# The Other American Imperialism

There is a version of American cultural imperialism that infects even the supposedly liberal and artistic. In Newsweek recently, some confident dunce announced that France has ceased to produce any great artists who might impress the world. Bernard-Henri Levy, normally not one of my heroes, commendably flew the tricolour by pointing out that America was not the world, and that it would be enough for the French to go on producing artists who might impress France.

But on the political front, at virtually the same time, there was an even more patronising instance of this kind of cultural imperialism. It made less noise only because the victims didn't realise they were being patronised. According to Hendrik Hertzberg in the New Yorker, Australia's long-serving Prime Minister John Howard lost his job in the latest election principally because he committed Australian troops to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. This interpretation is hard to refute — one thing certainly came after the other — but it makes you wonder why, in that case, he didn't lose his job in the previous election, in 2004.

A view less in thrall to geopolitics might suggest Howard lost this time not because he stayed too long in Iraq, but because he stayed too long in office. His successful opponent Kevin Rudd was clever enough to spot that no other issue really mattered except the incumbent's hubristic estimation of his own indispensability. Howard had stepped into the same trap occupied for more than a decade by the Labor party, which, in one doomed campaign after another, had made everything depend on the one leading role, recast periodically after the previous guy tanked. When Howard, despite murmurings from his own colleagues, decided that nobody except himself could win, he was unmistakeably announcing that he deserved to lose.

The question, now that the Liberal party has paid a proper penalty for letting everything depend on Howard, is whether the Labor party hasn't bought a mass of trouble by letting everything depend on Rudd. Those of us who had long wanted the Labor party to become electable again, but who think that Rudd has almost nothing to say, will be watching with interest to see how he comes good on the two main issues he said were crucial. These were not, as Hertzberg contends, Iraq and climate change. They were (a) the Future, which would demand New Leadership, and (b) the Educational Revolution. According to Rudd's repeated announcements, the Future lay ahead, and not in some other direction that an older man might seem to advocate or represent. Australia's continuing advance into this Future, featuring New Leadership, would be ensured by an Educational Revolution, in which every school pupil would be issued with a computer.

That Howard was unable to find the words to counter either of these vacuous propositions was in keeping with his inborn reluctance to talk tripe, but was also a clear indication that he had run out of tactical acumen. He should have had a few paragraphs ready to say that a government has no business providing a vision for the future. The job of government is to preserve the freedom and justice that have already been established, while furthering both to the full extent in which one of them does not interfere with the other. Beyond that, the vision of the future will be provided by the creativity of the people. He should also have found a few paragraphs to say that Rudd's scheme of equipping every Australian child with a computer is less likely to guarantee an educational revolution than to provide an incentive for the children to multiply their illiteracy.

A real educational revolution would restore the erstwhile capacity of Australia's young people to read, write and do elementary arithmetic in their heads. In the final minutes of his televised debate with Rudd, Howard started to make that last point, but he had nothing ready except an incoherent sentence, having relied once too often on his faith that the self-evident would make itself obvious. It was already all too obvious that he had forgotten how to fight anyone except the wiser voices in his own party, who had been too timid with their doubts. The voting public saw that the old lion was limping, and down he went. Democracy worked.

Democracy works better in Australia than almost anywhere. An American might usefully tell Australia that it needs a limitation on the number of prime ministerial terms — if the governmental term remains at three years, then three terms for the prime minister should be enough — but on most other topics the Australians need no instruction from abroad about how to run a country, or about how they might be failing by international standards of morality. To the extent that international standards of morality exist, Australia is doing more to set them than to undermine them: Australia, after all, is the country where immigrant minorities have the best chance, and if the indigenous minority continues to be disadvantaged, it nevertheless has prominent leaders who would like to see their people granted a final freedom — the freedom from being patronised as natural victims. (It was interesting, as the election campaign period got into the home stretch, that Noel Pearson, the most formidable of the Aboriginal leaders and one of the most impressive political analysts in Australia of whatever background, went public with his opinion that he trusted Howard more than he trusted Rudd. Or it would have been interesting, if Pearson's remarks had fallen into the category of those that the Howard-hating consensus could allow itself to hear.)

