

Nov 04, 2016 by [Caitlin Byrne](#)

Moving Australia's Public Diplomacy Beyond the Cult of Rudd ^[1]

Australia's international policy portfolio has been left hanging after Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd's surprise resignation from his post – announced from Mexico in the aftermath of the G20 meeting. Rudd's resignation, a deliberate retaliation strike against the current Prime Minister Julia Gillard and the ruling Australian Labor Party for the unceremonious leadership coup they pulled off against him some 24 months ago, while fascinating to the political observer, is potentially devastating for Australia's international image projection.

Both as Prime Minister, and subsequently as Foreign Minister, Kevin Rudd (or @KRudd as he is known in the Twittersphere), has been highly influential in projecting Australia's ambitious international policy agenda and image. Well known, well liked, and well respected amongst many of his international counterparts, Rudd has pro-actively engaged Australia in international dialogue from the G20 to global sustainability, to campaigning for a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). His prodigious (some might say relentless) ability to take on issues and build policy outcomes has seen him travel the globe extensively. Since January 2010, he has delivered over 40 speeches in nearly as many countries to international audiences ranging from foreign policy elites and global media to students and Australian diaspora. He has also pushed the same agenda at home, and through the same period made some 60 speeches to Australian audiences from Parliament to the outback. Add to this the ability to continuously satiate the appetite of a twitter following that now exceeds one million. Rudd has personified the message that Australia is a hardworking, practical, and creative global player. As such he has been a driving force for Australia's ambitious international policy profile, and a critical feature of Australia's public diplomacy profile.

So, where does Rudd's resignation leave the Australia's international policy machine and public diplomacy? Under Rudd's leadership, the traditional diplomatic footprint has continued to shrink to bare bones capacity, while the public diplomacy unit operates on a shoestring budget – even less than it did when public diplomacy was so neglected that a Senate Inquiry was launched to investigate. Without Rudd there to continually and personally reinforce the international policy message, Australians will be left wondering why we are so engaged on matters beyond our horizons and sphere of influence (such as Libya and Syria – and ignoring relationships with some of our closest regional neighbors in the process), and why it is so important for Australia to continue to campaign far from home for temporary place on the UNSC.

Perhaps given Rudd's departure, a time of international policy reflection is in order, along with some rebuilding of institutional capacity, particularly within the Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The blistering pace set by Rudd appears to have taken its toll on Australia's strategic international policy development and delivery. In terms of managing Australia's international image, certainly the latest political shift highlights the risks associated

with a public diplomacy profile that is heavily influenced by the cult of leadership personality. It draws attention to the gaping hole in the institutional leadership of Australia's public diplomacy. There are decent threads of substance to Australia's public diplomacy profile: the frontline work of Australian diplomats in building local relationships from the post, on-shore and off-shore modes of international education, the expansion of many Australian Studies Centers within international universities, international broadcasting activities and English language study offerings via the Australia network, the activities of nine bilateral foundations, councils and institutes utilizing small grants programs to build mutual understanding, the vast expanse of Australia's arts presence, cultural and science exchanges, as well as sports outreach programs, to mention a few. However, this expanse of public diplomacy activity is highly fragmented. Interagency coherence is absent, and Australia's public diplomacy remains disconnected from strategic policy – moving at a fits-and-starts pace, often following the latest crisis or politically motivated initiative.

If we consider, as Philip Fiske De Gouviea has suggested, that public diplomacy is like the sapper, paving the way for traditional diplomacy, then it is important that all of these activities and initiatives are pulled together to pave the way towards a common direction.

Last year at the Australian Institute for International Affairs (AIIA) Forum on Public and Citizen Diplomacy in Canberra, some suggested the establishment of a single entity that might move Australia's public diplomacy forward, in concert with existing diplomatic networks, but away from the unpredictable influences of political profiles and processes. That suggestion needs to be (re)considered. A formalized partnership model (such as the British Council), that operates independently from the political machinery, but collaboratively with policy agencies, and with more clout than a government funded committee or council could provide the overarching strategic direction and coherence that is currently missing from Australia's image projection and public diplomacy activities. Such an initiative would move Australian public diplomacy beyond the mesmerizing, but ultimately flawed reliance on the cult of political leaders like KRudd.
