

# **Australian Political Exchange Council**

Mr Richard Dowdy

## **United States of America Visit Report**

1 October, 2012 to 15 October, 2012

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## **Executive Summary**

This report provides an outline and analysis of my recent trip to the United States of America during the 2012 Presidential election campaign. The trip was funded by the Australian Political Exchange Council. Over the two weeks I was in the United States, I travelled across the United States and visited a number of battleground states including the two key states of Florida and North Carolina.

The purpose of my political exchange was to familiarise myself with and compare Advancing in the United States and Australia. I spent the two weeks of my political exchange with the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, the Hon John Boehner and his personal staff. The Speaker of the House of Representatives is one of the most senior elected officials within the United States and is third in line to the Presidency, only behind the President and the Vice President.

It was a profound privilege to have such access to an individual that is of such importance in the United States political system and someone who played a crucial role in the Presidential Election campaign. Speaker Boehner was a top surrogate for the Republican Presidential nominee, Mr Mitt Romney.

Over two weeks in the United States, I visited the following cities:

- Pensacola, Florida (1 to 4 October)
- Buffalo, New York (4 to 6 October)
- Washington, DC (6 to 8 October)
- Hartford, Connecticut (8 to 9 October)
- Charlotte, North Carolina (9 to 13 October)
- Chicago, Illinois (13 to 15 October)

In the United States, Advancing forms a critical component of a political office and is considered as important as a policy team or press office. Throughout my two weeks in the United States, I travelled with the Speakers' Director of Advance, Mr Curtis Isakson. Mr Isakson worked in the White House during the Presidency of George W Bush and comes well-credentialed to the role of the Speakers' Director of Advance. Mr Isakson is not only an Advancer but also has responsibility to manage the Speakers travel programme, a substantial task.

A significant reason for the importance of Advancing in the United States stems from the history of Presidential assassinations. Three sitting United States Presidents have been assassinated and thus the issue of security is at the forefront of Advancing in the United States. A common point of discussion during my political exchange was the importance of 'Continuity of Government.' As the Speaker is third in line to the Presidency, he is provided with a significant amount of security. The Speaker travels with a dedicated team of US Capitol Police at all times, as well as local and federal police depending on his location. At all times the Speaker is given a green light corridor through traffic lights and it isn't uncommon for him to be given a motorcade of 24 cars and a SWAT team. I was given an opportunity on a number of occasions to travel in the Speakers' vehicle, which was a wonderful experience. In terms of Advancing, this level of security ensures that the Speaker always runs on time and that events occur seamlessly.

The Speaker viewed his role during the Presidential election campaign as primarily supporting Republican House and Senate candidates as well as being a top surrogate for the Republican

Presidential nominee, Mitt Romney. This involved taking part in campaign rallies, attending fundraising events, business visits and bus tours. The Speaker travelled all over the United States during his 45 day nonstop blitz of the country.

It was fascinating to see first-hand the way in which campaigns are fought in battleground states during a Presidential Campaign. There are significant differences between the US and Australian political systems and the way campaigns are fought. In particular, the money and resources that is invested in battleground States. The way in which fundraising is undertaken was astounding to witness. Political events in the United States are amazing spectacles to watch as are the crowds, level of security, event setup, media control and access.

I was privileged to have dinner with the Speaker and three of his staff on two occasions. This allowed me to discuss the United States - Australia alliance and the key political issues of the day both in Australia and the United States.

I learnt more about the art of Advancing in three weeks than at any other time over the last three years. The trip provided me with a number of ideas that can now be considered in the context of advancing in Australia. I have made a number of lifelong friends and have memories that I will cherish for the rest of my life. It was a profound privilege to spend my political exchange with the Speaker of the United States, the Hon John Boehner.

## **Visit Report**

### **Pensacola, Florida (1 to 4 October)**

The first stop on my political exchange was to the well-known city of Pensacola, Florida. Pensacola is a beach town on the Gulf of Mexico and is famous for being the base of the 'Blue Angels' F/A-18 fighter pilots. The Pensacola Naval station is the place where United States Republican Senator John McCain trained to become a naval pilot. Senator McCain is a frequent visitor to the city as his son is currently undertaking his pilot training at the Pensacola Naval station. On Tuesday, 2 October, I visited the National Naval Aviation Museum, which contains hundreds of aircraft on display, including a retired Marine One Presidential helicopter and the S-3B Viking "Navy One" plane that President George W Bush used when giving his famous "Mission Accomplished" speech that officially ended the Iraq War on the USS Abraham Lincoln in 2003.

The Speaker landed in Pensacola on Thursday, 4 October and participated in one political event. The event consisted of a small roundtable fundraising breakfast of 20 people and a larger general reception fundraising event for 80 people. The roundtable lasted 30 minutes and the general reception for 15 minutes. It was valuable to witness the event and I was able to compare it to similar events that I have worked on in Australia. The expectations of people that attend these events in terms of access to politicians are considerably different in the United States than Australia. In Australia, the idea of paying hundreds of dollars for a general reception and not having the opportunity to speak with the special guest is hard to imagine.

The attendees were all proud and passionate and there were no complaints as to the format of the event. It was clear that everyone in attendance understood that the Speaker is a busy and important individual and they were honoured to be in his presence. The Speaker was only on the ground in

Pensacola for two hours in total. The Speaker was provided with a 24 car motorcade and SWAT team. It was quite an eye opening experience to see so many police. The Speaker departed Pensacola for his next destination. Mr Isakson and I then made our way to Buffalo, New York.

