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Rudd–Gillard, Obama, Shoalhaven: antagonism or inclusion?

Julia Gillard, the Deputy Prime Minister, is Minister for Social Inclusion. What does this mean? In a speech last November Ms Gillard said:

The concept of social inclusion in essence means replacing a welfarist approach to helping the underprivileged with one of investing in them and their communities to bring them into the mainstream market economy. It's a modern and fresh approach that views everyone as a potential wealth creator and invests in their human capital.

Several Koori people in the Shoalhaven have been talking privately about this kind of thing, through the past year. A world beyond Noel Pearson's visions.

The old antagonism and enemy focusing of the Howard era simply vanished – at least for now. We seem to have a muddled pause in community expression. We need now to find our voices again, to find positive voices, rather than critical, divisive voices. Inclusion seems a good basis for moving forward.

Barack Obama is clearly an advocate of inclusion and asserts a new path. He speaks of a *United States*, but there is little reported here in Australia of thought behind such rhetoric. The ABC's North American correspondent seems to stay in the press lounge lounging. A caller to Illawarra local radio recently said: "How can Obama, an American, say 'We can make the world right?'" What Obama is saying is that American power has been exercised wrongly, that America will remain powerful and needs to be a force for good in many areas.

A younger Obama wrote an extraordinary book about his search for his identity in 1995: his Kansas wife's brief marriage to a brilliant Kenyan student, his father, in Hawaii; his primary years with his Indonesian stepfather in the poorer quarters of Jakarta, his struggles with substances and perspectives as a student; his pull away from corporate employment to work on community capacity building in the worst corners of Chicago; his finding of extended family in Nairobi and rural Kenya.

In the introduction to the 2004 reprint he reflected on the impact of September 11, 2001.

...History returned that day with a vengeance... This past, directly touches my own. Not only because the bombs of Al Qaeda have marked, with an eerie precision, some of the landscapes of my life—the buildings and roads and faces of Nairobi, Bali, Manhattan; not merely because, as a consequence of 9/11, my name is an irresistible target of mocking websites from overzealous Republican operatives. But also because of *the underlying struggle—between worlds of plenty and worlds of want; between the modern and ancient; between those who embrace our teeming, colliding, irksome diversity, while still insisting on a set of values that binds us together, and those who would seek, under whatever flag or slogan or sacred text, a certainty and simplification that justifies cruelty towards those not like us...*
[emphasis added]

We watch from a distance the way his inclusive perspectives and policies are widening support – the whole world seems to take great interest in what will come after the destructive years of G.W.Bush. Even if Obama does not secure the Democratic Party's nomination for the election in November, these policies will now be a force in America. In a speech in Iowa in November Obama said:

I won't just ask for your vote as a candidate; I will ask for your service and your active citizenship when I am president of the United States. This will not be a call issued in one speech or program; this will be a cause of my presidency."

This combination of social inclusion and of service goes further than currently articulated Australian policy. But if it happens in America, we will see it here... though we seem to be trapped now in a mood of self-focused consumption: *I struggle with my bills, um, excuse me, I can't talk, I have to get back to my X-Box.*

Perhaps this, in Obama's *Blueprint for America* sounds a bit like our recent past:

Under the Bush administration, foreign policy has been used as a political wedge issue to divide us – not as a cause to bring America together. And it is no coincidence that one of the most secretive administrations in history has pursued policies that have been disastrous for the American people. Obama strongly believes that our foreign policy is stronger when Americans are united, and the government is open and candid with the American people.

It is worth looking at that Blueprint (link to download from our website) in its details. The foreign policy content includes this:

Not talking [to people we don't like] doesn't make us look tough – it makes us look arrogant, it denies us opportunities to make progress, and it makes it harder for America to rally international support for our leadership. On challenges ranging from terrorism to disease, nuclear weapons to climate change, we cannot make progress unless we can draw on strong international support.

and it is valuable to see the detail of policies to reduce petroleum consumption by 30% by 2030 and carbon emissions by 80% by 2050, to spend \$150 billion on clean energy technology development.

Oh dear, how far this is from our cat-fighting Shoalhaven political scrums, enmired in manipulation and craftiness and narrow vision.

As the great John Hatton notes we are endowed with extraordinary natural riches and human potential. John asks questions. It would be good to have lots of ideas for NBT 100, deadline April 10.

The Shoalhaven can go forward and up, or just slump. We can be a positive community and a great regional centre, or be bogged in social problems. What, for example, will we do about the families that will arrive here with the 500 inmates of the new gaol? Run from expanding ghettos or work for social inclusion? Lock up the chooks and put out the dog, or open our hearts and minds?

Why is our local government persistently stuck in mucky states, chewing its way through big issues without vision. Where are the younger people with vision, integrity and imagination to sweep all that away and enable us to become a leading, intelligent region which others might follow?

We seem stuck in a situation where thrills are secured by pettifoggery and mob-leading. That era is ending in the wider world. We will be left behind without new leadership that sees broader issues and builds community, rather than working constantly to divide.

Do you have the courage to pursue change? Send us ideas for our 100th issue? Can you get people together to consider what is the way to change the council. Do you have the vision and strength and integrity to organise to be a candidate – to nominate by 27 August, to be elected to Shoalhaven City Council on 27 September? Your party affiliation is not the main thing, the question is how to lift accountability, integrity and vision.