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Uplifted by Obama wave

Jennifer Hewett | July 15, 2009

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FEARS about the independence of the US Studies Centre have been dispelled by the appointment of its foundation professor of politics.

ROBERT Manne can relax. So can anyone else who feared for the academic independence of the US Studies Centre when it was established with a \$25 million grant from the Howard government in 2006.

At the time, Manne was one of those suggesting the centre would be judged and funded according to its loyalty in supporting that government's foreign policy agenda as well as the pro-American side of the culture wars.

This suspicion always hovered on the edge of paranoia. Now it simply seems ludicrous.

Not only has the Howard government been replaced, the popular mood in the US and towards the US is dramatically different thanks to the election of President Barack Obama.

As for the centre's supposedly conservative bias, consider the appointment of Margaret Levi as founding professor of US politics at the centre.

One of Levi's longstanding academic interests is the ability of organisations such as unions to encourage their members to act for the collective good rather than their own material interests.

She is fond of citing, for example, the actions of the Builders Labourers Federation under Jack Mundey fighting for green bans in Sydney in the 1970s.

Perhaps it's John Howard who should be uneasy, given he is hardly known as an admirer of the union movement. But no, the former prime minister doesn't seem to have any such concerns. Instead, he has just joined the centre's advisory council, along with another ex-PM, Bob Hawke.

Howard says that he believes in high-level bipartisan support for the centre and that he hopes the full range of opinion about the US-Australian relationship is given vent to.

Levi is certainly qualified to assist with that. She is a professor of political science at the University of Washington in Seattle, a past president of the American Political Science Association and is general editor of the *Annual Review of Political Sciences* and of *Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics*.

But she also has no hesitation in expressing her strong views about the interests of employees being different to that of employers and her concerns about whether the decline of unionism can be reversed.

"I wish I could say yes," she says of this prospect. That will depend, she thinks, on whether the services sector can be unionised as the once mighty US manufacturing sector was.

"The unions have no mobilising tactic or strategy and I don't know whether that will come through," Levi says.

Other things have changed to make it harder. A lot of things the unions had to create and fight for have basically been achieved and enforced by governments and by unions.

"But there will continue to be serious conflicts between employers and employees so there will be some effort on the part of employees to represent their own interests. Something will happen. It always does."

Such left-leaning views are just as traditional a part of the American cultural and academic landscape as the aggressively free market ethos most Australians associate with the US.

In that sense, the centre, a joint venture with the American Australian Association, should help in creating a greater understanding of the many nuances of US politics and attitudes.

Its political genesis came after a 2005 study of attitudes towards the US by the Lowy Institute. This found, among other things, that Australians were as apprehensive about US foreign policy as they were about Islamic terrorism.

A new US president will have already greatly altered that dynamic. Levi's enthusiasm for the change is obvious, along with her hope that it will lead to greater interest in acting for the collective good as well as a greater trust in government to come up with solutions.

"My interest is how you get individuals with lots of capacity and instinct to free ride to think beyond narrow self-interest," she says.

"The feeling during Obama's acceptance speech and inauguration speech was palpable. People felt this could be a moment where things are possible and if he plays it right, it could create a level of civic commitment and engagement. George Bush shut that down. He wasn't encouraging people to think beyond their individual boxes.

"I'm happy to see that the American public is at least open to the possibility that government should be involved in things they thought it should not be, like health care."

Levi still scoffs at any idea that one of the reasons she was chosen was to demonstrate the centre's non-partisan bona fides and try to ensure the continuing support of a Labor government in funding it.

She says that the centre needed a professor who carried some clout and points out that she has a big name in the US, thanks to her research work.

"A side benefit is that it creates some legitimacy for the reality that this is a centre that represents multiple perspectives and can speak to multiple publics," she says firmly.

She's also had a long-term knowledge of Australia, dating back to her time as a visiting scholar at the Australian National University in the 1980s. Levi has been a regular visitor to the country ever since, along with her husband.

Part of the fascination comes from their interest in buying what is now a formidable collection of Aboriginal art, much of which is now donated to the Seattle Art Museum.

"It has the first major gallery in North America devoted to contemporary Aboriginal art," she says proudly. No doubt an example of her faith in people acting for the collective good.

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