Most of Australia's problems — seen by commentators on the spot as proof that the whole of Western civilization is in deadly danger from the spreading influence of American imperialism — come from conflicting ideas about how to do the right thing. Institutionalised evil is hard to find, and even the corruption is on a small scale, although often inventive. Admittedly it is relatively easy to govern a country whose population is no bigger than that of New York state, but quite a lot of creative thought has been put into the job since Federation in 1901: the creative thought of a political class which has consistently been underestimated by Australia's massed ranks of bien-pensant intellectuals, some of whom might have spent too much time bashing Hertzberg's ear when he attended the Sydney Writers' Festival in May 2007. Perhaps they stunned him with the orchestrated confidence of their monocellular opinion that Howard had ruled for eleven and a half years only by trickery. That opinion, with its implied insult to the intelligence of the electorate that had been tricked, helped to keep the Labor party out of power for as long as its leadership listened to the pundits. When finally a man emerged who had the strength of character either to sidestep or to ignore virtually every issue the pundits had declared vital, his party won.

But let Hertzberg be certain that Rudd ignored him too. Whatever the New Yorker and Vanity Fair might say in the US — or the Guardian and the Independent in London — when Rudd is inspired to bring some of the Australian troops home from Iraq it will be because that country has moved closer to being a functioning and reasonably secure democratic state, and not because he disapproved of the invasion. He did disapprove of it, but in this election he didn't make his disapproval a major issue, because he knew it wouldn't fly. In leaving room for the assumption that Rudd thought otherwise, Hertzberg has put the New Yorker into the service of a fiction on the very topic about which it is currently most proud of speaking fact.

Fictions are tempting because they give fact shape. Hertzberg has built the best part of his career on respecting the texture of reality, in which facts are recalcitrant. His excellent Penguin collection of political writings, called simply Politics, shows that he can pay due regard to conflicting ideas and emotions. During the Vietnam war he served his country in the navy: his war service didn't affect his old-style socialist convictions — which to a large extent he still has, even though his fighting prose is now surrounded by advertisements for furs and jewellery — but it did help to give him the subtlety of nuance by which he could call anti-war polemicists to order if he thought their views simplistic.

With regard to Iraq he has allowed that subtlety to lapse, and it will be interesting to see how fast he can regain it if the news coming out of Iraq continues to improve. We should pay him the compliment of trusting him to greet improving news as welcome rather than otherwise. Hertzberg is a good enough reporter to know how alluring the temptation to shape the facts can be, and many a time he must have had to face the cruel moment when something that sounds good has to be struck out because it might not be so. On a final point, has he asked himself where he got the idea that Howard was "humiliated" when Rudd spoke "perfect" Mandarin to the Chinese leaders at the APEC conference in Sydney? Howard is a bit harder to humiliate than that, and would have been well aware that speaking the other chap's language is often the reverse of a qualification: Anthony Eden, after all, spoke perfect Arabic to Colonel Nasser. Howard might very well feel humiliated after losing the election, his seat, and his reputation for infallibility, but all that will pass, and he will be remembered as an outstanding prime minister even by critics who could bring themselves to praise him for nothing except his cunning.

There are a lot of us who sincerely hope that Kevin Rudd will earn a comparable eminence, as the head of a cleanly elected government in a rising country, an ex-colony which, having concentrated and transcended all the virtues of the old empire that gave it birth, is now busy providing an example to the world of what can be done by a bunch of creative people backed up by prudent management and double-entry bookkeeping. That last bit was always Howard's ace in the hole. Often speaking from comfortably subsidised positions, Australia's gauchiste commentators called him a money-grubber and condemned the voters for being too easily seduced by prosperity, but more than half those voters ticked the box for him as long as he looked as if he still had his head screwed on.

Certainly Rudd himself never made the mistake of calling Howard anything less than competent. That was one of the ways the new boy won the election: he promised to do almost everything that Howard had already done, but just do it younger. For Howard to answer that one, he would have had to attack Rudd's hairstyle, pointing out the cruel truth: that it's an incipient comb-over, and that time, which improves most men, is the mortal enemy of any man who can't accept it. But Rudd might start looking and sounding less bogus as he gets used to office. Power can do things for you, until the day it doesn't.

— The Australian, December 22, 2007