**Australia’s Puerile Politics on the Global Stage**

For students of incomprehensible behavior by otherwise apparently intelligent leaders, Australian politics is the [gift that keeps on giving](https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/australia-new-prime-minister-malcolm-turnbull-by-gareth-evans-2015-09). The latest example is the decision by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s government, just re-elected by a razor-thin margin, to deny former Prime Minister and Foreign Minister [Kevin Rudd](https://www.project-syndicate.org/columnist/kevin-rudd) the formal nomination he needed to join the race to be the next UN Secretary-General.

The decision defies not only the merits of the case and well-established precedent, but also the government’s own need for a more bipartisan spirit to develop if it is to get any of its major legislation through the Australian Parliament. It will be embarrassing internationally as well – seen as petty, partisan, and vindictive by most governments around the world, regardless of whether they would be inclined to support Rudd.

And it will be particularly embarrassing for Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, who argued that whatever distaste her conservative coalition colleagues had for the former Labor leader, it was wrong to stop a prominent Australian from seeking a position for which he was regarded internationally as manifestly qualified. Her government didn’t have to campaign actively for him – just not stand in his way.

Rudd’s qualifications for the job should not be in doubt. He is a diplomat by training, a brilliant linguist with a first-class policy mind, who in government won plaudits internationally for his leading role in the G20 response to the global financial crisis of 2008, his efforts on climate change, and his historic apology to Australia’s indigenous peoples. In his political afterlife, he chairs a major international commission on multilateralism, runs the Asia Society Policy Institute in New York, and has been a thoughtful advocate – respected highly both in Washington and Beijing – for strategies to manage better the US-China relationship.

True, his temperament and management style have been an issue in domestic politics, and partly explain the tumultuous leadership changes that have given Australians five different prime ministers in the last nine years. But it is hardly unusual for political leaders to be seen, by party colleagues and opponents alike, as falling short of sainthood. If the Security Council members whose votes will elect the next Secretary-General think that this is an issue, they will decide accordingly.

In fact, for all his skill and credibility, Rudd was always at best a fairly long-shot candidate. He is neither East European nor a woman, both seen as advantages this time round. He has likely veto problems with Russia in particular. And – perhaps most problematic of all – he is not likely to satisfy the five permanent Security Council members’ traditional preference for a secretary rather than a gen

Rudd would also have been coming into the race rather late, in an environment where probably his strongest male, non-East European competitor, former UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres, has a clear head start in early Security Council straw polling. But no one yet knows with any certainty how the veto endgame will play out, and Rudd should certainly have been given the opportunity to take his chances.

Until now, Australian politics has upheld a long and civilized tradition of support across party lines for those seen as being credible candidates for international positions. For example, despite the bitter divisions generated by conservative leader Malcolm Fraser’s role in the dismissal of Gough Whitlam’s Labor Government in 1975, I spent a year as Labor Foreign Minister in the early 1990s campaigning for Fraser to be elected Secretary-General of the Commonwealth. And when I left politics myself a few years later, John Howard’s conservative government graciously supported my bid (equally quixotic as it turned out) to lead UNESCO.

What makes the abandonment of this tradition in the Rudd case not only indecent but politically wrong-headed is that Turnbull’s government has just been elected with at best a one-vote majority in the House of Representatives, and nothing resembling a majority at all in the Senate, which now has a cast of independents and minor parties that has been likened to the bar scene in *Star Wars*.

Turnbull’s government will need every vote it can get to pass its legislative program, and in a number of cases will simply have to rely on opposition Labor support. But the Rudd decision has left a very bad taste in Labor mouths, and in those of some other independents as well.

The lesson of the last election, in which voters continued to drift away from the major parties to the single-issue fringe, seemed to be that the electorate was fed up with sloganeering and personality politics, and were genuinely crying out for more bipartisanship on major policy issues.

Instead, Turnbull has subordinated whatever rational and civilized instincts he was thought to retain to the demands of the small-minded extreme conservatives in his party. That is yet another reason why Rudd’s loss is also Australia’s. The need for adult supervision of Australian politics continues.

<https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/australia-government-blocks-rudd-un-bid-by-gareth-evans-2016-08>