### **Buffalo, New York (4 to 6 October)**

Buffalo is an industrial town about eight hours from Manhattan. Buffalo is known as being the home of the 'Buffalo Wing' and is approximately a 30-minute drive from the world famous 'Niagara Falls'. The Speaker arrived in Buffalo on the evening of Friday, 5 October. I was invited to a dinner that evening with Speaker Boehner and his staff. This dinner provided me the opportunity to discuss the US-Australia alliance, and I enjoyed speaking with Speaker Boehner about his experiences visiting Australia and what he saw as the most important issues of the Presidential campaign.

On the morning of Saturday, 6 October, the Speaker had two morning events. The first was a fundraising breakfast and the second was a political rally at the campaign offices of the local House candidate. The breakfast involved the Speaker taking part in a photo session with donors before a general reception. The Speaker addressed the breakfast for 15 minutes and departed. It was a valuable experience to analyse the setup and format for both the photo session and general reception.

The Speaker then attended a political rally at the campaign offices of the local Republican candidate. It was particularly interesting to analyse how political rallies play such an important role in political campaigning. These are relatively untried events in Australia and the format that is used in the United States is very different to what is currently used in Australia. It was also interesting to see how the media are controlled. In Australia, when the media are invited to events, they are generally provided an opportunity to ask questions of the politician and move about an event freely. In the United States, the media are provided with a distinctly separate section that is roped off from the rest of the attendees. There was also no opportunity for an interview with press. The Speaker spoke for ten minutes, walked a rope line for two-three minutes and departed. In Australia, it is common for a similar event to include a mingling session of 45-60 minutes, followed by a press conference. In the United States, no one complains, this is simply the model that is used.

### **Washington, DC (6 to 8 October)**

I arrived in Washington late afternoon on Saturday, 6 October. I visited the famous Willard Hotel on Pennsylvania Avenue. The Willard is a famous Washington hotel which has been the centre of many significant political events over the years, including Kevin Rudd's final press conference as the Foreign Minister of Australia. On Sunday morning, the Speaker very kindly organised a personal tour of the US Capitol Building. This was a wonderful opportunity and it was a special moment to stand on the Speaker's balcony, a venue that in a few short months will play host to the inauguration of President Obama. I then proceeded to walk down the National Mall, visiting the US Supreme Court, White House, Washington Monument and Holocaust museum.

### **Hartford, Connecticut (8 to 9 October)**

The Speaker visited Hartford, Connecticut on Tuesday, 9 October. The purpose of the trip was to attend a fundraising lunch as the guest of honour at the Hartford Club for approximately 120 guests. The lunch had been discussed in the local media and a number of protestors were present outside the venue. This caused a heightened degree of angst amongst the Speaker's security detail.

The format of the event included a private roundtable with 20 donors followed by a lunch with 120 guests. The Speaker addressed the guests for 15 minutes and mingled around the room. It was interesting to see the format of a private roundtable with senior donors occurring before a general fundraising event. The purpose of the roundtable as a distinctly separate event is to enable donors to raise specific questions rather than only have the opportunity to listen to Speaker Boehner's general remarks at the luncheon. The Speaker then departed Hartford immediately upon conclusion of the event.

### **Charlotte, North Carolina (9 to 13 October)**

The Speaker arrived in Charlotte, North Carolina on Thursday 11 October. The State of North Carolina was a key battleground state in the 2012 Presidential Election campaign. A substantial amount of money and resources were invested in North Carolina from both the Democratic and Republican parties. The Speaker had two engagements in Charlotte; the first was a political rally held at a Republican Victory centre and the second was a fundraising cocktail event.

An interesting difference between the United States and Australia is the proximity that political supporters can get to a senior politician. It is not unusual for a senior politician in Australia to be totally surrounded by attendees, whether it is a morning tea or a media event. In the United States, this does not occur. As is illustrated below, political supporters are separated by bike racks and or rope and stanchions. This is due to security concerns and allows absolute control at events. The Speaker addressed the rally of approximately 150 attendees and congratulated victory centre volunteers.

The rally also provided me with a valuable opportunity to speak to campaign volunteers about coalition groups. In this instance, the victory centre was staffed by volunteers from the group "Women for Mitt" My discussions provided me a better understanding of the importance of these coalition groups to the broader campaign.

The Speaker then proceeded to a fundraising cocktail event, where he held a private roundtable meeting with ten donors. The roundtable was followed by a general reception with 60 donors. Upon conclusion of the event, the Speaker invited me to dinner with his staff, which once again provided a wonderful opportunity to discuss the impending presidential election.

### **Chicago, Illinois (13 to 15 October)**

On the morning of Saturday, 13 October, I travelled from Charlotte, North Carolina to Chicago, Illinois. Chicago had a real buzz about it, being the home town of President Barack Obama. Chicago is a strong Democratic state and there was little presence of the Republican Party in comparison to the swing state of Florida. Of course, this is similar to the way Australian campaigns occur and political parties rarely invest significant amount of money in seats that they have no hope of winning.

Chicago brought to an end my Political Exchange to the United States. I learnt a significant amount in regards to political event management, political campaigning, political fundraising, the importance of coalition groups.

I would like to place on record my thanks to the staff at the Australian Political Exchange Council. The staff are all highly dedicated and proficient individuals who were pleasant to deal with at all times.

Sincerely,

RICHARD DOWDY