

The Road to Brisbane: Pre-Summit Antics Before the G20

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“There’s more police than people.” – Sara Elks, Brisbane resident, Nov 14, 2014

The diary entry of “why bother” might end an account of days spent at such a summit, but the G20 still has, in its chatting ranks, individuals who ought to know what they are talking about. But distance and disengagement prove fundamental at such gatherings. The first steps of inflicting this on the populace are through G20 prohibited person notices on protesters who are deemed threatening or unwelcome within the summit area.

So far, Deputy Commissioner Ross Barnett has identified four especially dangerous individuals, though such danger in this case is entirely relative. The G20 (Safety and Security) Act is a strange beast indeed, susceptible of the widest reading and application. So much, then, for the supposed openness of Australia’s spirit of protest.

One such activist prohibited from attending such zones is Ciaran O’Reilly, who was surrounded by police while sitting without giving offence or incident on Boundary Street in the West End area during the afternoon. The posters he was holding must have been scurrilous stuff – “Free Julian Assange” and “Obama, O-Bomber, O-Bummer”.[1] O’Reilly certainly does have gumption, having attempted the disarming of a B52 bomber at a New York military base during the 1991 Gulf War.

Special laws of ordinary vision but extraordinary application have excluded numerous items from being brought into set zones without a “lawful reason”. In another authoritarian sock to the jaw, banners are on the list. So are surf skis and reptiles, along with that menagerie of dangerous Australian animals that might become weapons. And eggs. Oh, and let us not forget the tactically deployable urine and animal manure.

The one thing journalists did find exciting as the city was emptying out its sensibility were three topless vegan protesters covered in green colouring. Presumably green coloured, half-nude protesters are not offensive to the cult of G20 protection, though perhaps they ought to be. A member of PETA insisted that G20 leaders attempt to become vegans during the course of the proceedings. An unlikely prospect, but nonetheless worth a shot.

In the meantime, Australia’s efforts to continue to insist on economic growth – and just in case anyone forgot – more growth – as the vital agenda item on the G20 schedule, seemed rather hollow as parts of Brisbane vacated en masse. “Locals say that the CBD and Southbank resemble a ghost town.”[2] Department stores and shops are operating on reduced hours. The only thing evidently growing was the presence of security personnel and the ever deepening presence of the thin blue line. One report suggested that brothels were the true winners in the security clamp.

The Lord Mayor of the city, Graeme Quirk tried putting a brave face on things by spouting inanities. “This event will help us to get better known, it will mean more tourism numbers for hotels, retail stores and restaurants for years to come.” The things people will do when they are in a fix.

In off shore proceedings hinging on the summit’s start, the Australian press felt a rush of blood with the presence of four Russian naval vessels doing what such vessels presumably do. They were sighted in the Coral Sea and were, in the chilling words of one news channel, “bearing down on Australia.”[3] Some trivia worth nothing here: Australian media outlets were suddenly able to name such Russian vessels as the cruiser Varyag. A refreshing change from the Olympics, when commentary reached such sophisticated heights as “the Russian won”.

It was unlikely that the Russian navy, in the event of getting into Australian waters, was going to be towed out to Indonesia, which has been the response of Australia’s midget like patrol forces to asylum seekers. The rationale there is simple: If it involves asylum seekers hoping to avail themselves of the Refugee Convention, they deserve every bit of bruising Australia’s guardians of their girt by sea can dish.

Analysts spoke of Vladimir Putin “flexing muscle” via sea channels, a nice counter to the Australian muscle flexing Tony Abbott. They were also quick to point out that such muscles were somewhat flabby – rickety Soviet era vessels were being used in the operation, with tugboats to match. The tugboat, said a smug member of the Strategic and Defence Studies centre at the Australian National University, was there to tow out vessels failing at sea. “The take-away point here is the over-emphasis our society still places on material assets and ‘hard power’.”[4] Presumably, Australia’s respectably mediocre navy, with its appallingly misspent acquisitions, may have something to teach their Russian colleagues.

The language from the Australian Defence Force, in contrast with those of Channel 7’s news office, tended to be less alarmist. In an official sobering statement, it clarified that, “The movement of these vessels is entirely consistent with provisions under international law for military vessels to exercise freedom of navigation in international waters.” The Russian response, which must have been delivered with some mirth bearing in mind Abbott’s stance on the subject, was that Moscow was testing its navy for purposes of monitoring climate change.

If Abbott wanted, through his distorted lenses of the world, an apology from the Russian president for the shooting down of MH17 over Ukrainian territory, this was as good as it was going to get. While he tends to have suffered something of a drought of common sense, the Australian Labor Party’s Bill Shorten did at least pick up on one thing: Russia cares not a jot what the US satrap thinks.

Now, all that is left is for the chatter to begin, insulated by the grand gestures of authoritarian stifling and muffling that typifies such carnivals of conversation.

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