is, where countries have focussed on economic growth and a strong market economy, they win.

Whether large or small – for example, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Japan or China – success today has stemmed from embracing a market economy.
So, from a foreign affairs point of view keep an eye on the reforming countries.

Furthermore, as countries successfully embrace market economies it does lead irrevocably to the development of key elements of a democracy.

- Greater transparency to attract investors
- The rule of law
- People demanding greater freedoms
- People demanding a greater say, and
- Less corrupt governance

So, liberalising economic systems leads to the liberalising of political systems.

**Realism versus Idealism**

Finally, any assessment of the future must be based on a realistic assessment of the power balance within the world and within our region, not a blind faith in international institutions.

The last 35 years has been witness to an unprecedented period of peace in North East Asia.

The world has benefited from this peace and prosperity.

This order of the last 35 years has been based on the primacy of the United States.

Yet a realistic assessment of the future power balance will see China accorded more power in regional affairs, will see Japan accorded more power in regional affairs, along with more power to India and Indonesia.

The upshot of this is that the primacy of the United States will be diluted.

The great challenge must be to strive to maintain the active involvement of the US so that the region transitions smoothly to an appropriate power balance.

Such a balance must continue to involve the United States in a very significant way.

Australia can best influence this shift in the power balance from a position of continuing economic success and strengthening bilateral trust with these key neighbours.

Thank you.