

Individual Study Tour to the United States: July 2007

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I travelled to New York, Boston, Washington DC, Chicago, Seattle and Los Angeles on an Australian Political Exchange Council study tour in July 2007.

On my study tour, I was provided with opportunities to meet a wide range of people with expertise in American politics, and from all sides of the political spectrum.

I also decided to focus on policy areas that, I believe, play a considerable role in determining election outcomes in modern-day Australia. I chose the areas of transport and law enforcement, including counter-terrorism.

My study tour came at a very interesting time in the American electoral cycle. Presidential candidates were in full flight, campaigning to win their party's nomination with the 'Primary' process to start in January 2008.

The upcoming United States election was also generating more international publicity than had ever been seen before at that stage of the race, with high-profile candidates Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and Rudy Giuliani dominating the headlines.

Most of the people I met with agreed that Iraq was the number one political issue for the candidates, which was reflected in opinion polls. Satisfaction levels with the United States involvement in Iraq was deteriorating rapidly. Candidates were focused on whether troops should be withdrawn from Iraq and, if so, when.

The primaries and the forthcoming Presidential election were focussing both the experts, and the wider community, on the big issues. Most of my discussions with those involved in the political system believed Hillary Clinton would win the Democratic primary. With no clear frontrunner for the Republicans, the people I met with favoured the Democrats to win the Presidential election. President George W. Bush's stance on Iraq was also causing electoral difficulties for his party's potential nominees.

Cities Visited

I chose New York, Boston, Washington DC, Chicago, Seattle and Los Angeles for this study tour because they are among America's most influential political cities, but also provide geographical and regional differences upon which to gauge the same political considerations. In addition, these locations are also the best places to learn more about how these major metropolitan centres have uniquely approached the key issues of transport and law enforcement.

New York is the most populated city in the United States, with 8.2 million residents. It is the home of the United Nations and is the headquarters of many major world companies.

The New York Police Department has 37,000 officers. Since the 1990s, the Department has adopted a number of very successful crime prevention strategies which has resulted in a 75 per cent drop in violent crime in the past twelve years.

The New York subway system is the largest in the world. New Yorkers also have access to buses, ferries and an aerial tramway. More than half the households in New York City do not own a car.

I visited Boston because it is one of the most culturally significant cities in the United States. Boston's colleges and universities have a major impact on the city and region's economy. They are major employers and they attract new industries to the city.

In the 1990s, Boston police undertook a crime reduction program which involved working with the community to stop young people from joining gangs. Their successful strategies have resulted in a reduction in the murder rate of 80 per cent. In 2004, the Democratic National Convention was held in Boston, which was the first since the September 11 attacks in 2001. This event posed a number of security challenges.

The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority runs a system of metro trains, bus lines and water shuttles. Their metro system was the first underground rapid transit system in the United States. The success of the system is demonstrated by the fact that 31.5 per cent of Boston commuters use public transport.

A major road project, 'the big dig' has been completed in recent years and has been used as an example overseas of a successful project that involved the local community.

I visited Washington DC because it is the home of all three branches of the United States Federal Government. I was able to meet with politicians, political staff, officials from the major political parties and representatives of key lobbyist firms.

During the 1990s, Washington DC had the unfortunate title of murder capital of the United States. Due to a range of policing measures, these figures have dropped from 482 murders in 1991 to 169 murders in 2006.

The Washington DC area is served by the nation's second busiest subway system, operated by the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.

I visited Chicago because it is the third most populated city in the United States and is a major financial centre. The headquarters of Boeing recently moved from Seattle to Chicago.

In 2004, Chicago implemented crime-reduction methods taken from New York and Los Angeles. These techniques have had a considerable impact, including a fall in murder rates.

Chicago is the largest intermodal hub in the United States and third in the world after Hong Kong and Singapore. It is the centre of the United States in terms of airline flights, freight rail and passenger rail. The Chicago Transit Authority operates an extensive network of trains and buses.

Seattle is the home of a number of major United States companies, including Microsoft and Starbucks. A large proportion of Boeing's manufacturing activity also remains in Seattle.

Seattle is serviced by electric trolleybuses, a rail system, a monorail and the largest ferry network in the United States. A new light rail system to the airport is currently under construction.

Los Angeles is the second most populated city in the United States. It is a centre of international trade, entertainment, technology and tourism. It is also the largest manufacturing centre in America.

Only 10 per cent of Los Angeles residents use an extensive system of bus lines, light rail and a relatively new metro train system. Most Los Angeles residents commute by car, providing a major counterpoint to the experiences of the other United States locations I was studying.

The Los Angeles Police Department has 9,600 officers working on 250 discreet assignments. Crime-fighting initiatives introduced by police there have seen dramatic reductions in crime rates.

Political Meetings

On my study tour I was able to meet with many political experts, who gave me their views of the candidates on all sides of American politics.

I met with representatives from:

- Office of Senator Hillary Clinton;
- Office of Speaker Nancy Pelosi;
- Office of Massachusetts Governor;
- Democratic National Committee;
- Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts;
- Squier Knapp Dunn Communications;
- Wilmer Hale;
- Burson-Marsteller;
- Congressional Liaison section of the Australian Embassy;
- Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research;
- Patton Boggs;
- JFK Library;
- as well as other political consultants and campaigners.

A recurring major topic of discussion was the use of the internet for political purposes. Howard Dean made a breakthrough with the use of the internet in campaigning four years ago, when he introduced online fundraising, forums and talking points.

