

Indigenous Foreign Policy: a new way forward?

James Blackwell, Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, ANU,
and Julie Ballangarry, School of Government and International
Relations, Griffith University

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Introduction

Current efforts of the Australian State engaging with First Nations communities, in Australia, in foreign policy practice and international relations as a discipline, are woefully inadequate. It does not meet standards desired by First Nations peoples, nor does it often meet international standards around First Nations policy development. What this results in is a cultural dynamic of exclusion for First Nations peoples, ontologies and approaches to policy. There is current work, including from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), to further include and value contributions of First Nations in foreign policy, and increase First Nations presence in policymaking. Many of these initiatives though still continue to fail First Nations by not giving us a fair seat at the table, or full and accurate representation.¹

To fully realise the potential of a feminist foreign policy approach, First Nations peoples and approaches must be fully integrated. The diversity and value First Nations can bring to Australian foreign policy is extremely large and represents an untapped area for Australian foreign policymakers.² Australia does not yet fully realise the potential First Nations peoples and approaches can bring to our representation on the world stage, and our approaches to issues of foreign policy. Drawing the connections between First Nations and feminist approaches to foreign policy can only strengthen this agenda. This paper seeks to outline the introductory steps needed in order to achieve this.

Historical Exclusion

When discussing First Nations exclusion from Australian foreign policy, it is important to background this with an understanding of the historical exclusion suffered by First

Nations in this country. Massacres, wars over land, forced dispossession, and the removal of our children were all horrors that awaited us after the British arrival in 1788.³ Even upon Federation in 1901, First Nations were deliberately excluded not only from the process of developing a Constitution, but also the Constitution itself.⁴

First Nations exclusion from participation in the Australian political system did not mean that we were excluded from its effects, or its policies. Close to 1 in 2 First Nations people were either taken from their families as children, or are a descendent of one of these children.⁵ Many other policies sought to exclude our involvement in workplaces, politics, and general society. In the second half of the twentieth century, especially after the 1967 referendum, some advancements were made in terms of First Nations rights and inclusion. However, these were either not as successful as they were set out to be, or made out to be by governments. Fundamentally, the approaches for First Nations inclusion were designed with little-to-no input from First Nations, with these flawed designs having detrimental impacts on policy success, such as with ATSIC, which had to balance the tension of government funding and control, with its duty to be representative of First Nations peoples.⁶ First Nations women were and are even more disenfranchised from policy discourse and development, facing systemic “marginalisation” and exclusion”, especially around issues of self-determination.⁷ These obstacles First Nations women face around “effective representation and participation” also still remain “largely unaddressed.”⁸

Decades after the 1967 referendum, First Nations peoples are still pushing for rights and inclusion. In 2017, First Nations presented the Australian people with the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which calls for an enshrined First Nations Voice to Parliament, due to our voices still

not being heard by governments.⁹ Unsurprisingly it fell on deaf ears, and remains unaddressed as of today.¹⁰ First Nations peoples are currently not afforded their rights, as outlined in UNDRIP, to authentically advocate for ourselves, or to shape our own futures through self-determination. This of course extends to current trends and work within Australian Foreign Policy.

The potential of First Nations approaches

The exclusion of First Nations within Australia at a domestic level, has also led to the exclusion of First Nations when looking at issues of foreign policy. Despite First Nations unique ontologies, epistemologies, and cosmologies, our perspectives are not treated as legitimate approaches to foreign policy. The relational nature of First Nations approaches to foreign policy is largely neglected and overlooked within foreign policy scholarship and policymaking.¹¹ Consequently, First Nations are not seen as “authentic political communities” whom have serious views on, or approaches to, foreign policy, which are not affected by such decisions.¹² However, this could not be further from the truth. A current, and ongoing issue is that governments do not engage First Nations peoples on foreign policy, and pay “little attention to what Aboriginal people think on different international issues”.¹³

Not engaging with First Nations peoples ignores the unique and diverse perspectives First Nations have when it comes to inter-polity relations, and the ways in which these can be applied not only to foreign policy practice, but the discipline of international relations as a whole. Within Australia, there are over 350 First Nations across this continent, each of which was conducting complex multipolar relations for over 80 thousand years; based on law, culture, and history, including with polities beyond Australia.¹⁴ First Nations polities operate from fundamentally different places on political ordering and the role of individuals versus the state. A First Nations approach, places individuals within the same system as political epistemologies, based on their relationality to each other, where individuals are autonomous, regulating their own relationships to others and to the law.¹⁵

The interconnectedness of First Nations ways of being—where individuals, rather than a state, share collective but individual responsibilities on law, caring for Country, relationality and reciprocity are very different to Western inter-polity relations. It also represents, in a condensed fashion, the kinds of approaches First Nations can bring to international issues within foreign policy.¹⁶ First Nations political thought and diplomatic practice does, and should, exist in relation with Western approaches, rather than in opposition; which is often how First Nations approaches are presented alongside western views.¹⁷ Subsequently, when First Nations approaches are brought into the mainstream thinking, relationality, rather than oppositionality, is made clear.

