

The G-20 Summit's "Pathology of Parochialism": Empty Proposals on Climate Change, Economic Growth

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Global Research, November 17, 2014

Region: [Oceania](#)

Theme: [Environment](#), [Global Economy](#)

It may well have been one of the more successful operations of silencing in Australia's political history, a classic of "strategic incapacitation", but the G20 summit could not contain the crass behaviour of its hosts. Journalists and state representatives were treated to a spectacle of prosaic complaint, the cringe whinge fest that ranged between the puzzling and bizarre.

The chair of any summit, or session, sets the tone, even if it might be distant and hollow. The opening speech of the Australian Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, made it plummet. "What was he thinking?" asked Mike Reddy in a letter to *The Age*. "Did he expect a standing ovation from the other 19 leaders for stopping the boats and repealing the carbon tax? Did he expect Barack Obama, who has struggled with an obstructionist Congress for six years, to a tear because he can't get all his budget through the Senate?"[1]

Abbott did try to add salve to the wounds in winding up matters, suggesting that the G20 leaders had achieved something, even if it was a mere communiqué. Over 800 reform measures were suggested, among them the establishment of a Global Infrastructure Initiative and pushing up participation rates of females in the workforce by 25 percent by 2025.

Tax evasion was also covered, with a proposal to prevent the use of anonymous shell companies to facilitate evading financial flows. How this will be practically addressed is quite another matter. (Governments and corporations, in this day and age, may be erratic bed mates, but they still remain bed mates.) Naïve commentators ran with the lotus eating sentiment, suggesting that the communiqué spells an end to the prospects of another "Lux leaks" scandal.[2] But the unilateral incentive remains too strong.

Then come the climate change pointers the Australian hosts were dreading: the enhancement of fuel quality, the reduction of carbon emissions from heavy-duty vehicles; healthier additions to the Green Climate Fund. Abbott, finding himself cornered, could only speak about all countries wanting "to take strong and effective action against climate change", achieved in ways "which build our growth and particularly strengthen our employment because that in the end is what it's all about."

Therein lies a fundamental problem. Growth has been the mania for most of the leaders gathered in Brisbane. But the convenient linking of climate change to the fetish for growth denies a fundamental contradiction. In the words of Christopher Wright, "Economic growth, rising affluence and a growing world population are the major contributors to the current environmental crisis." [3]

For all these monumental cleavages in the debates and the aspirations, it was perhaps fitting that these should be demonstrated with some vulgarity in the antipodes. “The adolescent country. The bit player. The shrimp in the school yard,” noted Robyn Dixon of the *Los Angeles Times*.^[4]

Australia’s distance from the big game has not always been tyrannous. Prior to the dark depressions brought on by its calamitous involvement in the First World War, Australia proved more than a bit player in the progressive stakes. In 1902, Australia became the second country after New Zealand to enfranchise women. The country’s labour movement proved sprightly and enthusiastic in its campaign for Robert Owen’s vision of “Eight hours’ labour, Eight hours’ recreation, Eight hours’ rest”, making considerable gains throughout the nineteenth century.

Then came the ill-health that distance can breed. Such sentiment oscillates between megalomania and indifference. Peter Hartcher of the *Sydney Morning Herald* got it down pat – the pathology of parochialism that screams across summit and meeting has become the modus operandi. It is a “provincial reflex” that hampers the making of policy. But Hartcher is also unduly glowing about the transformation of Australia’s bumpkin Weltanschauung as seen through the current prime minister. “In the course of a year, Abbott has been transformed. His provincial reflex has been replaced by an international inclination.”

Not quite, as the G20 antics have served to prove. Why push the constipated lament before fellow G20 leaders that he could not get efforts to make Australians pay \$7 to see a doctor for each visit? In the words of opposition leader Bill Shorten, “This was Tony Abbott’s moment in front of the most important and influential leaders in the world, and he’s whinging that Australians don’t want his GP tax.”

The maxim of “all politics is local” has seemed awkward and spiked with mediocrity. Loftiness is avoided for mud ground pronouncements. “The party room,” noted a pessimistic Nick Bryant in a Lowy Institute dispatch, “has trumped the halls of international summitry.” So much so, in fact, that national priorities are determined by “the latest polling from the western suburbs of Sydney” rather than “diplomatic dispatches from Washington or Beijing.”^[5]

Perhaps some of this is far more representative that we would wish. The G20 summits tend to be promoted as worthy gatherings that aspire to stratospheric goals with global scope. They are the chatterer’s dream. But Abbott’s behaviour has also shown that behind every grand hope for global worth lies a local provincial waiting to get out. The globe is mere fantasy, while the locality of here and now matters above all, notably in terms of votes. The shallowness of profligate junketing is all too evident, and continues to prove punishing for public treasuries.

The obvious point on the communiqué is that each country will, in its own way, take the parochial plunge on various points. Some of the leaders will have no choice. The vice of domestic politics can prove strong, restraining an ambitious executive. The parochial plunge, however, comes easier to some.

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Notes

- [1] <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/smh-letters/abbott-drops-the-ball-with--cringeworthy-speech-to-the-g20-20141116-11noif.html>
- [2] <http://theconversation.com/g20-tax-reform-plan-should-prevent-another-lux-leaks-34237>
- [3] <http://theconversation.com/to-get-climate-change-under-control-our-growth-fetish--must-go-34204>
- [4] <http://touch.latimes.com/#section/-1/article/p2p-81985646/>
- [5] <http://m.lowyinstitute.org/node/43959>

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