

Summary of June Address

Guest Speaker: Bruce Wolpe

Subject: "The American Presidential Election 2008".

As indicated by John Warden in his introduction, Bruce knows the US political system from personal experience, having worked for several years on Capitol Hill and been a partner in a Washington government relations firm. A resident of Australia since 1991, he is a director of The Australian American Leadership Dialogue, a Governor of American Chamber of Commerce in Australia, previously co-chaired its Trade and Government Committee and has served on the board of the Australian American Fulbright Commission. Holding a master's degree in political science from Brandeis University, he is the author of "Lobbying Congress: How the System Works". Currently Director, Corporate Affairs, Fairfax Media Ltd he is a regular analyst and commentator on American politics and policy.

The timing of Bruce's address was such that it's hardly surprising the majority of his time was spent referring to the contest between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton for the Democratic nomination. His prediction that Obama would close out the nomination was confirmed as correct within a day or so of his delivery. He was quite up front in declaring from the outset a Democratic leaning, but this in no way detracted from a most interesting commentary.

I suppose it's fair to say that most Australians have limited knowledge of how the American political system works, but what we know is probably a factor contributing to reluctance for change in our own country.

Bruce commented on the historic Hollywood/ Washington relationship, with some movie actors moving into politics. The Republicans tend to have an image of "old men" and the Democrats "new blood".

The major current issues in the US are the wars (Iraq and Afghanistan) and the economy. Iraq has cost them 4,000 lives and an ongoing huge financial burden. The people want it over, not cut and run but an end. And now the economy has supplanted the wars as the No.1 issue – it's going down while fuel and other costs are going up. Currently 81% say US is on the wrong track.

Bruce said quite candidly he hoped the Democrats would win. Why have the Republicans nominated John McCain? Well the people want another "Ronald Regan". McCain is a war hero and he beat Bush in Maine. They have discounted Giuliani the one time popular New York mayor. Last year the Republicans were looking for a true blue conservative. Bruce likened McCain to our own speed skater Steven Bradbury at the Olympics, winning when all the opposition fell over.

Obama is viewed as fulfilling a US dream, with frequent reference to "VO" (Victory Obama) day. Any other year Hillary would have won the nomination, having all the attributes. But Obama is like Bobby Kennedy in 1968. He has united rich and poor, black and white. He is endorsed by Ted and Caroline

Kennedy. Hillary hurt herself during the campaigning, also former President husband Bill, vigorously campaigning on her behalf, got people offside.

Reiterating his view that the Democrats will win, he believes there is a mood for change. McCain is being painted as a “3rd Bush Term”, not a true blue conservative, with base voters less enthusiastic about him. Aged 72, which would make him 80 after serving 2 terms, he is considered too old by many. Referring to campaign finances, Hillary/Obama have raised \$435m (with Obama getting substantial support from a huge number of small donors) and McCain \$100m.

The Democrats have won the last 3 by elections and Bruce believes they will achieve a landslide in Congress irrespective of who wins the Presidency.

He believes a lot of Aussies don't like George Bush but they do like the alliance, and they want to see good leadership.

Regarding Australia's economic relationship with China? Historically if US had a problem with China, Australia like so, and he sees no current difference in Australian /US attitudes. In economic terms he believes it lucky we have a free trade agreement with the US, as it will be interesting to watch the degree of economic protectionism should an inward looking US eventuate.

In this already most interesting campaign he posed the question “Are Americans ready for a black President?”

And his response? “It will be very interesting to see what happens.” He does believe if the economy is bad enough, they will vote for a black man. Also there's evidence kids are telling parents “get over it!”

During a lively question time, he expanded on a number of issues. He touched on the importance of “super delegates” in the close Democrat nomination race. Responding to a query on Obama's effectiveness if elected, he referred to his book “Audacity of Hope” disclosing a fine mind and indications “the hotter it gets, the cooler he gets”. He believes a strong America is still central to a safer world and acknowledged that getting the best out of US at a time of retreat is a challenge. On the role of the Vice President, Cheney has been the most powerful VP in US history – with that role being more important since the time of Jimmy Carter / Walter Mondale. He believed both Hillary and Obama would chose a good running mate, suggesting Hillary would not be on Obama's ticket as VP but he could do well to appoint her as Chief Justice.

In thanking Bruce, Rawdon Dalrymple commented that he considered America will remain strong militarily, but that it is inevitable that it will pull its horns in. He diplomatically gives McCain a slightly better chance than Bruce does and conveyed on behalf of us all appreciation for a most interesting presentation.