For the upcoming election, the internet is emerging as the most important tool candidates have at their disposal. In the United States, it is being used for fundraising and encouraging people to vote, as well as trying to sway voters' opinions.

Political parties have very professional websites and large teams of staff who manage these websites. Candidates and elected officials are setting up their own websites to update their constituents on their activities. The video sharing site of YouTube is an enormously popular forum to share political ads and get messages out and has a different audience and intention to standard mass media advertising.

Personal pages on websites such as MySpace and Facebook are allowing candidates to share personal information about themselves and attract younger voters, as well as keeping interested people updated in an interactive way, or when they want to learn more.

In addition, advertisements on websites are drawing people into the existing party and candidate websites. In the current campaign, Barack Obama is being credited with using the internet most effectively.

Using the internet for campaigning has been prompted in part by the American experience with the television system Tevo. This type of pay-television allows the user to record television programs without the advertisements. Formerly during campaigns, television was the domain of candidates trying to influence votes. Now that such a large proportion of people are watching television with the ads automatically removed, candidates have turned to the internet to catch people's attention. This is particularly the case in relation to younger, technology-savvy potential voters.

This Tevo system has recently been introduced in Australia so it can be expected that the use of the internet will become increasingly important for our campaigns. To this point, the importance of the internet has been picked up for the upcoming Australian Federal campaign by Kevin Rudd and, to a lesser extent, John Howard. The Opposition Leader is currently reported to have around 17,000 people interacting with his MySpace and YouTube sites, receiving daily updates on his activities and messages.

Other topics discussed included campaigning techniques; policy development; fundraising; the primaries and the 2008 election; voting patterns; the Federal legislative process; procedures in the House of Representatives and the Senate; freedom of information legislation; the role of the media; and, electoral entitlements.

Many people I spoke with explained the difficulties that politicians and political parties in America experience just trying to get people to turn up to vote. MTV has started an initiative called *Rock the Vote* to try to connect to younger people and get them to engage in the political process.

With the American system of optional voting, campaigning in new and inventive ways is required, and must focus first on encouraging people to vote at all, then encouraging them to vote for you.

Law Enforcement Meetings

In 2005, Kevin Rudd said in a Sydney Morning Herald interview that Labor's electoral presentation is like a babushka doll:

"The outer shell of the babushka doll is national security. The public has to be able to look you in the eye and have confidence that you will maintain security. Peel that layer off. Next, people want confidence that the economy will be well managed and that you can provide them with the basics of life - a job and an income."

It is only then that the voter will consider the next layers inside the doll, Labor's other offerings (*Peter Hartcher, SMH, 15/06/07*)

This is an even bigger issue in the United States, where national security and law enforcement have been major political and campaign issues since the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States.

I met with representatives from:

- New York Office of Emergency Management;
- New York Police Department;
- Federal Bureau of Investigation;
- United States Select Committee on Intelligence;
- United States Citizenship and Immigration Services;
- Los Angeles Police Department;
- Australian Federal Police at the United Nations;
- Office of the Massachusetts Under-Secretary for Homeland Security;
- Harvard University;
- Massachusetts State Police; and
- Boston Police.

Topics that were discussed in these meetings included successful strategies to bring down crime, including: community involvement; technology; ethnic crime; disaster response; domestic violence; hate crimes; gang crime; the role of Australian police overseas; and, immigration and border security.

We discussed law enforcement policy and legislation that has been introduced in the United States. We also discussed legislation that is being considered by various political parties for the upcoming Australian federal election.

As was evident in my political meetings, the use of the internet was raised as a very important issue. The way that groups form and communicate online is an emerging problem for law enforcement authorities, particularly in relation to counter-terrorism.

I spent a substantial amount of time talking to law enforcement agencies in the lead-up to the APEC meetings in Sydney, especially the Leaders' week in September. These agencies have managed numerous major conferences in recent years and were able to provide the most up-to-date information on counter-terrorism measures and event management. Their briefings also included information on the best way to communicate with the public and ensure that the event is peaceful and successful.

Transport Meetings

Many cities in the United States have advanced public transport systems, especially metro train systems. I inspected the metro railway systems in New York, Washington DC, Boston, Chicago and Los Angeles. In Seattle, I viewed the new light rail system that is currently under construction and is considered an integral part of a wider redevelopment of the city's residential and employment areas.

I met with representatives from:

- A Better City, Boston;
- EMBARQ, World Resources Institute;
- Chicago Transit Authority; and
- Patton Boggs.

Many of these discussions focused on the role of the private sector in providing public transport and road projects. The experience of these organisations in their own cities, and in the projects they have worked on internationally, all points to the importance of community involvement.

Community ownership of major transport infrastructure projects, including involvement in decision-making processes such as what to do with leftover space, makes for good policy and good politics.

Discussions were also held on how organisations have used the political process to get around obstacles and get positive results for the community. Not surprisingly, given my own experiences in political processes, this includes online media as well as general media, advertising and polling.

My meetings also focused on the need to provide transport solutions that are long-term, environmentally sustainable and economically viable. Topics discussed included financial issues and the financial feasibility of particular projects; the value of working out an integrated solution for roads and public transport; counter-terrorism issues on transport; transport technology; and, the importance of planning cities around public transport.

In addition to the meetings listed above, I also met with companies and organisations to discuss state and regional development. These included World Business Chicago, the Washington Department of Natural Resources and Microsoft.

I would like to thank the Australian Political Exchange Council for the opportunities I was provided with on this study tour. The knowledge I have gained will be of enormous benefit to me. I would also like to thank the Australian Labor Party for nominating me for this tour.

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