

Our Julian

For once, Australia really is
punching above its weight in the world

ERIC ELLIS

My mother, Sage of Winchelsea, Skyped me from her rural Victorian hearth to ask what I was doing in Cairo.

'Profiling Egypt's richest man, and writing about Australia's relevance in the world,' I told her as the Nile — less romantic than the mind's eye has it — flowed disappointingly though no less pharoanically by my hotel.

'The first sounds very interesting,' she mused, 'but the second won't take long. Australia has never been relevant. If we suddenly weren't here, no one would notice us missing.'

Ouch. Take that control-freak Kev, you not-so-Manchurian Candidate you, as you ruminate on whether WikiLeaks' airing of your get-tough-with-China advice to Hillary Clinton was good for the Rudd career (suddenly, the global exposure with Important People you so desperately craved) or bad (that it was exposed). Publicly, you said it was bad so that must be true, but Australian democracy will have to wait for another WikiLeak to see if you meant it.

Lesser minds than my mum's have opined about Australia's global standing. My personal favourite was the Taleban's ambassador to Pakistan, Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, in the frantic days after 9/11 before the US invaded Afghanistan. The world, his wife and the ABC crammed onto the porch of the Taleban's Islamabad villa to hear dark portents, their jihads and fatwas visited on infidel America by Osama and friends.

But this wasn't enough for the ABC. In the great tradition of Waugh's William Boot, above the ruck of scribes came the searing yet strangely comforting accent of Our Man in Islamabad: 'Woddaboud Ostrayans? In Ostraya?' He didn't quite end his interrogatory with 'mate', but he may as well have.

Fellow correspondents cringed and cackled, momentarily throwing Zaeef off-message. The mullah mumbled to confused aides billowing at his flanks in tents of shalwar kameez. Geographically-challenged brows knitted as they flicked through mental atlases absorbed by rote in madrassas to measure how far caliphate ambitions might extend through lands of heathen kafir. 'Any person,' the diplo-cleric muttered.

But that still wasn't enough for our taxpayer-funded hack. 'So the jihad could be extended to Ostraya?' he pressed. 'Yes, yes,' harrumphed the turbaned Taleb. That

night on the news Boot of the ABC solemnly intoned that, 'Till now, the Taleban had balked at including Australia in a declaration of jihad, and its timing comes as no coincidence, corresponding to the start of the new carpet bombing campaign. The message from the Taleban is straightforward: you harm our civilians and we'll harm yours.' The next day, Aussie tabloids shouted: 'HOLY WAR ON AUSTRALIA.' We had our jihad, a rather meretricious one.

I saw a variation of this — now blended with bloodlust — in Indonesia after the Kuta bombings, when Australia unwittingly stumbled into that jihad. In my year-long investigations into the atrocity, scouring the bombers' desperate Javanese home villages, I found nothing suggesting a motivation to specifically target Australia. Americans, certainly, and other Westerners maybe — white nightclubbers looked the same to the deranged Imam Samudra. But killing Australians was an afterthought, one partly the construct of a parochial media bribing Indonesia's prison wardens so they could dangle a camera and microphone in front of madmen seeking martyrdom. When a blow-in Oz hack asks a terrorist through prison bars, 'What do you say to Australians?' naturally he's going to vomit a torrent of bile on cue. Surely Kuta's charnel houses — the most hideous thing I've ever seen — were horrible enough a local angle? Apparently not.

My mother is right; Australia doesn't much matter. To Korean/Japanese/Chinese politicians and steelmakers we are a massive quarry where uncrowded golf is cheap, there's decent Asian tucker, porn on hotel TVs — and even at Bondi, relatively speaking, if you're a Beijing ironmonger on a tear. To most everywhere else tyrannised by distance — but also seemingly to Frank Lowy's film-makers — we are the third-choice holiday. In our backyard, we don't come up much anywhere in any meaningful, instinctive, authoritative manner, at least not since Dr Mahathir passed from the scene. The reporting of Australia in Asia's press is woeful, focusing on alleged racism. Australia's look-at-me need for relevance has to be teased out, or forced *pace* the ABC in Islamabad in 2001. We design our own global architecture, like APEC, so as to be in it. There's nothing particularly wrong with that — its proactive diplomacy, coaxes Australians outside well-fed comfort zones. But it feels like Qatar buying the 2022 World Cup

finals, because it can't get to them on merit.

Militarily, we reliably make up the American numbers at their command, but let's hope Washington never has to choose between us and Jakarta. Western Pacific superpower? Fiji's Frank Bainairama doesn't think so four years into his coup, nor East Timor either — and we liberated them. Every Australian government likes to say we 'punch above our weight' internationally because it makes them feel important. But that's mostly true when it doesn't matter — supping in Washington and Beijing's Great Hall — and rarely when it does, when stricken compatriots need protection, repatriation and fair and transparent justice. Australia is a welterweight at best, a blousy democracy to intimidate when necessary and whose grumpy demarches potentates ignore.

Ask Chris Dell, US ambassador in Zimbabwe, lamenting his limits to curtail Mugabe's excesses. Australia is a 'rock-solid partner (who) don't pack enough punch to step out front,' Dell noted in a WikiLeaks cable, as succinct a précis of Australian clout as any. Last week *Foreign Policy* magazine listed its annual Top 100 list of Global Thinkers and there's not an Australian among them; no Murdoch, no Singer, Flannery or Assange. Not even Sir Les Patterson. About the only human endeavour where Australia punches heftily is in Hollywood or on the sporting field, but Ricky Ponting is fast making that a nonsense. And FIFA too.

But, at last, succour in snowy-haired, unlikely form of Our Julian. Never before has an Australian been so relevant, sustained the attention of the world, not even Rupert Murdoch, whose best work was after he stopped being an Australian. Murdoch and Assange are arguably the two Australians who've had the most global impact, for better or worse; one grasps the internet and its infinite possibilities, including appropriating the traditional media domain of the other, who's losing the tech battle. Refusing to be pigeonholed as a new media gadfly, Assange has even made Murdoch's bloggers-are-parasites argument his own.

Assange sticks it up authority, the bigger the better. Isn't that supposed to be quintessentially Australian, that larrikin spirit of Ned Kelly? True, he seems a little odd, but what iconoclast isn't? Maybe its unAustralian to be brainy.

Our Julian deserves elevation to the Vegemite aristocracy, Australia's Sacred Order of the Collective Possessive. At the rate WikiLeaks is airing its 251,287 cables, Our Julian — and Australia — will punch above his weight globally every day until 2038. Relevance Deficiency Syndrome cured.

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