

# *President Hillary Clinton, Ricky Ponting & The Search for a First Class Temperament*

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## **BRIEFING NOTE**

HILLARY CLINTON AND RICKY PONTING HAVE A LOT IN COMMON THESE DAYS. It doesn't matter what they do, they get hammered for it. Welcome to the public arena. Act tough and you are branded hard-hearted. Act soft and you are branded a wuss. The important thing for a person in public life to remember is that first class temperaments are forged in this cauldron of public scrutiny and you have to keep your sense of humour and laugh at yourself as much as possible. In the realm of impossible media demands, truth and temperament ultimately do emerge. Clinton and Ponting are both tenacious winners. I suspect that Clinton and Ponting's opponents may have done them a favour they by giving them new challenges to rise above.

The major question about being President of the United States and Captain of the Australian cricket team is the same: Are you tough enough for the job? And can you carry that toughness with great civility and good humour?

I saw how Hillary Clinton got crunched on health care reform in 1993 by the biggest and most powerful lobbyists and corporate power blocs in the world. She had to be tough to survive that. The point is she was not only tough enough to survive it, she lives to fight another day. What didn't kill her made her stronger, maybe too strong.

The Ashes losses in England had a similar effect on Ricky Ponting. It gruelled him, toughened him and Australia has won a record equalling sixteen tests since that fateful English Summer. But maybe that steely determination has become the only thing the media now sees.

Hillary Clinton had her Eleanor Roosevelt moment in New Hampshire two days ago. Her world weariness and toughness gave way to real feeling and emotion and people responded well to it. Some have criticized her for instantly moving back to her professional political persona, but you have to be strong and tough to be a good President and to achieve things. You have to know where you stand.

I am not sure when Ricky will have his moment. But I know it will come. All he has to do is be himself and to explain the difficult decisions he must make on and off the field. The Australian cricketers have surely realised that if people cannot beat you on the field then they will try other tactics to beat you off the field. The irony of it all is that Australian sledging has greatly improved since Steve Waugh's time, as any SCG patron with decent hearing will tell you. But just as successful tenure in the White House requires toughness so too does the captaincy of a team of highly competitive international sportsmen. I think Ponting and his team have generally combined toughness with fairness. If the Indians are affronted by it, and the fact that Ponting did the right thing by reporting a racial sledge, as he was required to do, then let them take their ball and go home. No one expects Ponting's own mistakes to be cov-

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ered up, nor does he, but making him and Steve Buckner out to be incompetent, unfair, arrogant or bullies is beyond the pale.

The thing is I see many members of the media calling for these impossible public figures who are all things to all people. Is that really what we want in leaders?

Coming back to larger matters at hand, President Hillary Clinton will be good for Australia.

The past eleven years have seen a close relationship develop between George W. Bush and John W. Howard. During that time the Australian Embassy in Washington has returned to its Cold War structure in which predominantly military matters and personnel dominate. The measure of an Australian conservative administration is the number of military attaches and experts that get posted to Washington. The way in which Alexander Downer and Brendan Nelson measured their success was in the closeness of their ties to the Americans on military matters. The seamlessness of the relationship was the hallmark of success.

Australia has also signed a free trade agreement with the US and the free flow of goods, people and information is now clear and apparent.

In many spheres Australia holds its end up in the relationship with the US. Our health and medical research is strong and the free flow of ideas and information has helped our own competitiveness and viability to thrive. Our actors and film producers and directors are over represented in Hollywood for such a small country. Our tourism industry continues to generate American trade. Our mining industry is becoming a zone where Americans come to see how we are doing things as much as the other way around. But even with our competitiveness in these and other areas something is missing and unbalanced.

Remarkably, in the post George W. Bush and John Howard era, as Americans call for “change, change, change” Australians do not appreciate that we have something far more valuable than the Americans want: social cohesion and fairness. Our great weakness in this sphere is our relations with Indigenous Australians which ranks with the worst social injustice and inequality in the world. But between our mainstream urban classes there is a relatively small distance. I remember a year or so before he died, travelling up to Palm Beach for a surf, and seeing the familiar mug of Kerry Packer ten feet away from me in the surf. I don’t think this is a cliché or accident. Ordinary people can still travel to and swim at beaches with our richest men and women, they are not protected and hived away in some compound. There is no need to protect them away it is our relative level of social cohesion that protects the rich.

Of course whatever we have is slowly being eaten away by the extent to which Australians readily copy American social relations and economic structures. The great strength of President Hillary Clinton is that there will be a chance for our two administrations to explore together what is wrong.

I wrote a thesis in 1992 on how the Americans could learn from our Medicare system and how it is the half way house strategy between Canada and Germany that the Americans need to implement. It is not that our system is so much better than the famous Canadian and German systems, it is the most ready fit to the American system that would provide universal health care over a period of about ten years. One

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hundred million Americans would thank us for this export, and Australians would be heroes for much more than the shrimps on the barbie.

With President Hillary Clinton in the White House I imagine summits in which ideas like this are explored and whether the Americans do or do not implement our system, it may make us re-examine what our strengths and weaknesses are. We may be less ready to copy American systems without a critical analysis. In other words it would begin a more critical and engaging relationship between non-military leaders and thinkers.

The heart of the contest between Barrak Obama, who I hope one day in the future will also be President, and Hillary Clinton, is that ordinary Americans that the market has gone too far one way and they are recognising that they cannot win in a dog eat dog market in which the odds are stacked against them. Who will reshape the country so that ordinary people get a chance again? Moreover the protection of the rich and powerful is such that ordinary Americans continually suffer from the barriers of a class society which excludes them from the domains of the elite.

As I travel around and understand more about regional Australia I realise that Australia's elites are protected by the extremes of distance and oceans. We have created a relatively classless society for the lucky ones. But we build giant barriers in the form of protective, racially based immigration policy and massive infrastructure differences between remote, regional and urban Australia that keep out the unwanted.

Australians are much more unlikely to eyeball the poor within their own country. They rarely step over them in the streets. The Americans at personal, public and private levels have strong barriers between classes. It may be the rubric of never talking to someone you don't know on a bus or train in a big city. It may be the in-your-face, highly vigilant law and order system. It may be the indifference to the lot of a street beggar. Americans create barriers within public and private spaces that clearly keep the riff raff at bay. Most importantly of course the American wages system keeps the poor in their place. To live, be fed, and be housed increasingly means working extra-ordinary hours in multiple jobs. In America the poor starve or die from ill health in public places, in Australia they starve and die away from the major cities and population centres where nobody can see them or they mark time in a welfare system that allows them to keep their head just above water.

Hillary Clinton is the only one tough enough to change America, in doing so she offers hope and a new level of appreciation for the diminishing good things about the Australian quality of life. I expect Rudd and Clinton to form a new kind of social engagement that will mean the Washington embassy will balance out with as many social thinkers and reformers as militarists. Our security relationship will always be important, but what a small but significant blessing it would be to have social issues back on the agenda. In my opinion Obama needs to do more of an apprenticeship. I saw just how tough it could be in Washington when Hillary Clinton first brought forward health care reform in but what a great succession it would be from the first woman President to the first black President. America would certainly become a different place.

Peter Botsman