Current Australian Foreign Policy Context

Current foreign policy within Australia has not sought to engage with First Nations, let alone on the aforementioned approaches discussed. Instead, Australia has worked more on issues, which are bureaucratically focused, culminating in 2021 with the Indigenous Diplomacy Agenda.¹⁸ The Agenda, follows on from the 2015 Indigenous Peoples Strategy, which acknowledged that the Australian government needed to

engage better with First Nations peoples.

However, the Indigenous Diplomacy Agenda and its terms of reference were developed without any significant levels of consultation with First Nations peoples and no accountability mechanisms.¹⁹ Those First Nations peoples who were involved in this consultation process were from within DFAT. This raises some concerns around the validity of only using First Nations bureaucrats in the consultation process, as current institutions merely seek to place us within a system that is not designed for us, and without our involvement, or recognition of our perspectives. When policymakers do this, it is not First Nations setting the agenda for our own destinies, but government dictating the terms of our own participation.²⁰

The Indigenous Diplomacy Agenda is a four-page document that focuses on 4 key objectives:

- “Shape international norms and standards to benefit Indigenous peoples”
- “Maximise opportunities for Indigenous peoples in a globalised world”
- “Promote sustainable development for all Indigenous peoples”
- “Deploy Indigenous Australian diplomats to advance Australia’s national interests”²¹

Although the ambitions of this policy are advantageous, it is unclear how these four objectives became part of the agenda, and if this is representative of First Nations peoples. It is evident that the agenda focuses heavily on bureaucratic changes DFAT can implement itself, and in its own interest rather than First Nations people’s.²² It is also not clear, nor is there any explanation by what is meant by efforts to “benefit” First Nations people; in terms of what this looks like, for whom, on what time-frame, and who is accountable to First Nations communities for said benefit occurring.²³ This is not the standard of policy we should be applying to First Nations; as it would not be applied to any other similar stakeholder. However, this is a norm with First Nations who policymakers too often speak for, rather than with.

Whilst the Indigenous Diplomacy Agenda does represent a significant first step, with Blackwell calling it at the time “a strong move in the right direction for Australian foreign policy”, the policy itself has not lived up to that level of promise, and misses the bigger picture.²⁴ The Agenda appears to use First Nations merely for the advantage in assisting the mainstream, irrespective of what contributions we may have on our own. Brigg, Graham and Weber describe this kind of approach as “the scholarly mining of Indigenous philosophy for the dominant knowledge’s own projects”.²⁵ It also aids in enhancing the ‘othering’ First Nations have faced throughout policy, and foreign policy in particular.

Current Policy Tensions

The rhetoric of DFAT suggests that First Nations peoples are an integral part of developing an authentic Australian foreign service, achieved by building First Nations peoples into Australia’s diplomacy.²⁶ Yet this is somewhat questionable when looking at actual policy, with much of it done *to First Nations*, rather than *with them*. This then poses the question as to how foreign policy can authentically and genuinely meet these objectives and for First Nations peoples to value add their unique ontologies and epistemologies to

Australia's foreign policy approaches and diplomacy.

Current approaches to policy need to be examined to ensure that future policy processes are inclusive of First Nations ontologies, but also in line with the UNDRIP principles of self-determination, to ensure that genuine momentum in this space can be achieved. Since the mid to late 1980s, policy-making processes have come to rely heavily on a centralised 'policy community' model; an inherited feature of the Westminster system.²⁷ This model relies on relatively closed policy communities to formulate and develop their respected portfolio's suite of policies. The nature of centralised policy-making is exacerbated in foreign policy, as the locus of power is concentrated in the hands of the executive branch of the government; Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C), senior bureaucrats within DFAT, and ministerial advisors, these latter two having large influence over Foreign Policy.²⁸

For many First Nations people, their role in a policy community is generally in a consultative capacity. Consultative processes range from non-participation and tokenistic, to genuine engagement, highlighting the influence of power policy actors have to the different levels.²⁹ They signify the difference between empty rituals of participation to having the power needed to affect process outcomes.³⁰ Despite the fact that First Nations peoples may be 'involved' in policy processes, First Nations peoples are continuously articulating that their voices are not being heard. First Nations peoples hold little power, with consultations being held in a tokenistic manner. Ironically, approaches to First Nations peoples and policy are often penned as 'working in partnership,' however the reality of this does not align.

