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Rudd's finest hour could be yet to come

Meredith Burgmann, September 30, 2010

I have participated in some political walkouts in my time but none have matched the thrill of being part of the Australian walkout at the United Nations in the middle of the speech by the Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, alleging the September 11 attacks were an American conspiracy.

The first impression you get of the UN is of absolute chaos. Presidents, prime ministers and celebrities are everywhere. I get to hear Barack Obama twice. I sit in the same row as Bob Geldof and the exciting Liberian President, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Bill and Melinda Gates are omnipresent.

The security set-up is, understandably, oppressive but there is something particularly endearing about everyone having to deal with the trials of processing. It's a bit like the Olympics, it's the universality of it all that makes it so right, and so exciting.

We are here to examine, 10 years on, how nations have dealt with the promises they made to the poorest countries a decade ago. I am the non-governmental organisation representative on the Australian delegation to the UN Conference on the Millennium Development Goals (the eight goals set in 2000 to end poverty by 2015). It has given me a unique opportunity to see the Australian delegation undertaking its international obligations for the first time under the leadership of Kevin Rudd.

Most of the Australian delegation are weary from accompanying their Foreign Affairs Minister on his tour of the devastating floods in Pakistan, and then flying straight on to New York to a punishing schedule of round tables, bilaterals and summits. Rudd in contrast seems bright and chirpy. He is in his element in this international context. Leaders from around the world greet him as he sits behind the Australia sign. Not once is he lost for the correct name or issue. The East Timorese President, Jose Ramos Horta, greets him like a long-lost brother.

Rudd's message is firm. Australia is delivering on its commitment to dedicate 0.5 per cent of GDP to overseas aid by 2015. The global financial crisis has taken its toll and many other developed countries have not delivered on this promise. As a result, 90 million people in the least developed countries have slid back into poverty.

One of my particular passions - the third goal, which promises to promote gender equality and empower women - is hardly mentioned. Maternal deaths seem to be important but not the empowerment of women. Tucked away in a side report was the astonishing information that of the nine countries that still have no women in parliament, six were in the Pacific. The percentage of women in Pacific parliaments is 2.9 per cent and even the next worst, the Middle East, has 12 per cent. It is a total disgrace and unless Australia begins to use its influence with the male leaderships of these countries, nothing will change.

Rudd is particularly concerned with goals four and five, which deal with maternal health and child mortality. Improvement in maternal death rates has slowed dramatically. More than 500,000 women die each year of pregnancy-related causes. Australia announces that it is part of a newly launched public/private global alliance with the US, Britain, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to meet goals four and five and pledges \$1.6 billion to this alliance. Rudd also promises to allocate \$5 billion to education, \$1.8 billion to food security and \$1.2 billion for action on climate change over the next five years.

As Australia's aid program doubles it is likely to come under increasing attack from the conservative media, which will put pressure on the present bipartisan support. Rudd's strategy is obviously to make the case for aid. His first justification is the social justice element and his very real concern for "the poorest of the poor". The second is that if you want stability in the region then promoting prosperity and good governance is crucial.

The Rudd philosophy sees the non-government aid agencies as part of this validation of the aid agenda, which is why his speech acknowledged the importance of our activities, mentioning World Vision, Oxfam, Caritas, ChildFund, Plan International, the Red Cross and Oaktree Foundation.

As I watched Rudd pursue his relentless schedule of meetings it reminded me of a predecessor in the foreign affairs portfolio, Herbert Vere Evatt, during the early years of the UN. I wrote my masters thesis on Evatt and his fight to empower the small- and middle-sized nations at the UN. Evatt also punched above his weight.

It seems to me that there is much of Evatt's legacy in Rudd - burning passion, unlimited capacity for hard work, obsession with accountability and concern for the underdog. Perhaps, like Evatt, he will find his greatness in being foreign minister rather than being leader of the Labor Party.

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