

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

Australia on the UNSC: Big, Juicy and Decisive ^[1]

The community of nations at the United Nations has said ‘we like Australia’. Australia’s first round win of the temporary United Nations Security Council (UNSC) seat is testament to a strong and effective campaign. Labelled a ‘victory for Australian diplomacy and values’ the UNSC outcome signals a comeback for Australia’s global standing – which has spent a little too many years in the doldrums.

Described by Foreign Minister Carr as ‘big, juicy,’ and ‘decisive,’ yesterday’s win exceeded even the most optimistic predictions of Australian diplomats in New York. The fact that Australia garnered far more votes in the secret ballot process than had been expected based on the number of official diplomatic pledges is significant.

While the direct causal link may be difficult to confirm, there is something to be said for the role and relevance of Australian public diplomacy in this campaign. The simple message: ‘making a difference for small and medium countries of the world’ (DFAT 2010) spearheaded the campaign. Supporting initiatives which included a reoriented diplomatic network, more and better-targeted humanitarian assistance, outreach to media and civil society including on R2P, and an engaged, active and fiery brand of political leadership gave credibility to the notion that ‘we do what we say’ (DFAT 2010).

Just as surprising as the Australian win at the UN was Finland’s loss. Finland was the one European competitor expected to win. Instead the nation suffered an unexpected defeat coming third in the vote tally behind Luxembourg. Having launched the campaign in 2002 and moving early to secure diplomatic pledges of support, the Finnish UN Ambassador signalled quiet confidence earlier this week that Finland would win in the first round of voting.

No doubt lessons will surface as the dust on Finland’s campaign settles. Yet Finland’s slow-burn, traditionally oriented campaign simply proved less effective in the end. While Finland had the support of the Nordics and European bloc generally, less emphasis was placed on building links with the smaller nations of Africa, the Caribbean and Pacific. When considered together these nations represent a large bulk of the international voting community.

Not even the last minute blueberries were enough to secure support for Finland (a lesson Canada learned in 2010 when gifts of maple syrup distributed amongst the UN General Assembly proved similarly ineffective).

Having worked hard to press a distinct message and carve out new and solid relationships, Australia now has the opportunity to put so-called ‘creative middle power diplomacy’ to the test.

The challenge will be in maintaining and expanding on the momentum of public involvement (both at home and abroad) through the two year UNSC term. The past experiences of others,

including Australia, show that the winners can become so consumed with the workload and demands of an overwhelming UNSC agenda that efforts towards public engagement can wane.

Australia brings good experience in engaging publics – especially through outreach initiatives linked to peace-building and disaster relief efforts. Such experience offers potential for the UNSC to deal with issues differently, including from the bottom-up and the inside-out. While it may be difficult to bring new light to bear on the challenging situations such as Syria, there is potential to approach other security challenges like North Korea through a more encouraging and inclusive diplomatic frame.

Australia's domestic constituency should not be forgotten. Remembering that young adult Australians have no living memory of Australia being on the Security Council, the temporary term is an opportunity to develop and capture the next generation of aspirations for carving Australia's place in a dynamic world. This is important not just for Australia's term on the UNSC, but also for a resilient international outlook in the years beyond. Exciting times ahead.
