

# Former PM of Australia Kevin Rudd's Failed Bid to Become the Next UN Secretary General

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*Few sights are sadder in international diplomacy than seeing an aging figure desperate for honours. In a desperate effort to net them, he scurries around, cultivating, prodding, wishing to be noted. Finally, such an honour is netted, in all likelihood just to shut that overly keen individual up.*

Such a figure is former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who has become something of a prattler in chief, roaming an assortment of international stages in the vain hope that he might, just might become the next UN Secretary General.

Nominees, of which former Portuguese prime minister António Guterres is said to be favourite, have already been put forth by a range of countries, including New Zealand (Helen Clark), Croatia (Vesna Pusić), Argentina (Susana Malcorra). The one country lagging in the affair was Australia.

That Rudd would even think he had a chance offers an insight into a particular brand of megalomania. Each position he has occupied has seen a form of micro-managed mania take hold. Employees and staff have been run ragged. His infamous work ethic has been less a case of efficiency than paranoia about sticking with a decision, and fortifying it against rivals.

Then came the deeply personal portraits of a man of the permanent grudge. Wayne Swan, former Treasurer, and troubled friend for a period of 20 years, spared nothing in his memoir, *The Good Fight*. "Kevin," he suggested, "was prone to vengeful behaviour" and distinctly unstable.

Internationally, various instances of such instability have been charged to Rudd. His outburst at the Copenhagen summit on climate change in 2010, at which he suggested in moment of frustration that, "Those Chinese fuckers are trying to rat fuck us" has become somewhat legendary.[1] (China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Qin Gang diplomatically suggested disbelief about what "those reports" claimed.)

This has been coupled with an awful obsequiousness at points, typified by the usual line that Australia, if required to go to war against China with the United States, would happily do so. Hardly the stuff of a UN Secretary General.

The picture of Rudd, then, was a poor one to begin with, whereas others vying for the Secretary position, including former NZ Prime Minister Clark, were always going to be streets ahead.[2]

The issue in Australia has also descended into farce. The conservative Liberal-National

government has found itself at odds as to what to do with Rudd, a person many would rather not see at the UN's top job. For Rudd to even be considered for the UN required him to be put forth by his sponsoring country.

The debate has taken a very public form. On the one hand, the Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, sees no problems with staying comradely on the subject. Being a former prime minister, foreign minister and diplomat, was good enough, and party allegiance on this score did not matter. To that end, she could count on the support of Attorney-General George Brandis.

The Treasurer, Scott Morrison, begged to differ, making the issue entirely in partisan terms. As Labor did not push the candidacy for former treasurer Peter Costello's bid to succeed Dominique Strauss-Kahn as head of the International Monetary Fund five years ago, it was time to return the favour.

Ditto the right of right South Australian liberal senator Cory Bernardi, who sought to convince colleagues not to back an individual "dysfunctional", "vengeful", "unstable", and a "megalomaniac".

The opposition Labor Party was always going to assume that Rudd was suitable, a curious state of affairs given the fact that various members were thrilled at knifing their leader when he was prime minister.

Evidently, being UN Secretary General was far more appropriate than leading the country. In the words of acting opposition leader, Tanya Plibersek, "There is no question that it is in our national interest to have an Australian in this vital role."

The Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, had one corner to hide in: the suitability of Rudd for the role. "When the Australian Government nominates a person for a job, particularly an international job like this, the threshold question is, 'do we believe the person, the nominee, the would-be-nominee is well suited for that position?'"[3]

After denying that the issue had been factional, that the party room had been deeply unsettled by the debate as to whether Rudd's name should be put forth, the great red herring of objectivity was trotted out. Rudd was simply not suitable.

That he wasn't suitable for a range of reasons is hard to contest, be it temperament, timing, and the rank fact that having an Australian in such a post would be problematic for various powers. Russia and China, for starters, would be suspicious about having such a pro-Washington voice at the helm of the international body.

Turnbull kept mum on that subject, leaving Rudd up the creek with no paddle in sight. Only Senator Bernardi gave us a sense about what had happened with a congratulatory note for the prime minister: "Our participation in international institutions is more important than an individual's ambition." The conservative wing of the party had triumphed.

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## Notes

[1] <http://www.smh.com.au/national/china-thinks-rudd-rat-tale-too-curly-20100608-xtor.html>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/jul/27/julie-bishop-says-kevin-rudd--qualifies-for-job-as-un-secretary-general>

[3] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-29/kevin-rudd-un-secretary-general-bid--endorsed-by-malcolm-turnbull/7671542>

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