Future Directions

There are two overarching challenges when it comes to Australia achieving a foreign policy which is inclusive of First Nations peoples and their knowledges. The first is the presence of First Nations peoples within the foreign policy sphere, and the challenge this provides to dominant perspectives. The second includes the role First Nations peoples play in the design process for foreign policy. Both of these challenges center around the involvement of and input from First Nations peoples, and enabling them to have a direct impact on how foreign policy is developed and enacted. The solution to these challenges is clear; structural reform.

First Nations peoples require genuine participation and engagement which will only be achieved when we have a legitimate seat at the table where our voices are equal to those who sit beside us. This is the exact type of solution that a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution, as envisioned by the Uluru Statement from the Heart, was designed to facilitate.³¹ In the meantime, there are proactive actions the government and DFAT can undertake to maximise the opportunity to genuinely work in partnership with First Nations peoples.

Firstly, in terms of staffing and recruitment, First Nations peoples bring a wealth of lived and inherited knowledges

from our culture; this is also the case for women's participation, as it ensures that diverse perspectives are informing policy. First Nations peoples have the oldest governance structures on the planet and managed to co-exist with neighboring polities in complex relationships for millennia.³² Even following the British invasion and subsequent centuries of colonisation, our diplomatic style, rooted in First Nations ontologies and political values, is something that can be embedded and useful to modern Australia, if done effectively.³³ First Nations values and governance structure are rooted in worldviews inclusive of sustainability, and relationality not just to people, but also to Country.³⁴ First Nations expertise around caring for Country is something Australia and the global community can benefit from in the face of climate change and its related challenges, and represents a strong area of potential inclusion.³⁵

Secondly, policy approaches need to reflect First Nations worldviews and unique cosmologies. Feminist foreign policy provides a potential framework for understanding and transforming the systems of power that operate in foreign policy. First Nations cosmologies and worldviews can challenge traditional policy approaches, and shift our understanding of fundamental issues and principles within foreign policy. The fundamental basis of First Nations culture revolves around what Kirkness and Barnhardt call the 4Rs Framework; Respect, Relationships, Reciprocity, and Responsibilities.³⁶ The 4 of these form the basis of how many of our cultures operate, and the basis of an individual-centric ontology where the relationality of individuals to these four frameworks, as Brigg et. al articulate, forms a strong basis for a unique but integratable approach for foreign policy discussion.³⁷

Support for the principles found in UNDRIP, alongside the enshrinement of a First Nations Voice as envisioned by the Uluru Statement From the Heart, both can play a vital role in this venture. They are tools that can ensure that government and bureaucracies uphold the rights of First Nations Peoples whilst providing a lever to ensure accountability. These suggested actions aim to create the foundation for structural change within current Western governments and institutions so that the development of policy can truly reflect modern Australia. Not only is there alignment with a feminist foreign policy approach, but structural change grounded in First Nations worldviews is essential for feminist approach to realise their potential.

The Australian government has a wonderful opportunity to set global standards when it comes to respecting First Nations peoples and their rights. However, advancing First Nations peoples interests at home and abroad will only be possible when First Nations peoples are fully embraced by the Australian polity, in an authentic and genuine way.³⁸ A state's foreign policy reflects its values and identity on a global stage. How the Australian government engages with First Nations peoples, is telling of Australian democracy, diplomacy and how it views human rights on a global scale.³⁹

THE AUSTRALIAN FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY COALITION

The Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition is diverse network advancing feminist foreign policy in Australia. Convened by IWDA, its members work across a range of sectors including foreign policy, defence, security, women's rights, climate change and migration.

Feminist foreign policy is an approach which places gender equality as the central goal of foreign policy, in recognition that gender equality is a predictor of peaceful and flourishing societies. This Issues Paper Series aims to explore the opportunities and challenges for Australia in applying a feminist lens to a range of foreign policy issues, and provide practical ways forward.

Endnotes

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